

**MA AND MA/JD INTERNATIONAL AFFAIRS PROGRAMS  
INFORMATION ON COMPLETING YOUR  
DEGREE BY RESEARCH ESSAY OR THESIS OPTION**

## **1. Introduction**

Students choosing to write a research essay or thesis should do so primarily on the basis of their own interests and desires. If you have a research question that interests you, then that is the best guide to selecting this option for completing your degree. Other factors may include your plans for future work and education and your time constraints. A critical factor will be the ability to find a suitable supervisory team. The following issues should be taken into account by students considering this option.

### **1.1 Timing Issues**

Students should begin to prepare for the research essay as early as possible. Students should consider that members of faculty need to know well in advance what supervisory commitments are pending. Some faculty may not be available for more than limited consultations, especially over the summer, so that early contact with them is essential. It is possible to complete the M.A. program with a research essay in 12 months, but only if a research topic is defined early in the Winter term and pursued with dedication.

For this reason, the School requires that a **declaration of intent** to complete the program via either the coursework, or research essay, or thesis, option be submitted by **Friday, February 10<sup>th</sup>, 2017**. If you choose the research essay or thesis option, an actual **research proposal** is due **Friday, March 17<sup>th</sup>, 2017**. After consultation and with the approval of the School, students may choose, or be required, to switch to the course work option. A program change of this nature will involve the need for additional courses and may delay completion of the degree.

### **1.2 Choosing Between a Research Essay and a Thesis**

There are important differences between a thesis and research essay. What are they?

(a) A thesis is a two-credit research project, involving an original research design and its application in an original field study, and/or empirical study, and/or theoretical study. Students must have a minimum of an A minus standing (GPA 10) in their program coursework at the time of application to do a thesis. The proposal must demonstrate promise of a substantive contribution

to scholarly knowledge on the topic, and must bear some relation to the student's field. A thesis must include a conceptual framework, review of literature, and a fully developed argument with original material. Theses must conform to the guidelines regarding structure (see section 3 below), and will be between 100 and 160 pages.

(b) A research essay is a one-credit research project. As with a thesis, a research essay can be the outgrowth of a research seminar, but may not necessarily involve an original research design or empirical inquiry. A research essay may take one of several forms: it may take the form of an integrative or syncretic discussion paper, clarifying a concept or resolving a dilemma in understanding a subject; or an analysis of a subject using secondary sources (as distinct from the original research required of a thesis). The essay must be analytical as opposed to purely descriptive. A research essay proposal must identify a research question, conceptual or methodological framework, the relevant literature, and the promise of a sustained argument. Research essays must conform to the guidelines regarding structure (see section 3 below), and must be between 50 and 80 pages.

Under exceptional circumstances, and with the approval of the supervisory committee and the Associate Director of the MA Program, a research essay may be submitted with fewer than the minimum number of pages identified in the regulations.

## **2. Planning for a Research Essay or Thesis**

### **2.1 Identify a research topic**

The first step in the process of selecting the research essay or thesis option is to identify a topic of research. Students are expected to consult with faculty to identify a suitable topic. If you are having difficulty selecting a topic, consult your academic advisor and talk with those faculty members who seem best able to advise you on your chosen research area. It is always advantageous to build on your previous work in seminar papers or related studies that you have already submitted or plan to submit next term. Students are discouraged from submitting proposals that do not have the support of the appropriate faculty members. Faculty are experienced in identifying topics that are feasible and in their area of expertise. In the absence of clear faculty support, the essay writing process can become a frustrating experience for the students, as little direction may be provided in terms of theory, previous research, or preliminary sources.

### **2.2 Identify supervisory and advisory resources**

The second step is to identify those persons who you think could assist in your research. This is a sensitive issue and must be handled with care. **Students are encouraged to identify potential members of a supervisory team (made up of a supervisor and an advisor), but must remember that the School has the final decision over its composition.** The formal supervisory team is selected by the School to ensure:

- Expertise
- Inter-disciplinarity
- Policy relevance
- Administrative feasibility
  
- At least one member of the team is a NPSIA faculty member.

In considering a supervisor and advisor for your supervisory team you may wish to consult the various Carleton Departmental websites that identify faculty research interests.

A supervisory team, as indicated above, consists of a supervisor and an advisor. One of the two must be a NPSIA Faculty member. The supervisor has the primary role in the process and generally determines when a research essay or thesis is suitable for defence. Advisors may be more or less engaged in the research essay or thesis depending on the relationship they work out with the student. In some cases they are closely involved in all aspects of the essay or thesis, or they may play a limited role based on specific functional, methodological, regional, or policy expertise. Both are responsible for reading the essay or thesis.

After discussing their proposed topic with faculty, students would seek a commitment from the most suitable faculty member to serve as a prospective supervisor. If the proposed supervisor is not a full-time faculty member of NPSIA then the student must receive permission from the School through the Associate Director's Office before approaching that faculty member. When asking for a faculty member's agreement to supervise your project please note that this does not constitute the supervisor's acceptance of the proposal, nor does it confer approval by the School of either the proposal or the proposed supervisor. It is an agreement in principle or expression of interest and willingness to supervise in the topic area discussed. Approval, and the decision regarding the composition of the supervisory team, is the prerogative of the Research Essay Proposal Review Committee of The Norman Paterson School of International Affairs.

If you are unable to identify a supervisor on your own, then you may make suggestions and the Committee will attempt to identify one on your behalf. The absence of faculty commitment, however, may be a signal that the topic is unsuitable and the likelihood of rejection by the Committee, and the requirement for resubmission, is higher.

On your own, or with your proposed supervisor, you may identify potential advisors on your proposal form. Please note that neither you nor your faculty advisors should attempt to form a supervisory committee on your own. The School has specific responsibilities with respect to interdisciplinarity, policy relevance, and feasibility from the School's perspective, and these are best dealt with prior to the creation of the supervisory team. Official requests to serve on an advisory committee come from the School after the research proposal has been reviewed and the student notified of the results.

### **2.3 Submit a research proposal**

The next step in the research essay or thesis process is to complete a research proposal template (located on NPSIA website under "Current Students" -> "Program Guidelines and Forms"). The form must be completed in full with your proposal attached; no handwritten or electronic proposals will be accepted. You must submit a signed, hard copy, of the proposal.

Students registered in the MA/JD program are also required to submit their research essay proposals, and should do so in consultation with faculty at NPSIA and at the University of Ottawa, Faculty of Law. MA/JD students are co-supervised and must have a full-time faculty member from each of the University of Ottawa Law School and NPSIA.

When completing the research proposal form, and particularly in filling in the section on "Related Research", it is advisable to consult with the Resource Centre Coordinator. Much time and effort

can be saved by working with a professional librarian to determine the source literature in the field. There are few areas of research in international affairs that cannot be developed by using the various bibliographic reference tools. The statement that "there is no previous research on this topic" usually implies that you have not done sufficient preliminary bibliographic work.

Finally, be sure that you provide the review committee with as much information as possible on how you actually plan to conduct the research. Vagueness will be rewarded by rejection of the proposal. You should think about exactly what it is you are trying to explain or analyze, what the possible explanations or explanatory factors are, and how you intend to discover the connections between them.

## **2.4 Review of the proposal**

The proposals are reviewed by a Committee of faculty. The proposals are either accepted or rejected, and the Committee identifies a possible supervisory team. While the Committee tries to accommodate the supervisory team requests of the student, that is not always possible. Students are notified of the status of their proposal as soon as possible, and supervisors and advisors are officially contacted by the School to request their participation. Once a supervisory committee has agreed to assist the student, the student may proceed to solicit and expect their assistance.

If a proposal has been rejected, students must re-submit a revised proposal. They should do so after speaking with their academic advisor. The Committee may also identify specific areas of change they want to see, and may identify faculty members or a tentative supervisory committee with which the student may work.

## **2.5 Changing your research topic or supervisory team**

Occasionally it may become necessary to alter the composition of your appointed supervisory team; you may do so with the permission of the School. If it becomes necessary to change your topic, or a member of your committee, you must indicate this in writing to the School and to the faculty members involved. If the topic is deemed by the supervisory team or the Associate Director to have changed substantially from the original proposal, a new proposal must be submitted for approval. If you are facing difficulty with your research essay or advisory team, please speak to the MA Program Coordinator or your field advisor.

**NOTE: If there is insufficient progress on a research essay or thesis, the supervisory team may request that the student choose another option for completing their program, or switch topics. A member of the supervisory team may also request to be removed from a committee. All such requests are reviewed by the Associate Director.**

## **3. Research Essay and Thesis Guidelines**

You may ask the Resource Centre Coordinator where to find additional guidelines for the research essay and thesis. Course instructors, field advisors, supervisory committee members, and material from your policy and methods courses (INAF 5013/INAF 5014) may also assist you in identifying additional sources regarding style, content, and format.

### 3.1 Guidelines

The presentation of research essays and theses must conform to the Guidelines, Policy and Procedures for Comprehensive and Thesis Examinations and Preparation of Theses issued by the Faculty of Graduate and Postdoctoral Affairs. There are a number of excellent style guides which you can consult for information about writing format, citations, bibliographies, etc. Among these are the MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers (Modern Language Association of America), Kate Turabian, A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses and Dissertation (University of Chicago Press), Style Manual of the American Psychological Association (American Psychological Association). Agreement on format and style should be reached with your supervisor early on, and this should be followed consistently.

**Length:** Research essays must be between 50 and 80 pages. Theses must be between 100 and 160 pages. The maximum length will be strictly enforced, and is inclusive of appendices and the bibliography.

Under exceptional circumstances, and with the approval of the supervisory committee and the Associate Director of the MA Program, a research essay may be submitted with fewer than the minimum number of pages identified in the regulations.

**Margins:** 1.5 inches on the left (the binding edge), and 1 inch on the other three sides

**Typeface:** usually something standard like Times New Roman

**Font:** 12 for the text, 10 acceptable for footnotes

**Line spacing:** double spaced (except for bibliography, footnotes, abstract, acknowledgements)

**Page numbers:** at top right, EXCEPT for the beginning of chapters, where they are bottom centre

Additional guidance is available from the Resource Centre coordinator, including advice on reference styles.

### 3.2 Content and structure of the research essay or thesis

The purpose of the research essay or thesis is to provide students with a venue to demonstrate their understanding of a coherent literature and their ability to make a contribution to it through focused research. Students must demonstrate a capacity to conduct sustained analysis, as opposed to merely provide description. Students should avoid choosing topics that are too general or only vaguely defined, topics that are speculative (for example, analyzing anticipated events that have not yet occurred) or topics for which the data requirements are difficult to meet.

The greater the focus and precision of the topic and research question, the greater the likelihood of success.

The research essay and thesis must have the following components:

- A. A clearly-identified, well-motivated, and focused research question. These may deal with the following types of problems:
  - a. Theory testing: historical or contemporary case studies that test or clarify existing theories or that address a current policy debate.
  - b. Explanatory: explain a particular policy outcome or event.
  - c. Evaluative: evaluate outcomes of a policy.

B. A proposed explanation or argument that answers their research question. The student must be able to identify clearly a dependent variable that identifies or measures the phenomenon or outcome they are interested in, and the explanatory variables that will be explored as the key factors influencing the dependent variable. A thesis is expected to have a more sophisticated and rigorous theoretical framework in which their research question is framed and explained.

C. A methodology that clearly allows them to identify the key factors influencing the outcome of interest. For example, empirical analyses may take the form of a focused case study, comparative case study, or large sample statistical analysis. Additional workshops may be available to assist students on methodology. A thesis is expected to have a primary research component involving fieldwork or other activity that generates primary source information. A thesis will not generally rely solely on secondary sources.

D. A structured, focused, and coherent literature review that briefly exposes the reader to the important literature associated with their research problem and identifies the gap or debate in the literature that is addressed in the paper.

E. The body of the argument and the analysis. The argument should attempt, as much as possible, to reflect the concerns and approaches of more than one discipline.

F. Conclusions. Students are strongly encouraged to draw out the policy implications and relevance of their research as well.

#### **4. Oral examination, Grading and submitting final copies**

Once the supervisor has determined that the research essay or thesis is suitable for defence, generally in consultation with the student and advisor, the student may defend their research in an examining board. More information on this process will be sent out to students who are completing a research essay/thesis. Updated information will also be posted to the NPSIA website. For more information you can also contact [Karen.Howard@carleton.ca](mailto:Karen.Howard@carleton.ca).