

Carleton University School of Social Work
MSW Thesis Guide

An MSW thesis is an original application of new or existing knowledge to a new research question or problem. Completing a thesis is a challenging opportunity that requires students to: read extensively in their area of interest; develop a solid research proposal; if needed, write a successful ethics application; conduct independent research activities; complete an analysis of the research data in light of the research literature; write a coherent research paper of approximately 90-120 pages. The thesis can be pursued through fieldwork, literature review, archival research, artifacts and more.

The thesis option is worth 2.0 credits and usually replaces the Advanced Year Practicum. Because of the open-ended, independent nature of thesis work, students typically require an additional semester to complete their thesis work.

Your first step in preparing a thesis is to develop a brief description of the research question you hope to pursue. Once you have your idea, the next step is to establish your committee. The MSW Thesis Committee is composed of a thesis supervisor and a second reader.

1. Your Thesis Supervisor: You will need to find a Carleton University faculty member to supervise your project. To decide who to approach as a supervisor, consider faculty members' descriptions of their areas of expertise and research interest and the courses they teach. Does your research topic, or your choice of theory and methods have a connection with a faculty member's work? You may also ask the Graduate Program Supervisor for ideas about who to approach. Faculty members may not be available for any number of reasons, so be prepared to talk to a few faculty members before you find a supervisor.

NOTE: If you chose a supervisor in a discipline other than social work, they must arrange for cross-appointment to the School and your second reader will need to be a School of Social Work faculty member. If your supervisor is a School of Social Work faculty member, your second reader may be from another program or from the School of Social Work.

2. A Second Reader: You will need a committee member, or second reader, to support your work. This person is chosen and approached with advice from your supervisor. See note above.

Steps to Complete an MSW Thesis

1. The Proposal: The thesis proposal is a concise document that outlines your thesis research project in 12-20 pages, plus references and appendices, and is developed in consultation with your supervisor. The proposal should include a well-developed discussion of your proposed research question, your theoretical framework and methods, a concise literature review that supports your choice of question in terms of a research gap, a pressing or emerging social issue

and under-explored area or a contribution to a specific area of social work research. It will include a timeline for completion and a complete reference list. Please consult with your supervisor about the appropriate length for each section, since this can vary depending on your topic and proposed methods. The proposal will be a formal document that uses an accepted academic style for formatting and references. APA is the accepted referencing style in most social work theses, although Chicago is also acceptable if it is the referencing style used in journals relating to your topic.

Your proposal drafts will be reviewed by your supervisor, who will comment on each iteration, and return them to you for revision. Once a reasonably complete draft is developed, it will be reviewed by your second reader, and often more revisions are required. Once your supervisor and second reader agree that your proposal is developed sufficiently to proceed with your project, they will schedule a Proposal Oral Defence and send a copy of the proposal to the Graduate Program Supervisor (GPS).

The GPS will review the proposal within a week to ensure that it meets program requirements. If there are any issues, they will note them in correspondence to the Supervisor.

4. The Proposal Oral Defence: The proposal defence is a formal examination meeting with your supervisor and second reader. It is designed to give you practice in oral defence, as you will need to go through a more formal oral defence for your thesis. It also allows your committee to ask you more details about your project and to support you on next steps to completing your research.

The Oral Defence process:

The committee and student convene. The student steps out of the meeting while the committee members confer, to confirm that the student's proposal is ready for defence and to ensure they have a mutual understanding of the process for defence.

The student returns to the meeting and presents an overview of their proposed research, speaking for ten minutes. Some students may choose to show slides to accompany their talk.

The committee proceeds by asking their pre-prepared questions about the thesis proposal. The second reader asks their set of questions, which should take about 20 minutes of questions and answers. The supervisor then asks their set of questions, again taking about 20 minutes.

The second round of questions is more informal. If the student's work seems quite complete and the student has been able to address most question, this round aims to advance the work, problem-solve any gaps and offer directions. While the second reader begins this round, the supervisor may interject, and the round may become more of a discussion.

A thesis proposal has a number of potential outcomes. The thesis proposal outcomes are: Accepted, Accepted with minor revisions, Accepted with major revisions (specified in detail on the thesis proposal form) or rejected.

A rejected proposal can be rewritten and come back for re-examination once. However, a failure is a signal to reconsider the thesis option. A meeting with the Graduate Program Supervisor is required.

SAMPLE RESEARCH PROPOSAL COMPONENTS/ RUBRIC for EMPIRICAL STUDIES

INTRODUCTION
Very clear research question (s)
Theoretical framework clearly connected to the research
Conceptual framework defines important concepts
LITERATURE REVIEW
Introduction to the literature review clearly explains what it will cover
Literature review provides concise, integrated summary of relevant literature
Gaps in knowledge are clearly and accurately identified and described
METHODOLOGY
Methodology is appropriate to the research question(s)
Sampling procedures are appropriate
Data collection methods and instruments are appropriate
Proposed analysis is appropriate, given research design
REFERENCES
Sources, citations, and Reference List are complete, accurate and in accepted style
STYLE
Proper grammar, spelling, page #s and formatting
TIMELINE
Realistic timeline with dates that considers ethics review and committee review timings, vacations, university dates for submission and times to completion

5. Ethics Review

After your thesis proposal defence, you will consider whether you will need to submit a Research Ethics application. If you are working with humans, for example doing interviews, observations, or surveys, or if you are working with certain kinds of data sets, you will need to submit a Research Ethics Review Protocol to Carleton's Research Ethics Board. The REB meets monthly, so timing your application to ensure the earliest possible consideration is important. Details on how to complete this application is available at:

<https://carleton.ca/researchethics/submit-an-application/>

6. The Thesis

Completing a Master's thesis to the high standards required is a challenging and sometimes daunting, task. An MSW thesis is a research report of approximately 90-120 pages, including references. It is also a task that does not have the same kind of supports you experience in your course work or practicum experiences, requiring you to develop skills to produce work more independently. Many MSW thesis students find that they need the support of writing groups or partners, and regular check-ins with colleagues and their thesis committee. It is important that students stay in regular touch with their supervisor, to keep the work advancing, especially when the work is not going well.

Your thesis writing and review will proceed by producing chapters and submitting them to your supervisor who will read and return them with comments and suggestions for revision. It is likely you will have to put significant work into producing a series of drafts that slowly builds your entire thesis. Your second reader may or may not be involved along the way, depending on the agreement among the committee, but always reviews a next-to-final complete draft. The second reader will provide an additional set of comments and revisions to complete.

Once both your supervisor and second reader have agreed that the thesis is ready for defence, a thesis oral defence will be scheduled. Once a defence date is determined, inform the graduate administrator, so they can input thesis details into Carleton Central and authorize upload of examinable thesis copy.

You must give your committee two weeks' notice before you upload your final thesis that addresses all their requests for revision. There must be at least three weeks between the date you upload the committee- approved thesis into Carleton Central and your thesis defence. The external examiner must receive a copy of the committee-approved thesis at least two weeks in advance of the scheduled oral defence.

Master's students expecting to graduate at the Spring Convocation must submit their supervisor-approved thesis, in examinable form, to the department by March 1. Master's students expecting to graduate at the Fall Convocation must submit their thesis by August 1. Master's students expecting to graduate at the Winter Graduation must submit their thesis by December 1. If the department requires further approvals, these must be obtained prior to the submission deadline.

Your external examiner will be a Carleton faculty member with expertise in your topic or theory or method who has not worked with you as an instructor or co-author or and does not have a personal relationship with you.

Theses vary in form and style, based on their topic, their theoretical and methodological framing, their methods, analysis and aims. Reading completed MSW theses, available on the McOdrum library website, is one way to become familiar with what a thesis can look like.

Committee receives copies of examinable thesis at least 3 weeks before defence date either via email or through Carleton Central.

7. The Thesis Oral Defence

The Oral Defence process:

- a) The GPS, as designate for the Director, or other designate, chairs the proceedings. Attendance includes the student, their supervisor, the second reader, the external examiner, another faculty member of the School of Social Work who is invited as an examiner, and any invited guests. Other faculty members are also allowed to attend and should give notice of their plan to do so in advance as a courtesy.
- b) The student (and any guests) steps out of the meeting while the committee members confer, to confirm that the student's proposal is ready for defence and to ensure they have a mutual understanding of the process for defence.
- c) The student returns to the meeting and presents an overview of their research, speaking for fifteen to twenty minutes. Some students may choose to show slides to accompany their talk.

The committee proceeds by asking their pre-prepared questions about the thesis. The external examiner asks their set of questions first. Next, the invited faculty member asks their questions. Each of these rounds should take about 15-20 minutes for questions and answers. The second reader then asks their set of questions, taking about 15 minutes. The supervisor then asks their questions, taking about 15 minutes.

The second round of questions is more informal. This round aims to advance the work, problem-solve any gaps and offer directions for research dissemination. While the external examiner begins this round, the other examiners may interject, and the round may become more of a discussion.

A thesis oral defence has a number of potential outcomes. The thesis defence outcomes are: ACCEPTED, ACCEPTED with minor revisions, ACCEPTED with major revisions (specified in detail on the thesis defence form) or REJECTED. The oral defence is either satisfactory or unsatisfactory. If outstanding, a thesis may also be nominated for a medal.

Detailed University Policies pertaining to Masters Theses is available at
<https://gradstudents.carleton.ca/resources-page/thesis-requirements/>