

Criteria for evaluating Masters and Doctoral theses

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Short definition of a Masters thesis

1. A masters thesis is an initiation into serious experimental research. A good thesis shows that the writer can produce an extended piece of work, in perfect English, which respects the standards of form and structure.

The master's thesis is a carefully argued scholarly paper of approximately 12,000 – 13,000 words (roughly 50 pages). It should present an original argument that is carefully documented from primary and/or secondary sources. The thesis must have a substantial research component and a focus that falls within arts and science, and it must be written under the guidance of an advisor. As the final element in the master's degree, the thesis gives the student an opportunity to demonstrate expertise in the chosen research area.

<http://draper.fas.nyu.edu/object/draper.program.thesisguidelines>

2. The supervisor's word is usually final - subject to Director of Graduate Studies approval.
3. Different subjects have different traditions. It is the subject specialist/supervisor who has the definitive word. This particularly applies to the choice of topic, and the format of the thesis.
4. For all subjects, a masters thesis is data driven/practical. 'Data driven/practical' will mean different things in the various disciplines: the concept is much broader than using questionnaires or interviews. For Literature it might well be the application of a theory or approach to a minor author (ie something new is achieved). It is NOT a critical review of existing knowledge/literature.
5. In all subjects, the research needs to be small and precise and do-able/feasible.

For further reading

<http://www.iuj.ac.jp/gsir/thesis/evaluation.html>

Advanced Masters Program. MA thesis handbook. School of Education. DePaul University 2004-2005.

http://education.depaul.edu/downloads/forms/MA_Thesis_Handbook.pdf

See also books from 4shared.com such as: "How to get a PhD"

Table 1: Overall evaluation grid for Masters, and current PhD

| Grade | Existing system | Comparable British system |
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| Très bien | a. Near perfect defence b. Near perfect thesis | A few Extremely minor corrections by hand permitted on the existing copies |
| Bien | Defects in the oral or one or two areas | Correct the referencing mistakes and other minor errors. Rewrite no more than one chapter |
| Assez Bien | Significant defects in the oral and/or in three or more areas | Significant re-writing and editing needed |
| Passable | Serious problems in BOTH the speech, and the thesis | A complete re-write needed possibly including new experimental work. |

Short definition of a PhD thesis

A doctoral thesis is the culmination of three years full time work. By definition, it should be publishable in whole or in part. This means that the candidate has mastered the thesis genre, has written an original evaluation of the relevant literature, innovatively collected and analysed data, and presented the work in such a way that the thesis advances the existing knowledge on the subject. A doctoral thesis is proof that someone is now ready to enter the community of those who are capable of doing publishable work independently. The defence is also important, since it is a test of how well the candidate can present their material and argue their case in the face of sustained comment and criticism.

Table 2: Comparison between Masters and PhD

| Feature | New Masters | PhD |
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| 1. Length | 50-80 pages excluding preliminaries, references, and appendixes | 300 pages or more, excluding preliminaries, references, and appendixes |
| 2. Abstract | Publishable standard | Publishable standard |
| 3. Overall thesis presentation | <p>a. Respects the norms of the thesis genre.</p> <p>b. The parts are in the correct order and in rough balance.</p> <p>c. Few errors of English, presentation, or referencing.</p> <p>d. There is a coherent readable argument and progression of ideas.</p> <p>e. There is a high level of consistent adherence to an approved style of presentation.</p> <p>Note: There is some flexibility in format. For instance, some theses have one chapter for results and discussion, whereas others keep these chapters separate.</p> | |
| 4. Referencing | <p>a. Only a few minor mistakes.</p> <p>b. Every important point adequately referenced.</p> <p>c. Does not over-rely on a few references.</p> <p>d. Over-referencing is better than under-referencing.</p> <p>e. Only the references given in the text provided in the references.</p> <p>f. Every single reference in the text provided in the references.</p> <p>g. One variant of the APA style chosen and used throughout. The easiest way to do this is to choose one journal, such as the Journal of Applied Linguistics, or the ESP Journal, and follow the style and style sheet guidelines. Reputable style handbooks can be used.</p> <p>h. The number of references is rarely in dispute. Some subjects naturally have more references than others.</p> <p>i. References are appropriate. This has a wide meaning.</p> <p>1) References are correctly evaluated for authority, accuracy, etc.</p> <p>2) Newspapers and Wikipedia, in certain contexts, can be used, but how they are used depends on the context and what weight the reference is given.</p> <p>j. References are reasonably up to date.</p> | |
| 5. Topic and originality | <p>*At MA level it is not expected that the topic will be very original. But, the topic must not be simply a repetition of existing work.</p> <p>*Theses are data driven. A more theoretical project belongs to doctoral work.</p> <p>*Validation work, where students extend existing work, is to be encouraged</p> <p>*The topic must be interesting and worthwhile, ie it must not be banal, and not merely a restatement of the obvious.</p> | <p>*The resulting thesis must be publishable in whole or in part</p> <p>*Validation work is possible as a beginning but a PhD needs something more and original</p> <p>*The thesis must present something which is new, and significant, and of interest to the research community.</p> |

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| <p>6. Level of English</p> | <p>a. British or American English, but not mixing the two styles. b. Academic English, with no inappropriate informal forms. c. Perfect spelling and grammar. d. Total avoidance of ambiguous sentences. e. Subject/verb agreement should never be a problem. f. The whole thesis should be understandable to any final year English undergraduate.</p> | |
| <p>7. Audience and readability</p> | <p>a. The target audience is the final year English graduate - irrespective of the speciality. Anyone with an interest in your subject should be able to follow your thesis. There is a tendency to write the thesis at the level of research articles for specialists in the subject. This tendency must be firmly resisted. It is never wrong to be clear. It is possible to write a specialist text about a subject following the specialist structures and format, and still - without being condescending - be understandable to the general public. b. A thesis - especially the literature review - should have a distinct thread or story line. It is this thread which improves readability.</p> | |
| <p>8. Abstract</p> | <p>a. Follows one of the recognised styles. For instances: 1) Swales' three move 'create a research space' framework. 2) Introduction, Methods, Results, Conclusions. b. Perfect English</p> | |
| <p>9. Introduction</p> | <p>a. Addresses a final year English student - not a researcher. b. Briefly presents the research question. c. Outlines the methods that will be used to answer these questions. d. Briefly presents the structure of the thesis. e. Unlike the abstract, the main findings and conclusions are not mentioned.</p> | |
| <p>10. Sequencing of ideas</p> | <p>a. A thesis should tell a story. There should be a clear thread. b. From the beginning the subject of the thesis should be clear. c. All the material must have clear explicit relevance to the thesis. d. Each chapter should have the cohesion sentences and paragraphs that inform the reader of what has been achieved, and what now needs to be achieved.</p> | |
| <p>11. Literature review</p> | <p>*20-25 pages</p> <p>*Short review of the relevant literature in which you provide the background to the niche/gap. Sidetracks rarely followed up. Critical stance required, but less demanding and deep than a doctorate. There is less requirement for originality.</p> <p>*Since the literature review can be modified even towards the end of the writing process, a higher standard is expected here than for the decisions taken in the methodology.</p> | <p>*Usually over 50 pages</p> <p>*Concise but extensive and thorough appraisal of relevant literature. Depth required. Sidetracks adequately but concisely covered. High expectations for the critique. Originality is expected.</p> |

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| | <p>a. The review should be a ‘critical’ evaluation of the following:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) the discipline. 2) the topic. 3) the theories. 4) the leading players and authorities. <p>Note, it is rarely necessary to start a long way back in the textbooks. If desired, then it can swiftly be done in concise heavily referenced summary sentences. The references can be to the main detailed expositions, including textbooks and review articles.</p> <p>Note, by ‘critical’ I mean the older academic sense of discerning, evaluating, linking, and putting in context. I do not refer to ‘Critical Discourse Analysis’.</p> <p>b. A literature review is not a textbook. Neither is it mainly a list of some articles and books which are evaluated one at a time. A literature review must involve the weaving together of material. The thread must be obvious and never lost.</p> <p>c. Sidetracks will be identified as such and speedily and authoritatively dealt with. Footnotes are an excellent place for these.</p> <p>e. At the end of the research review the reader will have a clear and up to date grasp of the foundations of the thesis.</p> <p>f. In other words, the focus is the discipline-topic-theories-players and the argument. It is NOT the existing literature <i>per se</i>. The literature mentioned is merely the clothing for the content and argument. This is a difficult idea to grasp. It can perhaps best be grasped by studying carefully the literature reviews in the top journals such as the Journal of Applied Linguistics.</p> <p>g. Only relevant material should be reviewed. It should always be obvious to the reader why this particular literature is reviewed, and why this idea is important. Students must ruthlessly cut material that is not directly and explicitly relevant. Relevance should be explicitly and strongly linked to the research hypotheses.</p> <p>h. Relevance must be communicated explicitly - the reader should not have to work this out for themselves.</p> <p>i. The reader should never have to ask these questions</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> *why is this included? *Why is the author telling me this? *So what? <p>j. The reader should never have to look forwards or backwards in the thesis in order to pick up the thread or to answer the above questions.</p> | |
| <p>11. Research questions or hypotheses</p> | <p>*Testable/measurable in this country</p> <p>*Data collection in a few weeks.</p> <p>*A very limited number</p> | <p>*Testable/measurable.</p> <p>*Data collection can take place over a year.</p> <p>*A coherent set, with all of them tested</p> |
| <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. Choose ONE style. Either a series of questions, or a series of hypotheses, or a series of questions. b. The questions must be answerable. That means they need to be worded in such a way that data can be collected which answers these questions. c. Students must show they have known and evaluated the interaction of all the variables. | | |

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| <p>12. Methods</p> | <p>*Longitudinal work not possible</p> <p>*Small samples with low validity tolerated</p> <p>*Since these are decided upon early on in the apprenticeship, this is the one place in the thesis where standards can be lower. Even if later, with hindsight, poor choices were made, the thesis should be acceptable provided insightful explanation and remediation is provided.</p> <p>*Methods measure/test the hypotheses</p> | <p>*Limited longitudinal work is possible. Extensive case work is possible.</p> <p>*When methods involving sampling are used, then larger samples and work of high validity is expected.</p> <p>*A doctoral student has already passed through the MA apprenticeship. Students have time to learn more advanced and sophisticated methods. Careful use of pilot work should indicate other major problems. Theses with serious methodology problems are not acceptable and may mean examiners require a candidate to do more experimental work. This is extremely important, because new experimental work is a serious setback, whereas extra details in the literature review or discussion are relatively easy to add later.</p> <p>*Methods measure/test the hypotheses</p> |
| <p>This is often the weakest part of the thesis. It is particularly difficult because often decisions are made at an early stage when the student is inexperienced. Once made, the decisions cannot easily be changed. Therefore it is very important that students study the principles of methodology before launching out.</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. The methods must correspond exactly to the research questions. b. Most problems could be avoided if students decided how they were going to evaluate the data BEFORE collecting it. Therefore, methods of data analysis must go hand in hand with the methods for data collection. c. Considerations of validity and reliability must be addressed at the planning stage. d. A good researcher reasons from the larger population to the small population. e. A good researcher at an early stage identifies and controls the variables. f. The methods chapter should address two questions: <ol style="list-style-type: none"> 1) Which methods were used. Some references to the literature on methodology can with profit be used. 2) Why was each method used. Students need to learn to take decisions. Research includes facing the unexpected. Whatever decisions are taken need justification. | | |
| <p>13. Validity/ reliability</p> | <p>Limited validity and reliability is usually acceptable.</p> | <p>All theses should show a major concern for validity and reliability.</p> |
| <p>14. Results</p> | <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. The raw data, such as copies of the questionnaire, belong to an appendix - which needs suitable cross referencing in the results chapter. b. The main findings are presented. The material is factual and inferential, with little discussion or opinion. Note, referencing is rare in the results chapter. | |

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| <p>15. Discussion</p> | <p>a. The research questions are re-visited, and the results commented upon in their light. Personal opinion should be kept to a minimum but it is permitted provided it is justified.</p> <p>b. The research findings are compared and discussed in the light of the literature.</p> <p>c. Very rarely, new literature is introduced.</p> <p>Note 1. In some theses the Results and the Discussion are one chapter, in which case, a clear distinction between fact and interpretation needs to be maintained.</p> <p>Note 2. In doctoral theses, the Results and the Discussion may be divided up into several chapters.</p> | |
| <p>16. Conclusions</p> | <p>a. There is a summary of what has been achieved using a careful balance of confidence and humility.</p> <p>b. There should be a short balanced statement about the limitations of the research.</p> <p>c. There should be a few suggestions made for further research. These suggestions should be precise, objective, and firmly based in the existing research.</p> | |
| <p>17. Publishable</p> | <p>If not directly publishable, it should be potentially publishable (with for instance more depth, greater sample size, more than one method, consideration of other variables and other related theories). The best MA theses are publishable.</p> | <p>By definition a PhD thesis must be publishable in whole or in part in a reputable peer-reviewed journal. This is commonly taken to mean forming the basis for two articles, or be publishable as a book by a peer reviewed academic publisher.</p> <p>The thesis should make a significant contribution to the advancement of knowledge in the field, and indicates that the candidate has acquired the skills needed to function without supervision at this high professional level.</p> |
| <p>18. The defense</p> | <p>The defense speech should be in perfect English. It is meant to be an interesting presentation of the main points coupled with a mature and balanced assessment of the work. The candidate should respond well to constructive comment and questions. No candidate should ever read their speech, though they are allowed to consult their notes. Powerpoints, if used, should be ultra-clear and only convey the main points. In view of technical problems, students should be prepared to defend their thesis without using a powerpoint.</p> <p>Note: powerpoints are often used as a crutch. It is extremely difficult to make a good speech using a powerpoint effectively, and in my opinion many students would do better without the powerpoint.</p> | |