The M.A. Thesis

What is a thesis? The thesis is among the oldest form of academic evaluation in the west. Basically, a thesis is a demonstration that the student is able to carry out a major research project, under the supervision of a teacher that can be defended before a committee or jury of other academics in the field.

Why the name? The medieval ideal was for the candidate to post a sentence or proposition that they would defend against all comers. In today’s academic world, a good thesis is written around a clear conclusion that the student has reached in their research. The paper itself is an account of how the student came to that conclusion and what evidence might be offered in its defense. What we usually call the thesis is really the research report on what was learned in the process of researching a topic or topics. It is not necessarily a literary or scholarly masterpiece; rather, to use the language of the guilds, it is a journeyperson’s demonstration that they are, in fact, ready to practice their craft.

What is the process of writing a thesis? Good thesis work begins long before the actual writing. In the fall semester of the final year, the Thesis Seminar will focus on research methods, definition of a topic, organization, and writing style. During the course of this seminar the researcher identifies an area of interest within the specialization and locates an advisor who is willing and able to supervise the study. The major work of the researcher during this period is to gather bibliography, including books, articles, and web pages, and begin to form an idea of the status of the question. Basically, the status of the question is a statement of what contemporary researchers have already learned about the topic. No one wants to waste time reinventing the wheel. Once that is determined, the research can determine the specific area in which they wish to either elaborate the consensus or open a new line of inquiry. In other words, the researcher should formulate a question that can direct their research.

Once the question is clear (and hard work here pays off through the project), the student should determine what specific resources are needed to provide an answer. Under the guidance of an advisor the researcher develops a research plan involving the assembling, analyzing and critiquing of the material, eventuating in the formulation of a conclusion. Once the conclusion is determined, the researcher formulates an outline of the thesis.

At this point, the researcher files a thesis proposal with the Academic Dean. The proposal should include a thorough bibliography and a clear statement of the goal of the research or the question that the thesis will answer.

How does one time the writing of a thesis? The basic rule is that one should spend the first semester doing the research and the period from December through April writing and correcting the paper. This allows you to “defend” the thesis in April and to have the thesis formally deposited in the library at least one week before graduation.
Suggested Time Line for writing:

- **December** through **January** First Draft
- **February 1**: First Draft due to the advisor. Many students will not have the whole paper at this point.
- **February 15**: or earlier. Draft returned with comments and suggestions for rewrite.
- **March 1**: Second Draft due to the advisor and second reader.
- **March 15**: Draft returned to the student. The paper should be almost complete.
- **April 1**: The last draft should be in the advisor’s and second reader’s hands/
- **April 15**: The student should receive feedback from the advisor and second reader, along with final suggestions for rewrite, etc.
- **May 1**: Thesis Defense
- **May 10**: Submit the final in correct form to the library. This date will vary with graduation and will be in the academic calendar.

What is the required length? **50-75 pages** (double spaced, 12 pt)

How does one organize the Research Report? Some graduate students make a career out of writing their Master’s and Doctoral theses. But this is not necessary. While a thesis can be a work of art, what it must be is a narrative or argument that takes the reader from your understanding of the current state of research to your specific conclusion.

Suggested Outline:

**One.** The State of the Question and the specific question or problem that the thesis will answer. (about 10-15 pages pages).

**Chapter Two.** The Evidence for the Conclusion stated in Chapter One (30-40 pages. Some may divide this into two chapters).

**Chapter Three:** Conclusions and suggestions for further study. The conclusions should loop back to the first chapter and should show how this work fits into the larger pattern of study. (10-20 pages).

**Bibliography.** This usually contains both works cited and other research, some of which may not have been consulted, in the area of study. Many readers of your thesis will be using your bibliography as a short cut to putting together their own research project.

What about the Mechanics? Because theses are public works that are retained in an institution’s library, they are often encrusted with formal requirements. For instance, all theses submitted at Bangor Seminary must follow the Turabian style and meet exact requirement on such matters as title page, bibliographic and footnote form, table of content, etc. Many writers find it easier to write the report and then go back and put everything in good form; others find it easier to use the correct forms from the beginning, including the proper margins.
How is the Thesis Evaluated? Theses are evaluated by a first reader, the project advisor, and a second reader. Most often, a thesis will need some revisions before it is finally accepted for deposit so you should plan your work to allow for that time. From time to time the Seminary will suggest a formal presentation to which the entire community is invited. You have worked hard and deserve to have people take your work seriously.

What is the Value of the Thesis? The thesis is a serious test of a person’s academic skills. To complete a good thesis, one must write, research, and draw conclusions quickly. Often, a section from a well-done thesis, submitted with a graduate application, will be the item that makes the difference between acceptance and rejection. If one uses one’s Masters to teach on the junior college level, as many do, it is evidence that you have the research skills needed to help others develop their academic style. The thesis is not for everyone, but it can help