

RESEARCH GUIDE: THE MASTER'S RESEARCH ESSAY AND THESIS

Students choosing to write a Master's research essay or thesis should do so primarily based on their own interests and desires. Select a topic that interests you, read widely in that area, and reflect on its relevance for international affairs.

1. Preparation for a Research Essay

1.1 Distinction Between a Research Essay and a Thesis

A **Master's Research Essay** is a one-credit research paper. A research essay can be the outgrowth of a research seminar but may not necessarily involve an original research design or empirical inquiry. Students should have an A minus standing (GPA 10) in their program coursework at the time of application to do an MRE. The essay must be analytical as opposed to purely descriptive. A research essay may take one of several forms: an integrative or syncretic discussion paper clarifying a concept or resolving a dilemma in understanding a subject; a critical analysis of a subject through a comprehensive or systematic literature review (as distinct from the original research required of a thesis).

A **Master's 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), with a limit of 30,000 words, which is approximately 120 pages.

2. Planning a Research Essay or Thesis

2.1 Timing

Students should begin to prepare for the research essay or thesis as early as possible. Proposal development should begin in your first term, and if possible, you should complete class assignments related to your topic. Take classes with potential supervisors and approach them early to discuss your topic and their potential role in acting as a supervisor. Faculty members need to know well in advance what supervisory commitments are pending.

2.2 The Research Topic

The first step in the process of selecting the research essay option is to identify a topic of research and formulate a research question. If you are having difficulty formulating a research question, consult 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.

For MA Thesis: As you develop your research question, please be aware of the requirements for a thesis as outlined in Carleton's Graduate Regulations (12.5).

2.3 Select a Supervisor and Advisor

The Supervisor must be a NPSIA faculty member. The Advisor can be faculty members at NPSIA or at other relevant departments at Carleton, NPSIA fellows or adjunct professors, government officials, experts at non-governmental organisations including think tanks or other experts identified in consultation with the Supervisor.

Consider the following attributes when selecting a supervisor and advisor.

- Academic expertise
- Policy expertise
- Inter-disciplinarity breadth
- Administrative feasibility

In consultation and with the approval of their supervisor, students may bring on a non-NPSIA faculty member to be a co-supervisor.

For further information, please consult the [guidelines for nominal co-supervisors](#) and the Graduate Studies' [Supervision Appointments Policy](#).

The supervisor has the primary role in the process and generally determines when a research essay or thesis is suitable for evaluation.

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, advisors are closely involved in all aspects of the paper, in other cases they may play a limited role based on specific functional, methodological, regional, or policy expertise.

Both the Supervisor and Advisor are responsible for reading and evaluating the research essay. The thesis is assessed by the Supervisor, Advisor and external examiner and defended at an oral examination.

For further information, please consult [Graduate Studies' Responsibilities and Expectations Policy](#) that outlines the responsibilities of supervisors and of students.

MRE students registered in the MA/JD program: Please note that the MRE must be co-supervised and must have a full-time faculty member from each of the University of Ottawa Law School and NPSIA.

MRE and Thesis students in the African Studies Specialisation or the Latin American Studies Specialisation: Please note that you require co-supervisors from those programmes for both the MRE and Thesis.

For the MRE: In the case of co-Supervision, a third member of the Supervision Team (i.e. an advisor) is optional.

2.4 The Research Proposal

The next step in the research essay process is to complete a Research Proposal.

The Proposal is due on May 1 and should include the following components:

1. TENTATIVE TITLE
2. PROBLEM AND QUESTION. Describe the problem/puzzle/issue you are investigating, its relevance, and identify the research question or hypothesis you will be analyzing.
3. RELATED RESEARCH. Provide a brief overview of the literature that addresses or is directly relevant to the research question. The overview should specifically identify the gaps or shortcomings in the literature that the paper plans to address.
4. BASIC APPROACH. Describe what you plan to do in your research and how you plan to do it, i.e. the methods you will employ to collect and analyze information and evaluate your research question or hypothesis.
5. TENTATIVE CHAPTER TITLES (for thesis)/TENTATIVE SECTION HEADINGS (for MRE)

For students enrolled in the MA/JD programme (MRE only) and within the various specialisations, their research essay must address their specialisation.

2.5 MacOdrum Library

Carleton's MacOdrum library has resources to support MA students in their research. When completing the research proposal form, and particularly when filling in the section on "Related Research", it is advisable to consult with staff at the library. Much time and effort can be saved by working with a professional librarian to determine the source literature in the field. Please consult this website and make an appointment with the international affairs advisor to discuss your topic. <https://library.carleton.ca/services/research-help>

3. Undertaking Your Research

Research takes time and commitment. Please provide yourself adequate time to undertake a comprehensive literature review on your topic and gather the evidence needed to substantiate any claims you make in your MRE or thesis.

3.1 Academic Integrity

NPSIA students are expected to exhibit the highest standards of academic integrity in their research.

Please familiarise yourself with [Carleton University's Academic Integrity Policy](#). Your MRE or thesis must abide by this policy.

3.2 The Use of Generative Artificial Intelligence (GenAI)

Students undertaking an MRE or Thesis should be aware of both the opportunities and risks associated with the use of GenAI in research. While GenAI can be an excellent tool to facilitate research, improper use can result in lower quality research, factual errors, and ethical breaches.

Supervisory Consultation and Approval: Students who wish to use AI tools in their research must do so in consultation with their supervisor. Supervisors must provide advance approval on how generative AI tools will be used in student research. This approval should be documented in writing.

Transparency and Disclosure: Within their scholarly work, students must be fully transparent regarding their use of AI. This includes identifying the specific GenAI tools used and providing a complete and clear description of how they were integrated into the research process.

Failure to a) obtain prior approval and b) document the use of AI in an MRE or Thesis could result in an academic integrity violation.

Helpful Resources:

Please consult Carleton's AI framework for further information: <https://carleton.ca/ai/>

Please note that MacOdrum Library has many resources to support students in the use of AI in their research: <https://library.carleton.ca/guides/subject/artificial-intelligence-ai-tools>

3.3 Comprehensive Literature Review

Given that the MRE and thesis should build upon previous work, students should familiarise themselves with the principles of comprehensive or [systematic literature reviews](#).

The MacOdrum Library can provide MA students with support for this [literature review](#).

3.4 Planning for Field Research

If you are planning field work, preparation is essential. Please consult the NPSIA Field Research Guidelines for suggestions on how to navigate the academic and logistics challenges of fieldwork. Please note any approvals for travel/field research required by Carleton University.

3.5 Ethics Clearance

If your MRE or thesis includes any research involving human participants, you must undergo an ethics review by the Carleton University Research Ethics Board (CUREB). This requirement applies to interviews of stakeholders to data collected through individual interviews or focus group discussions conducted in the field. NPSIA falls under CUREB-A. Further details are available on this website: <https://carleton.ca/researchethics/cureb-a/>

Please be aware that the process of ethics review is comprehensive (you must present CUREB with your plan for research) and can take time. If you require an ethics review, please incorporate sufficient time for this step as you plan your MRE or thesis.

4. Overview of MRE Structure

4.1 MRE Content

The research essay should include the following components:

- A. Clearly identified, well-motivated, and focused research question that undertakes:
 - a. Theory testing: test or clarify existing theories or address a current policy debate.
 - b. Explanation: explain a particular policy outcome or event.
 - c. Evaluation: evaluate outcomes of a policy.
- B. An argument that clearly answers the research question.
- C. A methodology and conceptual framework that identifies 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.
- D. A structured, focused, comprehensive, and coherent literature review that briefly describes 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.

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

4.2 Formatting Guidelines

Unless otherwise agreed to by your supervisory committee, research essays must be no longer than **15,000 words**, inclusive of all notes, figures, and bibliography.

There are no set formatting requirements for MREs. Several excellent style guides provide 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 early on with your supervisor, and this should be followed consistently.

5. Overview of Thesis Structure

5.1 Thesis Content

The Thesis should include the following components:

- A. Clearly identified, well-motivated, focused, and original **research question** that identifies a puzzle within the field of international affairs and undertakes:
 - a. Theory testing: tests or clarifies existing theories or addresses a current policy debate.
 - b. Explanation: explains a particular policy outcome or event.
 - c. Evaluation: evaluates outcomes of a policy.
- B. An argument that clearly answers the research question. The argument should identify a dependent variable that identifies the outcome they are interested in, and the explanatory variables as the key factors influencing the dependent variable.
- C. A methodology and conceptual framework that identifies the key factors influencing the outcome of interest. For example, empirical analyses may take the form of an in-depth focused case study (justifying the use of a single case), comparative case studies, or large sample statistical analysis.
- D. A structured, focused, comprehensive, and coherent literature review that describes 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. Please note that a thesis requires scholarship that builds on a critical review of previous work to explore **a new question or specific problem or issue in a new setting**. A thesis should demonstrate “**originality in the application of knowledge**.”
- F. Conclusions. Students are strongly encouraged to draw out the policy implications and relevance of their research.

5.2 Formatting Guidelines

Unless otherwise agreed to by your supervisory committee, a thesis must be no longer than **30,000 words**, inclusive of all notes, figures, and bibliography.

Thesis formatting requirements are specified by the Office of Graduate Studies. Information can be found here: <https://gradstudents.carleton.ca/resources-page/thesis-requirements/formatting-guidelines/>

5.3 Academic Integrity

With the submission of their MA Thesis, students must submit an [Academic Integrity Statement](#).

6. Incomplete MRE and Thesis

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.

If this is the case, please discuss options with your supervisor or the MA Associate Director as with sufficient progress, students may be able to convert their MRE or thesis research into a 0.5 credit directed readings course (INAF 5901).

7. Changing your Supervisory Team

Occasionally it may become necessary to alter the composition of your supervisory team; you may do so with the permission of the MA Associate Director.