

IV: If You Choose to Write a Thesis

1. What counts as an M.A. thesis?

An M.A. thesis is not a research paper on steroids! In fact, we have agreed in the Department that thesis writers should aim to produce a publishable journal article, i.e., a 20-30 page paper that chooses some open problem within a subfield, situates it within the ongoing philosophical conversation, and then attempts to propose an original and effective solution.

2. Who should write a thesis?

Not everyone should write an M.A. thesis. In particular, if you'd like to fill in your philosophical background and use your courses to acquaint yourself with a wide range of philosophical topics and sub-disciplines, then earning your master's through coursework alone would be a good choice. On the other hand, if you'd like to explore a particular problem in depth and/or would like to see what it's like to live with and write about a problem for an extended period of time, then writing an M.A. thesis would make sense. Note that up to two courses can be devoted to thesis research. These may be taken concurrently (presumably during your last semester in residence) or sequentially.

3. Choosing an advisor and a topic

Ordinarily, the topic that catches your attention will be one raised in one of your classes. If so, you might meet with your professor to discuss the possibility of writing a thesis on that topic.

If you hit upon a topic independently, then it would make sense to approach the professor whose research interests most closely align with the problem you've selected.

4. Your committee

Each M.A. thesis is in the end approved by a committee of three faculty members. Your primary thesis advisor will be the one you work with most closely. There can be variation in the use made of the other two committee members. Some writers consult with them and show them drafts throughout the writing process; others bring them in only at the end, for the formal defense.

5. The Defense

The thesis defense is a friendly but probing session in which the thesis writer orally presents the thesis's main claims and supporting arguments to his/her Committee, then fields their questions and challenges. At the end of the session, the candidate leaves the room and the Committee members decide on whether the thesis and defense should be awarded a grade of Pass, High Pass, or Fail.

The thesis defense should be scheduled sufficiently in advance of expected graduation dates that there is time for the writer to make any requested changes.

6. Meeting Deadlines

The Graduate School has a set of rigid and non-negotiable deadlines with regard to theses. The relevant dates are posted for each semester on their website.

A preliminary version of the thesis must be submitted to the Graduate School 2 weeks before the scheduled oral defense. The final version must be accompanied by an M-3 Form signed by all committee members. Budget your time in order to meet these deadlines. Since it can be hard tracking down faculty members at the end of a semester, be sure to plan for obtaining of all needed signatures.

7. Format and Electronic Submission

Once successfully defended and approved, the thesis must be submitted to the Graduate School. Formatting instructions for the document – and especially for the title page – can be obtained from Nora. The entire thesis is submitted electronically. Microfilming fees and optional copyright fees are charged to your student account as part of this process. The section of the Graduate School website explaining these procedures can be found at: <http://www.umsl.edu/divisions/graduate/etd/index.html>