The Master’s 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 about a year and a half before graduation. The researcher identifies an area of interest and locates an advisor who is willing and able to supervise the study. In the early stages of research, the researcher gathers bibliography, including books, articles, and web pages, and begins 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.

At this point, the research 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.

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. The next stage is the stage of assembling the material, analyzing and criticizing it, and formulating the actual conclusion. Once the conclusion is determined, one writes the paper towards that conclusion.

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 January 1 to March 30 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. I would set the following schedule, but most faculty and other advisors know that one cannot fit a thesis into a rigorous straight jacket.
• **May 1:** Thesis Proposal of the year before the thesis is to be submitted.

• **September:** First meeting with advisor and the establishment of a research plan. Further monthly meetings with the advisor should be planned at this initial session.

• **October and November:** Check-ins with advisor with mini (maybe oral) reports on what has been done.

• **December:** This meeting with the advisor clarifies the conclusions of the research. In many schools, this is marked by the granting of “permission to write.” Outline should be developed at this meeting.

• **January**  Writing

• **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. All of chapters one and two should be completed by this point and the student should have a clear sense of the last chapter.

• **March 1:** Draft returned to the student. The paper should be almost complete.

• **April 1:** The last draft should be in the advisor’s hands with a copy for the second reader.

• **April 15:** The student should receive feedback from the advisor and second reader, along with final suggestions for rewrite, etc.

• **May:** Submit the final in correct form to the library. **Date is in the academic calendar.**

**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. If the thesis were to be fifty pages, an average length at Bangor, the following would be a good organization:
Chapter One. The State of the Question and the specific question or problem that the thesis will answer. (about 10 pages).

Chapter Two. The Evidence for the Conclusion stated in Chapter One (about thirty 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 this work fits into the larger pattern of study. (about 10 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 Chicago Manual of Style and met 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 at Bangor 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. Where time permits, the Seminary will often hold a formal jury where the whole community is invited to discuss the thesis with the candidate. You have worked hard. You 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