



School of Defense and Strategic Studies

NON-THESIS OPTION PROCESS AND PROJECT GUIDE

Effective: 1 July 2026

Non-Thesis Option for DSS Students: Pursuing the Non-Thesis Option for graduation at the MSU Department of Defense and Strategic Studies is available to all qualifying DSS students, on par with the Thesis option (see: “Thesis Project and Process”). The Non-Thesis Option should not be viewed by students as a “less demanding” or “less time-consuming” alternative to writing a thesis. Students choosing the Non-Thesis Option must complete a research project to be defended as part of the comprehensive oral examination. Moreover, a student’s knowledge of broader security and defense issues, as well as their verbal and analytical skills, may be thoroughly tested during the Comprehensive Oral Examination. At the examination, and in order to successfully obtain this post-graduate degree, students are also expected to demonstrate to the examination board their work ethic, commitment, and academic skills.

Non-Thesis Research Project and Paper: The Non-Thesis research project offers students selecting the Non-Thesis Option an opportunity to demonstrate the analytic and writing skills gained from the DSS graduate education. Students are strongly encouraged to start the project in their first year, especially during their second semester, when they should declare their preference for the non-thesis option. Please note that students seeking the **DSS/WMD option** Master’s degree must select a WMD-related topic for their Non-Thesis Project paper.

The Non-Thesis Research Project should result in an original project paper that is between 5,000 and 10,000 words in length (~20-40 pages), not including Cover, Abstract, and Bibliography pages, and double-spaced using Times New Roman, 12-point font. Students should appropriately add pages to account for excessive footnotes to honor the 20-page minimum requirement. Students should not exceed the 10,000-word limit without specific permission in advance from the Non-Thesis Mentor.

Non-Thesis Project paper must be submitted to the examination board in electronic form no later than two weeks before the Comprehensive Oral Examination. The choice of subject matter, research methods, and bibliographic sources, as well as the structuring, organizing, and formatting of the paper, shall follow the DSS format and requirements posted at the end of this guide.

Selecting the Non-Thesis Project Mentor and the Examination Board: While considering the subject area for their Non-Thesis Research Project, students should consider what intrigues them and what fuels their passion in the field of defense and security studies. In the process, they are welcome to interact with multiple faculty members to validate ideas and topics.

The student must recruit one DSS faculty member to serve as their Non-Thesis Project mentor and first reader, who will also lead their oral examination board. When recruiting and selecting their Research Project mentor/first reader and the additional members of the Oral Examination Board, students are encouraged to engage with multiple faculty members as mentors, but they must choose a primary reader/mentor from the designated research faculty who will also serve officially.

By the beginning of the graduation semester, each student, in consultation with their Non-Thesis Project mentor, must select two (2) additional faculty members from the DSS faculty to serve on their Oral Examination Board. The student's Non-Thesis Project mentor, together with the two selected DSS faculty members, will constitute the Oral Examination Board. Students are responsible for identifying, recruiting, and securing the participation of the two additional board members. Students should consider which faculty members would best serve their needs in terms of overall guidance and constructive criticism. Some general considerations regarding choosing faculty members for the Board include:

- Current and previous research and experience relevant to the subject in question;
- Familiarity with the student's interests, academic accomplishments, and coursework; and
- Ability and willingness to provide constructive criticism of the student's work.

The student will inform their academic advisor of their selections. This faculty mentor/first reader should be familiar with the student's work. The student's project mentor will be the student's main point of contact throughout the Non-Thesis Project experience. The student's project mentor and the student will establish a schedule and outline of expectations for completing the research project and paper, typically as part of a regular DSS seminar or a Directed Reading course. The student must keep their mentor informed of the project's progress and coordinate with their mentor any plans to change the direction or format of the Non-Thesis Project paper. Ongoing substantive engagement between the student and mentor throughout the Non-Thesis Project is very important to its success, and both parties are urged to take the relationship seriously.

Non-Thesis Research Project Paper Structure: The Research Project Paper template is posted at the end of this guidance and usually has sections organized as follows:

- Abstract:
 - Succinct statement summarizing key elements and most salient findings of the Non-Thesis Project and their potential ramifications.
- Introduction:
 - Statement of the research project's problem;
 - Articulation of the student's hypothesis or point of view (thesis statement);

- Literature review (as appropriate); and
- Explanation of research methods.
- Substantive body:
 - Review of the background and/or history of problems under analysis;
 - Analysis specific to the chosen subject matter; and
 - Assessment and critique of opposing views.
- Conclusion:
 - Discussion of research results and their implications;
 - Scenarios of future evolutions; and
 - Recommendation of policy or strategy.

(The Non-Thesis template may also serve as a template for any appropriate course paper; it provides, in general, a sound structure around which to organize analytical writing.)

Use of a Regular Seminar or Directed-Reading Course Paper to Advance the Non-Thesis Research Project: DSS no longer permits students to integrate a paper produced for a regular or directed-reading DSS course directly into their Non-Thesis Research Project. Students may use ideas, frameworks, research, methodologies, and sources derived from previous work. Any use of original quotes, ideas, or data from previous academic papers must be explicitly cited in the manuscript to avoid self-plagiarism.

Students will use the *Chicago Manual of Style (CMOS)* per separate DSS guidance. The *CMOS* (footnotes and bibliography) format offers a comprehensive approach to academic integrity by acknowledging intellectual obligations while providing a clear trail of evidence for scholarly arguments.

Additional Submissions to the Examination Board: Two weeks prior to the exam, and together with the Non-Thesis Research Project Paper, students will submit two additional papers of at least 1,750 words each – that is, about seven (7) pages in length that were completed in previous DSS courses. These additional papers will also be reviewed and critiqued by the Oral Examination Board. Students must be prepared to defend the views, logic, and research methods used in each of these additional papers during the examination period.

Non-Thesis Comprehensive Oral Examination: The Oral Examination under the Non-Thesis Option must take place during the student's final (graduation) semester, no later than the Non-Thesis Project submission deadline set by the MSU graduation calendar for that semester.

Exams will take place in one of the DSS's classrooms and/or virtually via a DSS-assigned Zoom engagement. The student is responsible for coordinating with their mentor a specific date and time for the examination and for securing the commitment of the second and third oral examination board members to that date and time. The student is to promptly inform their academic advisor when the oral exam time/date has been scheduled and confirmed by all board members. (Note that the Zoom link for these examinations must be hosted by one of the faculty board members involved

rather than the student, so that the student can drop out of the conversation temporarily should faculty members wish to consult amongst themselves about the examination.)

The oral examination is intended to provide the student with an opportunity to demonstrate their ability to think critically and articulate thoughts cogently, analyze competing schools of thought, express opinions, and defend them articulately. It is also expected to demonstrate the student's general knowledge and understanding of defense and strategic studies at a level appropriate for a master's degree holder.

During the exam, the defense of the Non-Thesis Project is followed by oral questions covering the student's two additional papers from previous courses, as well as current events relevant to the field of defense and strategic studies, emphasizing the main areas of study at DSS. The comprehensive oral exam will typically last between two and three hours, and the student is usually informed of the grade upon its conclusion.

Any student who fails the oral exam will be allowed to retake the exam the following semester. The student must register for an additional course during that semester, however. If the student fails or otherwise does not complete the Non-Thesis Project or Comprehensive Oral Exam in the intended semester, in other words, the student must register for an additional course the following semester (DSS#794: "Active in Research"). Non-Thesis students *may not* take DSS#799 ("Thesis") to fulfill this credit requirement.

Grading: Per MSU guidance, grades for the Non-Thesis Comprehensive Oral Examination are "pass" and "non-pass." DSS evaluations also permit a "pass with distinction" result for those who demonstrate superior performance. Passing and non-passing grades will be decided by a majority vote of the three-person examination board membership. Students will be informed of the Board's decision but not of each board member's vote. Passing "with distinction" requires a unanimous vote of all members of the examination board. Graduates earning a "pass with distinction" rating may include that fact on resumés and CVs¹ to demonstrate their ability to produce high-caliber work.

A Comprehensive Oral Examination Results form will be prepared by the student's academic advisor and provided to each oral exam board member to indicate their vote of "pass", "non-pass," or "pass with distinction." The academic advisor will ensure the results of the oral exam are reported to the MSU Graduate College for posting to the student's academic record. (Note that a letter grade will also be assigned for the DSS 796 course that a student completes with their mentor. This grade represents the mentor's assessment of the student's work in undertaking the Non-Thesis Project and is separate from the exam board's evaluation of the project itself, the two additional papers, any additional questions that may be asked by the board, and the student's oral defenses thereof.)

¹ A CV – short for the Latin phrase "*curriculum vitae*, meaning "course of life," is a detailed document highlighting one's professional and academic history.

DSS Administrative Support: At every stage of the Non-Thesis Project process, students may rely on the advice and support of their project mentor, academic advisor, and other staff members. Students are also welcome to contact their academic advisor and/or the Academic Advisor to discuss:

- Complying with MSU and DSS requirements;
- Making a choice between the Thesis and Non-Thesis options for graduation;
- Identifying areas of non-thesis research;
- Preparing and filing all documents related to the Non-Thesis Project; and
- Interacting with DSS Faculty Members in establishing the Oral Examination Board, etc.

Student Responsibilities: Successful completion of the Non-Thesis Option process and project requires serious preparation. Students should expect to exert considerable academic effort to produce an acceptable Non-Thesis Option project paper. It is the student's responsibility to do the following:

- Recruit requisite DSS faculty for your Non-Thesis Project and Comprehensive Oral Examination board: Mentor, plus two (2) additional readers/board members;
- Make a clear timeline for completing all phases of the Non-Thesis Option process and project in consultation with their Non-Thesis Project mentor;
- Take personal responsibility for the work required and for the end product;
- Report progress to their mentor periodically;
- Report project setbacks/delays to their mentor quickly;
- Notify their academic advisor of any issues/problems that might delay the timely/projected completion of their project paper or oral comprehensive exam, and thus potentially delay graduation;
- Expect critically constructive feedback in the process of preparation and presentation of the Non-Thesis Project paper, and be receptive and responsive to suggestions from the student's project mentor and readers;
- Follow ethical guidelines and comply with all MSU and DSS policies and procedures;
- Comply with MSU DSS guidelines regarding the use and misuse of Artificial Intelligence (AI), in full awareness of the fact that papers will be reviewed for improper use of AI (and for plagiarism) using appropriate methods; and
- Most importantly, ask for help when needed and in a timely manner.

Any delay in the completion of the Non-Thesis Paper and/or the Non-Thesis Comprehensive Oral Examination may result in the DSS faculty and staff being unable to support MSU's grade submission and graduation timelines.

Faculty Responsibilities: Faculty members serving as a Non-Thesis mentor and oral examination board members are expected to help students understand the importance and expectations of each

stage of the Non-Thesis Research Project and Process. They should clearly and quickly communicate their availability (or lack thereof) to students.

The Non-Thesis mentors have special responsibilities, working most closely with the student and giving the most guidance. This may be done during a regular DSS seminar course or a directed-reading course. Mentors are expected to meet personally with their students to discuss and facilitate the Non-Thesis Project Option process, give advice at all stages of the Non-Thesis Project and paper, and help the student coordinate with other members of the respective examination boards.

The Non-Thesis process can be enormously rewarding. Students taking this path have a valuable opportunity to learn and grow not just in the field of defense and strategic studies, but also as well-rounded, well-informed citizens knowledgeable about the myriad threats and opportunities presented by a challenging world.

I wish you great success!

Christopher A Ford

Professor Christopher A. Ford
Director, School of Defense and Strategic Studies
Reynolds College of Arts, Social Sciences, and Humanities
Missouri State University

(Continued next page)

Acknowledgment of Non-Thesis Project requirements

A. I certify that I have read this document and understand all components.

Non-Thesis Student Name

Date

Student Signature

B. I certify that I will be available under reasonable circumstances to the student for assistance in the completion of the thesis process.

Non-Thesis Mentor

Date

Mentor Signature

This document will be signed by the Non-Thesis mentor and the student upon the formation of the Examination Board and submitted to the student's DSS academic advisor.

Sample Questions for the Comprehensive Oral Examination

Students who opt to take the Non-Thesis Comprehensive Oral Examination should understand that they will be asked to “defend” the views, logic, and research methods used in each of their submitted papers. Additionally, students may be asked a range of questions on a variety of issues, including current events covered during their academic pursuits at DSS, for example:

- Key authors and publications that influenced your studies at DSS;
- Theories of deterrence (especially nuclear deterrence), including Schelling and Kahn;
- The basic parameters of Just War Doctrine;
- The doctrine and policies of “peace through strength”;
- The relationship between deterrence theory and U.S. Cold War and post-Cold War arms control policy;
- Key emerging strategic challenges to U.S. and global security;
- Major aspects of and issues in U.S. national security policy and organization;
- U.S. approaches to counterproliferation, both unilateral and multilateral;
- Evolving roles of intelligence and counterintelligence; and
- Methods of and major issues in counterterrorism.

Finally, to establish students’ proficiency in analysis and critical thinking, they may be asked to answer general questions and cogently defend their positions on defense and strategic policy in the context of current events, for example:

- Having studied a range of issues at DSS, which issues do you believe are the most significant for U.S. national security? What do you think are the biggest national security challenges facing the United States today? Do you think US policymakers are addressing these issues properly?
- How would you describe a vital national interest, and what do you think are America’s vital interests today? (If not, what would you recommend be done differently?)
- What US national security policies, if any, would you change and why?
- Describe an issue you studied at DSS that led you to challenge your previous assumptions about the topic. Have your opinions changed as a result?
- What is your understanding of the relationship between “defense” and “national security”?
- How do you define “strategic” in the context of your studies at DSS?

(Note that these lists of additional questions are illustrative and not exhaustive. Board members have discretion in shaping their questions in ways they feel appropriate to each student.)

Next Page -- Non-Thesis Paper Template and Format

[cover page template]

**TITLE OF THE NON-THESIS PROJECT (DOUBLE SPACED, UPPER-CASE, BOLD,
AND CENTERED – INVERTED PYRAMID, IF OVER 48 CHARACTERS)**

By

[Student Name]

A Master's Non-Thesis Project
Submitted to the School of Defense and Strategic Studies
Of Missouri State University
In Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements
For the Degree of Master of Science, Defense and Strategic Studies

[Month, Year] (This date must match in all iterations)]

Approved:

Dr. or Professor [First Last name], Non-Thesis Project 1st Reader/Mentor

Dr. or Professor [First Last name], Non-Thesis Project 2nd Reader

Dr. or Professor [First Last name], Non-Thesis Project 3rd Reader

Professor Christopher A. Ford, Director of the School of Defense and Strategic Studies

In the interest of academic freedom and the principle of free speech, approval of this non-thesis project indicates the format is acceptable and meets the academic criteria for the discipline as determined by the faculty that constitute the non-thesis committee. The content and views expressed in this non-thesis project are those of the student-scholar and are not endorsed by Missouri State University, its School of Defense and Strategic Studies, or its employees.

Paper Format:

[cover page template]

ABSTRACT

[Text: single-spaced, Times New Roman font, 12 pitch, left aligned; Text should not exceed one page. May include Keyword list if desired.]

The formatting of this abstract should be one paragraph without indenting and single-spaced. The abstract is limited to this space so that everything fits on this one page. There must be at least two single-spaced blank lines between the abstract and the line with keywords. Abstract is expected to cover the introduction, methods, overview of results, and discussion of the research. Use of the pronoun “I” is acceptable; use of we here is only acceptable if multiple authors are listed on the title pages.

[optional] KEYWORDS: list at least five to ten keywords here, use lowercase (except proper nouns – even for the first word), separate keywords with commas, use no ending punctuation, do not indent any subsequent line, this section is single-spaced

INTRODUCTION

[Text: Double-spaced, Times New Roman font, 12 pitch, left aligned; first line of paragraphs will be indented; must include the “thesis statement;” Footnotes will be in 10-pitch Chicago Manual of Style format]

This is where you begin your non-thesis project paper. Your introduction is an important road map for the rest of your paper. Your introduction conveys a lot of information to your readers. Announce what your topic is, why it is important, and how you will proceed with your discussion. Moreover, the introduction presents the kinds of information you used to make your argument and the general organization of the paragraphs and pages that will follow. Your introduction must contain a thesis statement or question that will assert your main argument. The thesis is both the purpose and the “hook” of your paper. After reading your introduction, your readers should not have any major surprises in store when they read the main body of your paper.

[Substantive Body]
SUBTITLE HEADERS

*[Organized via subtitled headers (centered and **bold** font), as desired or appropriate]*
[Text: Double-spaced, Times New Roman font, 12 pitch, left aligned; first line of paragraphs will be indented; Footnotes will be 10-pitch Chicago Manual of Style format]

Main body of evidence and argument: The bulk of the text will be made up of your presentation of evidence relevant to the questions the paper considers, your evaluation of this evidence, accounts, and your assessment of what (if anything) other experts have said about these challenges, and the evidence-backed argument you offer in favor of your principal conclusions. The specific structure and organization of this section of the paper will vary considerably from one subject to the next, but it is always important that the writing be clear and concise, and that the narrative flow of your argument (e.g., from one point to the next, and ultimately supporting your conclusions) be clear.

Recommendations: As a rule of thumb, limit yourself to only the most relevant policy recommendations: ones that stem directly from your work. While you can have multiple recommendations for each issue researched, it is also acceptable to have one recommendation that is connected to more than one issue researched.

These recommendations should be targeted at your readers, those in the field who work on similar subjects to your paper or dissertation topic. They can account for any limitations you found while conducting your research, or recommendations that might require certain parameters in the future, but might not exist today.

CONCLUSION

[Text: Double-spaced, Times New Roman font, 12 pitch, left aligned; first line of paragraphs will be indented]

The conclusion should briefly review the argument you've built, but it's not a summary – it is your final pitch to the reader for your thesis and recommendations. A conclusion should remind readers of what you have just told them, return to the “hook” from the introduction, reiterate any recommendations, and possibly pose questions for future study. Take care not to repeat your words exactly in the conclusion. At the same time, do not introduce any new concepts or parts of your argument in this section. You are synthesizing and commenting on the ideas you've presented, but not making any substantially new points. By the end of your paper, readers should already understand your position and the evidence used to support it. The conclusion provides readers with a sense of completion, a reminder of why your paper was worth reading.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Unless directed by or coordinated with the Non-Thesis Project Mentor, the citation should follow the Chicago Manual of Style format for footnotes and bibliography. Use the link for various sample citations: https://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide/citation-guide-1.html

Sample:

Foot Notes – 10-pitch (internet citation)

1. “Privacy Policy,” Privacy & Terms, Google, last modified April 17, 2017, <https://www.google.com/policies/privacy/>.
2. “About Yale: Yale Facts,” Yale University, accessed May 1, 2017, <https://www.yale.edu/about-yale/yale-facts>.
3. Katie Bouman, “How to Take a Picture of a Black Hole,” filmed November 2016 at TEDxBeaconStreet, Brookline, MA, video, 12:51, https://www.ted.com/talks/katie_bouman_what_does_a_black_hole_look_like.

Shortened footnotes (internet citation)

4. Google, “Privacy Policy.”
5. “Yale Facts.”
6. Bouman, “Black Hole.”

Bibliography entries (in alphabetical order, 12-pitch) (internet citation)

Bouman, Katie. “How to Take a Picture of a Black Hole.” Filmed November 2016 at TEDxBeaconStreet, Brookline, MA. Video, 12:51. https://www.ted.com/talks/katie_bouman_what_does_a_black_hole_look_like.
Google. “Privacy Policy.” Privacy & Terms. Last modified April 17, 2017. <https://www.google.com/policies/privacy/>.
Yale University. “About Yale: Yale Facts.” Accessed May 1, 2017. <https://www.yale.edu/about->

yale/yale-facts.

Any and all questions regarding the Non-Thesis Project Paper style and format beyond the guidance provided in this document should be addressed with your faculty mentor/1st reader.

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