

Professor Glas' MA Thesis Process and Expectations

Conceiving and producing an MA thesis is challenging and time-consuming. The steps noted below will likely take between 4 and 10 months. They are designed to help streamline the process for you and your committee and – crucially – to ensure that you are set for a successful MA thesis defense.

A cautionary note: the writing of the two- and five-page outlines are often the most intellectually challenging and time-intensive steps in this process. A second cautionary note: you may be asked to repeat steps and revise revisions to ensure you are set to move on.

This document is designed to make clear my expectations as an MA thesis supervisor and to push you to think systematically as you start work on a thesis. For most students, the sooner you start, the better.

Writing an MA Thesis:

Step 0. Before getting started

Before you start on research and writing your thesis, please ensure you are familiar with the requirements of the MA program. It may be advisable to meet with the Director of Graduate Studies (DGS) to ensure you are on track and that your plans for courses and the thesis match the requirements of the program.

Step 1. Write a “Two-Pager”

The first step in the research process is to articulate your thoughts in a short document and gain some feedback. This is a really important, and challenging step. The document must be two single-spaced pages (references excluded) – thus, a “two-pager”. It must concisely and clearly outline your early thoughts. They won’t be polished or complete, and that is okay. But the document should answer the questions in a concise, clear way:

1. What is the topic of your proposed research and why does it matter?
2. What is the interest, empirical puzzle, and/or question you seek to understand or answer?
3. What do existing accounts in relevant literature(s) have to say about this topic?
4. Why do these existing accounts miss or not address sufficiently well? What more could be said?
5. What is your proposed answer?
6. How will you develop and defend that proposed answer? (i.e., What theoretical or conceptual tools will you draw on and develop? And what methods and data do you propose to use?)

Once you’re happy with your answers – and you’ve ensured you can answer them in 2 pages – share this document with me. I’ll review and likely suggest a meeting to talk more. At that point we can also talk about who would make a good committee member to contribute to your project.

Step 2. Write a revised “Two-Pager”

The second step is to revise the two-pager and bring it to your would-be committee. After receiving feedback from me, you will be asked to revise the two-pager. I may ask to review it again (and again). And once it is set, you will share with potential committee members for their feedback and interest in joining your committee.

Professor Glas' MA Thesis Process and Expectations

Once they have agreed to join the committee, you should meet with the committee members (in person or virtually) and solicit feedback on your two-pager. Please do this *before* devoting time to expanding your proposal. This is the time to build your committee, commit to your project, and start thinking about the project in real detail.

Form required: This is the time to formally establish your committee by signing the committee form (available from Jennifer Gregory in the POLS office) and complete any other paperwork required.

Step 3. Write a “Five-Pager” and Tentative Timeline

After you have received feedback from me and the rest of your newly established committee on the two-pager, the third step is to will expand your proposal into a five-page (single-spaced) outline of your proposed research (excluding references and timeline) and devise a tentative timeline. The five-pager should address the following topics (which can serve as headings in the document):

1. Introduction (~0.5 pages): sell the project as interesting and important.
2. Question and/or Puzzle (~0.5 pages): tell us what you want to answer, understand, or explain.
3. Existing and Alternative Explanations (~1 pages): tell us what we know about this topic and why we need to know more. Show us why your topic is interesting, puzzling, and/or important by reference to relevant theories, concepts, and studies.
4. Answer in Brief (~1 page): tell us about your answer and how you'll approach your topic in theoretical and conceptual terms (i.e., the literatures and concepts you will draw on).
5. Methods and Case Selection (~1 page): tell us how you'll know you're right. Articulate and defend your approach to your answer by explaining how and why you have selected your case(s) and what methods of inquiry and data needed and why.
6. Prospective Findings (~0.5-1 page): conclude by telling us a bit about what you think you'll see in your case and your data, and why.

In addition, provide a tentative timeline for your research in a one-page appendix. This must be a reasonable and actionable plan that you can commit to. Consider when and how long it will take to complete the research and writing as well as again the required IRB approval or waiver (see below). If you are travelling for research, which is not advised an MA, it is especially important to think now about where, when, and how your plans will be financed. For funding suggestions, please speak to the DGS and myself and review suggestions in my “Beyond the Program Advice for Graduate Students” document. Please ensure your plans align with the Grad School’s academic deadlines: <https://www.niu.edu/grad/current-students/academic-deadlines.shtml>.

Form required: At stage you should complete your IRB process, whether you require research with human subjects or not (if not, you will submit a waiver).¹

Step 4. Research and Writing: Draft Thesis

After you have received feedback and approval from me on the five-page outline and your timeline, you will expand the outline by researching and writing your draft thesis.

¹ For the IRB form and process, please visit <https://www.niu.edu/divresearch/compliance/human/irb/index.shtml>.

Professor Glas' MA Thesis Process and Expectations

This stage is when the most of your research and writing will take place. This step will likely require continual check-ins and periodic reviews of your progress. Based on your tentative timeline, will devise a writing plan and a plan to check in periodically on progress. You'll be welcome to check in with me and your committee as often as you need during this research and writing stage.

Your draft thesis will be no more than 40 *double-spaced* pages (references excluded). The structure of the thesis at will vary based on the interest and design of your own particular project. However, generally speaking, some variant of the following sections will be expected (as discussed with me):

1. Introduction (1-2 pages)

Introduce your topic and case(s). Explain why this research is interesting and important. 'Sell' your project to your readers. Clearly state your research question(s) and your answer in brief (your thesis). Outline the structure of the thesis clearly.

2. Empirical Puzzle and Research Question (1-3 pages)

Provide background to your topic and/or case(s) to situate your study. Make clear what the puzzle is that drives your research: What is surprising? What is *puzzling*? This is your space to offer sufficient background information to ground your question and defend that the research is indeed important and interesting.

3. Existing and Alternative Explanations (4-8 pages)

Provide a detailed literature review drawing on *relevant* scholarly work. Do not review literature for the sake of reviewing literature. Use the literature in two ways. First, show us what existing and alternative explanations exist. Alternative explanations exist explicitly or implicitly in the relevant literature. Clearly articulate why they do *not* answer your questions sufficiently well. Second, show us which literatures you use to arrive at your own account or explanation and how that account complements or contests existing accounts and/or provides us insight we have missed in existing accounts (that it 'fills the gap' in an often-used phrase).

4. Argument in Brief (3-6 pages)

Detail the explanation you seek to advance. Here, you may outline the theoretical foundations of your work and the synergies and complementarities with existing explanations (linking with the discussion above). You may articulate your hypotheses, hunches, or expectations and defend the logic that underscores them. In this section you should also operationalize key concepts and state the observable implications of your proposed answer.

5. Research Design: Methodology and Case Selection (2-5 pages)

Explain how you will know you're right. Said differently, tell us how will defend your thesis, advance your argument and/or how you will test your hypotheses. This is your research design. You should explain the methods and data you rely upon and provide justification for the case(s) you have selected by reference to relevant literatures.

6. Findings and Analysis (10-15 pages)

Here you present your own analysis and your findings in detail. This will vary widely between theses but must defend and showcase your argument as clearly as possible. As you explore

Professor Glas' MA Thesis Process and Expectations

the case(s), be sure to underscore the observable implications of your answer and approach and the lack of analytical ‘fit’ of alternative explanations.

7. Conclusions (1-2 pages)

Summarize your findings and how you arrived at them. Underscore the contributions or ‘added value’ of your research. Reflect on the limitations of the study and where you – or others – may take the research in the future. What questions remain unanswered? What questions have arisen from this study? Where might your argument have further relevance or ‘travel’ to?

Step 5. Thesis

After you have received feedback and approval from me and your committee members on your draft, you will be asked to revise and produce a final thesis to be defended orally. The thesis must not exceed 45 double spaced pages (references excluded). You may be asked to highlight the revisions made from draft thesis. I may wish to review the thesis before scheduling the oral defense, or we may schedule it based on the draft.

Note: At this stage, you must ensure your thesis aligns with the writing and formatting requirements of NIU’s Graduate School: <https://www.niu.edu/grad/thesis/>. Failing to do this may delay your graduation.

Form required: Once approved, you will be asked to complete and share a “Request for Oral Defense of Thesis” form with your committee members. Note that your defense must be scheduled at least two weeks after that form is signed by all and submitted. So, please ensure your timeline aligns with the Grad School’s deadlines for graduation taking that into account.

Step 6. Oral Defense

You will sit a two-hour oral defense with the committee. The defense should be scheduled at last one or two weeks before the Graduate School’s “last day submit post-defense version thesis” which varies year by year (<https://www.niu.edu/grad/current-students/academic-deadlines.shtml>).

The defense has two parts: First, you’ll present your thesis in roughly 15-20 minutes using visual aids (e.g., PowerPoint slides). Second, you’ll respond to questions from the committee. Those questions will ask you about your project’s research design and findings, relevant literatures, and where your research could go next. We’ll also chat about what you liked and liked less about the research process. I will provide you questions and suggestions in advance to help you prepare.

Form required: After the defense, your committee will file paperwork indicating you’ve passed your thesis defense (yay!), and you’ll be asked to revise and return the thesis to me or directly to the Graduate School.