

## **SUGGESTED OUTLINE FOR THESIS PROPOSALS AND THESES**

*Developed for use by students in ENVS 201 Research Methods (UVM Environmental Program) and in the Environmental Thought & Culture/ Environment, Society, & Public Affairs Master's Concentrations (Rubenstein School, UVM). Version: Dec. 17, 2007*

### **TYPES OF THESES**

**Research thesis:** A standard academic thesis, involving the testing of a hypothesis, solving of a problem, or answering of a question or series of questions, with the goal of contributing to the knowledge base within a field or fields on a selected topic.

**Project thesis (or Project):** A project thesis involves planning, designing, implementing, and evaluating some research-related 'applied' or 'hands-on' project. The goal is to implement and accomplish a selected task. A project thesis should follow the regular thesis format and include an introduction, literature review, methodology, and analysis or reflection, but it should also provide documentation of the project carried out.

**Creative arts thesis:** A creative arts thesis involves the production of a work or series of works of writing (literary or critical), visual art, film or video, performance, intermedia, or some other format of artistic production. A creative arts thesis should follow the regular thesis format and include an introduction, literature review, methodology, and analysis or reflection, but it should also include either the actual creative product or documentation of said product carried out for the thesis.

### **OUTLINE**

*Note: The following is a **suggested** outline for thesis proposals and theses. The sections are intended to represent the 'functions' fulfilled by a thesis proposal (or thesis), not necessarily the specific sections or section headings as such; in fact, it is often better (or at least more reader-friendly) to use headings that reflect the substance of the proposal rather than the generic headings listed below. Note that some sections below are listed as "THESIS ONLY." If you don't think a particular item is necessary in your proposal, ask yourself if it is evident to your readers **why** it is not necessary to include this item (e.g., if you are not including any quantitative research, it is not necessary to discuss statistical methods); if it is not self-evident, it may be best to discuss (somewhere) the rationale for the item's absence. The final format and contents of your proposal will vary depending on the type of proposal (see above categories), the kind of work it involves (qualitative, quantitative, etc.), and the specific requirements it calls for. Details should be discussed with your advisor(s).*

**TITLE PAGE:** This includes the title of the proposal or thesis (this commonly includes a sub-title, but should normally not exceed about 10-12 words), your name, the type of thesis or thesis proposal (project, creative arts, or research thesis), program and university name, date submitted, and a list of advisors or advisory committee members.

**ABSTRACT:** This is a brief, clear and concise summary (normally about 75-200 words in length) of what you propose to do, how, and why (for proposals), or of what you have done, how, and its results (for theses). It should be clearly labeled 'Abstract.'

**TABLE OF CONTENTS** (including page numbers)

**TABLE OF ILLUSTRATIONS** (if relevant; this should also include page numbers)

### **INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW:**

This section sets the stage for the detailed proposal or thesis. It presents the rationale, goal context or justification, and tells the reader why it is important to do the proposed research or project and what will be gained from doing it. For proposals, this section is generally written in concise, summary form, with a reasonable total length being 2 to 5 pages. It typically introduces some or all of the following:

- Purpose of the Study, or Problem Statement (50 words or less): The purpose or problem statement specifically delimits the focus of the study. It specifies – clearly, precisely, and concisely – the research questions to be answered, hypotheses or variables to be studied in a research study, or specific tasks to be accomplished in an applied or creative arts project.
- Scope, Background, and Significance of the Problem: What is the scope of the problem you will be addressing (e.g., how pervasive is it? how many people are affected by it? etc.). What do we know and/or do not know about it? Why is it an important problem? What is the practical and the substantive/theoretical significance of your proposed study – what will its results add to the literature or practice in this topic area?
- Conceptual/Theoretical Framework, Assumptions, Definitions: If your study is delimited within a specific theoretical or conceptual tradition of analysis, or is guided by theoretical or normative assumptions (basic conceptual or value principles implicit within your work) that may not be shared by readers, these should be introduced here. If any key terms are central to your thesis and are used in a theoretically delimited (not ‘everyday’) way, it would also be appropriate to introduce these here. (Alternatively, key terms can be introduced as they arise, or in an appended Glossary; the latter is more appropriate when there are many technical terms used, but these are not conceptually central to understanding the thesis or proposal.)

## **REVIEW OF LITERATURE:**

This contains a review of related literature and a more complete discussion of the theoretical underpinnings of the study. It will normally be the longest part of a proposal, and can range anywhere from about 5 to 25 pages in length; this depends on the range of topics, problems, or fields that require reference in order to credibly establish your expertise to go on with the proposed thesis work. The literature review normally remains in place (in some form) in the thesis itself, though often it may blend or ‘disappear’ into the main body of the thesis (this is especially the case when the thesis involves analysis of literature).

The functions fulfilled by the literature review normally include the following:

- A literature review logically presents the reasoning upon which the proposed study or project is based. It can be thought of as providing the ‘foundations’ upon which you will build (or have built) the habitable structure that constitutes your thesis. If the foundations are shaky (poorly defined, uninformed by the current knowledge in the relevant field, etc.), the thesis will not ‘hold together’ convincingly. The literature review provides the perspective from which the investigator views the problem and the rationale or theoretical argument underpinning the study/project. It may blend existing theoretical traditions or may compare and contrast competing frameworks. It provides a cogent case for why the proposed study/project should be done, and frames it within historical, social, and/or theoretical contexts.
- More specifically, a literature review provides information about what is already known about the problem or topic and what is not known. Organized topically or thematically, it focuses on the main traditions or schools of thought, key authors, books, research studies, or other sources of knowledge on the relevant topic (and/or sub-topics); the strengths and shortcomings and relevant debates or disagreements between competing perspectives; linkages and gaps in the knowledge; and so on.
- The literature review should be organized in a way which logically leads to and provides justification for your own proposed research or project activity. Normally, this means that the literature review is organized topically or thematically, following a logic appropriate to the subject (e.g., moving from a broader to a more specific focus, from earlier work on the topic to more recent work, from general theoretical concerns to more specific methodological ones; etc.).
- The literature review may include a description of the conceptual/theoretical framework and methodological strategy underpinning the study/project, relating these to previous applications of such frameworks/strategies to similar or related problems, and providing justification for why this is an appropriate approach for the proposed research. Alternatively, this can be discussed in detail in the next section below.

## METHODOLOGY AND WORK-PLAN:

This section describes the specific approach you will use to test your question(s) or hypotheses or to carry out your proposed project objectives. It must be in sufficient detail that someone else could fully replicate your study or project. (In the thesis proposal, the methodology is normally described in the future tense; in the thesis itself, it should be in the past tense.) It normally includes some of all of the following:

- Research design: Description of the type of research or project design or strategy used and the rationale for its selection. Of critical importance is whether the design is consistent with the conceptualization of the study and the specific aim(s) or purpose(s). (*This should normally be no more than one paragraph.*)
- Activities and time-line: Describe in detail the specific steps in performing the proposed research or project, and an appropriate time-line for performing them. These steps should follow logically. In the proposal, discuss any potential variations or unknown factors here (or below under “Contingencies and alternatives”). (*This may be in the form of a list or table, or it may be in summary form, with a time-line chart appended below.*)
- Sampling and data collection/analysis: Describe in detail the steps you will perform in your collection of data, your analysis of the data collected, and/or your performance of project tasks. (*Depending on the type of thesis you are proposing to do, the following sections may or may not be relevant.*)

Sample and sampling procedure: Describe in detail the procedure for sampling your data; label it in something approaching conventional descriptors, e.g., “This is a stratified, random sample of...”; “This is a purposive sample of...”, etc. (See, e.g., Martyn Denscombes’ *The Good Research Guide*, on different sampling strategies.) State what size sample you will use, from what population the sample will be drawn, how participants will be selected, and what the criteria are for inclusion or exclusion in the sample. Include a description of the study site as appropriate.

Data producing instruments: Identify the indicators that will be used to reflect each variable expressed in the hypotheses or research question(s). These are your operational definitions. The choice of indicators should reflect the concepts being studied, and the state of knowledge and measurement regarding that particular concept or variable. Provide estimates of validity and reliability of each instrument or measurement method to be used, or means to determine reliability and validity of instruments if not already ascertained. Describe any pilot study to be done with the measures to determine feasibility of use. Etc.

Data collection: Describe the specific methods you will use to collect data, the kinds of data you will collect, and how data collection will proceed. Provide a schedule if appropriate. Describe how you will gain entry into the research setting, what participants will be told, what participants will be asked to do, and so on. Discuss how participant attrition or non-participation will be handled.

Data analysis: Describe in detail the methods you will use to analyze the data you have collected. If you have more than one research question or hypothesis, specify the intended statistical or other analytic approaches as appropriate for each question or hypothesis.

- Resources, facilities, equipment, transportation, et al.: Describe in detail what specific resources, facilities, and equipment you will make use of, how you will gain access to it, your transportation needs, and any other requirements.
- Budget: Provide a detailed breakdown of estimated expenses and any income from grants, donors, and other sources. (*This may be added separately in an Appendix.*)
- Risk management and ethical issues: This section discusses any potential risks that may be incurred by yourself or others in the process of conducting your research or project, and all steps you have taken or will take to ensure a minimization of such risk. If you will be conducting research involving human or (vertebrate animal) subjects, you must include a statement detailing your plans for the protection of these subjects. ***It is essential that university-required human subjects review forms, along with any relevant consent forms, etc., all be completed and submitted in accordance with Institutional Review Board specifications.*** (See [www.uvm.edu/irb](http://www.uvm.edu/irb) - follow the links to ‘Committees’ and ‘Forms’.) These should be submitted with, but separable from, the proposal. (For graduate students, they may be submitted directly to the IRB; consult your thesis advisor on this.)

- **Limitations:** Describe any limitations (usually ones that limit the generalizability of findings) related to your sampling, measurement, or data collection procedures. Discuss any biases related to the ways your own position as researcher and your own assumptions may affect the research findings. Discuss any implications of these limitations on the outcomes of your research or project.
- **Contingencies and alternatives:** Discuss any reasonable potential obstacles and uncontrollable circumstances which may delay or disrupt your research or project plans. Describe any alternative plans or ways in which you will go about mitigating the effects of those circumstances, should they arise.

**ANTICIPATED OUTCOMES/FINAL PRODUCTS & CONCLUSIONS:** [*THESIS PROPOSAL ONLY*]

This should be a brief (no more than one or two pages) description of the anticipated final products or outcomes of your research/project. Discuss (if appropriate) the criteria by which you will know that you have successfully accomplished what you set out to do.

**RESULTS:** [*THESIS ONLY*]

Summarize the results of the research, and/or provide actual data (to the extent necessary) in a graphic or other form.

**DISCUSSION:** [*THESIS ONLY*]

Discuss and analyze the results in light of the hypothesis or questions set out in your previous sections of the thesis.

**CONCLUSIONS, IMPLICATIONS, RECOMMENDATIONS:** [*THESIS ONLY*]

Summarize the conclusions and implications of the research conducted. Provide any recommendations that emerge out of the research.

*(NOTE: The above three sections may be separate or may be combined, depending on the nature of the thesis. For project theses and especially for creative arts theses, these sections may take a substantially different form or may not be necessary. Creative or project products should be included or attached as a separate section of the submitted thesis.)*

**BIBLIOGRAPHY:**

List of references cited, following a standard citation format, such as MLA, APA, Chicago style, etc. (You may also include references not cited, but which you consider important to the topic; however, it is generally better to cite any important references in your literature review, and to list only cited references here.) It is normally best to list all references in a single list ordered alphabetically according to authors' last names (though variations are sometimes acceptable, depending on the nature of your thesis and types of sources).

*(NOTE ON CITATION: As always in scholarly work, you are expected to cite all passages or ideas taken from other sources, using footnotes, endnotes, or in-text citations, including to actual page numbers of the relevant source (where the idea or quote is taken from a specific page).)*

**APPENDICES:**

These may include consent forms, data collection forms and instruments, a budget, a detailed time line, and anything else that is appropriate (e.g., letters granting access to facilities, letters of agreements to allow you to conduct research at a fieldwork site, et al.).

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**FOR YOUR REFERENCE: HANDY DATE REMINDER**

First draft of thesis due: \_\_\_\_\_

Final draft of thesis due: \_\_\_\_\_