**Thesis Guidelines**

Graduate programs that require the thesis or offer the thesis as an option to fulfill the culminating experience requirement for the degree must provide students with information regarding the expectations to meet this academic requirement. The thesis should assess the degree to which each student has achieved some or all of the program learning outcomes. This document provides guidelines for programs to develop a thesis rubric that assesses achievement of program learning outcomes.

As a minimum, theses must follow California state policy as described below:

[Title 5 Description of Theses](https://govt.westlaw.com/calregs/Document/IF41B2430D48211DEBC02831C6D6C108E?viewType=FullText&originationContext=documenttoc&transitionType=CategoryPageItem&contextData=(sc.Default)) for Culminating Activity

A thesis is the written product of the systematic study of a significant problem. It identifies the problem, states the major assumptions, explains the significance of the undertaking, sets forth the sources for and methods of gathering information, analyzes the data, and offers a conclusion or recommendation. The finished product evidences originality, critical and independent thinking, appropriate organization and format, and thorough documentation.

**Guidelines for Developing a Thesis Rubric**

1. Include a description of the purpose of rubric - assessment of thesis in aggregate form; feedback to students common criteria, clarity on the expectations for the project; should be tied to relevant learning outcomes
2. Identify how the program intends to use rubric (for program assessment/PLOs; individual; feedback to students; to norm among faculty reading thesis).
3. When programs can use the rubric:
   1. During orientation so that students can make an informed decision when selecting a culminating experience
   2. During the advancement to candidacy advising appointment
   3. As feedback during process of writing manuscript (e.g., to highlight areas to improve)
   4. At oral defense
   5. As aggregate data to assess program effectiveness (Program review; accreditation data)
4. Match rubric domains to PLOs.
5. Make sure your Research Methods courses provide the content and skills needed for students to be successful with completing a thesis.
6. Faculty may decide to weight criteria based on discipline specific standards or importance. Below is a list of rubric domains to consider, each graduate program should decide which are most relevant:
   1. Written Communication
   2. Theoretical Background/Assumptions
   3. Significance/Impact on the Field/ Contribution to the Public Good
   4. Purpose of Study/Identification of Problem
   5. Methodology
   6. Results
   7. Discussion/Analysis:
   8. Ethical Considerations

**DESCRIPTIONS OF RUBRIC DIMENSIONS**

Below is a list of thesis rubric dimensions that a graduate program might include in the final thesis rubric to collect assessment data. It is not necessary to assess each of these areas using theses; some of these areas may be assessed through assignments in specific courses or through other departmental or programmatic assessment activities. These descriptions can be modified to suit needs of the department or program. We encourage you to meet as a department (assessment committee, faculty, etc.) to discuss which of these reflect standards in your discipline.

**Written Communication**

Because a thesis requires an extensive amount of writing, theses make great sources of data for assessing graduate students’ writing skills. Organization, style, clarity, tone, style manual application, and mechanics are just a few areas of written communication skills that could be assessed within a thesis.

For an example of rubric scales for assessing Written Communication, visit our [assessment resources webpage](https://www.calstatela.edu/apra/assessment-resources).

**Theoretical Background/Assumptions**

Students will describe key theoretical influences that inform their current study. Students may describe theoretical models, relevant previous scholarship or analysis on the topic, key terms and concepts, and/or current gaps in the literature.

**Significance/Impact on the Field/ Contribution to the Public Good**

At the graduate level, students contribute to the advancement of their discipline through original research, scholarship, and creative activity. This contribution can be described in a thesis in terms of knowledge generation, professional application, and/or positive social change. The student may describe how their scholarship contributes to overall well-being of local community, region, and/or discipline.

**Purpose of Study/Identification of Problem**

Students will provide a description of what their study intends to contribute to the discipline (e.g., adding new knowledge to the field, applying existing theory to a new population, replicating a published study, proposing new theoretical models to inform discipline, critical analysis of existing work). Students will provide hypotheses or research questions.

**Methodology**

Students will describe the process by which their data was generated, gathered, and recorded or the source from which secondary data were pulled. Students will describe their sample and any relevant demographics. For students who are analyzing or interpreting text, literature, or visual art in their research, inclusion criteria and the reasoning behind them will be described. Students may also describe how they plan to analyze the gathered data.

**Results**

Students will report the findings of their study and how they address the hypotheses or central research questions. Statistical analyses, if any were performed, will be described. In some cases, content analyses may be used to identify and describe themes in literary work. Visual graphics of data and findings (e.g., charts, tables) may be presented in this section.

**Discussion/Analysis**:

Students will interpret the findings reported in the Results section. Students might discuss the results in relation to existing literature, highlight the implications for theory, practice, and policy, and/or describe limitations of the study and offer suggestions for future scholarship on the topic.

**Ethical Considerations**

Students may need to provide evidence that ethics were considered, understood, and applied within the thesis. Ethical consideration may be showcased by an acknowledgement of the IRB approval process or through descriptions of the research process (e.g., how research procedures were designed to pose minimal risk, etc.). Ethical considerations may also be inherent in the subject matter of the thesis (e.g., focus on vulnerable population, sensitive topics, etc.) and how the data can be used (e.g., proposing new or questioning existing policy and practice).

Before developing thesis rubrics for assessment, revisit your **learning outcomes** and **curriculum map**. You may also consider reviewing Cal State LA’s [Institutional Learning Outcomes](https://www.calstatela.edu/apra/learning-outcomes). Identify which PLOs relate to the thesis rubric dimensions listed above or which PLOs could be best measured using theses as sources of data and include those dimensions in the rubric. Programs should consider designing the thesis rubric so that it will provide assessment data on outcomes or competencies that are not being assessed elsewhere in the department’s **assessment process or plan**.

If you’d like to learn more about the terms in bold, consider attending our [Assessment Workshops](https://www.calstatela.edu/apra/spring-2021-assessment-workshops), which cover introductory and advanced topics in assessment, including the assessment of graduate-level learning outcomes.