

Your Anthropology Thesis FAQ: Completion timeline and student responsibilities

In response to recent student questions, the Anthropology Grad Committee developed this handout to serve as a [quick go-to reference about student responsibilities and important deadlines concerning the thesis route](#). Related information is also found in the Graduate Handbook.

By when should I have decided on my thesis topic?

Short answer: About the time you are 9 to 12 hours into the Program.

Longer answer: Your faculty designed the MA to be completed in 4 full-time semesters. They thought that after a semester to get a feel for the Department, you would be in position to decide whether you wished to do a thesis or experiential project, and if it was the former, to select your general topic. The Research Design classes, typically taught in the Spring, were created with the process of thesis development in mind. If all goes well, it takes about 10 months from the start (say June) of data collection to the polishing of a submittable draft (March of the following year). Now, many folks are not on the 4 semester plan, but even if your schedule isn't quite as compressed, the sooner you pick a topic, the sooner you can identify supporting courses, initiate data collection logistics, and read. No matter your precise timing, keep in mind that it takes some serious engagement with your advisor and the literature relevant to your research area before you settle on a feasible thesis topic. Not infrequently, students change their mind after their first or second-chosen topic ends up being impracticable. This usually results from insufficient background research and/or failure to adequately involve their advisor in the process.

How do I create a Thesis Committee?

Your committee starts with an advisor. If your advisor is the best faculty member to guide your topic—and in fact they have already helped you develop it—and you have a good rapport, great. If, however, you have realized that perhaps another prof might be a better match, then some conversations are in order. This happens all the time, organically, when your preliminary advisor encourages you to explore your ideas with another professor. Sometimes students feel awkward negotiating such a switch; if that's the case, speak with the DGS. You need a second Department member—and that can be anyone whose perspective will be useful to you. Run any committee ideas by your advisor before inviting other faculty to join your committee. The third member must be someone outside of the Department, either at UofL or at another institution. Again, first discuss possible outside members with your advisor. By the way, the outside member must be approved to serve on the Graduate Faculty; for non U of L faculty, this will take some paperwork so be sure to make this decision *at least* 3 months before you anticipate defending.

Can I start my thesis before I get a Committee?

Yes. Most people do. It's ideal to assemble a committee before you get started since that gives you more input from the get-go, but it's okay to invite people on even after your project is underway as you will then be able to select committee members who have a clear fit with your thesis topic, methods, theoretical framework, etc. By all means you should finalize your committee at the very latest in the beginning of the semester in which you plan to defend your thesis, or better put, before you finish your first draft. Use the electronic form found here:

<https://louisville.edu/artsandsciences/academics/graduate-education/faculty-resources>

How do I register for my thesis hours?

You do it by hand, just as for other individualized instruction. But first, you need to prepare a thesis proposal. This 10-12 page document serves as a research design for your project. A good proposal can also serve as the first draft of a thesis chapter—typically its components include a problem statement, background to the problem, and a methodology. The document should also make evident your command of the relevant literatures. You will work out the expectations for your proposal with your advisor—it would be a good idea ask them to give you an example of a strong proposal from a prior student. Once your advisor and the DGS approve your proposal then you can register for 3 or 6 thesis hours, using the A&S independent study form found here <https://louisville.edu/artsandsciences/academics/graduate-education/student-resources>

Where does candidacy fit into this? I keep hearing that candidacy will save me money.

Candidacy is a status that comes into play for MA students who have completed their required 30 credit hours (24 units classwork + 6 units thesis or experiential credit) but who have not yet finished their degree work. In other words, you will only enter candidacy if you need to stay on for an additional semester to complete your thesis or experiential work, after all of the 30 credits are exhausted. So if you finish up your credit requirements in 3 or 4 semesters (9+9+9+3) *and* complete and defend your thesis/experiential work, candidacy will not pertain to you. However, if for some reason you need extra time to finish your thesis work (say your samples blow up-- hey, it happened) even after you have paid for those 6 thesis credits, you can then register for candidacy and pay for the equivalent of two credits for every semester (including the summer) until you finish. (The grad handbook details this further). Registering for candidacy (MAST 600) also confers full-time status for purposes of financial aid and GAships. (See the Graduate Handbook for elaboration on the ins and outs).

What does a thesis actually look like?

To see, why not review the work of your predecessors? We have most of them collected in the Anthropology conference room and individual faculty can furnish you with electronic copies. You can find theses from across campus here: <https://ir.library.louisville.edu/etd/>

The length, number of chapters, uses of tables, etc., are things you will sort out with your advisor. A conventional thesis comprises the following elements: i) an introductory chapter where you introduce your topic, background studies, objectives and research questions; ii) methodology section- you discuss how you gathered your data and the rationale for the chosen methods...etc; iii) results, and, iv) discussion and conclusions- where you summarize and contextualize your findings, draw some sound conclusions, and lastly highlight the contribution/relevance of your study.

Be aware that the Grad School has strict rules for formatting and you will want to learn about these as well as meet with Grad School staff months ahead of your defense. You can find the guidelines and contact info here: <https://louisville.edu/graduate/current-students/thesis-dissertation-information/thesis-dissertation-information>

How often should I meet with my advisor and Committee?

It will vary according to your personalities, your project, and the phase of work. Regular weekly or biweekly meetings with your advisor seem most common. It is helpful to have goals established for each meeting (e.g. data sets cleaned up; sections written). Jot down your questions and concerns as you go; not only can your advisor help but it will help them to help you if they know more about your thinking.

As for the rest of the committee, although you will meet with them less frequently than with your advisor, they should be part of your discussions and feedback process in some way as you work on your data collection and writing up your findings. How they fit into this process will depend in some ways on their expertise and on your topic—what is most critical is that you have clear conversations with each committee member about how and when they will give you feedback. For example, one committee member's guidance might be critical in a specific phase of analysis or in the use of a particular method. You should ask each committee member their preferences when it comes to reading the thesis—do they like to read individual chapter drafts or the whole thing? **Your next two questions are crucial: 1) how long a reading turnaround time do they need; and 2) what is their schedule and availability in the semester you plan to defend.**

Why did you bold that last sentence?

Because it always takes longer than you think: let's count backwards with some language from the Grad Handbook.

The final, perfect draft of your thesis will be due at the Grad School sometime the last week of April. It is always the case that revisions will be required following the thesis defense. If the revisions take a one to two weeks, and you must provide a month for your committee to read your thesis, this means that you must schedule your defense by early/mid-March. Really. Keep in mind that the Committee usually gets a version of the thesis that you have already revised for your advisor, which means that for a Spring defense, you should be aiming to complete a first draft by early February.

Here's the punchline – Most of your fourth or otherwise final semester will be devoted to revising your thesis. Setting a defense without adequate time for review and revision means that you may be dealing with some frustrated committee members who want you to succeed and graduate, but also want your thesis to be strong, consistent, and something you will be proud of having posted on ThinkIR for anyone—including future bosses, advisors, other researchers etc.—to read and assess.

Anything else?

Yes, a little more paperwork. You will need to apply for graduation early in the semester in which you intend to defend. Watch for reminders from the DGS about this process, and know that your advisor will need to schedule your defense with the grad school no later than two weeks before your planned date <https://louisville.edu/graduate/forms/request-to-schedule-thesis-dissertation-final-oral-examination>

Finally, be prepared to accept lots of cheers, beers, and congratulations!!