



Graduate Thesis Manual

Approved by SSW Faculty 2.7.24

Table of Contents

CHOOSING THE THESIS OPTION	3
Why Write a Thesis?	3
How Does the Thesis Option Differ from the Standard MSW Research Curriculum?	3
Is the Thesis Option a Good Fit for <i>Me</i> ?	3
What is the Timeline for Completing a Thesis?	4
SELECTING YOUR THESIS COMMITTEE	5
How Do I Choose Committee Members?	5
REFINING THE THESIS TOPIC AND METHODS	5
SWO 695 THESIS I: PROPOSAL	6
SWO 696 THESIS II: PROJECT	7
OBTAINING INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD (IRB) APPROVAL	8
WORKING WITH YOUR COMMITTEE	8
WRITING THE THESIS	9
Formatting Guidelines	9
Graduate School Requirements	10
DEFENDING THE THESIS	11
SUBMITTING THE COMPLETED THESIS	12
RESOURCES FOR WRITING AN SUCCESSFUL THESIS	12
Suggested Books and Articles	12
Suggested Websites	13
APPENDIX A: THESIS ENROLLMENT FORM	14
APPENDIX B: THESIS PROPOSAL FORM	15
APPENDIX C: THESIS COMPLETION FORM	17

CHOOSING THE THESIS OPTION

Why Write a Thesis?

The thesis is a comprehensive paper that details an original social science research study. The length of a completed thesis depends on a variety of factors, including the study methodology, but most completed theses exceed fifty pages in length. Completing the thesis provides an opportunity for graduate social work students to delve deeply into a topic of interest to them by conducting a study larger in scope than that required in the standard MSW research curriculum. The thesis provides an opportunity for students to work closely with faculty to develop additional research skills and substantive area expertise. The thesis option may be especially attractive for those students contemplating doctoral-level education in social work or other social science disciplines.

How Does the Thesis Option Differ from the Regular MSW Curriculum?

All MSW students are required to complete SWO 505 Social Work Research I and SWO 605 Social Work Research II. Students who pursue the thesis option take these two required research courses in addition to two thesis courses: SWO 695 Thesis I: Proposal, and SWO 696 Thesis II: Project. Students who write a thesis conduct an original social science research study whereas other students may only complete a proposal or classroom project in the required research courses. Conducting a research study involves the development of a research question, submitting research protocols to the Institutional Review Board (IRB), collecting data, and analyzing data. SWO 695 and SWO 696 are structured more like independent study courses than traditional courses. The thesis process is supervised by the Thesis Committee Chair. Students also consult with additional Thesis Committee members for support, as needed. Upon completion of the research and data analysis, the student writes a manuscript and presents the work orally at a formal defense meeting. The two thesis courses each replace one elective, so students who complete the thesis take only one additional elective.

Is the Thesis Option a Good Fit for *Me*?

- Are you eager to develop additional social science research skills?
- Are you hoping to delve deeply into a specific topic of interest?
- Are you able to motivate yourself to work independently and meet deadlines?
- Do you have strong written and oral communication skills?
- Do you enjoy working closely with faculty members and integrating their feedback?

If you answered “yes” to all of the questions above, the thesis option is probably a good fit for you! However, the decision to pursue a thesis is an important one. Consult with your faculty advisor to discuss your interest in the thesis option further.

What is the Timeline for Completing a Thesis?

Deciding to pursue a thesis is a decision best made *before* you plan to enroll in SWO 605 Social Work Research II. Prior to enrolling in SWO 605, you should meet with your faculty advisor to explore how the thesis option will align with your overall curriculum plan. You may wish to use assignments in other classes, especially SWO 505 Social Work Research I or undergraduate research courses, as an opportunity to explore possible thesis topics. Prior to enrolling in SWO 605 is also the best time to meet with faculty who you might like to serve on your Thesis Committee.

SWO 695 Thesis I and SWO 696 Thesis II are designed to be completed in succession across two semesters. When possible, students should enroll in SWO 695 Thesis I concurrently with SWO 605 Social Work Research II as the assignments in SWO 605 will assist students in developing their Thesis Proposal and IRB protocol.

SUGGESTED THESIS TIMELINE	
Semester	Activities
<i>Before</i> SWO 605 Social Work Research II	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Meet with Faculty Advisor ● Identify thesis topic ● Select Thesis Chair and Committee ● Submit Thesis Enrollment Form (Appendix A)
<i>Same Semester as</i> SWO 605 Social Work Research II	<p>Complete SWO 695 Thesis I: Proposal</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Complete CITI Training ● Draft Introduction and Literature Review ● Submit Thesis Proposal to SSW Research Committee with completed Thesis Proposal Form (Appendix B) ● Submit IRB Proposal
<i>Semester After</i> SWO 605 Social Work Research II	<p>Complete SWO 696 Thesis II: Project</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Collect and analyze data ● Draft Methods, Results, and Discussion Chapters ● Defend Thesis to Committee ● Submit Thesis Completion Form (Appendix C)

Your individual timeline for your own thesis, including due dates for chapters and your target defense date, will be created by you in conversation with your chair. If you plan to graduate at the end of the semester during which you will enroll in SWO 696, you should engage in earnest, realistic discussions with your Thesis Chair to ensure your project can be successfully completed during one semester. In the past, several students have had to delay their graduation because their thesis was not complete.

SELECTING YOUR THESIS COMMITTEE

A student wishing to embark on a thesis must first identify a SSW faculty member who will provide initial consultation around the research design and serve as the Chair of the student's Thesis Committee. Two additional committee members, for a total of three, must be selected with the approval of the Chair, at least one of which should be another SSW faculty member. One committee member can be from another academic department or from outside of USM. All committee members should hold graduate degrees. A student can have more than three committee members at the discretion of their Chair. While your instructor for SWO 605 may support you in the initial development of your project, they are not required to be a member of your committee.

How Do I Choose Committee Members?

Students work most closely with their Chair during the thesis process, so it is important that your Chair is a faculty member you trust and whose style of communication and workflow align with your needs. The Chair should also have sufficient background knowledge related to your thesis topic and research methods. Additional committee members should offer additional substantive or methodological expertise to support your work. Past thesis committees have included faculty from the Muskie School of Public Service, the School of Education and Human Development, as well as a range of other academic departments across the University. The online profiles of faculty typically feature information about their research interests which can help you identify potential committee members. While your Chair may suggest USM faculty members who may be appropriate, it is the student's responsibility to contact potential committee members and gauge their interest. Faculty who serve on thesis committees do so in addition to their regular teaching obligations, and do so at their own discretion based on their professional interest and current workload demands.

REFINING THE THESIS TOPIC AND METHODS

Finalizing one's topic and selecting appropriate methods are often a difficult task in any research project. As you will learn in SWO 605, a strong research project is built upon a specific and feasible research question. Usually, the research question indicates specific variables or constructs to be explored in the study. You are encouraged to approach prospective thesis committee members with a rough idea of your possible research question, but anticipate that these committee members will provide you with feedback to help you refine your variables or constructs of focus.

The research question(s) always determines the research methods to be used. Once you have finalized your research question, then you will start thinking about how to collect and analyze data to answer that question. Your instructor for SWO 605 and your thesis committee members will again be important resources for you during this process. As you are considering various methods, you will want to reflect on your own interests and strengths as well as feasibility given

time and resource constraints. Your Thesis Chair can provide guidance around ensuring your thesis project meets departmental expectations for scope and rigor.

SWO 695 THESIS I: PROPOSAL

Enrolling in SWO 695 Thesis I: Proposal

Once you have determined that you would like to pursue the thesis option, you must enroll in SWO 695 Thesis I: Proposal. To do this, complete the Thesis Enrollment Form (Appendix A) and obtain signatures from your Faculty Advisor, Thesis Chair, and Thesis Committee Members. Your Thesis Chair will then forward the form to the School of Social Work Research Committee Chair and MSW Coordinator. The MSW Coordinator will collaborate with the SSW Administrative Specialist to ensure you are enrolled in SWO 695 Thesis I: Proposal for the designated semester.

Completing SWO 695 Thesis I: Proposal

To successfully complete SWO 695 Thesis I: Proposal, students must develop a thesis proposal and obtain approval of that proposal from their thesis committee. The thesis proposal is an expanded version of the research project proposal developed in SWO 605 Social Work Research II. The proposal should comprise the first three chapters of the thesis, and should contain the following information:

- Title page
- List of committee members
- Introduction to the thesis topic, including definitions and guiding theoretical frameworks
- Literature review
- Research question(s) and, if applicable, research hypotheses
- Detailed description of proposed study methods, including:
 - Overall research design
 - Sampling procedures
 - Measurement or instrumentation
 - Data collection procedures
 - Data analysis procedures
 - List of required materials (e.g. audio recorder, photocopied questionnaires, incentives, etc.)
- Proposed timeline for project completion
- Proposed budget (if applicable) with information about funding sources
- Reference list of cited sources

The proposal should be developed in consultation with the Thesis Chair and, as appropriate, the other thesis committee members. Once completed, the thesis committee members will assess the thesis proposal according to the following criteria:

- Potential scholarly contribution of the proposed study to the social work knowledge base
- Alignment of proposed study with the values, ethics, and aims of the social work profession
- Appropriateness of proposed methods for addressing identified research question
- Scope of proposed project and sophistication of proposed methods
- Feasibility of proposed methods for timely completion
- Quality of written communication

Once the thesis committee members are satisfied with the proposal, they must sign the Thesis Proposal Form (See **APPENDIX B: THESIS PROPOSAL FORM**). The Thesis Committee Chair is then responsible for submitting the approved proposal and signed Thesis Proposal Form to the Research Committee Chair, who will complete a second review of the proposal to ensure feasibility of the project. Finally, the Research Committee Chair will submit the approved proposal and signed Thesis Proposal Form to the MSW Program Coordinator for final approval. The MSW Coordinator should receive the approved application and signed form no later than the due date listed below, corresponding to when the student plans to enroll in SWO 696 Thesis II: Project.

Due Date for **Spring** Semester Enrollment in SWO 696: **November 30th**

Due Date for **Fall** Semester Enrollment in SWO 696: **May 30th**

Thesis Chairs submit a letter grade to MaineStreet for SWO 695 Thesis I: Proposal. A proposal that receives approval from the Thesis Committee and SSW Research Committee Chair should correspond to a letter grade of B or higher. Receipt of the signed Thesis Proposal Form (APPENDIX B) will prompt the SSW Administrative Specialist to enroll the student in SWO 696 Thesis II: Project.

Once students have received approval from both their Thesis Committee and the SSW Research Committee, they may submit their research protocol to the Institutional Review Board.

SWO 696 THESIS II: PROJECT

To successfully complete SWO 696 Thesis II: Project, students must undertake the social science research project outlined in the Thesis Proposal. During this course, students will collect and analyze data, write the results and discussion chapters of the thesis, and refine the introduction, literature review, and methods chapters. The final thesis manuscript must be prepared according to the formatting requirements outlined below.

Upon completion of their project and manuscript, the thesis student will present their work orally at a formal defense meeting as described below in the section entitled, "Defending the Thesis."

Upon successful defense of the thesis, the Thesis Committee members will sign the Thesis Completion Form (Appendix C). Copies of this form should be included in the final copies of the thesis submitted for binding. Thesis Chairs submit a letter grade to MaineStreet for SWO 696 Thesis II: Project. A thesis that is successfully defended should correspond to a letter grade of B or higher.

OBTAINING INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD (IRB) APPROVAL

Any person who conducts a research study involving human participants must submit their research protocol to the IRB for review. The IRB oversees protections for human subjects in research. The process will be discussed in your SWO 605 and SWO 695 courses. Our IRB is overseen by the Office of Research Integrity and Oversight (ORIO), and detailed information about the IRB submission process is available on their website: <https://usm.maine.edu/orio/>. IRB Protocols are submitted through the Cayuse Portal as described [here](#). Students should make note that they must complete the [CITI Training](#) for ethical research with human subjects prior to gaining access to the IRB Portal. As noted in the table above, students receive approval from both their Thesis Committee and the SSW Research Committee before submitting an IRB Proposal. Students are encouraged to meet with ORIO staff during SWO 695 for assistance crafting and submitting their research protocol to the IRB.

GRADUATE RESEARCH OPPORTUNITY FUNDING

The Graduate Research Opportunity (GRO) program exists to provide USM graduate students with resources to promote research, scholarship, and creative activities. We accomplish this by fostering a community to connect graduate research fellows in support of funding, inclusion, and mentoring. We offer grants of up to \$1,000 to students in all research disciplines. And workshops to help students learn more about key aspects of research like publishing, presenting, grant writing and more. We are now accepting grant applications on a rolling basis for the 2023-2024 academic year.

WORKING WITH YOUR COMMITTEE

The working relationship between the student and their committee members is essential to the successful completion of the thesis, but the style of working relationship may vary greatly depending on the personalities and preferences of those involved. Students are strongly encouraged to discuss their expectations for communication and support with their Chair early in the process. Here are some examples of questions to discuss with your committee:

- How often will the student and Chair meet in-person or via Zoom?
- How often will the student and Chair communicate via email or phone, and what is an acceptable time frame for responding to these forms of communication?
- How often and through what formats will the student communicate with other committee members?
- How and when will the student submit drafts of thesis components to the Chair and other committee members?
- How and when will the Chair provide feedback to the student on their submitted work?
- What will the student do if they feel they are not receiving adequate support from their Chair or other committee members?
- What will the Chair do if they are concerned about the student's progress or professionalism?

If at any point in the thesis process, you feel you are not receiving the agreed upon levels of support and communication from any member of your committee, you are encouraged to address your concerns with that committee member directly. An in-person or virtual meeting is probably the best venue in which to express your concerns and outline your expectations moving forward. If students require additional support, they are encouraged to reach out to their other Thesis Committee members first, rather than School of Social Work administrators or other faculty. In exceptional circumstances, students may need to make changes to the composition of their Committee. This decision should be made jointly with existing Thesis Committee members in consultation with the current School of Social Work Research Committee. The MSW Program Coordinator should then be notified of any changes to Thesis Committee membership.

WRITING THE THESIS

Formatting Guidelines

Most theses follow a standard format that roughly aligns with the sections of a published empirical study in a peer-reviewed journal article.

The elements of all theses and dissertations are commonly presented in the order given below. Collectively, elements 1-7 are referred to as “Front Matter,” number 8 is simply referred to as the “Body” or “Main Text” (which is usually divided into separate chapters) and the remaining elements, 9 and 10, are called “Back Matter.” “REQUIRED” means the section must be included in every thesis or dissertation, optional means the author can elect to exclude that particular section. If an optional section is excluded, omit it entirely and arrange the remaining sections in the order indicated.

Front Matter

1. Title page (REQUIRED--the date must be the month and year in which the student will graduate (the only choices for months are, May, August, or December: Do not number this page.
2. Abstract page which must be double-spaced (REQUIRED—this page is typically numbered Roman numeral ii)
3. Copyright page (optional)
4. Acknowledgments page (optional)
5. Dedication page (optional)
6. Table of Contents (REQUIRED)
7. List of Tables, List of Figures, etc. (optional—only consider if you have one or more of these in the thesis. Use a separate page at the start of each type of list).

Body or Main Text (Suggested Chapters for the Thesis)

8. Body of master's thesis. Begin page numbering with Arabic numerals and number each page consecutively to the end of the thesis. Do not skip any pages within the body of the master's thesis or doctoral dissertation.
 - Chapter One: Introduction
 - Contextual information
 - Problem statement
 - Definitions of key terms
 - Relevance to social work
 - Chapter Two: Literature Review
 - Chapter Three: Methods
 - Research Design
 - Sampling
 - Measurement
 - Data collection
 - Data analysis
 - Rigor/trustworthiness
 - Chapter Four: Results
 - Chapter Five: Discussion
 - Limitations
 - Discussion of findings
 - Implications for future research
 - Implications for social work practice

Back Matter

9. Bibliography/References/Works Cited, (REQUIRED--however, it is optional here if references are provided at the end of every chapter in the main body of the thesis or dissertation).
10. Appendix (optional).

We recommend using the template available at [this link](#) to format your thesis.

USM Graduate School Requirements

The following guidelines are intended to assist students in the preparation of theses, to establish a University-wide consistency of form, and to ensure high standards of quality. Students are responsible for submitting theses that adhere to general University requirements. Students should prepare their manuscripts, including all documentation, in accordance with the APA Manual of Style

Paper Quality. The original copy of the thesis must be on white 8-1/2 x 11 bond paper of at least 20-pound weight containing 25% or more rag content (e.g. Southworth Cotton Business Paper). Submissions printed on standard copy paper will not be accepted.

Typing. All copies of the thesis must be produced with text that is dark enough and clear enough to be easily readable. The thesis must be double-spaced throughout, with the exception of quotations, footnotes, illustrations, bibliographies, and appendices which may be single spaced.

Corrections. The final copy must be clean and neat without visible corrections.

Margins. The margins of the thesis must be at least 1.5 inches from the left edge of the paper and at least one inch from the other three edges, leaving a maximum copy area of 5.75 x 9.

Required/Optional Items and Arrangement of the Thesis. The final copy of the thesis must include certain items; other items are optional. Items should be arranged in the order listed below:

1. Title Page (required)
2. Acknowledgments (optional)
3. Preface (optional)
4. Abstract (required)
5. Table of Contents (required)
6. List of Tables (required)
7. List of Figures (required)
8. Text of Thesis (required)
9. References (required)
10. Appendix B - Final Approval (required)

Pagination. A thesis contains two sets of numbers. The preliminary pages (items 1-8 of the thesis) should be numbered consecutively in small Roman numerals. The title page should be considered “i” but should not be numbered. Beginning with the text, all pages must be numbered consecutively in Arabic numerals (items 9-11 of the thesis).

Illustrations and Inserted Material. Graphs, diagrams, photographs, and other material included in a thesis must be on paper that meets the specifications described above.

DEFENDING THE THESIS

Upon completion of their project and manuscript in SWO 696 Thesis II, the thesis student will present their work orally at a formal defense meeting. The student typically prepares a presentation of about 20 minutes in length with an accompanying PowerPoint or Google Slides presentation. Thesis defense presentations are open to the entire SSW student body and faculty and are scheduled to include the Chair and all committee members. Students are also

welcome to invite community partners, family members, and friends, if they wish. The student should be prepared to respond to comments and questions about their work during this meeting. After the presentation, the Thesis Chair and Committee members make a final assessment of the student's work.

Upon successful defense of the thesis, the Thesis Committee members will sign the Final Approval Form (Appendix B). Copies of this form should be included in the final copies of the thesis submitted for binding.

SUBMITTING THE COMPLETED THESIS

Copies and Binding. Two copies of the thesis, with all applicable signatures obtained from the student's program/college, must be submitted by the student to the library for binding. All students are required to use the binding service provided through USM's Glickman Library. Students must submit payment for binding services in the form of a check or money order (payable to USM). Binding costs are as follows: first copy, for the USM Library, is free; any additional copies, for the student, \$25.00 each. The SSW does not require students to submit a bound copy of their thesis to the School.

Print and complete this [content release form](#) to submit with your thesis.

Electronic Copies. Students are required to submit an electronic copy (PDF) of their final thesis, once defended, to the Thesis Committee Chair, MSW Program Coordinator, and SSW Administrative Specialist. The thesis will be added to an electronic archive of SSW theses.

RESOURCES FOR WRITING A SUCCESSFUL THESIS

Suggested Books and Articles

Anderson, J., Durston, B. and Poole, M. (1970) *Thesis and Assignment Writing*. Brisbane: Wiley.

Cone, J. D., & Foster, S. L. (2007). *Dissertations and theses from start to finish*. Washington, DC: American Psychological Association.

Creswell, J. W. (2007). *Qualitative inquiry and research design: Choosing among five traditions*. Thousand Oaks, CA: SAGE.

Dunleavy, P. (2003). *Authoring a PhD: How to plan, draft, write and finish a doctoral dissertation*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan.

Engel, R., Schutt, R. (2014). *Fundamentals of social work research*. Sage Publications.

Heppner, P. P., & Heppner, M. J. (2004). *Writing and publishing your thesis, dissertation, and research*. Belmont, CA: Thomson/Brooks Cole.

Lunenburg, C., Irby. (2008). *Writing a successful thesis or dissertation: Tips and strategies for students in the social and behavioral sciences*. Sage Publications.

Miles, M., Huberman, M., Saldana, J. (2020). *Qualitative data analysis: A methods sourcebook*. Sage Publications.

Murray, R. (2006). *How to write a thesis*. Oxford University Press, McGraw-Hill Education.

Pyrzczak, F. (2013). *Evaluating research in academic journals: A practical guide to realistic evaluation*. Pyrczak Publishing.

Rubin, A., Babbie, E. (2017). *Research methods for social work*. Cengage Learning.

Suggested Websites

[10 Ways to Successfully Defend Your PhD](#)

[How to Prepare an Excellent Thesis Defense](#)

[Video: How to Defend Your Thesis](#)

[Video: Master's Thesis Presentation Example](#)

[Video: Master's Thesis Defense Structure](#)

APPENDIX B

THESIS PROPOSAL FORM

Student Name:

Working Title of Thesis:

The thesis committee has evaluated the thesis proposal according to the following criteria and determined the proposed project appropriate for a thesis in the School of Social Work.

- Potential scholarly contribution of the proposed study to the social work knowledge base
- Alignment of proposed study with the values, ethics, and aims of the social work profession
- Appropriateness of proposed methods for addressing identified research question
- Scope of proposed project and sophistication of proposed methods
- Feasibility of proposed methods for timely completion
- Quality of written communication

The committee supports the student in their enrollment in SWO 695 Thesis Option.

Semester to Enroll in SWO 696 Thesis II: Project: Fall / Spring (Circle One) of Year _____

Signatures:

Student: Print Name	Signed Name	Date
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Committee Chair: Print Name	Signed Name	Date
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Committee Member: Print Name	Signed Name	Date
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Committee Member: Print Name	Signed Name	Date
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(FORM CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE)

The Research Committee Chair or other Research Committee representative has reviewed the proposal approved by the Thesis Committee. The proposal is considered appropriate and feasible for completion within the designated time frame:

Research Committee Chair: Print Name	Signed Name	Date
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The MSW Coordinator has received the approved thesis proposal and the student will be enrolled in SWO 696 Thesis II: Project.

MSW Program Coordinator: Print Name	Signed Name	Date
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CC: School of Social Work Administrative Specialist
Student's Faculty Advisor

APPENDIX C
THESIS COMPLETION FORM

Student Name:

Title of Thesis:

The Thesis Committee members listed below affirm that [Student Name] has successfully completed and defended their thesis entitled [Title of Thesis] in accordance with the requirements of the University of Southern Maine School of Social Work.

Signatures:

Committee Chair: Print Name	Signed Name	Date
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Committee Member: Print Name	Signed Name	Date
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Committee Member: Print Name	Signed Name	Date
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CC: School of Social Work Administrative Specialist