

The M.A. Thesis: Some Guidelines and Procedures

The Thesis Proposal

The thesis or capstone proposal introduces your study: the rhetorical situation that generates a problem, the question or issue that you are asking about the situation, and the means by which you'll answer those questions. It should persuade your committee that you have a viable study (one that is motivated by disciplinary conversations and/or external needs and problems, that is do-able, etc.) and it lays out a map for you to follow as you conduct your inquiry and draft the thesis or complete the capstone. The proposal has two main "movements." The first explains the origins of the inquiry and how that inquiry is motivated by and situated within previous work and current conversations on the topic; it culminates with a list of specific research questions. The second lays out your plan of action for pursuing answers to those questions. The proposal shouldn't be too long: 2-3 pages single-spaced (not including bibliography). It should get right to the point and show that you have a focused idea. The proposal should be organized with the following headers:

Introduction

The introduction should establish the rhetorical situation around your study or project and the problem that you plan to investigate and ultimately solve. The motivation or exigence for the study may include personal experience (in the workplace or elsewhere), emerging societal problems, needs and trends, and/or disciplinary conversations that suggest your study is needed.

Literature Review

The literature review examines what has been researched and argued about your particular issue, object of analysis, rhetorical situation, and/or theoretical approach within the disciplinary literature. This discipline might be framed as rhetorical studies, professional writing, technical communication, composition studies, cultural studies, media theory, etc. These areas often have different journals, different conversations, and different research methods, but they can also overlap in various ways. It is important for you to pick one particular area as your main one to review. Relevant material can come in to your analysis from other areas, but by defining an initial disciplinary audience you can determine whether this other material is new or useful to that audience and its concerns.

The lit review should be written in paragraph form and approximately follow a historical organization to show the development of an ongoing disciplinary conversation that you will write into. The thesis should expand on this initial run at some research and cover some more territory; the capstone lit review will focus more on methods and theories that support your project. The review is not just to show that you know who said what. It serves three rhetorical functions for your argument: it situates your study or project in a disciplinary conversation; it identifies the conceptual foundations and theoretical framework you will be applying in your study (stating explicitly the key theoretical

terms/concepts you will be using and defining them clearly); it identifies a gap in the scholarship/research that needs to be filled.

Research Questions

These questions should grow out of the problems and gaps you've identified. You probably won't know exactly what your main claim will be at this stage, but the questions should orient you to the scene and object of analysis and to possible solutions or claims that your analysis will generate. They should be open-ended enough not to pre-determine your claim, but specific enough to focus your research in particular directions. 2 to 4 research questions will be about right for a thesis; a single central problem to be solved is appropriate for a capstone. As you move forward with the study and begin turning your research questions into claims and sub-claims, think about these 5 predominant types of claims, the kinds of questions they answer, and their logical sequence. Your questions will need to be more specific than these, but start with these more general categories:

- Fact: Did it happen? Does it exist? Is it true?
- Definition: What is it? What is it like? How should it be classified? How should we interpret it? What does it mean?
- Cause (Effect): What caused it? Where did it come from? Why did it happen? What are its effects? What are the possible results?
- Value: Is it good or bad? How bad or good? What is its worth? To whom? Is it moral or immoral? To whom? What do those people value? What values or criteria ground our evaluation of it?
- Policy: What should we do? How should we act? What should our future course of action be? How can we solve this problem?

The rhetorical situation, problems, and gaps you identify will point you toward these kinds of questions. If you are analyzing a new phenomenon, your focus might be on fact and definition. If it is an established phenomenon or problem, you may need to determine the cause if no one has clearly established this yet. If all of these have been dealt with by previous research, you may need to move on to focus on value or policy. You might analyze value assumptions or theories that have grounded previous research; or, you might provide a new solution to an ongoing problem. Start with these kinds of questions as your research questions and move toward answers to these questions as your research develops to produce your primary claims. In the proposal, you might want to indicate which one you think will turn into your main claim and which ones will become supporting sub-claims. Often as you move down the list, the questions above will become supporting sub-claims: for example, a main claim of policy will often need sub-claims of fact, definition, or cause to establish the problem. For the proposal, simply provide a bulleted list of your primary research questions and if needed, write a brief paragraph about how you think these will develop.

Methods

Having posed your questions for research, the proposal should move into establishing how you will answer those questions. You should anticipate what you need to learn and the ways you can obtain that information. You should discuss your overall approach (rhetorical criticism, ethnography, discourse analysis, case study, genre analysis, theory/application), your specific methods for collecting data (library research/close reading, participant observation, interviews, surveys, usability studies, etc.), and your criteria for choosing your participants and/or texts (i.e., your sampling methods). Just as your problem might need multiple types of claims to fully answer it, you might need multiple methods to find needed information. If so, discuss how these strategies fit together to build the stages of your evidence.

If you are using more qualitative or social science-based methods, you should discuss how you will implement the methods: how you will gain access to a workplace or social context, how you will determine and approach informants, how you will treat informants ethically, whether you'll need HSRB/IRB approval, etc. This may include the logistics of using technologies (recorders, computers, etc), pay or reward participants, how you will code and analyze data or field notes, etc.

Contents

It can be helpful to project your chapter or section breakdown for the thesis. Think of this as a Table of Contents with chapter/section titles and a single paragraph explaining what each chapter/section will accomplish rhetorically. For researchers doing ethnographic work, it's likely that the main sections will be determined by the main categories that emerge from your field notes and transcripts. For researchers doing discourse analysis, your main sections might be driven by some variety in the texts you're examining. For researchers doing primarily theoretical work, your outline might revolve around a section that establishes your theories and the application of these theories to your object or scene of analysis; or, your sections might be based on the types of sub-claims needed to support your claim: fact and cause for defining a problem, value for establishing the need to solve the problem, and solution for showing what theorists or practitioners should do about it. For researchers working on a workplace-oriented project, your sections will include an intro, a lit review, a process description, examples of the product (if available) and a reflection section. Your breakdown in the proposal should be brief and simply provide a sketch for a basic logic that seems to fit your situation, problem, and methods.

Schedule

Timelines for theses are often flexible and change as your work develops, but it helps to start out with some basic goals. Finishing a thesis in one semester is a challenge and requires fairly strict adherence to a tight timeline. You should discuss some realistic goals with your chair and build this initial structure into the proposal. Typical milestones would be: getting your proposal approved, gaining IRB approval, a period for gathering research or data, due dates for getting drafts to your chair, dates for getting revisions to readers, a

date for getting the final version to the graduate school. This can simply show up here as a bulleted list.

Bibliography

For the proposal, include an initial bibliography. This would obviously include material cited in the proposal, but also include works from your coursework that you know you will use and any new research you gathered up to this point. The goal is to pull together what you have and to show what key texts and theorists you will use. Eventually you'll want to do more research and add on to this initial list. APA format is preferred.