

Guidelines for the Preparation of
A PROPOSAL FOR A MASTER'S THESIS

DIVISION OF EMERGING MEDIA STUDIES

COLLEGE OF COMMUNICATION
BOSTON UNIVERSITY

Revised, January 2019

WHAT IS A THESIS PROPOSAL?

A Thesis Proposal is a document that sets forth what is to be studied as a thesis project, why and in what way. It contains a number of important sections. The purpose of the proposal is to communicate the plan for the work to the faculty of the Division of Emerging Media Studies via the First Reader (principal thesis advisor) and a Second Reader.

A Thesis Proposal is rather like the blueprint of a house that is to be built and it serves the same functions. An effective plan describes each step that will be taken and how they will all fit together to achieve an acceptable overall result.

WHO SHOULD COMPLETE A THESIS?

Master's students in the Division of Emerging Media Studies have three distinct options for completing their degree requirements: they may complete a thesis, complete an internship, or complete additional coursework. Think carefully before planning to use the thesis option. It is appropriate only for a limited number of students who have an appropriate background and particular kinds of goals. Completing degree requirements with a thesis is best suited for those students who plan to continue their graduate studies as a doctoral student in communication or another related field. Appropriate academic preparation includes a graduate coursework in research methods, data analysis, and theory, equipping the student with the requisite skills for completing a thesis as a primary investigator. Students who may feel that completing a thesis is the right choice for them should first consult with their Academic Advisor before making a commitment to developing a formal thesis proposal. Additionally, depending on the nature of the intended study (e.g., online survey, content analysis, lab-based experiment), the student may wish to consider the option of extending their degree program for an additional semester, in consultation with their Academic Advisor.

WHAT TOPICS MUST BE COVERED IN A THESIS PROPOSAL?

The various parts or sections of an effective Thesis Proposal can be described in the following

terms. Each needs to be part of the document:

OVERVIEW:

This part of the proposal is like an "executive summary" or abstract of what the document contains. It should be no more than a single page or even less, double-spaced. Essentially it is a "map" that shows the territory through which the reader will be led. This section should be written last (as summary) after all other sections have been prepared.

BACKGROUND AND GENERAL GOALS OF THE THESIS:

The major body of the document begins with any background that needs to be understood and helps in understanding what is to be done and why. It also explains in general narrative terms the main question or questions that will be addressed and describes broadly the research strategy that will be used to bring together the information needed to answer those questions. This sections should also include

- *Statement of objectives.* Clearly and concisely, what are the general goals of the thesis. Each thesis may have distinct goals. For instance, is your thesis project purely descriptive of a new phenomena? Is it empirically testing causal relationships between particular variables of interest? Are you providing a critical evaluation of a particular topic or framework? Are you providing a new perspective by presenting a new typology? Are you creating, implementing, or testing a new research tool? Any such missions of the thesis should be clearly stated in this section.
- *Significance of the project.* What is the social importance of this thesis. That is, how will this thesis aid our collective understanding of emerging media, in terms of theory and real-world application to a particular social domain (e.g., politics, health, entertainment, design).

LITERATURE REVIEW

This section is an initial (not the final) report of what others who have studied the same problem or topic have found or concluded. This review should be selective, and should be limited to information that is relevant to the thesis topic. This section should include formal statement of research questions and/or hypotheses derived from your review of the extant literature. A fuller review should come later as part of the thesis itself, including extensive consideration of prior studies or other writings that focus directly on the issue under investigation in order to show the state of knowledge that already exists.

PROPOSED METHOD

This section should provide a clear description of the methods you will implement for conducting your thesis project. In order to gather information, will you conduct an experiment, a survey, a content analysis, a focus group, or some other means of data collection? This section should specifically describe the following, as applicable to your intended method of inquiry:

- *Procedure.* What will be the general steps for completing data collection? Here you should describe any all general steps for recruiting participants, conducting an experiment, leading a focus group, distributing surveys, gathering publicly-available data, or otherwise completing your intended means of data collection.
- *Measures.* If examining the associative or causal relationships between variables, how exactly will you measure or operationalize these variables.
- *Stimuli.* If using particular stimuli for experimental conditions (e.g., in-person and online experiments) or gauging individuals' responses to specific content (e.g., surveys, focus group, interviews), how will these be obtained? Do they already exist for public use? Must you produce and/or edit custom stimuli?

OVERALL STRUCTURE OF THE PROPOSED THESIS

In this section you should provide a brief outline of the general structure of your intended thesis. If a typical empirical investigation, this may simply include an introduction, literature review, methods section, results section, and closing discussion. If another format or type of thesis, similarly provide a general outline of the overall structure of the future deliverable.

REFERENCES

Here, provide a complete listing of all references citing in your proposal's literature review (and other sections, if they exist). This section should abide by APA formatting guidelines.

TIMELINE

This section should outline when various stages of the project will be completed. For instance, for an empirical investigation, this might include the completion dates for the full literature review, data collection, data cleaning & preparation, data analysis, tentative results write-up, and full written report. The exact elements or stages to be included in this section should be decided in consultation with your Academic Advisor. This timetable is essential because it keeps one focused on the idea that there are deadlines that must be met. Keep in mind that the First Reader and Second Reader are very busy people with many demands on their time. They must be allowed ample time to read and indicate where they want changes made to an initial draft of a report. Additionally, their involvement in any preceding stages (e.g., methodological trouble-

shooting, statistical analysis) should be considered with courtesy. Factor ample time into such stages, as necessary.

NOTE: Developing a proposal is an interactive process. Do not expect your Thesis Advisor/First Reader to blindly accept an initial proposal draft. It is a process of refinement until they feel that you are actually ready to start with a high chance of success.

HOW LONG IS A THESIS PROPOSAL?

There is no set limit. Each of the above sections should be concisely stated without excess verbiage. However, the explanations must be in narrative form and not mere bulleted outlines. To keep excess length in check, keep in mind that the proposal is simply a plan explaining what will be studied and how.

HOW ARE THE PROCEDURES FOR GETTING THE PROPOSAL APPROVED?

1. Before beginning the develop a proposal, it is best to discuss the general idea with a faculty member who may be willing to serve as the First Reader.
2. With initial guidance from that faculty member, draft the proposal and show it to him or her. He or she may or may not agree to continue. That will depend on the faculty member's workload with other theses, the nature of your project, his or her areas of expertise, and many other factors. If the first faculty member decides not to be your First Reader, seek out another.
3. When the First Reader has been identified, he or she will review the proposal in detail and make suggestions for polishing or revision. Incorporate those suggestions into the proposal. This may take several exchanges. This is a normal process or intellectual interaction.
4. Once the First Reader has verbally accepted the proposal, a Second Reader who is willing to serve must be identified. He or she will also review the proposal and may have some further suggestions for change. These should also be incorporated.
5. When the Thesis Proposal has been completed and the title page signed by both Readers, it must be formally submitted to the Director of the Division of Emerging Media Studies for final approval. A copy of the style for the title and signature page of the proposal is attached to this document. A copy of the proposal must be given to the Director of the Division of Emerging Media Studies for official records.
6. There are critical deadlines that must be met. Do not undertake a thesis if there is any change that you cannot meet them.

WHEN CAN THE ACTUAL WORK BEGIN?

Once your Readers and the Director of the Division of Emerging Media Studies have approved of your proposal, you are free to undertake the work that you have planned. Note: It is unwise to undertake work on the actual thesis before all of the above steps have been completed. Such work may not be acceptable to one or more of those parties who must provide approval for the thesis proposal. Starting work on a thesis without a formally approved proposal may result in wasted time and effort.

(Format for Title Page of Proposal)

A Proposal for a Master's Thesis

To be Entitled

[THE TITLE OF THE PROPOSED THESIS]

by

[Your Name]

To Be Submitted in Partial Fulfillment for the Degree of
MASTER OF ARTS IN EMERGING MEDIA STUDIES

[Date of Proposal Here]

Approved: _____

Date: _____

(Thesis Advisor/First Reader)

Approved: _____

Date: _____

(Second Reader)

Approved: _____

Date: _____

(Director, Emerging Media Studies)

THESIS DEADLINE STATEMENT

There are a number of important deadlines that must be met if you are to graduate on time. First, you must consider your planned date of graduation. The College of Communication honors three graduation dates: January 25th, September 25th, and one in May (usually the third Sunday).

These dates are baselines for determining when your initial draft of your thesis must be in the hands of your First Reader. These dates also determine when your completed thesis must be delivered to Mugar Library.

Starting with your planned graduation date, you can determine the specific day and date when the following are due. Please make those determinations and discuss them with your First and Second Reader.

1. The initial draft of your thesis must be delivered to your First Reader at least 4 weeks before your graduation date.

This date is: _____

Note that the reason for the above date is to allow your Readers ample time to review your draft, to make recommendations for change and to work with you to complete the final product. Also note that faculty members become very busy toward the end of semesters. If you fail to meet this deadline they have no obligations to set aside their other work to give you priority. If the deadline is not met, they may decline to continue as a Reader. This can result in the termination of your candidacy for the degree in your planned semester. In addition, professors who are not on duty during the summer have no obligation to provide services to you during that time. Finally, do not expect them to attend to your work during vacations, holidays, or weekends. Therefore, do not miss the above deadline.

2. For Master's Thesis, the deadline for delivering the final copies (and relevant forms) to the Mugar Library is two weeks prior to graduation.

This date is: _____

Please discuss these dates with your First Reader and then fill in the above, to be submitted with your Thesis Proposal document.