

Institute of Political Economy 2011-2012

MA Thesis and Research Essay Compared

Master's Thesis and Research Essay – Main Differences Summarized

Thesis

Credits 2.0

Proposal 10 pages

Manuscript Length: 100 pages

Content: original application of new or existing knowledge to a new problem or setting; may include analysis of primary or secondary research data from archives, interviews, policy documents etc.

Archived: University library, Institute Office, may be deposited with National Library and Archives

Graded: With Distinction, Satisfactory, or Unsatisfactory

Research Essay

1.0

5 pages

50 pages

raises issues and presents arguments based on an engagement with the work of others; primarily a library-based paper, could include some preliminary primary or secondary research

Institute Office

Awarded a letter grade

Thesis and Research Essay Scope and Claims

Both the research essay and a thesis aim to be creative and innovative in their offering of political economy insights. They both develop a position or standpoint that represents the voice of the student. The main differences between the research essay and the thesis are of aims, scope, and evidence.

A **research essay** aims to establish an argument through the assessment and evaluation of existing research and theoretical literature. Its primary material is a critical reflection on the work of others, organized around a clearly specified topic. In some cases, a research essay may include a preliminary exploration of original research material or secondary data. For example, you may wish to interview a few key respondents, or examine available data sources. The research essay can have a wider scope than a thesis because it can be more speculative and agenda-setting. Its role is to provide illustrative evidence, rather than definitive, fully-documented answers. The end result of a research essay could be a well-grounded set of new research questions, or the initial exegesis and preliminary development of a working argument.

A **thesis** aims to produce original evidence or argumentation based on the candidate's own novel research or theorizing. The overall scope is more focused, and the standards of argumentation and evidence are higher. Don't be frightened by the idea of originality! It doesn't mean you are expected to completely revolutionize our understanding of the world. The expectation is that, as an original contribution, the thesis will identify ways to push ideas forward by providing new evidence and argumentation, and some working answers to the research questions posed.

MA Thesis Proposal and MA Research Essay Proposal

After your courses are completed, you will need to prepare a proposal for your thesis or research essay. A thesis proposal has a working title and should be a compact document (maximum 10 pages). It identifies and locates the significance of the question framing the research and sets out the investigative procedures to be followed. In order to develop a proposal you must have a sense of the field, i.e. what is 'known' and 'claimed' about the issue, and a well-specified research question. You need to be explicit about the logic of inquiry and the strategies proposed to support your own claims. An MA research essay proposal is a more concise document, normally 5 pages. It too identifies an organizing research question, and your plans to investigate and answer this question.

Thesis Proposal Format

Formats may vary but should contain the following elements:

1. **Research question:** This is key and should appear on the first page of any proposal. It should be clear and specific. It can be thought of as a puzzle or a problem to be solved.
2. **Location re: the existing literature:** Locate your proposed thesis in terms of the relevant theoretical approaches and substantive research in the field. Key here is the **assumptions** and **claims** made by others and the extent to which you concur or differ. Do not write a lengthy review of the literature - what is more important is to identify how your project is situated in relation to the current issues in and approaches to your topic. You need to be conscious of your place in the literature – where and how you are making a contribution.
3. Specify your **working argument**. This is your tentative, speculative answer to the research question. Focus on bringing out the underlying logic. Setting out a working argument will help guide your investigation, and keep you focused on your contribution to the literature.
4. Define your usage of **key concepts** used in formulating your research question and working argument. This is more than a simple matter of definitions. Your discussion should reflect on debates about these concepts, conceptual ambiguities and room for development.
5. Identify your research **method** and **sources**. Bring out the way your research question, and the argumentation in which it is located, establishes the importance of certain kinds of evidence. Identify and discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the methodological approach you have chosen. Be reflexive about your position as ‘researcher’ in the investigative process. Consider issues of access to data sources, and the quality/quantity of information required. Show how these sources, using this methodology, will produce evidence in terms of your research question and working argument.
6. Outline the **research process** (how you intend to proceed) and **the data analysis strategy**. How do you intend to work with the primary or secondary data relevant to your research? How does the data analysis strategy you propose speak to the research question and fit with the overall theoretical orientation of your research? Discuss any considerations, including any special circumstances, required for ethics approval.
7. Discuss the intended **contribution** of your proposed thesis - the significance of your research and the claims to originality.
8. Provide a **timeline** for your work.
9. Provide a **rough outline** of thesis chapters.
10. Include a **sample bibliography** of relevant writing in the area.

Research Essay Proposal Format

1. ***Topic and research question of the essay:*** What is the general topic of the essay and what do you propose as the specific research question? This question will guide your interrogation of the literature.
2. ***Location re: the existing literature:*** Locate your proposed essay in terms of the relevant theoretical approaches and substantive research in the field. Do not write a lengthy review of the literature - what is more important is to identify how your research essay is situated in relation to the current issues in and approaches to your topic.
3. Identify your ***research sources.*** Identify the range and types of material that you intend to read and interrogate. If you plan to do some limited form of primary research, outline why you intend to do this and how you plan to carry it out. Make sure to note if you will need ethics clearance.
4. Briefly state the ***contribution*** you hope to make with the work of your research essay.
5. Provide a ***timeline*** for your work.
6. Include a ***sample bibliography*** of relevant writing in the area.

Supervisory and defence procedures

A ***research essay*** requires a supervisor with whom the candidate works. A second reader is also required, and is someone who may be more or less involved in the production of the essay. The second reader is always involved in the examination of the essay, and may be identified for this purpose only. The oral defence of the essay will be about an hour in duration. In attendance will be the candidate, the second reader and the supervisor who will chair the proceedings. The defence will begin with a short statement by the candidate (5 minutes) outlining the contribution of the essay, followed by a round of questions from the two examiners. The supervisor and the second reader will agree on a letter grade for the essay.

A ***thesis*** requires a supervisor and committee member (in some instances, co-supervisors). When the thesis is ready for defence an external examiner will be appointed. The oral defence of the thesis will last about an hour and a half and will be chaired by the Director of the Institute (or his/her designate). The defence will begin with a statement by the candidate (5-10 minutes) locating the work in the candidate's intellectual biography and outlining its contribution. The examination committee will evaluate a successful thesis as satisfactory or with distinction. External examiners are required to give notice before the defence date if they judge the thesis not ready for defence, or in need of major revisions. The external examiner must agree with the final evaluation of the thesis.