Writing a Master’s Thesis:
General Considerations

# What is a Master’s Thesis?

Your Master's research paper can be based upon your original research in the field, upon data gathered from other sources (say, videotaped footage; political speeches; Internet chatrooms; archival or museum material), and/or upon existing theoretical and ethnographic literature. A fieldwork-based Master's paper has certain advantages. Fieldwork is of course the foundation of anthropology, so conducting original fieldwork gives you a chance to flex these muscles, and (if need be) to test the waters to determine whether you think a future in anthropology is for you. It is also wonderful to have a fieldwork-based writing sample when applying for doctoral programs, or, minimally, to be able to summarize one's fieldwork-based project in one's applications. However, fieldwork is not a must for an MA paper, and plenty of strong papers have been grounded in other material instead.

# How to Develop a Research Question

No matter where your data comes from, your Master's paper must emerge from a specific research question. Ideally, your introduction will set up your thesis statement (that is, your statement of your central argument) with a context that shows how your thesis stems from a tension, question, or puzzle in your data or the anthropological literature or both. Rather than simply stating "I'm interested in X and Y," you must set up the problematic from which your (clearly stated) argument emerges. It is sometimes helpful to formulate a "why" question that your thesis will attempt to answer, or at least illuminate.

# What are the Components of the Thesis?

The structure of a thesis can vary widely depending on the exact nature of the topic. Generally speaking, a thesis will be somewhere between 50 and 100 double-spaced pages of writing, excluding references.

Your thesis must engage meaningfully with the anthropological literature on the subject matter and demonstrate proficiency in that literature.

## Hypothetical Thesis Outline

1. *Introduction (~5 pages)*

The introduction will outline the central research problem that the thesis is about, the main theoretical arguments, and the structure of the thesis.

1. *Background Chapter(s)*

This section, which may consist of one or more chapters, should address any background information relevant to your thesis. This includes some combination of historical information or review of previous work on the subject, an exploration of the theoretical perspective utilized within the thesis or to which the thesis contributes, and a discussion of the methodology used within your case study.

1. *Content/Case Study Chapter(s)*

These chapters will present the specific context of your study, a description of the data utilized, your analysis of the data/how the data supports the argument that you’ve made thus far in the thesis, and the significance of the data within the theoretical framework that you’ve provided.

1. *Conclusion (~5 pages)*

Your conclusion should review and discuss the main points of the thesis, connecting your data and observations with the questions and problems presented in the previous sections.

1. *References*

Following anthropological conventions, all references should be cited within the thesis using parenthetical citations, with full citations in APA format at the end of the thesis.

# Timeline

Beyond the specific deadlines set by the Department and by the Graduate College, students should set certain targets for themselves if they plan on completing a thesis.

## Semester 1

Developing Your Thesis Topic: You should begin to formulate your thesis topic. This may start simply by identifying subjects that you are interested in. Through conversations with faculty and independent reading on the topic (outside of course work), you should begin to narrow the focus from a general subject area to a specific area of knowledge and a research question.

Identify a Thesis Chair & Assemble a Thesis Committee: Generally, your thesis chair will be a faculty member with expertise in your thesis area. The chair will direct the student through the thesis process, from identifying a research question to reviewing drafts of the thesis proposal and the thesis manuscript itself. Your thesis committee will include at least two additional faculty members, ideally individuals with expertise in various aspects of your thesis research.

## Semester 2

Thesis Proposal: While enrolled in ANTH 7300 you will develop a thesis proposal. This document will contain your research question as well as a preliminary literature review of relevant theories, case studies, and methodologies that will be used in your thesis.

IRB Clearance: If your thesis research involves human subjects research, you will need approval from the IRB prior to beginning your project. The application you need to submit will be similar to your thesis proposal.

## Semester 3/Summer

Data Collection & Analysis: Anthropological fieldwork and data collection generally take place in the summer months, though not always. In most instances, data collection will require some sustained effort or engagement, so be sure you give yourself enough time to dedicate to this part of the process.

## Semester 4

Draft your Thesis: You should begin the process of drafting your thesis. You will build on your literature review and methods section from the proposal and expand them into full chapter(s). You will describe your data and results of your analysis, and address how your data relates to your research question. Your thesis advisor will be involved in this process by providing feedback on drafts, but the exact nature of this support will be determined between the chair and the student. Your thesis should be mostly drafted by the end of this semester or before moving on to the next phase.

## Semester 5

Final Manuscript & Oral Defense: You will finalize your thesis manuscript and defend it while enrolled in ANTH 7301 (or ANTH 7100). Because the Graduate College deadlines for oral defense and thesis deposit are generally mid-semester, students should not enroll in ANTH 7301 unless their thesis is nearly ready for defense. Once ready, your thesis chair will circulate the draft among your committee members, who may request some changes prior to a defense date.