

Guidelines* and Policies for Preparing a Research Thesis

M.A. in Public Relations and Advertising DePaul University

What is a research thesis?

Students with a minimum GPA of 3.7 after the completion of six courses may choose to propose and complete a research thesis to fulfill the degree completion requirement for the M.A. degree in Public Relations and Advertising. The thesis must demonstrate the student's ability to apply the knowledge and skills gained through graduate study to the development of an original research project that will make a contribution to the public relations and/or advertising body of knowledge. The thesis should explore, test, refine or expand existing theory in the area. The thesis should offer satisfactory evidence of the candidate's potential for scholarly research.

The student should enroll in PRAD 599 (Research Thesis) during the term in which he/she intends to complete the project. If the student fails to complete the thesis during the targeted term, he/she must register for PRAD 601 (Active Degree Completion) as he/she continues to work on the thesis and use university facilities. Students can register for PRAD 601 a maximum of two quarters.

Choosing a Research Topic

The first step in the development of a research thesis is the selection of a topic. The subject should be something that interests or intrigues the student so that he/she will enjoy the process of learning more about it. Most research begins with a question – students should consider what topics they would like to know more about. They often find it helpful to review the literature, particularly academic journals, but also the trade and popular press and internet sources in various areas to learn more about existing knowledge and thinking. This review may help narrow the focus of the research. As the student learns more about the subject, he/she will be better able to articulate the particular purpose of the study.

Students can learn more about what is required of a thesis by reading completed theses, paying close attention to format, style and content.

Developing a Thesis Proposal

Students bear the responsibility for developing an idea for a research thesis. Once he/she can define the specific purpose of the study, the student must prepare a thesis proposal. The proposal should describe the purpose and significance of the thesis, provide a brief overview of the subject, outline the theoretical framework, outline the research objectives and methodology(ies) to be used, include a working bibliography and provide a timeline for completion of the project. Most proposals are between 10-30 pages in length. The proposal should include a clearly articulated purpose statement and research questions, as well as justification for the specific research methodologies chosen and a working bibliography.

Recruiting a Faculty Committee

If he/she has not already done so, once the proposal is written, the student is ready to recruit a supervisory committee. He/she must select a minimum of three full-time members of the College of Communication faculty to supervise the thesis. (A faculty member outside the college may serve with the program director's approval.) At least one faculty member must be a member of the Public Relations and Advertising faculty. Students should identify faculty members who have

expertise and interest in helping them complete their work in a timely fashion. Specifically, students should identify committee chairs who can direct their work throughout the thesis and a methodologist who can provide advice and counsel on the research component. A student may elect to add other committee members who have particular expertise in the subject area.

The thesis proposal should be presented to the faculty with a request to serve on the student's supervisory committee. If the proposal is approved, the committee chair must sign the Thesis Approval Form (found on the PRAD website under "Complete your Degree."). The student should then ask the graduate program director to approve the thesis by reviewing the proposal and signing the form. Committee members and the graduate program director must approve the project before any work on the thesis may commence. It is advisable that the student schedule an initial meeting of his/her advisory committee to assure agreement on subject and method. The purpose of the meeting should be to refine the study and define the expectations of the faculty. If a student is not able to develop an acceptable thesis proposal, the program director will direct the student to register for comprehensive exams.

Committees should be formed before the completion of three terms or six courses, whichever comes later. Once the committee is formed, faculty substitutions may be made only with the approval of the program director. Committees may be dissolved by request of the chair if inactive for a period of one academic year.

If a student does not make significant progress towards the writing, research and completion of the thesis within one year of submitting the thesis approval form, the student's committee has the authority to determine if the student is allowed to continue with the thesis. If the committee decides to discontinue the thesis, the student must take the comprehensive exam to fulfill the degree completion requirement.

The Research Phase

Once the research instruments (e.g., involving such methods as surveys, focus groups, in-depth interviews, content analyses) have been developed, the student must gain any necessary approvals from his/her faculty committee and the Institutional Review Board (IRB) before carrying out any primary research. This process can take weeks – students should plan accordingly. Upon receiving the required approvals, the student may begin collecting and analyzing data. Although committee members may provide guidance as needed, students should work as independently as possible during the data gathering stage.

Writing the Research Thesis

Research theses typically share common elements including an introduction of the study, statements of purpose and significance, literature review, research questions/hypotheses, research methodology(ies), research results/findings, discussion of results/findings, conclusions, limitations and future research. The literature review should describe and synthesize previous research on the topic, noting what is known and not known about the thesis topic. This review leads to the specific research questions/hypotheses of the intended study. (In some cases, students may elect to replicate past studies to examine trends, etc.) The methodology section should describe and justify why the methods chosen are most appropriate for the intended study. Next, the data gathering and analysis process should be detailed. The results/findings chapter should address the research results, outlining the specific findings of each research component.

After the presentation of research findings, the findings should be discussed – students should explain what the findings mean in relation to the existing body of knowledge on the topic. This section should demonstrate the significance of the study. The discussion should be linked to the theoretical framework introduced in the literature review. This section also should address the implications of the findings for communication professionals. In other words, what are the practical implications of the study? The limitations of the study and proposals for future research typically follow the discussion section, along with a brief conclusion.

Thesis advisors should respond to graduate student submissions within a reasonable time period. No more than two weeks should be taken to review each thesis chapter submitted for consideration. Following this timeline will ensure timely thesis and program completion.

The final document should be a minimum of 50 pages, excluding bibliography and any appendices. Acceptable citation styles include the latest editions of the American Psychological Association, the Chicago Manual of Style and the Bluebook Style of Legal Citations. Writing quality is very important in the successful completion of a research thesis. Students should not expect faculty members to edit their work – they should provide neat, polished work that is carefully edited. It is advisable that students give the final thesis to their committee chair for review before distributing to all committee members.

Oral Defense

The final step in the completion of a research thesis is a formal, public defense of the study. Faculty, students and other interested parties are invited to attend. The student should work with his/her committee chair to schedule the place and time of the defense. Thesis defenses must be held no later than the seventh week of the term in which the student hopes to complete the degree completion requirement.

In preparation for the defense, the student is responsible for:

- Providing a copy of the final typed thesis to each member of the committee for review at least two weeks before the defense;
- Arranging a time and place to fit the schedules of committee members;
- Securing the meeting place with the help of the College of Communication graduate advisor;
- Having a copy of the final thesis defense form and an original signature page available at the defense for committee members to sign; and
- Delivering the signed form to the M.A. program director.

Grading the Thesis

The thesis is graded on a pass/fail basis by committee members. Following the oral defense, the committee members will ask the student and other parties to leave the room so that they can discuss whether the student has successfully completed the thesis requirements. If the student passes, all committee members must sign the thesis completion form stating that the student has met all thesis requirements, passing both the written and oral portions. The form is then provided to the student for submission with the completed thesis to the College. Any revisions required by the committee must be made prior to acceptance of the thesis for graduation. If the thesis is judged generally acceptable, but some work remains to be done, the chair of the advisory committee may hold the signature page until the thesis has been satisfactorily completed. The

student can then receive the signature page to be placed with the thesis and submitted as required. If the student receives a grade of fail, he/she will be dismissed from the program.

Thesis defenses are held during regular business hours. Presentations may be videotaped for educational purposes.

Final Steps

When the thesis has been accepted by the supervisory committee, the student must submit one bound copy to the College office. Students bear the responsibility for getting all materials/forms in on time and in the required format. Any delay in this process could delay the student's graduation. It is customary to provide each committee member an electronic copy of the final version of the research thesis.

Timeline for Completion of the Research Thesis

Students are advised to begin work on their theses 6-9 months prior to the time they hope to complete their work. For example, if the completion date is in the Spring Term, thesis work should begin no later than the Fall Term of the same academic year.

The student must provide committee members sufficient (i.e., typically two weeks) time to review their work during each phase of the thesis. These "review" periods should be factored into the thesis timeline. The final draft of the thesis must be submitted to committee members at least two weeks prior to the oral defense.

Students should keep in mind that thesis work must be completed during the regular academic year calendar. Oral defenses must be held during the Fall, Winter or Spring terms. Students should not expect committee members to be available for consultation outside the regular academic year calendar, i.e., during the Winter intercession, spring break or summer recess.

Suggested Thesis Schedule:

<u>Approval of Thesis Proposal</u>	<u>Oral Defense</u>
Autumn	Spring
Winter	Fall
Spring	Winter

**NOTE: These guidelines include some material from "Guidelines for Writing a Thesis or Dissertation" by Linda Childers Hon.*