



School of Defense and Strategic Studies

THESIS PROJECT AND PROCESS GUIDE

Effective: 1 July 2026

Thesis Definition: A thesis is an empirical research and analysis project that provides students with an opportunity to demonstrate mastery of one particular topic of study. Components of the Thesis Project process include developing clear research questions or statements, writing a high-quality literature review, formulating theoretically grounded expectations and hypotheses, constructing a sound research design, collecting data, demonstrating appropriate analytical techniques, and articulating the importance of the thesis findings to the field of defense and strategic studies. A DSS thesis makes a unique contribution to the academic and policy literature, either by addressing an issue from a new angle or validating and building upon existing research through a replication or corroboration study. In all cases, these are expected to demonstrate analytical acumen, critical thinking, depth of scholarly engagement with the subject, and clear and persuasive analysis and argument. More substantive than a research paper, the thesis articulates an argument or position that the student defends with solid evidence, logical reasoning, and rigorous analysis, including an examination and critique of opposing viewpoints.

Thesis Structure: A thesis typically has chapters organized as follows:

- Abstract:
 - One-page statement summarizing key elements and most salient findings of the Thesis Project and their potential ramifications
- Introduction:
 - Statement of the Problem
 - Articulation of the student's hypothesis or point of view
 - Literature Review
 - Explanation of research methods
- Substantive chapters:
 - Review of the background and/or history of problems under analysis
 - Analysis specific to the chosen subject matter
 - Assessment and critique of opposing views
- Conclusion:
 - Short summary
 - Discussion of research results and their implications

- Recommendation of policy

One of the best ways to better understand the form and requirements of a thesis is to review completed theses with topics similar to your own. The DSS Library has bound copies of theses from a wide range of subjects completed by DSS alumni. MSU DSS theses are also viewable online at: <https://bearworks.missouristate.edu/dss-theses/>.

Why do a thesis? A thesis is one of the most time- and labor-intensive aspects of graduate school, and its size and scope can be intimidating. However, there are several benefits to this option. First, a thesis prepares one to write a future dissertation or capstone project, should one decide to pursue a terminal degree. (A completed thesis will, for example, help demonstrate to admission boards your desire, work ethic, commitment, and academic skills to successfully obtain a doctoral or PhD degree.) Second, thesis research enables students to acquire and demonstrate a strong, expert-level background in a particular topic, making them much more effective analysts, advisors, and decision-makers in that field. Thesis research can also give students the chance to contribute to the growth of knowledge and understanding in their field through published writings, helping them establish themselves as experts within the wider policy and academic community.

The thesis provides a platform for sharpening and reinforcing the skills gained from graduate education. The organizational skills necessary for drafting an informative literature review, the critical thinking and problem-solving skills used to develop a research design and analyze data, and the writing skills required to persuasively communicate the project's contribution are all strengthened and polished through the thesis. Students who complete a thesis also produce a bound document that becomes part of the Missouri State University and DSS Libraries. As a result, graduates with a thesis will be able to include on their CVs¹ to demonstrate their ability to produce valuable written work.

Thesis Process: The student's first step is to select a research topic. Thesis students should consider what interests them and what drives their passion in the field of defense and security studies. They should identify specific issues and problems related to these topics that would be beneficial to explore, as well as how professional interests can be framed within a research question that will guide the thesis development.

Students are strongly encouraged to start considering thesis topics, research questions, and initial research in their first year, especially during their second semester, given the rigorous timeline of completing the master's degree program in two years. Please note that students seeking the **DSS/WMD option** Master's degree must select a WMD-related topic for their thesis paper.

DSS Administrative Support: At every stage of the thesis process, students may rely on the advice and support of their chosen first reader/thesis mentor, who will assist and guide the student through the thesis process and ensure an understanding of the following:

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. It is sometimes referred to, less formally, as a resumé.

- Complying with MSU and DSS thesis requirements;
- Making a choice between the Thesis and Non-Thesis options for graduation;
- Identifying and confirming appropriate topic areas for thesis research;
- Preparing and filing all documents related to the thesis project;
- Developing and presenting the thesis concept paper;
- Interacting with DSS faculty members in establishing thesis committees and assuring their efficient functioning; and
- Staying on schedule with thesis submissions, etc.

Working with a First Reader/Mentor: As students begin to gather topic ideas, narrow them, and craft research questions/statements, it is important that they find a faculty member to serve as a First Reader early in this process. First Readers serve as mentors throughout the process and as evaluators at the end. A First Reader faculty member can assist students with various tasks, such as:

- Helping the student to remain topically focused;
- Identifying good places to start with a literature review;
- Challenging a student to refine ideas and questions so that they are suitable for rigorous academic study;
- Offering ideas and feedback about how similar topics have been examined in past research;
- Providing links to agencies that might be receptive to students collecting data for a thesis or assisting with the identification of databases suitable for the needs of a research project;
- Motivating students to keep moving forward with their thesis framework; and
- Providing initial reviews, edits, and comments.

Selecting the First Reader and Thesis Committee: Students are encouraged to engage with multiple faculty members as mentors, but they must choose a first reader/mentor from the designated research faculty who will also serve officially. At the beginning of the second semester, but no later than the third, the student will form a Thesis Committee composed of three readers, all of whom are resident or adjunct MSU DSS faculty. After the First Reader is confirmed, the student is to notify their academic advisor. The First Reader will be the student's main point of contact throughout the thesis experience. With the First Reader, a student will establish a timeline, including hard deadlines, and outline expectations for completing the research project. In addition, the First Reader is the primary authority and must be consulted on any plans to change the direction or format of the thesis.

In consultation with the First Reader, the student will also recruit a second and third reader for their thesis committee. The purpose of the thesis committee is to offer constructive input and feedback in the development and refinement of the final thesis product. The First Reader has primary responsibility for reading and assessing early drafts. The student and First Reader will work together to keep the full committee informed regarding the stage of the research project and the status of drafts or revisions. When choosing committee members, the student should consider

which faculty members would best serve the students' needs regarding the thesis topic's focus and overall guidance. Some general considerations when choosing faculty members for the committee 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.

Starting the Thesis Project -- The Concept Paper: A student begins the thesis project by developing a concept paper to be discussed with and approved by the First Reader. The concept paper includes:

- A comprehensive abstract of the thesis defining the student's hypothesis, areas of proposed research, potential courses of action, and an explanation of the aim, purpose, milestones, and focus of the study;
- A concise chapter-by-chapter outline of the thesis explaining how different problems will be addressed; and
- A bibliography of primary and secondary sources that will support the student's ability to study and research the problem statement, with an emphasis on primary sources as much as possible.

Because it is critical to ensure that the overall manuscript hangs together well and that its evidentiary and argumentative flow is clear and compelling, this concept paper may require multiple rewrites to achieve clarity and the First Reader's agreement on all aspects of the proposed thesis project. Please allow time for this process.

Thesis Concept Presentation (Optional): *At the discretion of the First Reader*, students may be asked to present their concept paper to the first reader or the members of the selected committee. Once the First Reader has received the concept paper, the student should begin preparing the thesis presentation. The presentation should be completed no later than the middle of the third semester. A thesis presentation should achieve the following:

- Clearly articulate the significance of your proposed research and the hypothesis you propose to prove, disprove, or defend;
- Introduce key concepts and dilemmas connected to the proposed study;
- Provide a short overview of the study you envision, and a tentative breakdown of the project's chapter progression;
- Explain the methods to be used in the research; and
- Identify key bibliographic and other sources for the study.

Completion of the Thesis Project: Once a student has written a concept paper and had it reviewed and accepted by the first reader, the academic advisor will grant permission for the student to enroll in DSS#799 ("Thesis") to complete the thesis project. To meet MSU registration deadlines, this must be completed by the end of the first week of the semester's start. Collection and analysis of

data and other information, and writing of the thesis manuscript must be completed by the student's graduation (usually fourth semester) at DSS. A thesis should be at least 20,000 words in length and prepared in double-spaced, Times New Roman, 12-point font. (This equates to around 80 pages). Longer theses may be permitted with concurrence from the First Reader, but length should not come at the cost of verbosity or duplication; clarity and concision are always expected.

Use of Course Papers to Advance the Thesis Project Process: DSS no longer permits students to integrate a paper produced for a regular or directed reading DSS course directly into their thesis. 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 thesis 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 and providing a clear trail of evidence for scholarly arguments.

Thesis Submission Schedule (the final semester): All data and information collected, including work on statistics, graphs, and tables, is to be submitted to the first reader 11 weeks before the MSU thesis submission deadline is posted in the appropriate semester's MSU academic calendar. Generally speaking, those exact dates will fall in mid-April for a May graduation date and mid-November for a December graduation date.

The following timetable is a guideline for submission of drafts and revisions:

- Baseline -- 4 weeks after the semester begins (approximately February 20th for Spring graduates and September 20th for Fall graduates), submit the first assembled draft to the First Reader for initial review
- +2 weeks -- 1st assembled draft back to Student from First Reader
- +3 weeks -- 2nd draft to First Reader
- +4 weeks -- 2nd draft back from First Reader
- +6 weeks -- 3rd draft to 1st, 2nd, 3rd Readers (Committee)
- +8 weeks -- 3rd draft back from 1st, 2nd, 3rd Readers
- +10 weeks -- Thesis finalized in coordination with First Reader only and posted to MSU Graduate College via DSS Staff

Students are required to inform their First Reader and their academic advisor of any significant delays or deviations from this schedule. Any delay in completing the thesis process and paper may result in the DSS faculty and staff being unable to meet MSU's grade submission and graduation timelines.

Formatting Guidelines: The Graduate College has very specific guidelines for formatting the final thesis document. Students should access the Graduate College Thesis on the Brightspace

course for details (<https://graduate.missouristate.edu/currentstudents/ThesisResources.htm>). The Graduate College takes these formatting requirements seriously, and students must expect their manuscripts to withstand *very* careful scrutiny on these grounds.

Student Responsibilities: A thesis requires time, dedication, and hard work to finish. Students should expect to put considerable effort into producing an acceptable thesis. To complete a thesis, it is the student's responsibility to do the following:

- Make a project timeline for completing the project in consultation with their First Reader;
- Take personal responsibility for the work required and the end product;
- Report progress and setbacks to the First Reader and academic advisor periodically;
- Notify the First Reader and academic advisor if deadlines are impactfully delayed;
- Expect critically constructive feedback at each stage of the thesis process and be receptive and responsive to suggestions from the committee;
- With the First Reader, address any comments that seem confusing, contradictory, or unreasonable;

Note: It is critical to remain organized, for comments from three different readers will need to be adjudicated. Some students have found success using a spreadsheet to collect, catalog, and adjudicate thesis comments. Submitting the spreadsheet with a revised version of the thesis can facilitate rapid comment adjudication by the thesis committee members and may speed up their final reviews. Students are responsible for making it clear to readers where and how they have made changes in response to feedback.

- Follow ethical guidelines and comply with all MSU and DSS policies and procedures;
- Remain disciplined to the CMOS citation format and template guide;
- Recognize that the thesis committee needs sufficient but reasonable time to answer questions and review drafts (ideally 10-14 days);

Note: Students must allow for sufficient time at each stage of the process to make corrections or conduct further research efforts in response to thesis committee feedback. Provide as much of a “buffer” as you can to permit you to deal with unanticipated delays and avoid having either the students or the thesis readers miss a deadline. Theses usually suffer greatly when “rushed to completion” under time pressure, which can jeopardize the student's chances of success.

- Understand that the quality of students' submissions to readers will greatly influence the nature of the feedback received as well as the effort necessary to address that feedback;

Note: If a poor draft is received, a faculty member may simply hand it back with little comment, requiring a more acceptable draft before investing the considerable time and effort needed to offer detailed substantive comments.

- Comply with MSU DSS guidelines regarding the use 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.

Faculty Responsibilities: Faculty members serving as First Readers and committee members (*i.e.*, second and third readers) are expected to help students understand the importance and expectations of each stage of the thesis process. Thesis committee members are also expected to clearly communicate their availability to students, including summer semester schedule, travel, sabbatical, and other commitments. In addition, all thesis committee members should respect the thesis due dates and provide feedback on drafts and revisions within the timeframes specified in the thesis submission schedule.

- **The First Reader has special responsibilities.** First Readers have the primary responsibilities and prerogatives in this regard and in the review process in general. First Readers are responsible for mentoring, working most closely with the student, and giving the most guidance. First Readers are expected to meet periodically (in person or via Zoom) with their thesis student to discuss progress, facilitate the thesis process, provide feedback after reviewing the first and second draft submittals, and help the student coordinate with the second and third readers. It is not the First Reader's responsibility to recruit the remaining committee members; that is the student's responsibility. However, First Readers may recommend faculty to the student for recruitment.
- The second and third readers may offer guidance throughout the thesis process, but are only expected to review the third and final drafts while providing constructive feedback on major deficiencies and format errors.

Any delay in completing the thesis process and paper may result in the DSS faculty and staff being unable to comply with MSU's grade submission and graduation timelines.

CRITICAL REQUIREMENT!

MSU requires students producing a thesis to complete a series of tutorials and quizzes via Brightspace <https://graduate.missouristate.edu/currentstudents/ThesisResources.htm> before final submission of the thesis. Please address any questions regarding this requirement to your academic advisor. It is important to note that the student's thesis will not be accepted by the MSU Graduate College if these requirements are not met prior to the thesis submission deadline date. It is strongly recommended that the thesis student review these requirements soon after deciding to complete a thesis.

The Thesis process can be enormously rewarding. Students taking this path have the chance not merely to deepen their own experience and competence through original research and critical analysis, but also to expand human knowledge and to make the defense and strategic studies community wiser and better informed about critical issues affecting national and international security policy. A good thesis project thus makes a valuable contribution to society and to the world, and should be seen as a deeply exciting challenge.

I wish you great success!

Christopher A Ford

Professor Christopher A. Ford
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Acknowledgment:

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

Thesis Student (Print and Sign)

Date

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

First Reader (Print and Sign)

Date

This statement will be circulated to all DSS Faculty Members and students for information. It will be signed by First Readers and students upon the formation of a Thesis Committee, as approved by the Thesis Coordinator.

MSU Thesis on Brightspace Completion Requirements

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