

Writing a Thesis / Research Paper

Guidelines for Choosing an Advisor, a Topic, and Preparing a Proposal

Note: If you are approved for the thesis stream and plan to apply for OGS, please let Denise know as soon as possible. Do not start your OGS application until your status has been changed to the thesis stream. This will ensure that you go into the 'MA' applicant pool, not the 'PhD' applicant pool.

Choosing an Advisor (aka Supervisor)

- **Check website: sociology.uwo.ca→Graduate→Supervisors**
- Talk to potential advisors
- Consider those with broad expertise in yours or related areas (experience supervising, publishing)
- Expert in your area can be important but not essential
- Someone you can get along with – may want to talk to them about the process

Choosing a Topic

- Think about subject areas that interest you (generally)
- Think about what is known and unknown about it (literature, gaps, questions)
- Something related to the literature and theory
- Something that has not been widely studied, or has been studied but not in a certain way, with certain data set, or in certain context, etc.
- Think about data sources available, and how you might study the phenomenon
- Think about what is doable with available data and time frame. Keep the scope realistic
- Read more about it, and come up with definable research questions and hypotheses
- Something you can live with and not get too sick of

Overview

RESEARCH PAPER STREAM Completed in one year					
Fall Sept-Dec	Winter Jan-Apr	Summer May-Aug			
-Take 3 courses -Choose advisor -Choose topic -Submit MA supervisor form	-Take 3 courses plus Research Practicum (milestone)	-Research Paper (graded) -See overview, formatting in Grad Handbook	Entry into the thesis stream requires the development and approval of a preliminary thesis proposal of 2-5 pages and the agreement of an advisor who supports entry into the stream. <u>Forms, thesis proposal guidelines, and research paper overview/formatting</u> are in the Graduate Handbook - sociology.uwo.ca →Graduate→Graduate Handbook→MA		
THESIS STREAM					
<u>YEAR 1</u>			<u>YEAR 2</u>		
Fall Sept-Dec	Winter Jan-Apr	Summer May-Aug	Fall Sept-Dec	Winter Jan-Apr	Summer May-Aug
-Take 3 courses -Choose advisor -2-5 page preliminary thesis proposal -Submit MA supervisor form	Take 3 courses -Find supervisory committee member in consultation with your advisor	-Thesis Proposal (milestone) -See guidelines in Grad Handbook -Submit thesis proposal form	Thesis writing	Thesis writing (it is possible to defend and complete in this term)	Defend and complete

Search for research papers and theses on the website (by supervisor, etc.)

sociology.uwo.ca → Graduate → Find A Past Thesis

Research Paper

6 courses + Research Practicum (winter term) + Research Paper (summer term)

What is a Sociological Research Paper?

- An original research project of a more delimited scope
- An advance in knowledge (new question, new data, new control variables)
- Papers can vary in focus, topic and methodology. The length is around 30 pages
- Papers should look like a standard paper published in a sociological journal (can use these and previous research papers as a guide)
- Can use quantitative methodology, qualitative methodology (small sample), content/policy analysis, or in rare cases can be more theoretical

Considerations

- This is a challenging option: you must identify a problem, study the literature, form hypotheses or research questions, do some data analysis, and write up your assessment of the literature, your results and implications. Most of this should be done second term – although you can finalize, polish and revise in the summer term.
- A lot to do in a short period of time
- Research questions should be related to the literature in your sub-area (address a gap in the literature), and ideally should be theoretically informed
- Given time and space constraints, your question may be somewhat delimited. Further, your ability to study a given topic may be highly restricted by the availability of data. Before you finalize your questions, see what information is available to you, and what you can reasonably study
- If you choose a qualitative research topic (low-risk only), you must submit an ethics proposal (in conjunction with your advisor) to the Non-Medical Research Ethics board. I am happy to review these beforehand to provide feedback. Ideally, this stage should be completed no later than reading week.

Activities for the Fall

- Talk to professors in your area of interest. Choose an advisor with whom you can work. Talk about research ideas, data availability, etc.
- **Submit supervisor form, available at sociology.uwo.ca→Graduate→Graduate Handbook→MA**
- Look into data availability: secondary data sets, professors' data sets, available documentation, etc.
- Narrow down your research interests: Can go top-down, bottom-up or combination
- Before January read a major work or two in your field (advisors can suggest some important ones)
- Come to class in early January with an advisor, a general research question, and some general idea about how you are going to address your research question

MA Sociological Research Practicum (winter term) January to April, 'milestone' (not graded)

- **For the outline, go to sociology.uwo.ca→Graduate→Course Information**
- The practicum will cover the various sections of a traditional research paper, discuss making the case for your research, refining your research questions, and writing about your research (problems and challenges of writing, formulating research hypotheses, writing up results, etc.)
- You work closely with an advisor who will help you define your topic, guide you to the relevant literature, assist you with data analysis, and so forth

Research Paper (summer term) All requirements must be completed by August 31, graded (out of 100)

- **For Overview and Formatting, go to sociology.uwo.ca→Graduate→Graduate Handbook→MA**
- The expectation is that complete draft will be completed by the end of July, final paper submitted by second week in August to allow time for the advisor to grade the paper
- Final degree requirement is to publish your research paper in Scholarship@Western

Thesis

6 courses + thesis proposal (summer term) + thesis (second year in program)

What is a Sociological Thesis?

- An original research project or theoretical take on sociological phenomena.
- An advance in knowledge (new question, new data, new control variables)
- Theses can vary in length, topic, focus, methods, etc. No simple formula
- Can be quite variable in terms of focus, number of research questions, methodology, etc.
- Can be quantitative or qualitative methodology, content/policy analysis, or theoretical

Considerations

- Often the research problem is small and defined in scope, not large. Questions should be delimited, can be very narrow. Don't get bogged down in grand questions
- Look at previous theses during process, can use as a guide – sociology.uwo.ca → Graduate → Find A Past Thesis
- Try to narrow down your research interests: think about what you want to study, and roughly how you want to study it (which methodologies would suit the problem). Think about defining a problem that is “doable”. The one year goes by very quickly
- If you collect your own data (quantitative or qualitative) study you will need an ethics review. For low-risk research, the process takes 3-6 weeks, but for research on vulnerable groups, First Nations, or for more controversial research, the process can take 3 months. Be prepared for this delay.

Activities for the Fall/Winter

- Talk to professors broadly in your area of interest. Choose an advisor with whom you can work. Talk about research ideas
- Provide preliminary thesis proposal (2-5 pages) to your advisor
- **Submit supervisor form, available at sociology.uwo.ca→Graduate→Graduate Handbook→MA**
- Try to read ahead in the winter term and get a head start on your literature review, and refining your topic. Something that you need to make time for. Don't leave it until April. Spend time reading and exploring resources

Preliminary Thesis Proposal (2-5 pages)

- Purpose: To create a basic plan for relevant and ‘doable’ research that is appropriate for a thesis at the MA level and have the plan approved by a professor who is willing to supervise
- Elements: research topic, research methodology, type and source of data, brief overview of timelines
- How: Present a basic outline to your potential advisor so you can have a conversation about your plans. Present your written preliminary proposal to him/her. She/he may approve the proposal ‘as is’ or work with you to create a proposal for a thesis that she/he is willing to supervise

Thesis Proposal (summer term), ‘milestone’ (not graded)

- **For Thesis Proposal Guidelines, go to sociology.uwo.ca→Graduate→Graduate Handbook→MA**
- The thesis proposal is designed to give you an opportunity to work with your advisor to refine your research topic, come up with a research strategy, and construct a plan of attack.
- As part of the process, a supervisory committee member must be named – the expectation in our department is that the supervisory committee member will serve as a “reader,” providing feedback beginning at the proposal stage and throughout the writing process, and will read the thesis in its entirety before preliminary submission of the thesis.
- Review (some not necessarily all of) the literature (and theory) on this topic. This review of the literature should provide you with some research questions, hypotheses, which you should specify. Your questions should be related to the literature and relevant theory – what does the literature suggest you should find when you look at this topic?
- Think about what we know and don't know about the topic.

- By the middle of the summer term (end of June) you should have a completed thesis proposal outlining the main literature in the area, the gap in the literature or theoretical question you seek to address, and how you intend to address this question. Data gathering, initial data analysis, ethics review process, should begin in the summer term.
- The thesis proposal should provide a basis for your introduction and an initial draft of the literature review, and lay the groundwork for your thesis chapters (or your ethics protocol if applicable).
- **When you have completed the thesis proposal, the *Thesis Proposal Report* must be submitted to Denise so the milestone can be recorded. The form is available at sociology.uwo.ca→Graduate→Graduate Handbook→MA**

Elements of the Thesis

- **For full details, go to sociology.uwo.ca→Graduate Handbook→Policies & Procedures→Thesis**
- Introduction – often written last, it sets the general scene and loosely describes what you are doing – can be quite short.
- Literature Review: Generally the hardest chapter to write – organize the literature thematically, address the studies, but not one by one – must integrate them, and make an argument. Point out, what we know about the phenomenon and what we don't know. Talk about the literature in terms of how it establishes a context for your own research, shapes research questions, etc.
- Methodology – describes what you are going to do clearly, and how you are going to do it. What variables? How operationalize key concepts? What is the nature of the data you are using? What is the nature of the population/sample you are studying? Does your data have any limitations?
- Results – presents the results of your analysis.
- Discuss the results of your analysis. What significance do they have? How do they refer back to the literature? What remains still to be studied? What should future researchers do?
- All of this can vary. Theses take different forms – sometimes 2 literature review chapters, a separate historical chapter, or other contextual chapter. Results can be divided. This is a guideline only.

Steps to Completion

- **For details, go to sociology.uwo.ca→Graduate Handbook→Policies & Procedures→Thesis**
- When your advisor thinks your thesis is ready, she/he forms an examining board (two professors from Sociology, one from another discipline) and sets a date for your thesis defence (aka thesis exam).
- The examining board members receive the thesis about a month before the defence date. They read the thesis and provide an evaluation, indicating whether the thesis is acceptable and ready for defence.
- Thesis defence – at the defence, the examining board members ask you questions about your thesis. You may have to defend your choice of theory, methodology, the interpretation of your findings, its relationship to the literature, etc. By this point you are such an expert, that this should go smoothly.