Master of Arts Thesis Proposal and Proposal Defense

Policy Updated April 2014


Purpose of the thesis proposal:

The thesis proposal has two purposes. The first is to enable the student to develop detailed plans for the completion of the thesis. The second is to give the supervisory committee a clear idea of the student’s plans, so that the committee can anticipate and avoid any major problems with the research, and so that the student and the committee can reach agreement about what the student is expected to do to prepare the thesis for defense. The proposal should describe the research to be done for the thesis and the method by which it will be done. It should also outline the projected contents of the thesis.

Thesis proposals should contain:

- A proposed Table of Contents for the thesis. This should include the estimated number of pages for each chapter. (For theses that involve data collection, these estimates may change after the data is collected).
- An Introduction, briefly explaining the problem(s)/questions to be explored in the thesis and the contribution the thesis will make to Gender, Sexuality, and Women’s Studies scholarship.
- A section describing the research method(s) to be used. Methods of analysis of data should be carefully described.
- If the research involves human participants in any way, the method of selecting the participants, the number of participants to be studied, methods of data collection, means of obtaining informed consent, and means to ensure confidentiality of the participants’ responses should be described in the research methods section of the proposal. If questionnaires are to be used, their full texts must be included in the proposal. If interviews are to be used, an interview schedule must be included. This information will form the basis of your submission to the University Research Ethics committee, which is required by the university whenever research involves human participants. You will submit this information to the University Research Ethics Committee after completing the proposal defense. For more information see http://www.sfu.ca/vp-research/ethics/applications/index.html
- For research involving discussion/analysis of texts, archival material, films or other media, the proposal should make clear what texts or other material will be studied with brief explanations of the relevance of the material chosen and how you will gain access to this material. The questions/problems on which the discussion will focus should be described at length.
- Where the production of a non-literary work (e.g., film, video, art work) is to form part of the thesis, it should be described in sufficient detail to clarify its relationship to the theme(s) of the written portion of the thesis.
- Descriptions of the contents of each chapter.
- A preliminary bibliography. This means that you should make yourself aware of most of the existing literature on their topics before completing their thesis proposals. The proposed bibliography may be expanded or condensed in the final thesis.
- An approximate timetable for completing the various stages of work on the thesis (e.g., data collection, data analysis, first drafts of chapters, second drafts, filming, editing).
- M.A. thesis proposals should be 10 to 15 pages long. Examples of previously approved thesis proposals are available in the Gender, Sexuality, and Women’s Studies office. Keep in mind that Senior Supervisors vary in the amount and kind of detail they require for proposals; the Graduate Committee considers this variation a legitimate exercise of academic freedom.

**Process**

The thesis proposal should be developed in consultation with the Senior Supervisor at each step of the process, e.g., conceptualizing themes, developing bibliography, designing methods, writing drafts. Normally, the M.A. thesis proposal is completed by the end of your fourth term in the M.A. (if you are a full-time student and have not taken extended leaves of absence). If you do not prepare a proposal within the expected time for the degree, the reasons for this must be described in your annual review and approved by the Graduate Program Committee. When the Senior Supervisor and you are both satisfied with the proposal, you should give it to the other supervisory committee member(s) and schedule a thesis proposal defense meeting. Once the committee is in agreement that the proposal is ready to be defended, the Senior Supervisor will schedule a thesis proposal defense meeting. If the student wishes to take the proposal to a defense without the agreement of the senior supervisor, the supervisor and the student must inform the Graduate Chair and Graduate Program Committee, and the Graduate Chair will schedule the defense. For the M.A. thesis proposal, the student, the supervisory committee, and the Chair of the Gender, Sexuality, and Women’s Studies Graduate Committee attend the meeting. NOTE: The thesis proposal must be submitted to the student’s supervisory committee a minimum of two weeks prior to the defense date.

**Procedures for Thesis Proposal Defense**

The Graduate Chair normally chairs the thesis proposal defense. The Chair begins by asking the student to make a brief statement about the purpose of the proposed research (maximum of 10 minutes). The Chair then invites each supervisory committee member in turn to raise questions about the thesis proposal (maximum of 15 minutes each, with the possibility of a second round of questions). The
Graduate Chair may also ask questions of the student and the committee about the research. Once the discussion has been completed to the satisfaction of the committee members, the student will be asked to leave the room while the committee comes to a recommendation. The Graduate Chair will summarize the recommendation at the end of the meeting, checking to be sure that everyone has the same understanding.

Based on the written proposal and its oral defense, the examining committee may recommend to the Graduate Program Committee one of the following possibilities:

1. Unqualified pass (that the student proceeds to the work on the thesis)
2. Minor revisions to be approved by the Senior Supervisor only (that the student revises the thesis prospectus as specified by the examining committee and then proceed to work on the thesis)
3. Major Revisions and a second proposal defense (that the student be required to undertake major revisions for another defense within 3 months of the original defense date). After the second defense the committee may recommend the following outcomes: unqualified pass; minor revisions approved by Senior Supervisor only; Fail and requirement to withdraw from the program.

**After the thesis proposal defense**

After the defense, the Senior Supervisor should write a memo to the Graduate Secretary to be included in the student’s file, stating that the committee met, noting the recommendation reached by the committee, and describing in detail all agreed-upon changes to the thesis proposal. A copy of the memo should be sent to the student, the other member(s) of the supervisory committee, and the Graduate Chair. The student must give the Graduate Secretary a copy of their final thesis proposal, including all the required changes, for their student file.

1. If the defense is successful and no changes are required, then a copy of the proposal must be given to the Graduate Secretary for your file. The Senior Supervisor must send a memo or email to the Graduate Secretary stating that the proposal was successfully defended.

2. If the proposal requires changes, the student should inform the graduate secretary. After these changes are made to the satisfaction of the Senior Supervisor, then the student must provide the graduate secretary with a copy of the changed proposal. The Senior Supervisor should send a memo or email to the graduate
secretary saying that the changes have been made and that the proposal is now acceptable to the committee.

3. It is the responsibility of the Senior Supervisor to prepare a letter summarizing these changes, including the date by which the changes are to be made and the process for their review, and to circulate it to members of the defense committee.