

GRADUATE SCHOOL OF DIVINITY
MASTER'S PROGRAM THESIS GUIDE

MASTER OF ARTS IN CHRISTIAN APOLOGETICS (MACA)

MASTER OF ARTS IN BIBLICAL STUDIES (MABS)

MASTER OF ARTS IN GLOBAL STUDIES (MAGS)

MASTER OF DIVINITY (M.DIV)

MASTER OF THEOLOGY (TH.M)

September 19, 2018

MASTER'S DEGREE THESIS GUIDE

I. INTRODUCTION

The production of an acceptable thesis represents the culmination of the research-based Master's degree. A Master's thesis is an extended discourse on a research topic of significance in the student's field of study. Consequently, you are encouraged to be thinking about a topic early in the program and to pursue the various stages of thesis production in an orderly and systematic way. The final product should demonstrate critical thinking skills and the ability to carry out a program of research.

The thesis should consist of a minimum of 15,000 words, exclusive of front matter and bibliography. In order to make a worthy contribution to the fund of knowledge, you should choose a thesis subject which will add to and is based in the current discussion of scholars in your field. This means that you will need to search exhaustively for what others have written on your topic. You should not seek merely to repeat what others have said about the topic; you must make an original contribution to the subject. In sum, the thesis must embody a well-researched position demonstrating critical judgment, independence of thought, and exegetical soundness.

Essential guidelines for thesis form are found in *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations* (current edition) by Kate L. Turabian and the Student Supplement for the *SBL Handbook of Style*, 2nd ed.¹ Additional instructions as to the form and mechanics of the thesis will be given in RTCH 680 (Research Methods). Accuracy in form, correct grammar, good organization, and a clear and concise English style will be crucial to a successful thesis. Students are expected to know and follow the policy on academic honesty stated in the Graduate Catalog.

A thesis is primarily an academic document demonstrating a high level of proficiency in research and analytical skills. To accomplish this purpose, it may be necessary for the thesis writer to draw conclusions with which the faculty is not in full agreement. For this reason, it is understood that the views expressed in students' theses are not necessarily those of the university, the faculty, or the specific mentor or reader(s) who may approve the thesis. You should recognize, on the other hand, that you are writing the thesis at Liberty University and for a mentor and reader who agree with the doctrinal statement of the institution.

Per the Graduate School Academic catalog, "All 30-47 semester hour master's programs have a maximum time limit of five years from the date of matriculation. All 48-60 semester hour master's programs, doctoral programs, or degrees offered outside the regular semester have a maximum time limit of seven years from the date of matriculation. All over-60 semester hour master's programs and doctoral programs have a maximum time limit of ten years from the date of matriculation."

1. Biblical and theological related theses require the Student Supplement for the *SBL Handbook of Style*. You may acquire a copy of the *SBL Handbook* supplement from either the Department of Biblical Studies or the Department of Theological Studies.

II. STEPS IN THE PRODUCTION OF THE THESIS

It is highly recommended that you take RTCH 680 (Research Methods) during the second semester in the master's program in which you are enrolled. RTCH 680 will introduce you to bibliography and thesis research with special emphasis on the formulation of a topic and thesis proposal. This is a "how to" course that is designed to equip you with the proper tools of research and writing at the master's level. In RTCH 680, you will be required to submit your topic choices to the instructor in the course in addition to submitting it to your department for topic approval. Please be aware that the proposal you produce for RTCH 680 is preliminary. Your thesis mentor will guide you in the creation of a working proposal which may or may not include the proposal developed for RTCH 680.

After completing all required course work for your degree program, you will enroll in THES 689 (Thesis Proposal and Research) in preparation for THES 690 (Thesis Defense). THES 689 pertains to finalizing your thesis and getting it ready to present to your thesis committee. You will remain enrolled in THES 689 for as long as it takes to get your thesis ready for more scrutiny. Furthermore, you will remain enrolled in THES 689 at the discretion of your thesis mentor who also serves as the instructor for the course. Your mentor will advise you by email when he or she is convinced that your thesis is ready to move from draft to final form. You will move on to THES 690 when your THES 689 instructor/mentor has advised you that your thesis is ready to move to the defense stage. At that point, your THES 690 instructor will simply enroll you in THES 690. This signals to your department and to the administration that you are ready to schedule your defense.

Below are the typical steps undertaken as you move through this stage of your degree program. These steps may be modified at any time depending upon exigencies beyond the control of your mentor or your own life situation.

Step 1. Upon successful completion of RTCH 680, you will work with the appropriate [SOD Program Director](#) to identify a Thesis Mentor and Reader who have expertise in your subject area. Once these two faculty members agree to serve in these capacities, have them sign off on the Thesis Topic Approval Form (Appendix A).

Step 2. Email the signed Thesis Topic Approval Form to your Department Chair or Program Director. Once approved, the Chair will contact the Graduate Registrar to open a section of THES 689 with your thesis mentor as the professor of record. At this point, you will be ready to enroll officially in THES 689. You will remain enrolled in THES 689 until your mentor and reader both agree that your thesis is ready for the oral defense. Your mentor will notify the Registrar that you are ready to move into THES 690.

Step 3. Attend to the research and writing necessary to submit the first draft of your thesis. Your mentor will inform you as to whether you submit your thesis by chapters or in its entirety. Submit your draft by email and be sure to save a copy to your own computer. While the Thesis Guide offers a schedule template there is no official schedule for you to follow. This you will work out with your mentor individually.

Step 4. Correct the first draft in response to comments and feedback provided by your mentor and reader.

Step 5. Return your corrected draft and the originals given to you by your mentor and reader. This allows your advisor to track how you modified your draft thesis in response to feedback provided by your committee.

Step 6. Modify your thesis in light of any comments/suggestions made to this version of your draft by your mentor and reader. These should be few in number if you have paid attention to feedback received earlier.

Step 7. Submit your final draft for review by your mentor and reader. With this final draft, also include your abstract following the directions provided in the *Master's Program Thesis Guide*.

Step 8. Your mentor in conversation with the chair/director of your department will schedule your oral defense.

Step 9. Your oral defense will take place during the date and time determined per step 8. During your defense, you will have twenty minutes to present your thesis and your findings to the assembled body. Residential students may defend in-person. Online students will defend via an online medium. Members of your committee may ask questions regarding methodology, literature, conclusions, or other features of your written work. Upon completion of the oral defense, the members of your committee will assign a grade. The final draft must be worthy of a minimum grade of B or it must be re-submitted. Your thesis must be cleanly edited prior to depositing it with the Jerry Falwell Library (JFL).

Step 10. Deposit your thesis with the JFL. Read the details for how to submit your thesis to the Library [here](#). Dissertation and Thesis submission guidelines must be followed precisely.

III. THESIS PROPOSAL²

Section 1 - Introduction

a. Statement of the Problem

State the problem or issue to be treated in the thesis. The writing of the thesis should be an attempt to resolve the problem raised or to contribute toward a clarification of an issue.

b. Statement of Purpose

State what you intend to accomplish concerning the particular problem or issue. For example, is the intention to refute common notions on the problem, analyze the problem more closely, or present a new solution to the problem?

c. Statement of Importance of the Problem

2. The Thesis Proposal outlined here will be accomplished in THES 689 (Thesis Proposal and Research).

At this point, you should present a defense of the significance of the issue raised, why it needs to be treated, and why you are qualified to address it. You must convince your reader that the issue is worthy of a thesis and that previous literature on this issue is inadequate.

d. Statement of Position on the Problem

You should clearly indicate your view based on your research to this point in relation to the problem raised by the thesis. It is this position or thesis that you expect to establish through the writing of the thesis. Perhaps your position will be that common perceptions or common answers to the problem are all mistaken, or that you have a resolution which you believe you can establish as correct.

e. Limitations/Delimitations

Indicate precisely any parameters, limitations, or assumptions of your thesis. It may be necessary to spell out what you do not want to cover in order to make the thesis defensible. Limiting your research to materials in English is not an appropriate limitation.

Section 2 - Method

Describe the methods or procedures to be used in conducting the writing and research of the thesis.

a. Research Methods

Explain broadly what type of thesis is being proposed. Is it a library thesis that compares and analyzes the results of research? Is it a descriptive study of existing data and subsequent analysis? Is it a study of a proposed questionnaire/interview or a participant-observer study? Is it an experimental research project that will attempt to project a statistical inference to a specific population?

b. Tests or Questionnaires

Describe any existing standardized tests to be used. If you intend to develop tests or questionnaires, they should be described in general. If they have already been created, they should be appended to the proposal.

c. Data Collection

Describe the methods of gathering data for your research. State what, how, when, and where you plan to gather the information you are seeking. You will need to become familiar with the library and all online databases that are relevant to your thesis topic.

d. Data Analysis

Describe the methods of correlating any data that result from the research. Explain how you plan to evaluate and synthesize your resources.

Section 3 - Proposed Development of Thesis

a. Working Outline for the Thesis

Present the proposed outline for the writing of the thesis. In the process of writing the thesis, it may become necessary to make some minor modifications. At the point of presenting the proposal, the mentor and reader need only see the basic outline.

b. Proposal for Chapter Division

State not only what the chapters will be but also why the material should be divided up according to the proposed division.

c. Proposed Summary of Each Chapter

Briefly summarize expected contents of each chapter. Be sure to show how each chapter contributes to the overall development of the thesis. You will, at this point, not have confirmed all the details of your argument but you must be able to defend the general structure of the actual thesis.

Section 4 - Results

Indicate the specific conclusions that you hope to establish in the thesis. It should be obvious from this information, that no student will be able to write an acceptable proposal without having completed considerable initial research and thought in relation to the topic. It is especially precarious to set forth what you intend to prove before much of the research has been completed, otherwise you will be tempted to manipulate the evidence to support your conclusions.

Section 5 - Working Bibliography

Present a preliminary working bibliography of at least 50 entries (excluding standard reference tools). This will inform your committee whether you are in touch with the significant works on the topic. This will also indicate whether you have read enough to be considering the specific thesis proposed and whether there are enough scholarly resource materials available for producing the thesis. Annotations, wherever possible, would be helpful, though not required.

IV. THESIS SUBMISSION

A. Submission of First Draft of Thesis

After the proposal has been approved and you have completed your research and

written a first draft of your thesis, you will submit electronic copies of the completed first draft to your Thesis Mentor and Reader. The form of the first draft shall approximate the final draft, and shall conform to the proper standards for form. Your mentor may, at their discretion, ask that chapters be submitted individually or they may ask for corrections in form to be made before passing copies on to the reader.

B. Return of First Draft with Corrections to the Student

The thesis mentor and reader should return the first draft to you within one month (remind your mentor of this time expectation if necessary). If it is accepted, you may proceed with final corrections and with the preparation of the final draft. If the thesis is not acceptable, you will receive corrections from the mentor and reader, and instructions on how to rewrite the draft.

C. Submission of Corrected Draft

After receiving the first draft with corrections, submit electronic copies of the corrected draft to the mentor and reader. Be sure to save your marked first draft. Your mentor will want to see both the copy of the first draft with corrections and the rewritten draft.

D. Return of Corrected Draft to Student

Within a month after receiving the corrected draft, the mentor and reader will return the corrected draft. At that time, they will indicate whatever further changes are necessary. You may then proceed with your preparation of the final draft.

E. Final Draft

The final draft shall conform to the corrections suggested and incorporated in the earlier drafts. You must submit the final draft on or before the scheduled date in order to graduate. The final draft must be submitted electronically to the Thesis Committee and the Department Chair.

F. Abstract

With the final draft, you must submit a one-page summary of the thesis, specifically identifying your conclusions and primary arguments. Do not talk about the thesis but encapsulate in several paragraphs the argument of the thesis. This abstract must be approved by the program director and will be distributed to the graduate faculty apprising them of the public defense. It will also be sent to abstracting services. It becomes page three of the final copy of the thesis.

G. Disclaimer

The following disclaimer will be placed by the institution on the title page of *every* thesis: “The views expressed in this thesis do not necessarily represent the views of the institution and/or of the thesis readers.”

H. Defense: Public

Under normal circumstances, the finished thesis must be openly and orally defended before a council composed of graduate faculty and the members of the Thesis Committee. The public defense may be conducted via a web meeting such as Web-Ex or Skype. Under this plan, the mentor and department chair will approve the selection of one or two additional members within the department to serve on the Thesis Committee and at least one faculty member outside the department. Under this option, at the public defense the approval of three-fourths of those sitting in council will constitute final acceptance of the thesis and its grade.

Defense: Non-public

Under this option, the department chair and mentor will approve the selection of a committee which must consist of at least one faculty member within the department in which the student is earning their degree, one graduate faculty member from the Seminary, and one faculty member outside the Seminary. This committee shall read and approve the finished thesis. No more than one negative vote will be allowed for final acceptance of the thesis and its grade. A non-public defense must be approved by your department chair. It is granted only in unusual circumstances, primarily when either the student or a committee member cannot be present for a defense. Under either plan one member may be from an institution other than Liberty if he or she is a recognized expert on the topic.

I. Grading

The thesis will be assigned a grade by the mentor in consultation with the reader after the defense. It will be placed on the approval page (Appendix B) and reported to the program director. The final grade will be due on the date when grades are due in the registrar's office for graduation. The chairman of your department will report this grade to the registrar. The final draft of the thesis must be worthy of a minimum grade of B.

J. Deposit with Jerry Falwell Library

The thesis must be deposited electronically with the JFL. It must be in Microsoft Word. The thesis requirement is not complete until receipt of an acceptable copy of the approved thesis is confirmed by the JFL in accordance with JFL deposit guidelines and policies. The specific guidelines and requirements for submitting dissertations and theses are available [here](#).

K. Submission Deadlines

The final draft is due by April 10 for a May graduation or by November 1 for a December graduation. You cannot receive the degree without a graded thesis and a JFL deposit receipt.

V. THESIS ACCEPTANCE AND ACADEMIC FREEDOM

It is understood that the primary purpose of a thesis is academic. It will be evaluated primarily based on the proficiency and breadth of research and reasoning demonstrated in the thesis. It is also understood that if you feel that your work is being judged too heavily based on the professor's personal attitude, or that the professor's personal doctrinal and/or non-doctrinal commitments are overly prejudicing his assessment of your work, you have the privilege of appealing to the Associate Dean. The Associate Dean will appoint, if necessary, a committee of two professors (excluding the mentor and reader of the thesis) to consider the student's appeal. Should this committee decide in favor of the student, the professor will not be required to accept or sign the thesis. In this case, both of the members of the Appeal Committee will sign the thesis.

The goal of all involved in the procedure must be both to uphold the highest level of academic freedom within the institution while being careful not to compromise the academic or doctrinal integrity either of the institution or the professors involved. It is assumed that in such matters all concerned will conduct themselves with utmost Christian love and consideration for one another.

Liberty University and its faculty desire that the experience of producing a thesis will be both academically rewarding and spiritually beneficial to the student. The faculty of Liberty University stands ready to do whatever they can to help make the project a good experience for all involved.

APPENDIX A: Thesis Topic Approval Form

Thesis Topic Approval:

Master of Divinity (MDiv)
Master of Arts in Global Studies (MA-GLST)
Master of Theology (ThM)

Name: _____

Student ID #_____

Topic: _____

Thesis Title: _____

Prospective Date of Completion: _____

Thesis Mentor: _____ **Date:** _____

Reader: _____ **Date:** _____

Program Director: _____ **Date:** _____

1 Copy - Registrar
1 Copy - Thesis Mentor
1 Copy - Reader
1 Copy - Program Director

APPENDIX B: THESIS APPROVAL SHEET

RAWLINGS SCHOOL OF DIVINITY

GRADE

THESIS MENTOR

READER
