

STANDARDS FOR M.A. THESIS
Department of Government
University of West Florida

Overview of Thesis

The thesis will include an appropriate theoretical foundation and a scholarly investigation of a significant political problem or question. The problem may be historical, contemporary, or hypothetical. The research will be conducted in accordance with a methodology suitable for studying the question. The method may be quantitative, qualitative, or some combination of both. The data may be statistical, textual, or both. What is absolutely required is a disciplined approach that involves rigorous thinking, objective examination of the available evidence or texts, and reaching conclusions that are consistent with the weight of the evidence or the logic of the argument. The object is to produce something that, in condensed form, could be presented at a state or regional conference of political scientists. There is no minimum or maximum length, although most theses will run between 50 and 100 pages. For more information on the thesis structure, see the guidelines that follow.

The choice of the thesis topic lies with the student in consultation with the thesis director. Before a student embarks on a thesis, a prospectus has to be approved by a committee of three faculty. Also, the final product will be defended before a committee of faculty whose composition should, if at all possible, be identical to the first committee. Approval of the prospectus and successful defense of the final product requires the consent of at least three faculty members on the thesis committee. In the case of an unsuccessful prospectus defense, the student will have one more opportunity to defend the prospectus, but this defense must be successfully completed within the semester subsequent to the first defense. In the case of an unsuccessful final thesis defense, the student will have one more opportunity to defend the thesis, but this defense must be successfully completed within the semester subsequent to the first thesis defense.

Credit Hours

No more than six sh of thesis credit may be applied to the student's degree plan. However, as long as the student is working on a thesis, he or she must enroll in at least 1 sh every semester, even if this brings the total for the degree to more than 33 sh.

Committee

The thesis committee must have a minimum of three members. The thesis will be directed by a faculty member who consents to work with the student. The thesis director, who must be a full-time member of the Political Science program faculty, will chair the committee. The director will assume responsibility for guiding the student through the entire thesis cycle, from choosing and refining a topic, preparing a thesis prospectus, doing the bibliographic review, collecting and analyzing data, through writing one or more drafts of the thesis. It is the thesis director who decides when the prospectus is ready for presentation and when the thesis is ready for a defense.

At least one more committee member must be a member of the full-time faculty. The third committee member may be an emeritus faculty, a visiting faculty member, an adjunct faculty, a member of another UWF department, or even a faculty from another

institution whose expertise bears on the thesis topic. The selection of committee members outside of UWF is subject to approval by the thesis director.

Thesis Prospectus

The thesis prospectus must contain the following parts:

1. A statement of the research problem or question.
2. A statement on the methodology to be followed in investigating the question as appropriate to the discipline.
3. A description of the data or texts to be analyzed.
4. A comprehensive bibliography to be consulted.
5. A timeline for completion of the thesis.

Thesis Timeline

A thesis normally takes two semesters. In consultation with the thesis director, the student must draw up a timeline consistent with the university thesis calendar. The timeline should have dates for the following milestones:

1. Selection of two or three committee members in addition to the thesis director.
2. Submission of a thesis prospectus to the committee.
3. Meeting of thesis committee to approve, subject to revisions, the thesis prospectus.
4. Defense of the thesis.

Sample Calendar with Suggested Target Dates

A student may work on a thesis at any time during the academic calendar, however it should be noted that a Fall-Spring schedule leaves more time for completion than a Spring-Summer or Summer-Fall schedule.

Fall – Spring Schedule

September – select thesis director and discuss thesis topic

October – select other committee members and defend prospectus

November – if successful defense of prospectus, begin work on thesis

December – schedule second defense of prospectus if first is unsuccessful

January – meet with thesis director to discuss draft of thesis

February – work on revisions and meet with committee members to discuss draft

March – schedule defense of thesis

April – if unsuccessful, work on revisions to re-defend in the summer

Thesis

The thesis shall consist of the following parts:

1. An abstract of no more than 300 words.
2. A statement of the research problem or question.
3. Review of the literature.
4. Description of data or texts and methodology.
5. Data or textual analysis.
6. Presentation of findings.
7. Discussion of results and implications of investigation.
8. Conclusion.
9. Bibliography.

Preparation for Prospectus Defense

The prospectus defense is a panel discussion between the student and the faculty on the thesis committee. This discussion serves to clarify, bolster, and defend the thesis structure and argument provided in the prospectus. Generally, it will be scheduled during the first semester of the student's work on the thesis.

After scheduling the prospectus defense, but before the actual meeting of the thesis committee, students would be well advised to visit with the individual members of their thesis committee to gain possible early insight into their potential concerns. To prepare for the prospectus defense, students should thoroughly revisit their prospectus, noting areas in need of clarification, elaboration, or amendment.

The prospectus defense begins with a presentation by the student of the thesis topic. After this 10-30 minute presentation, each faculty member on the thesis committee may ask questions of clarification or elaboration of the prospectus. Typically prospectus defenses last up to 2 hours. At the end of the prospectus defense, the student is asked to leave the room so the faculty on the thesis committee may deliberate on passage. The student is then asked to return, and the decision is announced.

Students should treat this phase as a defense of their conceptualization of the project and an opportunity for intellectual discussion. Students should prepare to hear constructive criticism and difficult questioning.

Preparation for Thesis Defense

In many ways, the thesis defense is very similar in form and purpose to the prospectus defense. The thesis defense is a panel discussion between the student and the faculty on the thesis committee. Whereas the prospectus defense is a time for clarification and constructive criticism of the proposed topic, the thesis defense is a discussion to defend the thesis structure, argument, and findings in revised form. Generally, it will be scheduled early enough during the second semester of the student's work to provide time for a secondary defense if necessary.

The thesis defense begins with a presentation by the student of the thesis research question, mode of analysis, findings, and major conclusions. After this 10-30 minute presentation, each faculty member on the thesis committee may ask questions of clarification or elaboration of the thesis. Typically thesis defenses last up to 2 hours. At the end of the defense, the student is asked to leave the room so the faculty on the thesis committee may deliberate on passage. The student is then asked to return, and the decision is announced.

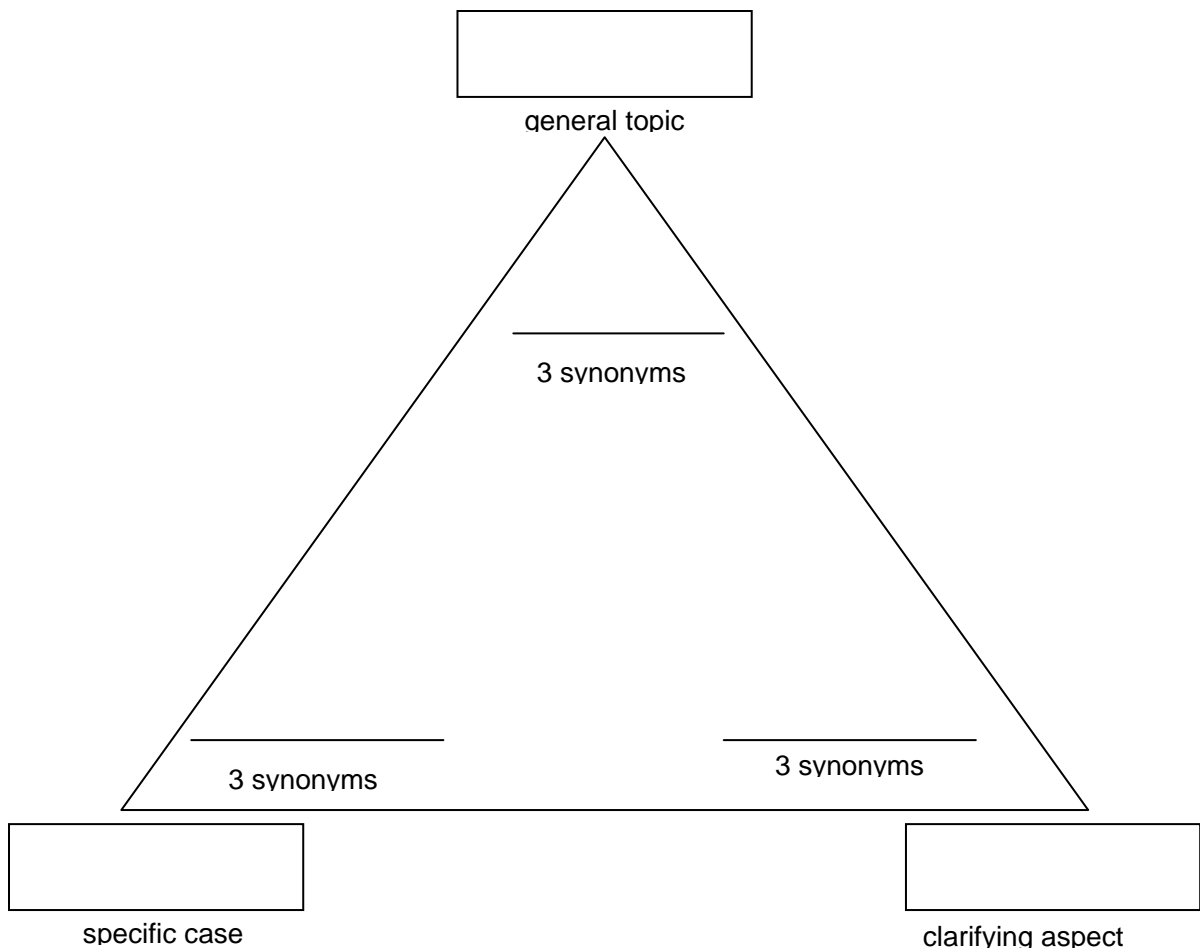
Guidelines for and Explanation of Thesis Structure

Element	Length	Description
Abstract	No longer than 300 words.	The purpose of the abstract is to communicate the research question and the major findings of the study in a succinct well-designed paragraph.
Introduction	2-5 pages	The introduction should briefly suggest the theoretical basis for the inquiry, the specific research question, the scope of the project, and expected findings.
Research Problem	2-5 pages	The research problem should be phrased in such a way that it can be systematically addressed. It should set up a scholarly investigation of a significant political problem or question. The problem may be historical, contemporary, or hypothetical.
Literature Review	10-20 pages	The literature review should briefly describe the major academic works in political science on the topic as well as suggest to the reader to the areas of the topic left inadequately addressed by the literature.
Data and Methods*	2-5 pages	The data and methods section should present the choice of data sources, including statistical, textual, or both. The methodology also should be presented. The student may choose to use a quantitative or qualitative methodology or some combination of both.
Analysis	10-25 pages	The analysis section should present the major analytical work of the thesis. For example, if the student chooses to use a quantitative approach, this section would present the major tables, charts, graphs, models or arguments suggested by the data and methods employed. In the case of political theory, this section would offer a textual analysis that supports the contention of the thesis.
Findings	10-20 pages	The findings section draws the reader's attention to the major results of the analysis. The student should focus on the important correlations or associations in the data or, or similarities and differences between authors or deductions or inferences drawn from the text(s) These results should be related back to the original research question to either support or refute the initial expectations of the student.
Discussion/ Implications	5-10 pages	In the discussion and implications section, the research findings are discussed in terms of the broader literature on the subject. The contribution of the student's findings should be highlighted. This section should also draw out the implications of the findings for future research in the field.
Conclusion	5-10 pages	The conclusion sums up the entire thesis in a concise manner for the reader. The research question is rearticulated. The major findings are summarized. Just as the reader should gain from the abstract and the introduction the purpose and structure of the thesis, so should the reader ascertain this information from the conclusion.
	Total = 50-100pp	

Note: This component may not be appropriate for all disciplines. For example, a thesis in political theory may not need to specify the data and methodology employed. The student should clarify with the thesis director the expectations for elements included in the final work.

Topic Triangulation

In preparation for beginning research on your thesis, fill in the three boxes and accompanying synonym lines below. This exercise will help you focus your research topic into a manageable project. For example, writing about interest groups and campaign finance is too broad. In this example, your general topic would be interest groups and your clarifying aspect would be campaign finance, but you lack a specific case to study. By focusing on the contributions of the NAACP to contemporary campaigns, you have identified a general topic (interest groups), a specific case (NAACP), and the clarifying aspect (campaign finance). This is a manageable thesis topic.¹



¹ This exercise is adapted from Williams (2004) *Information Literacy Exercise*.