

Thesis Guidelines: M.A. in Communication

The thesis option requires a student produce a substantial scholarly research paper in order to earn the degree. Students in this option are required to register for a minimum of six credit hours of Comm 5994: Research and Thesis. Comm 5994 has been approved to accept an EQ grade. An assigning of the EQ grade has no impact upon a student's GPA, but does indicate that the thesis credit requirement for thesis option students has been fulfilled.

While not the best option for all students, writing a thesis can be extraordinarily rewarding. Students should consult with both faculty and thesis students before determining whether to choose this option.

The Prospectus:

A thesis is a major research project that should not be engaged without careful consideration. A student must determine whether the question being investigated is worthy of a major research endeavor, whether the research methodology is suitable, and whether the study is likely to result in a contribution to the literature of the discipline.

The thesis prospectus is designed to ensure that the master's candidate has, in fact, considered those criteria. It is also designed to provide the student's advisor and advisory committee with sufficient information so they can answer the same questions. That is, the prospectus will help the advisory committee determine whether the topic is manageable in both content and scope. Based on the prospectus, and a discussion between the student and the committee about the prospectus, the committee will approve or deny approval of the thesis.

The student, therefore, should use the prospectus to advocate the topic. The average prospectus should be between 15 - 25 pages long, although this may vary considerably depending upon the project. At a minimum, the prospectus should cover:

- *Purpose.* What specifically are you investigating? Define or clarify terms, time frames and issues. Be as specific as possible in stating the research question. What unanswered questions led to the proposal of this study? What contributions to knowledge might result from the study, and why are those contributions important? That is, why is this study important?
- *Survey of the Literature.* The literature survey is a working bibliography of the work that has been done on the issue. As such, a preliminary bibliography is to be included as part of the prospectus., But the literature review is more than simply a bibliography. The research reviewed in the prospectus will establish or at least suggest the theoretical home of the thesis, for example. The literature review also explains how previous research complements what you plan to do, and how it is different from your research. You don't want to repeat someone else's work; you want to add to the body of literature on the topic. Your work, therefore, must go beyond what has been done.

- *Methodology.* How are you planning to research the topic? How will data be analyzed? Although it may seem that content analyses, surveys and other types of quantitative research often need more explanation than qualitative projects, qualitatively based projects, must also explain at the least how the tasks will be accomplished, what sources will be used, and how those sources will be evaluated.

Individual work plans should be discussed with the student's advisor, but it is strongly suggested that a Thesis Prospectus be completed and defended by early in the semester prior to the semester in which the student expects to finish the degree. For most students, this will be the Fall of the second year. Therefore, the summer between the first and second year should be set aside for research and background reading in preparation for the writing of a Thesis Prospectus.

An oral defense of the prospectus is not required, but may be called at the discretion of student's advisor and committee. When the final prospectus is approved, the student must submit six copies of the prospectus along with six copies of the completed Thesis Prospectus Approval and Committee Agreement Form.

Oral Defense:

The Graduate School requires that all graduates pass a final examination in their program. Thesis-option students will satisfy this requirement through a successful oral defense of the thesis which is open to the public. The oral defense must be scheduled through the Graduate School office at least two weeks in advance by completing and submitting a "Request to Admit Candidate to Final Exam" form.

Examination cards should also be obtained from the Graduate School on the day of the examination. The card should be returned to the Graduate School office as soon as possible after the exam. The oral defense must be scheduled at least two weeks prior to the last day to complete all requirements for commencement participation for the graduating student. Committee members must receive the final draft of the thesis at least two weeks before the oral defense.

After the defense, each examination committee member will grade the defense using a "pass-fail" designation. A candidate cannot have more than one unfavorable vote from the examination committee to pass the final exam.

A student may receive a "provisional pass" from the committee that is contingent upon additional revisions to the thesis that is to be supervised by the Thesis Advisor. Provisional pass assumes that the thesis is close to completion, but requires additional revision to meet departmental standards of excellence. Upon a provisional pass designation, the committee will direct the student as to the area(s) in need of additional revision. As per university policy, if a student fails the final oral exam, the exam may not be rescheduled until the next semester. A student is allowed no more than two opportunities to pass the final oral examination.

A student must be registered for at least one course during the semester in which the oral defense is administered and degree requirements are completed.

Submission of Thesis to Graduate School:

Thesis students are required to submit an electronic version of the thesis to the Graduate School no later than two weeks after successful completion of the defense; if this deadline cannot be met, a request for an extension should be sent to the dean of the Graduate School by the major professor. A student hoping to graduate at the end of spring semester must submit the thesis to the Graduate School at least ten days before commencement. Theses must follow the format required by Virginia Tech. Instructions for electronic submission and formatting are at < <http://etd.vt.edu/>>, and may also be reviewed in Appendix I of the Virginia Tech Graduate Catalog.

A bound copy is also to be submitted to the Department of Communication. An additional copy is customarily given to the major professor.