So You Want to Write a M.A. Thesis

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Requirements for the Thesis

The thesis is the final step before receiving the Masters of Arts degree in the thesis concentration. It demonstrates your mastery of a specific historical subject and of the techniques of historical research. By design, it is a different experience from graduate coursework. Although you will build on your courses and receive guidance from your advisors, to complete the thesis you must be able to investigate new terrain on your own. The masterpiece in a craft guild is a useful analog: completing a thesis proves that the student is capable of doing high quality independent work.

While the graduate college has a number of formatting and style requirements for the final published version of the thesis, there is only one formal requirement imposed by the History Department: the thesis must be accepted by at least two faculty members after a defense. There are no specific requirements about page length, number of chapters, number of sources, or originality of research; and each professor in the department has slightly different expectations about each of these things. There are, however, general guidelines you should follow.

A thesis is an original piece of historical research based on primary sources. It advances a single argument that explains change over time. It places this argument in historical context, displaying familiarity with the larger historical milieu, and in historiographical context, displaying familiarity with key works in the field. It addresses the larger significance of its argument. Most theses are between sixty and one-hundred pages long and are typically divided into at least four sections or chapters: an introduction, at least two main body chapters (one of which is sometimes background), and a conclusion.

An M.A. thesis is not a Ph.D. dissertation. It does not have the same expectations of originality. Although it should not reproduce an existing piece of scholarship, a thesis may make the same argument as another historian using different sources or a different approach. A thesis does not require the depth of sources a dissertation does. It does not require archival sources and it can be based on sources in translation rather than in the original language, although you should discuss issues involved in using translated works with your thesis advisor. Finally, a thesis does not require the same density of literature and background. It should demonstrate familiarity with major works, but not the obsessive cataloging of every book and article on the subject.

The remainder of this document is intended to give you practical advice on producing a thesis. It is intended to supplement, rather than replace, frequent consultation with your faculty advisor.

The Nature and Purpose of Writing a Thesis

Conceptually, the process of writing a thesis involves moving from a topic (the culture of the late Roman Empire) to a specific question about change over time (why did the Roman Empire fall?) to an argument (the Roman Empire fell because the spread of Christianity eroded the traditional Roman values on which it was based). None of these are easy steps, and moving from one to the next requires reading primary and secondary sources and writing. You may also find that as you discover more about your subject, you need to go back and revise your topic, question, or argument.

Because of this, writing a thesis is a recursive process. You will make lots of false starts and go down many blind alleys. You will have to revise everything about the project, possibly several times. You will spend time reading things that don't find their way into the final paper. All of that is not only OK, it is essential to producing a well-written thesis. In fact, going through this process is in some ways the most important aspect of the masters program. The ability to work independently and be self-critical, rather than the specific historical knowledge you gain, is what employers and schools value most about the M.A. degree.

This is also what your advisor is there for. It is likely that your advisor knows at least a little bit about your topic, but you will very quickly become the expert in that area. The advisor's main job is to help you through the process of revision by pointing out things that don't work in your thesis. If you want to get the most out of writing your thesis, embrace revision and try not to get frustrated when your advisor suggests that you change something in your work.

Picking an Advisor

When thinking about choosing a faculty member to work with as an advisor or primary reader of your thesis, you should consider the expertise of the faculty and the type of working relationship you can have with them. Of the two, the nature of your working relationship is more important because in most cases you will very quickly reach a point where your knowledge of your topic surpasses your advisor's. For most of the thesis process the advisor's role is to help refine your thinking, clarify and strengthen your writing, and generally to use their experience as a historian to help you. So you need an advisor you are comfortable receiving feedback and constructive criticism from and with whom you have compatible expectations about things like how often to meet, how strictly to keep a schedule of drafts, and so on. You should also consider availability: generally speaking, the Americanists in our department have more thesis advisees, but they always endeavor to work with new and old advisees with what time they do have.

But it's also quite useful to have an advisor who has some expertise related to your topic. Especially at the beginning of your research, your advisor can help you navigate the historiography, understand the historical context, and locate primary sources. Keep in mind the methodological and thematic expertise of faculty members. An advisor whose research is in a particular area, such as military history or labor history, can provide valuable guidance on doing that kind of research even if the specific topic is outside their area of expertise.

The same considerations apply when selecting a second reader, although that typically comes later in the process. Also be aware that the second reader does not necessarily have to be in the history department. If there are faculty members or other experts outside the department who fit the criteria for a good advisor, keep them in mind as potential second readers. Finally, although you must have two readers, you are also allowed to have more than two if you think it would improve your thesis.

Refining Your Topic

You probably have at least a general idea of what you want to write about. Hopefully, you've taken a class related to the topic and you are familiar with the basic outlines of the subject. You may have written a paper for History 570 on your topic. Some students already have a perfectly good topic and are ready to move on to developing their question. But if you have a very broad topic, you will benefit from narrowing it before you start trying to formulate a question.

You need a topic that is manageable and possible. "Manageable" in this case means you can look at the relevant secondary literature and sample the primary sources to develop your question in a reasonable amount of time. If your topic is very broad (the French Revolution), you should try to narrow it down or you will spend months or years reading. Look at general works on the subject and try to get a sense for what interests you.

The topic also needs to be "possible," meaning something that you will be able to find primary sources for. If there aren't sources that you can find and use, the topic is worthless. For example, you might be interested in popular reactions to the Protestant Reformation in the Scottish Highlands. But if all the sources are in Scottish archives and/or written in Gaelic and you don't have access to those archives or read Gaelic, that's not a good topic for you. Make sure there are some sources available before you spend too much time reading up on a topic.

How to Read Secondary Literature

You will use secondary sources for three purposes in the thesis writing process: to help develop your topic and question, to provide background and context for your argument, and to highlight the significance of your argument by contrasting it to others. Each purpose will require you to look at different types of books and articles and to use them in different ways. When you're reading to define your topic, you should be reading fairly general works and looking for specific areas that you want to explore. In this phase, it's very useful to look at several generations of scholarship. The types of questions that historians ask changes, so the area that you might be interested in may appear in older works or it may be something that has only been discussed in newer works. If you just look at one generation, you may miss something.

When you're reading for background, you should also focus on some general works. Typically you'll want to use the most up-to-date works here, although there are exceptions. You should also look at more specialized books in areas that are related to but distinct from your topic. For example, if you are writing about the culture of the Enlightenment in Paris in the 1760s, you will probably want to know as much as possible about the economy and political situation of the

time, even though this is not what your own research will focus on. When you're reading for background, don't feel obligated to read entire works. Skim the whole thing, but focus on what you want to get out of the book or article.

Finally, when you're reading to put your argument into context your focus should be on the argument of the secondary sources. Focus on the introductory material (whether to an entire book or to a section that relates to your topic) and read carefully to understand how the author presents the argument. You don't need to read all the books and articles on your subject, but you should try to identify the major schools of thought. Look for books that are influential (that other people cite often) and focus on them.

To find relevant secondary sources, look at bibliographies and references in other works. Many fields also have bibliographic guides that are published semi-regularly. A reference librarian can help you locate these guides, which are typically in the reference section. It's also useful to physically browse the shelves of the library. Finally, when you do find a book, note the Library of Congress subject heading and do a WorldCat or EZ Borrow search for that heading.

Developing a Question

Once you have a topic you should start working on developing a question that will guide your research. You should spend some time on this: a well-formulated question will make researching and writing your thesis much easier. Like your topic, the question should be manageable and possible. Part of formulating the question is mapping out a plan for finding the answer that you can accomplish given the available resources.

A good question has several important features. It is about explaining change over time, so it should be expressed in terms of "Why?" It should be a genuine question, with at least two possible answers. It should be about something important: there should be stakes to how you answer it. Finally, it should be a puzzle. For example, the question "Why did George II become king of Great Britain?" is not a good one. It is about change over time, there are several possible answers, and it is about something important (as head of one of the most powerful countries in Europe, George II was an important historical figure). But there is a trivial answer that exhausts the subject: his father died and he became king as a matter of course according to the rules of succession.

To develop a good question, you need to read the secondary literature on your topic. Look for changes that don't have a satisfactory explanation. There may be questions that other historians have answered but that you disagree with, or that you think could be answered another way. There may even be things that no one has thought to ask before. You should also look at primary sources. This will ensure that you will have sources to answer your question, but it may also help you discover a new question. Look for features in primary sources that aren't explained in the secondary literature.

Your question will guide your research and writing, so it is important to have it clearly established before you begin to do either in earnest. But it's not important that the question be completely worked out or set in stone. Like everything else about the thesis, you will revise your

question as you learn more. Once you and your advisor are satisfied that you have clear idea of what you're looking for, you should start serious research.

Finding Primary Sources

There are four main places where you can find primary sources: Kemp Library, interlibrary loan, online, or area research libraries. Obviously, Kemp Library is not a research library and there are limitations to what you will find there. But there is a great deal of material available on campus. It's a really good idea to set up a meeting with a reference librarian to get started.

There is also a tremendous amount of published material available through interlibrary loan. Be aware, however, that this takes time and advance planning. The ILL staff requires you to go to EZ Borrow first, so make sure to check there. You should be on the lookout for published collections of primary sources as well as microforms.

There is also a wealth of information online. Look at archives, major research libraries (such as the British Library), and universities for material. Be aware, however, that not everything is online and that you can't do all your research from a computer.

Finally, ESU is near a number of fine academic libraries that you may be able to get access to. Many universities allow access to graduate students as guests. There is also the New York Public Library, which is open to anyone and has a large collection of services, including some archival material. For local history topics, historical societies possess troves of primary sources that will be of use to most topics of that nature.

In many cases you won't have access to archives, so you need to be creative in finding published sources. Look in the bibliographies of secondary sources for ideas. There are many places where you can find published primary sources. Historical societies, especially in the late 19th and early 20th centuries, often published primary source material. Governmental or quasi-governmental agencies, like the Historical Manuscripts Commission in Great Britain, have done the same. Many official state papers have been published in their entirety. Some very old "histories" (from the 18th or early 19th century) are really just collections of primary sources with some connecting material. Many of these types of collections are available through interlibrary loan or sometimes on Google Books.

In all these cases, you will be looking at something mediated by an editor. That's fine, but you should be aware of the editor's choices and how they may bias the collection. You should also seek to minimize this as much as possible. For example, *The Complete Correspondence of…* is always better than *Selected Letters of…* As far as possible you should avoid general collections of primary sources intended for undergraduate classes, because these are often not representative and are sometimes taken out of context.

Research Tips

Once you've developed your question and identified some primary sources, you're ready to start intensive research. One of the challenges of research is figuring out what's important and what

you can skip or skim. Generally you should start by reading a lot, at least until you get a sense of the "rules of the game" for that source. You should not think of it as a race. If you're reading slowly that's a good thing, because it means you're getting a lot of information. As long as you have a clear idea of what you're looking for (this is where having a clear question is very valuable), you aren't wasting your time by exploring slowly.

As you read, you should take notes. Save yourself a lot of time and trouble, and write down full bibliographic information and page numbers for everything you look at. You should also develop a system for distinguishing between direct quotes, paraphrases, and your own thoughts. One such system is to use quotation marks for direct quotes, plain text for paraphrases, and square brackets [ ] for your own reflections.

Everyone has their own system for taking notes. Take a moment to think about how you want to organize them. Find a system that works for you, especially one that will allow you to search and access your notes easily when it comes time to write.

Answering Your Question: The Argument

Even though you will probably have a hypothesis, it's important not to fixate on the answer to your question too early. If you do, you'll close yourself off to other possibilities. Rather than doing research, you'll be looking for evidence of a preconceived position.

Often, your argument will not become clear until you start writing. That's a normal part of the revision process and nothing to worry about. Many people hold off on writing the introduction, with the formal statement of the argument, until later. On the other hand, some people develop the argument first and rigidly outline the rest of the thesis around it.

However you begin, by the time you defend your thesis it should be centered on the argument. This is the goal of the revision process.

Writing and Revising

By this point in your academic career you probably have developed a prose style that works for you. Use it in the thesis. But if you have questions or doubts about style, remember that your only goal is to say what you mean as clearly as possible. Here are some tips from George Orwell's excellent essay "The Politics of the English Language" that have helped me.

i. Never use a metaphor, simile, or other figure of speech which you are used to seeing in print.
ii. Never use a long word where a short one will do.
iii. If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out.
iv. Never use the passive where you can use the active.
v. Never use a foreign phrase, scientific word, or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.
vi. Break any of these rules sooner than say anything outright barbarous.

When you write early drafts of your chapters, feel free to make them incomplete. For example, if there's a section that needs more work, thought, or clarification, it's perfectly acceptable to put in a note to that effect and move on. One thing that you should not put off, however, is the references. Although it may seem easy to say "I'll add the footnotes later," it is actually much harder to insert references after the fact. Save yourself some trouble and do them as you go.

On the subject of footnotes, avoid using abbreviations like "ibid" in your drafts. As you move things around and insert references, these will no longer point to the right source, and it can be difficult to sort out after the fact.

As you write and re-write your thesis, you will gradually hone in on your argument with the help of your advisor. That means cutting material from the paper if it is not necessary to advance the argument. Sometimes this material will be extremely well-written, enlightening, and special to you. Cut it anyway. The point of the thesis is to advance and support your argument, not to make interesting points.

Time to Completion

The amount of time it takes to write your thesis is largely up to you. No one will be there to force you to work on it, so you are dependent on your self-discipline to get it done.

Some students find it helpful to work up a timetable for chapters and drafts with their advisor. These self-imposed deadlines can be useful. It can also be helpful, especially if you are writing your thesis part-time, to set aside a block of time on a daily or weekly basis to devote to thesis work.

Finally, make sure to leave plenty of time between your expected graduation date and your defense and between the defense and the time you submit your defensible draft to your committee. In particular, the department requires that you submit the thesis to your advisor by the date the University requires you to apply to graduate. Ideally, you should submit a draft before this deadline so your advisor can tell you whether you are ready to defend or not.

What to Expect from the Defense

The defense is the penultimate hurdle in completing your thesis and your degree (you will still have to survive formatting it for the Graduate College). But it should also be an enjoyable experience. You have a chance to have a conversation about your work with smart and engaged people, in which you are the expert. The members of your committee may point out areas that need further clarification, but for the most part they will ask you the kinds of questions they would ask any other colleague whose work they wished to understand better.