

GUIDELINES FOR PREPARING THE THESIS PROPOSAL



INTRODUCTION

Completion of a Thesis Proposal is one of the steps required to earn a Master's Degree from the University of Wisconsin-Green Bay Environmental Science and Policy (ES&P) and Applied Leadership for Teaching and Learning (EDUC) Graduate Programs. These guidelines discuss the purpose and structure of an acceptable Proposal and provide some advice for its development.

PURPOSES OF THE THESIS PROPOSAL

The Proposal serves three closely related purposes:

First, the Proposal provides evidence that you are competent and prepared to undertake and complete the Thesis Project. In the Proposal, you must demonstrate that you have chosen an appropriate and focused problem, are familiar with the scholarly literature and understand related contemporary issues, and have formulated an acceptable research procedure or methodology.

Second, the Proposal assures that you are proceeding in a way acceptable to your Faculty Committee. An approved Thesis Proposal serves as a contract between you and the University as represented by your Thesis Committee. If you complete the work as agreed upon in the Proposal and prepare the final thesis document according to accepted standards, the Thesis Defense and final approval of your Thesis should go well. Because the course of research is often uncertain, relatively minor and reasonable changes are to be expected as the work proceeds. However, major modifications must be agreed to in writing and approved by the Director Graduate Studies. Formal development, preparation, and approval of your Proposal will ensure that there are no surprises for you or the committee members at the time of your Thesis Defense.

Third, submission of the Thesis Proposal along with the GR-2 Approval Form signed by the committee members, assists the Office of Graduate Studies in tracking your progress toward your degree. Approval of the Proposal by the Director Graduate Studies triggers clearance for you to register for thesis credits. This is an important point and will be discussed further in the following section. The GR-2 Form identifies the Major Professor (Committee Chair) and the members of the committee. A copy of the approved Proposal is placed in your official file for later reference if necessary.

WHEN SHOULD THE PROPOSAL BE PREPARED?

Before a Proposal will be accepted, you must have an approved Program Plan on file with the Office of Graduate Studies and have completed at least 8 credits (EDUC) or 15 credits (ES&P) of graduate course work. These requirements are in place to ensure that you have developed a coherent program of study and obtained the background needed for your project.

When you should prepare your Proposal depends on whether you are a full- or part-time student. Generally, if you are a full-time student, you should be working with a committee to develop a project during the second semester of course work. Your proposal can be finalized and approved at the end of the second semester, allowing you to register for thesis credits during the summer or the following semester, if you wish to do so. If you are a part-time student, you may not be ready to develop a Proposal until your third, fourth or even fifth semester depending on the number of credits completed each term. In either case, a Proposal should be on file by the time that you have completed 21 to 24 course credits. It is never advisable to proceed too far with a project without an approved Proposal for the reasons stated in the previous section, and because a well-done Proposal will assist you to clearly visualize the objectives and scope of your project. In addition, failure to file a Proposal may prevent you from registering for thesis credits and thereby delay graduation.

HOW SHOULD THE PROCESS BE STARTED?

It is your responsibility to initiate the process, but not to develop a fully formed project without guidance. Although at times professors may seek out students for specific projects, the reverse is more common. Choosing a Major Professor (Committee Chair) and a committee is an important step. It may seem like a daunting or intimidating venture but it should not be. Professors generally welcome inquiries about their work and availability for committee service. If you have a strong interest in a particular area and know our professors, you may have focused on one or two individuals to chair your committee soon after beginning your studies. If you are uncertain, unfamiliar with our professors, or have wider interests, investigate the possibilities. Meet with professors to discuss their work and your interests. The initial advisor assigned to you on your Letter of Admission, course instructors, and the short descriptions of faculty interests in the Graduate Catalog can assist your search. Be aware that each professor can serve on a limited number of committees, and therefore, your first choice for a Chair may not be able to accommodate your request—another good reason to begin the process early!

When a professor has agreed to chair your committee, you should work together to formulate and focus a thesis project. Most professors have projects that they would like a student to do. Some may have funded projects, or you may suggest a problem for consideration. Once the general plan has been established, it is time to select the other committee members with expertise to support your work. A fourth member, external to the University, may also be appropriate and is encouraged. At this point, it is wise to arrange a meeting of the whole committee to discuss the objectives and methodology, and whether it is necessary for you to take specific courses to be better prepared to complete the project.

You can now develop the Proposal with the assistance of the Major Professor. When you agree that it is in good form, distribute a copy to each committee member. After they have had time to read and react to the draft, it is valuable to arrange a second meeting of all members to discuss any suggested changes.

While it may be difficult to schedule committee meetings, it will save you a great amount of time in the end. The meetings can be short (fifteen minutes to a half hour), but they are invaluable because each member can provide rationale for suggested changes and the entire committee can come to a common approach. If, on the other hand, copies are distributed individually to committee members you may have three or more conflicting versions to deal with. You should prepare a final draft for review by your Major Professor, and then distribute copies to the other members for final approval. The GR-2 Form is then signed and submitted to the Office of Graduate Studies along with a copy of the Proposal.

Some additional comments may also assist you with the Thesis Proposal preparation process.

- 1) Always provide each committee member with a separate neatly done copy of drafts of the Proposal and later of the Thesis. Sloppily done drafts present a poor impression of your ability, and circulating a single copy will result in significant time delays.
- 2) Give your committee members adequate time to react to drafts or requests for assistance or information. Normally, ten days to two weeks is a reasonable time for a review of a draft. Requests for guidance or help with an encountered problem are usually handled more quickly, however, you may need to schedule an appointment.
- 3) Finally, avoid meetings and draft reviews around registration periods or near the end of semesters. Those are especially busy times of semesters.

WHAT IS THE PROPER LENGTH AND STRUCTURE FOR A PROPOSAL?

There are no rigid rules governing the length, structure or format of the Thesis Proposal. Some Major Professors and committees require extensive detailed Proposals whereas others are comfortable with shorter ones. Two things are important to remember: First, you want your Proposal to adequately describe the focus and scope of your project. Second, the time and effort that you spend developing your Proposal will not be wasted, but will improve and guide the research and apply to the final Thesis document.

The format and structure of a Proposal should be guided by the standards of technical or scholarly writing in the related field of study, and must satisfy the faculty committee. The following outline presents a suggested structure of the major sections usually present in a Thesis Proposal:

I. Problem Statement. This section presents a clear statement of the specific topic to be addressed and the purpose of the work to be proposed. Precisely, what is the problem to be

solved, the issues to be analyzed, the questions to be answered, or the project to be completed? The general and specific objectives must be enumerated. This section is critical, because it establishes the framework for the rest of the document by presenting exactly what you will do and why it is being done. Usually, this section is the shortest in the Proposal and must be done carefully.

II. Literature Review. In this section, you will provide a review of the published scholarly literature pertinent to the thesis topic. In addition, for the problem-oriented projects that are encouraged and often undertaken at this University, it might include such sources as technical manuals, commercial product or technology literature, and methodology descriptions. Citation and documentation should be guided by the standards for the field in which you are working. This is often the longest section of the Proposal.

This section establishes the broader academic or technical context of the research. It demonstrates that you are familiar with the current related body of knowledge and that you have an understanding of the wider implications of the topic. This section can be as brief or as comprehensive as you and your committee decide. Both have advantages and disadvantages. The brief approach will allow you to finish the Proposal in less time, but must satisfy your committee that you are aware of the most important sources available. It also assumes that you will continue to identify additional sources and complete a more inclusive list of references that will guide the research and be incorporated into the Thesis document. For the comprehensive approach, you will do a much more complete analysis of the relevant literature. This takes longer, but the section can serve as the Literature Review section of your Thesis with only minor updating. This will save time when you are preparing the thesis document.

III. Methodology. In this section, you will describe how the research will be carried out. This will include the research design, sampling protocol, and data analysis. Describe the ways in which the data will be collected, the analytical techniques to be used, and the intellectual framework or conceptual models that will be employed. For example, indicate the instruments and equipment needed, the survey instrument to be used, subjects to be interviewed, the statistical techniques or packages applicable, and any laboratory facilities required. Typically, this section is short, only two or three pages in length.

This section may also be as brief or comprehensive as deemed appropriate. It must provide enough detail to satisfy the committee that you have a sound grasp of the methodology to be used but not so much that you are locked into particular steps, a number of analyses, or an amount of data. Usually, a more comprehensive approach is preferable so that there are no misunderstandings about what is expected. Conversely, do not promise more than you can deliver in the time available. The best advice is, “be specific but be realistic!”

IV. References. Your Proposal will typically conclude with a list of sources or references. This section may consist of all works that appear to be relevant to the topic, or only those actually cited in the Proposal.

The Office of Graduate Studies does not require a particular referencing format. You should

adopt a set of standards acceptable in the field of study of the Thesis. Adopting a set of standards for references at the Proposal stage will facilitate preparation of the final Thesis document. Remember that the purpose of a referencing system is to document sources and to provide information to readers. Therefore, it should be consistent and clear. Systems that eliminate titles of sources or abbreviate highly technical terms are not acceptable.

PURPOSES OF THE THESIS PROPOSAL

In summary, the purposes of a Thesis Proposal are to demonstrate that you are prepared to carry out the work, ensure coordination between you and your committee, and assist the Office of Graduate Studies to track your progress toward a degree. Although your Thesis Proposal will not be accepted until you have a Program Plan on file and have satisfactorily completed the required minimum number of course credits, start the process early to avoid a possible delay of your graduation. You will not be able to register for Thesis credit until an approved Proposal is on file.

The structure and format suggested in these guidelines are not mandatory but are applicable to most cases. Minor changes to the approved Proposal can be made as appropriate. Substantive changes should be agreed upon with your Chair and committee members, in writing if necessary. You can even replace one Proposal with another for a completely different project, but then you must start the process over from the beginning.

Work closely with your committee. If you have concerns about the research or problems with techniques, ask questions. Should major difficulties arise, feel free to consult with the Chair of your program or the Director of Graduate Studies in Cofrin Hall 835 at 920-465-2123, or email: gradstu@uwgb.edu.