



Canada's Capital University

Department of Law

Guidelines for MA Theses and Research Essays in Legal Studies

There are two routes to the MA degree in Legal Studies: 3.0 credits of course work and a MA Thesis, and 4.0 course work credits and a Research Essay. Both routes have equal value. These guidelines are meant to help you decide which route to take, how to decide which topic to pursue, and how to write a successful Research Essay or Thesis.

Thesis or Research Essay?

The key difference between the thesis route and the research essay route is in the balance between course work and independent research. The thesis option presents more opportunities for guided research on a larger project. The research essay option allows you to combine more breadth in your course work with a smaller-sized research project.

The following table presents an overview of the two options. The choice between the two routes depends on many factors, and you should consult with your advisor and/or the director of the graduate program.

	Research Essay	Thesis
Credits	1.0 (equivalent to two graduate courses)	2.0 (equivalent to four graduate courses)
Length (pages)	40-60	70-100
Duration of the Research Essay/Thesis project	Depends on project and commitment, on average: four to eight months of full time work	Depends on project and commitment, on average: eight months of full time work
Supervision & Committee membership	Supervisor, second reader (will mostly be involved in the evaluation of the essay)	Supervisor, second reader, external committee member
Supervision Process	Regular consultations with supervisor	Regular consultations with supervisor and other committee members (as appropriate)
Expectations	Should represent a strong understanding and original interpretation of the field(s) studied	Should represent a distinct and original contribution to the field, based on primary research

	Research Essay	Thesis
Evaluation	Mark assigned by supervisor and second reader (letter grades)	Thesis is defended & discussed with the committee; mark (pass, distinction, or fail) assigned by committee
Benefits you can derive	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – A research project that may be converted into a publishable article 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – A substantive and complex research project – A summary or parts of the project may be converted into a publishable article
This option is very suitable if you	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Have a wide range of interests you want to develop during course work – Hope to proceed quickly to a PhD program where you will pursue a more substantive research project – Are a part-time student and want to pursue projects that don't overwhelm your schedule 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> – Are drawn to a particular project you want to pursue in depth – Want to hone your methodological skills in a larger project – Want to use the Thesis as a preparation or testing ground for PhD studies – Want to use the Thesis as a 'capstone' before switching to a line of work that doesn't involve larger projects

Finding a topic, finding a supervisor

Whether you decide on the research essay or the thesis option, you will need a good topic and a suitable supervisor. These are a few things to keep in mind on your search:

The topic

- The topic should be interesting and relevant to you
- The topic should tackle a problem in the world and the research literature
- The topic should lend itself to investigation through methods that you can learn and master within the time you have
- The topic should allow you to develop and hone skills
- You should start thinking about the topic early and choose courses that help you develop your topic
- You should not write term papers that you intend to be thesis chapters. (This would raise issues of plagiarism and also deprives you of the opportunity to broaden your horizon.)

The supervisor

- You should approach potential supervisors with your topic ideas, preferably in the Winter term of the first year
- Your supervisor can help you to define and shape your topic, proposal and research plan
- Your supervisor should be familiar with the literature and/or methodology in your proposed topic area
- Your supervisor is not your supervisor until they have signed the departmental form of agreement (found on the Department web site)
- Your supervisor might choose not to "sign on" until you have completed a proposal that sets out the scope and course of the project

- You should not switch supervisors unless there has been a breakdown in communications or you are switching your topic. In this case, please consult the graduate program director
- If you have not found a supervisor for your intended topic towards the end of the Winter term of the first year, please see the graduate program director for further suggestions
- Do not register for the thesis or research essay if you have not yet secured a supervisor
- Generally, the supervisor and the second reader are full-time faculty members in the Law Department. Exceptions, especially for second readers, can be discussed with the graduate program director.

What to expect...

What students can expect of supervisors	What supervisors can expect of students
- Help to select and plan a suitable and manageable research topic	- A commitment to the research topic, and to the work that is entailed in completing it successfully
- Help to set up and stick to a research plan	- Willingness to develop and stick to a research plan
- Being available for consultations about the project	- Seeking the supervisor's advice if needed
- To respond to the student's writing in a timely, thorough, and constructive manner	- To submit drafts to the supervisor (as agreed upon)
- To notify the student and the director of graduate studies if prolonged absences jeopardize the supervision	- To recognize that supervisors and committee members have other teaching, research, and administrative duties that might at times conflict with supervision duties
- To advise the student on the committee membership for the thesis/research essay project	- To meet with the supervisor (and other committee member as appropriate)
- To provide advice about funding opportunities and doctoral programs (if appropriate)	- To meet the requirements set by the University and the Department, including format requirements and research ethics guidelines
- To advise students about any changes that might be required by other committee members	- To take seriously and to respond to comments and suggestions
- To acknowledge the student's contribution towards joint research projects in appropriate ways	- To be scrupulous in acknowledging sources of assistance or information
- To provide letters of recommendation	

Developing a Research Essay or Thesis Proposal

- A proposal for a thesis or research essay functions as a road map for your further research and as a contract between you and your supervisor
- There is no required format for a proposal, please consult with your (potential) supervisor about format suggestions

- The proposal should, for example, answer the following questions :
 - What is the central problem you want to deal with?
 - Why and how is it a problem?
 - How will you go about addressing this problem?
 - What are your preliminary arguments or hypotheses?
 - What are the benefits and limits of your approach to the question?
 - How does your work fit with or advance the literature in the relevant field(s)?
 - What is your preliminary chapter or section breakdown? How many pages do you anticipate for each chapter or section?
 - What is the timeline for your project?
- A good proposal can help you to plan and structure your work, so make sure that you're really committed to the proposal you develop
- A good proposal helps you to write compelling scholarship applications, so it might pay off in more ways than you expected
- There is no proposal defence, but you should make sure that your supervisor and, if possible, all your committee members have seen and agreed to the final version of your proposal before you proceed
- But, in the end, a proposal is never final; it is always a record of a work in progress

Writing the Research Essay or Thesis

- Stay in touch with your supervisor, your proposal, your time line, and your peers
- In the end, you are the person who is setting and checking on the deadlines. So make a habit of being both realistic and ambitious with your plans
- Researching and writing a larger project tends to be a solitary activity, so make sure to maintain a network of peers to share work with: Thesis/research essay support groups that are devoted to discussing the members' work on a regular basis are highly recommended. Try to establish a group before you start your project.
- Make sure to discuss the progress of your research regularly with your supervisor even if you have no written work to discuss or are experiencing difficulties. Dropping out of sight is not going to solve any problems.
- Maintain a schedule, set yourself achievable and verifiable deadlines (for example: graduate student conference presentations, submitting draft chapters to the supervisor, sharing drafts with other students)
- Expect and welcome comments and criticism: research projects are great opportunities for improving your skills, so don't be too content with the first draft
- Allow your readers sufficient time for making comments; and allow yourself enough time to address their comments
- Be aware of deadlines and other regulations: the Faculty of Graduate Studies regulations establish final dates for defending and submitting theses for each term as well as formatting and presentation requirements. Please consult the graduate calendar.

Questions?

- Contact your (potential) supervisor or the Graduate Program Director

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