

# California State University, Los Angeles

## Department of Sociology

### Guide to Preparing a Masters Thesis Proposal

#### Overview

The following few pages provide you with guidelines for writing a Masters thesis proposal. Remember, the proposal, just like the thesis, may be subject to faculty revision suggestions and what you first submit should be seen as a draft. However, the draft should be your best effort. The more clearly written, coherent, complete, and *credible* the thesis proposal, the easier it will be to convince faculty to participate on your thesis committee. Also, keep in mind that all work done on the proposal helps in finishing the final thesis project.

The proposal is a key step in the work toward a Masters thesis. In part it is a description of the work to be done. It is also, very importantly, a way to establish *credibility* and feasibility. In other words, it is through your Masters thesis proposal that you demonstrate you are prepared to undertake the work. At this stage you are not expected to thoroughly explore every aspect of your subject, but rather to adequately show that you know enough about the project that your efforts will not be wasted.

The proposal should generally follow an outline similar to the way the thesis will be organized. The more detailed the proposal, the greater the start on the thesis itself will be. However, the Masters thesis proposal is written to describe work yet to take place, and to provide coherence and the orderly presentation of the thesis question, hypothesis and analysis.

The structure of the Masters thesis proposal should, generally, follow the outline provided below:

- Overall Aims: The Question, Problem or Relationship to be Investigated
- Background and Significance or Conceptual Framework: Why it's Important
- Theoretical Questions or Research Questions & Hypotheses: Specifying the Above
- Methods
- Strategy of Analysis
- Projected Timetable

This is only a guideline and may differ according to the issues being posed and explored in the thesis. However, in as much as possible these guidelines should be followed in the first draft of your Masters thesis proposal and each section should be fleshed out prior to submitting the first draft to faculty for advice.

The proposal need be no longer than 10 pages. If you find this is not sufficient to thoroughly describe the project in all its parts, you have probably picked too large or complex a question for a Masters thesis. Pick *part* of the larger idea to focus on. In general, you should be treating one or two theoretical or research questions, and no more.

# **Proposal Components**

## **Overall Aims**

This section should consist of *one* or *two* paragraphs of introduction. It briefly defines the research or theoretical question you intend to examine, the study you propose to do or the means of addressing the theoretical issues, and what you hope to establish. This brief section serves as an abstract as well as a general outline for the proposal to follow. This section should provide the reader with a general orientation and ensure that there are not major surprises in the rest of the document.

## **Background and Significance**

This section provides a short description of the general topic area related to your thesis question, defines key terms, and reviews what is generally thought to be known about the question you will be addressing. An abbreviated literature review should be included. That is, while literature should be cited, you need not put into the proposal the *full* literature review to be used in the thesis. Remember that the key task in the proposal is to establish both the credibility and feasibility of your project. Therefore, the background section need only cite enough sources to make it clear that you've read widely enough in the relevant areas to know what the major issues are for your thesis project. Your readers need to know that other people agree that your question is important, but not everything that has been said about it. As a rule-of-thumb, each major point you are making should probably have two or three references, but it is important not to get hung up here or try to include too much. (Remember, for all references cited, include the full bibliographic information at the end of the proposal.) After reading the "background and significance" section, readers should believe the following four things:

- (1) That you know enough about the appropriate terminology and structure of the topic area that you will be able to understand the readings and handle the specialized terms correctly;
- (2) That you've identified a question that others are interested in;
- (3) That enough work has been done in relevant areas to give you a solid background for getting into the project yourself; and
- (4) Where your work fits into and contributes to existing work.

## **Theoretical Questions or Research Questions and Hypotheses**

This section is where you define specifically what issues you are investigating or examining and what you expect to find or demonstrate. Again, there need be no more than one major research or theoretical question and there should never be more than two. Some Masters theses will address primarily theoretical issues, while others will be more research orientated. In either case, the Masters proposal will need to identify the questions of interest and any hypotheses related to those questions.

The research or theoretical questions are brief statements of unresolved issues or applications in the subject area that you plan to investigate or examine. They should be discussed in the terms of the subject area that you are addressing. They are open-ended questions such as "What is the relationship of X to Y?" or "In situations characterized by X, what happens to Y?" or "How does viewing the phenomenon through the perspective of X better explain Y?"

Hypotheses, by contrast, are declarative statements (testable or demonstrable statements) of the relationships between things, such as “X is inversely related to Y.” Remember, you do not need to do the analysis ahead of writing the proposal—you do not need to know if your hypotheses are *correct*. At the time of writing the proposal, all that is necessary is that you are able to *propose* reasonable hypotheses based on the knowledge you have to date. If you later find other relationships between your issues or interest provide better or more important answers to your research or theoretical questions, these are what you write about in the final Masters thesis. You are not tied to your original hypotheses.

This section of the theses should include relevant definitions of key theoretical issues, concepts, terms, and variables of interest where appropriate. If it helps your presentation, consider providing a picture of the proposed relationships in a diagram model, two by two table or other devise. This helps focus both you and the reader on the primary dynamics, interactions, or relationships of interest in your thesis.

After reading the first three sections (“overall aims,” “background and significance,” and “theoretical questions” or “research questions and hypotheses”), the reader should be able to understand a clear theoretical framework for your study.

## Methods

This section is a description of specifically *how you will acquire* the necessary evidence to explore your theoretical or research questions and defend the insights or answers you will ultimately provide. The methods section is specifically a blueprint of the *process* you intend to follow in carrying out the thesis work. This includes identifying the qualitative and/or quantitative means by which you intend to test your hypotheses in answering your research question or the avenues you will use to explore issues relevant to your theoretical question. You will need to address whichever of the following are relevant for your particular thesis project:

- Qualitative or quantitative data sources
- Investigative techniques or specific research methods fully described
- Access Issues for field work or data acquisition
- Availability of needed resources
- Overall feasibility of the research project or theoretical application

Here you will also need to cite some methods literature or reference other theoretical applications to demonstrate that the approach you have chosen is appropriate to your task.

In the preceding section you identified and conceptually defined your variables or major issues, so that step need not be repeated here. However, your discussion of the overall research or applied theory process should include *operational* definitions of the variables or issues of interest—that is, the specific measurements in your date or the manifestations of the phenomenon that will represent the concepts. Operational definitions tell the reader how you will recognize “it” when you see it. Such clarity in the description of your variables and primary issues is essential. It is often helpful to present this information in the form of a table such as shown in the following two examples:

<b>Concept</b>	<b>Variable</b>	<b>How Measured</b>
worker morale	personnel turnover rates	number workers leaving the firm in a given year as a % total employment

<b>Concept</b>	<b>Variable</b>	<b>How Measured</b>
Sex role traditionalism	advertising media Images of women	percentage of pictorial depictions of women in housekeeper, maternal, spousal and dating roles as opposed to occupational, sporting, solitary, and other roles.

In addition to operationalizing major issues and variables, you will need to fully describe any research methods to be employed. For example, if your methods will include contemporary and/or historical document searches, you need to indicate whether these are primary or secondary sources and the relevance these documents have for your thesis question. If your methods include surveys or interviews, you will need to describe the approach you intend to take, as in how many people will you attempt to survey or interview, how you intend to draw the sample, the representativeness of your sample, how you intend to gain access to them, and so forth. At the Masters thesis proposal state you need not have already assigned your survey or your interview protocol. If you are using observation as a method, you will need to describe the intended observation site(s), the import of the site(s) to your thesis question, the feasibility of your gaining access to the site(s) and, what observation methods you intend to employ (participant observation, ethnography, undeclared observation, etc.) If you are using the case study method you need to include the case selection process. In short, whatever method you intend to employ to address your research/theoretical question should be described in this section. As was said above, this section is a blueprint of the *process*.

### **Strategy of Analysis**

This section outlines what you are going to do with the evidence or data when you have it. You may be intending to present simple frequency tables or percentages. You may intend to provide more complex statistical analyses. You may intend a largely narrative work with deductive or inductive logical paths, mapping or modeling or descriptive typographies as your primary presentation or analysis. There are many choices and your task in the “analysis strategy” section is simply to indicate how you intend to analyze and present your work. This section should include a defense of your strategy as relevant to your thesis project. Once again, you are not tied to this as your sole analytic strategy. Once you are in working with the outcomes of your efforts and/or the actual qualitative or quantitative data, you may reconsider the best means of analysis and presentation. However, this section should represent your best effort to design an analysis strategy to date.

### **Projected Timetable**

Finally, you should include a projected timetable for the project. You need to identify key milestones for the project and, to the best of your ability, provide estimates of the completion of those milestones. This is a simple schedule of thesis work events that enables you and your committee members to better picture and monitor the progress of the project.

## **Summary**

The Masters thesis proposal should not be a major stumbling block. If in your research or during your application things don't turn out exactly as you described in the proposal, no one is going to make you start over. We all know that unexpected things may happen during a project that are often more interesting than what we set out to look at. Revising the project as appropriate is allowable. However, the committee should be apprised of all such significant redirections. The main caution in a thesis proposal is to keep the project focused, bounded, and manageable leading to work that is defensible and credible. A well-done proposal serves as the criterion of what is and is not to be included in the thesis, thereby facilitating completion of your MA thesis.

