

The Norman Paterson School of International Affairs Procedures for the Research Essay or Thesis Defence

The M.A. program in the Norman Paterson School of International Affairs includes the option of a thesis (2 credits) or research essay (1 credit), which is presented for defence at an examination board. A research essay is expected to identify a research question of relevance to international affairs and to demonstrate an awareness of the literature and theories associated with that particular question. The paper should then seek to make at least a modest contribution to our understanding of the issue or demonstrate that the student clearly understands the key elements of the issue. Research theses, by contrast, must demonstrate a more sophisticated understanding of the theoretical foundation of the topic under examination, and be able to link that theoretical awareness to a methodology for testing or understanding the associated hypotheses. The methodology is expected to be fairly sophisticated and robust, and the contribution to our understanding is expected to be more substantial than a research essay.

When the research essay/thesis is complete and certified by the supervisor as being ready for submission, it is then submitted for defence. An examination board is appointed by the Director of the School to conduct the defence. It is usual for the examination board to consist of a chairperson along with the supervisor, advisor, and an external examiner. For the INAF 5906/5908 MA/MA-JD research essay defence the role of the Chair will usually be filled by the supervisor of the research essay in addition to their normal role of supervisor. For the INAF MA/MA-JD 5909/5919 thesis defence, a Chair must be present. A Chair will be provided for INAF 5906/5908 defence under the following circumstances:

- (i) A member of the examining board requests a Chair.
- (ii) A Chair is requested by the candidate.
- (iii) The candidate on an INAF 5906/5908 defence has requested the defence to be scheduled without the support of the supervisor.
- (iv) The candidate is repeating the defence because of unsatisfactory performance in a previous defence.
- (v) A member of the examination board is absent and requires questions to be read on his or her behalf.
- (vi) At the discretion of the Director or Associate Director of the School.

For research theses, the Director of the School and the Deans of the Faculty of Public Affairs and the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Affairs are ex officio members of the examination board.

The examination board will examine the research essay/thesis, and its relationship to its core areas of study. It is the responsibility of the chairperson to ensure that the regulations and procedures pertaining to examination boards are followed. Procedures at examination boards may adhere to the following pattern: the student should be invited to open with a brief statement, to be followed by a round of questioning on the written work commencing with the external examiner, then to the advisor and supervisor. A second round of questioning may follow which can take up issues raised in the initial round and can also address more comprehensive questions related to the student's program of study at the School.

Evaluation of the Defence and Comprehensive Examination:

The written and oral comprehensive components of the defence are evaluated separately. The examination board should seek to arrive at a consensus among its members in making these assessments. Conventionally, the external examiner is allowed to initiate the assessments. If consensus proves impossible to achieve, the assessments will be determined by majority vote of the members of the examination board. No member of the examination board can exercise a veto over assessments, though any member may decline to sign the report.

The Oral defence:

The oral defence portion of the examination is graded as unsatisfactory, satisfactory, or pass with distinction. Most grades are satisfactory, indicating that the student has demonstrated to the examination board that the work in the essay or thesis is their own work, and that they have a sufficient facility with the material to be able to answer most questions with a reasonable degree of sophistication, accuracy, and ability. Grades of distinction are reserved for cases where the student demonstrates a capacity to engage in a discussion of the material at an exceptional level of sophistication, demonstrating nuanced understanding and expertise. A student who cannot demonstrate sufficient understanding of the material in the paper or serious weaknesses in understanding the relationship of their work to their core area of study may receive an unsatisfactory grade, in which case a new oral defence must be scheduled. In extreme cases where the weakness of the oral defence calls into question the contribution of the student in the writing of the essay or thesis, the student may fail the research essay or thesis.

Assigning Grades:

Different grading systems apply to research essays and theses. Research essays are graded with a letter grade, in which B minus is the minimum passing grade. The average grades tend to be in the B+ to A- range and reflect all aspects of the paper from style and presentation to methodological rigor and grasp of theory. Grades of A and A+ should be reserved for papers of unusually high quality; A+ grades should be reserved for papers that are effectively worthy of revision for peer reviewed publication or for doctoral work. Grades of B or B- reflect the presence of some significant but not very serious problems in the paper's presentation of a sophisticated analysis of an important research question. Papers that are seriously flawed for which the examiner thinks the grade should be less than B- (70%) should not be permitted to go to defence, and the School must be notified of this at least one week prior to the scheduled examination

In grading theses, the passing grades are "Satisfactory" or "Passed with Distinction". For all examination boards the oral comprehensive component is graded with "Satisfactory", "Unsatisfactory", or "Passed with Distinction". Most grades are satisfactory, but in unusual circumstances a distinction is awarded for an outstanding paper worthy of publication after minor revisions and appropriate formatting for length.

Please note that a student may insist on proceeding with a defence even if a member of the examination board does not believe the paper is ready. In this case, the defence proceeds according to standard procedure. However, in such cases, failing grades (less than B- on a research essay, or unsatisfactory for a thesis) should be considered as options for the initial assessment.

If an examination board calls for revisions or corrections, the supervisor will certify that these have been done satisfactorily, prior to the research essay/thesis being accepted for the partial fulfilment of the degree requirement.

If you require any further information on the responsibilities of the supervisory team, please do not hesitate to get in touch with the School. Details of the procedures and requirements for the research essay/thesis may also be found on our website at <http://www.carleton.ca/npsia/school/forms.html>