



# MSW THESIS HANDBOOK SCHOOL OF SOCIAL WORK

---

UPDATED VERSION: OCTOBER 1, 2020

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

---

Introduction .....	1
Scope And Parameters Of The MSW Thesis .....	1
The MSW Thesis.....	2
Focussing And Pacing Of The MSW Thesis .....	3
Timing Within The MSW Program .....	3
The Oral Exam Committee.....	5
The Oral Examination .....	6
Guidelines For The Preparation Of The MSW Thesis.....	8
The Final Product and Graduation Information.....	8
Appendix I – Proposal for MSW Thesis .....	10
Appendix II – Arrell Prize Review Form.....	12

## INTRODUCTION

---

Each student in the MSW Critical Analysis program is expected to complete a thesis. The thesis offers students an opportunity to build upon their particular experiences and interests and upon perspectives and material introduced in courses, and to demonstrate their capacities for critical analysis in policy or practice.

The thesis requires students to exercise in a focused way the capabilities that the program seeks to foster as follows: a) the development of conceptual and analytical skills in relation to social work practice and social policy; b) an appreciation of the entanglement of fact and values in seeking an understanding of questions relating to policy and practice; c) an ability to apply these skills and modes of understanding to substantive areas of interest; and d) the capacity to move from analysis of social work/social welfare issues or problems to consideration of the possibilities and limits of action and change in practice or policy.

To facilitate preparation for thinking about the thesis, a half day MSW Research Day is held in October. MSW Alumnae, who have recently completed their theses, participate in a panel presentation which focuses both on the thesis process and the substantive findings.

## SCOPE AND PARAMETERS OF THE MSW THESIS

---

The MSW thesis should be a coherent study with a clear and manageable focus in which students demonstrate substantive and theoretical knowledge of their topic, sound research skills and an appreciation of the implications of their work. It is expected that the thesis will make a contribution to knowledge, have implications for action and research, be academically rigorous, and be clearly communicated. The normal length of the thesis is 50 pages (12,500 words), exclusive of appendices etc.

It is helpful to think of the thesis as the equivalent to a practicum in terms of the number of hours required for its completion. The CASWE accreditation standards consider 450 hours as the minimum number of hours for a practicum at the Master's level, so you should plan into your schedule an equivalent amount of time for completing the thesis.

In terms of research approach, the thesis can be based upon a range of orientations to knowledge-building. It can be grounded in diverse theoretical and methodological frameworks. It may involve the gathering of a variety of

kinds of data e.g. original empirical data, available data, policy documents, organizational documents, historical material. Analyses of existing literature are acceptable as long as they generate a reframing of the issues and make a clear conceptual contribution.

Given the professional nature of the program and the School's commitment to generating knowledge for action and use, students are strongly encouraged to communicate their research to relevant audiences - whether by presenting their work to community groups or service settings concerned with their topic or by submitting it for review in academic, professional or popular publications.

## THE MSW THESIS

---

A thesis offers students an opportunity to develop their conceptual and analytical skills, to apply these skills to substantive areas of interest and to move from analysis to consideration of implications for social policy and practice. There are different approaches students can take in answering research questions. Possibilities include (but aren't limited to) primary research where you collect your own data through interviews or surveys, secondary research where you look at data someone else has collected with a new question, policy research where you investigate the history, design, and implementation of a particular social policy or critical discourse analysis, where texts (usually a particular literature or a policy) are your primary source of data.

Depending on the research approach which is used, theses will typically include the following components:

- An abstract (a concise summary)
- An introduction to the research topic (why is this topic of interest to you)
- Theoretical perspective applied in the paper (what lens(es) will you use in investigating this topic)
- A critical analysis of the literature (what is known about this topic, what have others said and how does your research question(s) fit into current knowledge)
- A statement of the research problem (what research questions are you asking)
- Methodology (where and how will you find evidence to answer your research questions)
- Findings (what broad themes did you find in your data that can shed light on your topic)

- Discussion and Conclusion (what are the implications of your findings, what conclusions can be drawn, what are the limitations, what further research may need to be done)
- Implications for social work (how might you change social work practice and/or policies to incorporate your findings)

### **FOCUSSING AND PACING OF THE MSW THESIS**

---

Choosing an appropriate and workable thesis focus is a critical aspect of the MSW program. Students are encouraged to use course assignments to work toward their thesis focus. In addition, procedures and resources are in place to assist with structuring thesis proposals and locating potential supervisors.

### **TIMING WITHIN THE MSW PROGRAM**

---

Since the thesis represents an integration of the skills and perspectives introduced in the graduate program, it is generally the last requirement to be completed. Students are likely to be thinking about ideas for their research throughout the program, and course assignments in the fall and winter terms can often be used to explore facets of possible research interests and to clarify ideas or, equally, to exhaust or eliminate possible avenues of interest. The summer term (May-August) is devoted to full-time work on the thesis.

#### **Thesis Calendar**

This 'Calendar' is intended as a guide to the usual sequence and pacing of work on the MSW thesis. It is mapped out with a full time student in mind. For part-time students, please contact your research supervisor or graduate secretary to confirm important dates.

#### **September**

At Student Orientation, you have an opportunity to meet with the Graduate Chair who will ensure that you have the information you need about resources and possible research supervisors among the School's faculty members. You are encouraged to consult with the Graduate Chair as needed. Your research supervisor, once selected, becomes your primary advisor through the program.

#### **January**

By the end of first term, you are expected to have contracted formally with an appropriate research supervisor. By mutual agreement with her/him, you are expected to outline the focus of your thesis and a planned schedule of work and supervision and identify another faculty member for your oral examination committee. In consultation with your Supervisor, complete the MSW Research

Thesis Proposal Form by the end of January and submit it to the Graduate Secretary (see Appendix I).

**Thesis Proposal** (see Appendix I):

**Proposals** (2 pgs. maximum) must specify:

- a working title
- a brief summary of proposed research
- a statement of the research purpose
- a brief description of the literature in which the research is to be situated
- the methodological approach anticipated
- anticipated arrangements for obtaining needed resources, supports and approvals (e.g. literature, data, ethics review)
- a work plan (including timeline)

## **February**

### **Ethics Application:**

If your research will involve gathering original data from research participants, students must submit an application to the McMaster University Research Ethics Board. Approval can take several weeks, so it is important to submit the necessary forms to the Research Ethics Board early in the term to ensure that you obtain approval in time to embark on your research in the spring. Students often find that recruitment of participants (if you are conducting primary research) takes more time than anticipated, so timely approval of ethics means an earlier start on recruitment.

### **Mid April – end of July**

With courses complete, you begin the third term of the program and can give full attention to your thesis. At this stage, in accordance with your proposal, you will be meeting regularly with your supervisor and, depending on your research and your methodological approach, reviewing literature, recruiting participants, gathering and analyzing data and submitting chapters for feedback. You should complete a first full draft of your thesis by August 2nd. (See Appendix I). After your supervisor has reviewed your thesis draft and you have addressed any revisions required, your supervisor will indicate that you are ready to arrange your oral examination.

### **August**

In August, you are expected to prepare a final draft of your thesis and submit three printed copies (double-spaced; backprinted) to your supervisor in readiness for your oral examination. Your research supervisor approves the final draft of the thesis before it is submitted for oral examination. You will then need to give your second reader at least two weeks to read the thesis prior to the oral exam. You will need to plan ahead to ensure their availability. Your oral examination will have been scheduled for late August or early September. On successful completion of the oral exam, and when all revisions required by the examining committee have been made, you submit your thesis electronically to MacSphere. Check the School of Graduate Studies calendar for their deadline date for submission - it is usually around mid-September.

### **September**

Please refer to “The Final Product” section found on page 10 which outlines the final steps students need to follow when submitting their thesis electronically, manner of submission and graduation information.

---

## **THE ORAL EXAM COMMITTEE**

### **Research Supervisor**

Students carry out their research with the advice and guidance of research supervisors. An outline of each faculty member's research and writing is included in the orientation package which students receive after being admitted to the program. Faculty will have presented their research interests at orientation. Students are encouraged to approach faculty members whose research interests may overlap with their own for an initial informal conversation. Once you have had an opportunity to consult with several faculty members you can make a more formal request for a faculty member to act as your supervisor.

Supervisors for MSW theses are normally drawn from the faculty members of the School of Social Work. A student may make a request to invite supervision from someone who is not a current faculty member but has a connection to the School of Social Work by way of emeritus status, sessional instruction or associate membership. The person must have supervisory status and be approved by the Graduate Chair.

It is the supervisor's responsibility to assist with procedural and practical steps (e.g. ethics review, locating a sample), and to offer guidance, as needed, with substantive and methodological dimensions of the thesis and with writing. It is important that each student and supervisor develop a mutually agreed upon

plan of work to ensure completion of the thesis for oral examination by the relevant deadline.

### **Second Reader**

A second faculty member will serve as a member of the student's eventual examining committee. The choice of this person will be arrived at in discussion between supervisor and student and will be based on his/ her relation to the research topic or the student's approach and on his/ her availability. He/ she will be given a copy of the final draft of the thesis in preparation for the oral examination. The second reader does not normally provide feedback on earlier drafts.

### **Examining Committee Chair**

The Director of the School appoints a faculty member to chair each oral exam. It is the chair's role to guide the proceedings, introduce the exam's purpose, clarify its conduct, clarify the evaluation procedures and guide the discussion as needed. The chairperson does not normally ask questions about the thesis.

## **THE ORAL EXAMINATION**

---

The oral examination represents the final stage of evaluation of the thesis. It is also an opportunity for students to present their work, to receive feedback to consider the broader implications of their research, and to discuss avenues for communicating their work and putting it to use in their chosen fields.

Oral examination dates will be offered in June and September. Students who wish to defend at a date other than those set by the School of Social Work must make a request to the Chairperson of the Graduate Studies Committee. For specific defense dates, please consult the Important Dates Calendar.

Students intending to graduate at the Fall Convocation must submit a printed copy of their first full draft of their thesis (double-spaced; backprinted) by August 2nd. Students who fail to meet this deadline may not be able to graduate in the Fall.

At the oral examination, students will provide a 15 minute (maximum) presentation on their thesis research, focussing on issues such as: how they came to their research question, methodological and ethical issues they confronted, major findings and their implications, and dissemination plans. The supervisor and the second reader then pose questions covering, for example, directions for future research emerging from the thesis, the student's appraisal of its limitations, its implications for practice/action, and questions related to the study's methodology and/or substantive findings.

The oral examination normally lasts an hour. At the end, the student is asked to leave briefly while the committee members discuss and finalize their evaluations and feedback. To achieve a passing grade, a positive evaluation from two out of three of the committee members is required. The final Thesis Submission Sheet form will then be initialed by the Chair of the Defense in the appropriate box which outlines the conditions pertaining to the successful defended master's thesis, 1) No changes required, 2) Minor changes required or 3) Major changes required.

The Supervisor and Second Reader will complete an Arrell Prize Review form to the Graduate Secretary after the thesis has been successfully defended (see Appendix II).

## **GUIDELINES FOR THE PREPARATION OF THE MSW THESIS**

---

The final product of the thesis research is a bound manuscript. This manuscript must be prepared in accordance with university standards that are set down in the School of Graduate Studies [Guide for the Preparation of Master's and Doctoral Theses](#).

The School of Graduate Studies Office offers thesis boot camps four times per year, virtual write-ins and thesis toolkit resources. For more details, please consult [The Writing Centre](#).

## **THE FINAL PRODUCT AND GRADUATION INFORMATION**

---

### **E-Thesis Filing and & Number of Copies Required for Binding**

Following a successful defense and any required revisions, the student is required to file their final thesis via [MacSphere](#). Please read SGS [Final Thesis Checklist](#) webpage (found on "Submit" tab) before clicking on "MacSphere" link.

Our School does not require a hard copy, but if you wish to order any hard copies for yourself, here is a link to Binding Service:

<http://graduate.mcmaster.ca/masters-degree-thesis> Click on "Submit" tab, then #6 "E-Thesis Binding". You will see link to binding service which is available through Lehmann Bookbinding at: <http://pageforpage.com/>

Lehmann Bookbinding has been a trusted McMaster Vendor for nearly 30 years and, via their website, can print, bind and send your thesis where you wish. However, this is only an option; you may use any binding service that you prefer.

### **Manner of Submission**

The following five (5) forms will be completed by the oral exam committee and submitted to the School of Graduate Studies by the graduate secretary via Mosaic Service Request system:

1. Report of Examining Committee,
2. Oral Defense
3. Licence to McMaster University
4. Completion of Course Requirements
5. Final Thesis Submission Sheet - Master's Thesis

This form will be initiated by the Chair of the Defense at the oral exam. The Chair of the Defense is required to initial the form and then hand it to the graduate secretary;

After all corrections and revisions have been made to the thesis, the Supervisor will sign the form. The Supervisor will then notify the student by email (cc Graduate Secretary) that they are ready to e-file their thesis. The graduate secretary will then submit all five forms to the School of Graduate Studies. Once the form has been signed, the student is now ready to electronically file their thesis via MacSphere on Library web site. Please see "The Final Product" section, page 8 for details.

### **Graduation Information Centre**

All convocating students must complete their profile at:

<http://registrar.mcmaster.ca/grad/gic-2/>

Click on *Graduation Information Centre* link for Spring or Fall convocation.

This profile is used to indicate whether you will be attending the ceremony or having the diploma picked up or mailed out after the day. Diplomas will be available for pickup starting the 2<sup>nd</sup> week of December from the Office of the Registrar in Gilmour Hall, Room 108 during regular business hours. Students must present photo id in order to pick up their diplomas. Students may elect to have someone else pick up their diploma on their behalf. The delegate must present written authorization from the student (including McMaster student ID number and signature) and photo identification in order to pick up the diploma.

## APPENDIX I – PROPOSAL FOR MSW THESIS

---

This form should be completed by students prior to beginning work on their research.

This form should be submitted to the Graduate Secretary by full time students by the end of January. Part-time students should submit the form six months prior to their anticipated completion of the thesis.

Student:

Supervisor:

Working title of thesis:

### 1) Summary of proposed research

i) Purpose of the research (general focus, central question/ issue of concern, policy/ practice literature in which it is situated)

ii) Proposed methodological approach (type of data to be gathered to explore central question/ issue, plans for locating data sources, approach to sampling, data collection, analysis)

### 2) Plans to obtain needed resources, supports, permissions

i) Are the data you will be seeking readily available (i.e if you plan to gather original data do you have access to research participants? If you are gathering secondary data have you located the kinds of literature and documentary materials that you need?)

ii) If you are collecting original data, you need to submit an application, co-signed by your research supervisor, to the McMaster Research Ethics Board (MREB). When do you plan to submit your application to your supervisor?

### 3) Planned schedule of work on the thesis

(Please consult Important Dates Calendar)

i) what kind of working arrangements have you agreed upon with your supervisor (meetings, email/ phone contact, frequency of contacts)?

ii) specify the proposed timetable on which you have agreed -- (pacing of data collection, analysis and writing, submission of first draft etc).

Student: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

Supervisor: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

2<sup>nd</sup> Reader: \_\_\_\_\_

Date: \_\_\_\_\_

