

How to Write a Master's Thesis¹

Essential to writing a Master's Thesis is presenting and subsequently answering a central research question. A Master's Thesis will be the most prominent piece of your graduate work up to this point, and a pertinent thesis that forms the spine of this work elevates it from the prosaic to the significant. Working with a clear research question and thesis also makes your work easier, they are the foundation upon which the rest of the Master's Thesis is built!

Part 1: Choosing a Topic

1. Think about what interests you. You will spend much time working on this project, so it is imperative that you choose a topic that you are truly interested in, something that you will not grow bored of. Try thinking about your favorite subject of study - it may be a particular author, theory, period, etc. Imagine how you might further the study of that subject. If you are having trouble thinking about your academic interests, you might consider skimming through papers you wrote for your graduate courses and see if there is any apparent topic that you tend to gravitate towards.

2. Choose your thesis question. Carefully consider questions for your Master's Thesis that will generate important research and answers. In your project, you must answer the thesis question with conviction and clarity. Make sure that your question and the answers provided will contribute original content to the body of research in existence. A judicious question will also keep research focused, organized, and interesting.

3. Conduct your research. To answer the central question of your Master's Thesis, you'll need to conduct the necessary research. For a historical argument, this entails reading both secondary literature and primary sources. From the start, take notes of anything striking: do historians disagree about a topic? Is there uncertainty as to what happened? What is surprising about the primary sources? Don't forget to always record where you read something!

Part 2: Selecting your Sources and Texts

1. Complete a literature review. Review the literature and research currently available that is relevant to your Master's thesis. This also includes newer literature which reflects the state of research on a specific topic. This review of the literature must be exhaustive to ensure that your Master's thesis will be important and not be redundant. It is important that your thesis idea is original and relevant. To ensure this is the case, you need to be aware of the context of your research, what other people have said on the subject, and what the general opinion of your topic is. Take notes on the background information about your topic and the people involved in the available material.

2. Choose your primary sources. Primary sources are the first-hand accounts from the time period you are studying. They are the important factual base that you will use and are at the center of historical analysis. For example, a diary by a civil rights activist, presidential notes, photographs, or newspapers are primary sources. Today, the internet is replete with access to sources. Some good places to start your research are:

- The [Library of Congress](#) they even provide [research guides](#), organized by subject!
- [National Archives](#)
- Newspapers:
 - [Newsbank archive](#) (only accessible through University's internet/VPN).
 - [Chronicle America](#) archive

¹ This text is to a large extent based on <http://www.wikihow.com/Write-a-Master%27s-Thesis>, however, it has been specified according to the needs and requirements of a Master's Thesis in North American Studies at the University of Cologne.

3. Choose your secondary literature. Secondary literature are books or articles that are written *about* primary sources and the problem of your thesis. They are important to include in your Master's thesis because you'll need to demonstrate that you have a solid understanding of the critical context of your topic and that you understand what the major scholars in your field have to say about the subject. Pay particular attention to areas of disagreement, uncertainty, or blind spots the secondary literature may have.

4. Manage your citations. It is crucial that you keep track of the many different works you reference. You need to keep track of your citations as you write, rather than trying to add them after you are finished writing. North American history prefers citations to be formatted in Chicago-style, with footnotes at the bottom of each page (see: [Chicago Manual of Style](#)) You must use a citation management software such as EndNote, Citavi, or Zotero. Only these will enable you to insert and move citations within your word processor program and will automatically populate the bibliography at the end of your thesis.

Part 3: Planning an Outline

1. Know the requirements for your department/advisor. Ensure you know and understand the requirements by consulting the guides available on the [institute's website](#). Also consult your advisor and try to clear up misunderstandings early.

2. Nail down your thesis idea. Prepare a clear statement of the central thesis question that you intend to answer with your research. Being able to state your thesis explicitly and clearly is important. If you struggle to state the question, you might need to rethink your project altogether.

3. Prepare an outline. The outline will be beneficial to you to "see where you are going" as you move forward in your project, but also to give your supervisor an idea of what you want to accomplish and how you plan to do so.

4. Know what to include. You should check with your supervisor for the exact requirements, but most history Master's theses should include the following:

- i. Title page
- ii. Table of Contents (with page numbers)
- iii. Introduction
- iv. Body of paper
- v. Conclusion
- vi. Works Cited or Bibliography A) Sources B) Secondary Works
- vii. Any necessary appendices or endnotes
- viii. Declaration of Originality (*Eidesstattliche Erklärung*)

Part 4: Moving through the Writing Process

1. Make a schedule. One approach that works for many people is to use a reverse calendar, where you plan your writing schedule from the due date and work backward. If you know how much time you have to complete the project and break it up into manageable parts with individual due dates (whether these due dates are simply for you or if they are for your supervisor as well), you will be less likely to get overwhelmed by the scale of the project.

2. Write a little every day. Writing 30 finished pages in two weeks is a daunting task, but if you write 500 words every day, then you will be able to meet that deadline with ease. Try not to get frustrated and put off your work because then it will pile up and become unmanageable. Anything you write can always be edited, so it is better to have written something you don't love than nothing at all.

3. Take breaks. It is important, especially when working on a large-scale project, to give your brain a break now and then. You cannot stay focused and on-task 100% of the time without losing content quality, and letting yourself step away from your ideas for a couple of days will give you fresh eyes when you come back to your work. You'll catch mistakes you did not see before and come up with new answers you could not think of.

4. Write your introduction. You may find that your thesis proposal is a useful jumping off point for writing your introduction. You might want to copy and paste sections of your proposal for the start of your introduction, but remember that it is okay to change your ideas as they progress. You may want to

revisit and revise your introduction at several points throughout your writing process, perhaps even each time you finish a large section or chapter.

5. Incorporate the review of the literature. If you were required to write a review of literature before beginning your thesis, good news: you've already written almost an entire chapter! Again, you may need to reshape and revise the work, and you will likely also find occasion to add to the review as you move forward with your work. If you do not already have a review of literature written, it is time to do your research! The review of literature is essentially a summary of all of the existing scholarship about your topic with plenty of direct quotations from the primary and secondary sources that you're referencing.

6. Contextualize your work. After reviewing the existing scholarship, you should explain how your work contributes to the existing scholarship—in other words, you're explaining what you are adding to the field with your work.

7. Write your thesis. The remainder of the thesis varies greatly by field. A historiographical project will focus on the secondary literature and how this has developed over time. A historic argument will focus on primary sources, comparing your analysis to the literature where appropriate.

8. Write a powerful conclusion. Your conclusion should detail the importance of this Master's thesis to the subject community and may suggest the direction that future researchers might follow to continue with relevant information on the subject. Reiterate your major findings and how your arguments support your thesis.

9. Add supplemental information. Be sure to include relevant charts, graphs, and figures as appropriate. You may also need to add appendices at the end of your work that is germane to your work but tangential to the central question of your Master's thesis. Be sure that all aspects of your work are formatted by the guidelines of your institutional and discipline expectations.

Part 5: Finalizing Your Thesis

1. Compare your draft with your university's requirements. The formatting requirements for theses and dissertations are notoriously tedious and complicated. Make sure that your documents adhere to all of the requirements laid out by your department, in general, and by your supervisor, in specific. The North American history department also has a [style sheet](#) on its website.

2. Re-read the entire thesis for correctness. Take a week or so off, if possible, once you have finished writing and give your brain a break. Then, go back with fresh eyes to catch any grammatical errors or typos you may have made. When you are so deep in the writing process, it is easy to just read what you *mean* instead of what you actually *wrote*. So it is important to take a step back so that you can evaluate your work and your writing more effectively. Additionally, ask a trusted colleague or friend who is a native speaker to read over your thesis to help you catch any minor grammar/spelling/punctuation errors and typos. Make sure you do not commit plagiarism. Everything you quote or paraphrase must be accounted for in a footnote or its equivalent.

3. Follow all printing guidelines according to your department's policies. You will probably have to print two copies of your Master's thesis for your university, as well as any other personal copies you may want for yourself. Make sure you abide by these guidelines to avoid any potential setbacks during this final stage. Make sure to include the prescribed text concerning plagiarism (*Eidesstattliche Versicherung*) as handed out by the Prüfungsamt.