



## School of Defense and Strategic Studies

# THESIS PROJECT AND PROCESS GUIDE

Effective: June 2024

**Thesis Definition:** A thesis is an empirical research and analysis project that provides students with an opportunity to demonstrate mastery over one particular topic of study. Components in the Thesis Project process include developing clear research questions, writing a quality literature review, forming theoretically-based expectations and hypotheses, constructing a sound research design, collecting data, demonstrating appropriate analysis techniques, and articulating the importance of the thesis findings to areas of Defense and Security. A thesis makes a unique contribution to the scientific literature, either by addressing an issue from a new angle or validating existing research through a replication study. More substantive than a research paper, the thesis articulates an argument or position that the student defends with logical reasoning and rigorous analysis, including an examination and critique of opposing points of view.

**Thesis Structure:** A thesis usually 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:
  - Discussion of research results and their implications
  - Scenarios of future evolutions
  - 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 on 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-consuming and work-intensive aspects of graduate school and its size and scale can be intimidating. However, there are several benefits of this option. First, for those students considering future doctoral programs, a thesis prepares one to write a dissertation or a capstone project. A completed thesis will help demonstrate to admission boards your desire, work ethic, commitment, and academic skills to successfully obtain a doctoral degree. Second, publications are often generated as a result of thesis research.

Moreover, the thesis offers a platform upon which to sharpen and reinforce the skills gained from graduate education. The organizational skill necessary for drafting an informative literature review, the critical thinking and problem-solving skills utilized to create a research design and analyze data, and the writing skills involved in persuasively communicating the contribution of the project are all strengthened and polished through the thesis. Students who complete a thesis also receive 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 convey that fact on resumés and CVs to show potential employers your ability to produce impactful bodies of written work. A CV -- short for the Latin "curriculum vitae," meaning "course of life," is a detailed document highlighting your professional and academic history.

**Thesis Process:** The student's first step is to choose a topic of desired research. Thesis students should consider what they find intriguing and what fuels their passion in the subject arena of defense and security studies. Consider specific issues and problems from these topics that you would like to explore, as well as how your interests can be framed in the context of a research question that will guide the development of the thesis.

Students are strongly encouraged to start the thesis process in their first year, especially during their second semester given the rigorous timeline of completing the Master's 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 Project paper.

**DSS Administrative Support:** At every stage of the Thesis process, students may rely on the advice and support of their chosen First Reader, who will assist and guide the student through the Thesis process, and other members of the DSS Staff. Students are welcome to contact the Thesis Consultant: Visiting Professor Curtis McGiffin ([curtismcgiffin@missouristate.edu](mailto:curtismcgiffin@missouristate.edu)) to discuss:

- Complying with MSU and DSS Thesis Requirements
- Making a choice between the Thesis and Non-Thesis Options for graduation
- Identifying areas of 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
- Keeping up with thesis-submission schedules, etc.

**Working with a First Reader:** As students begin to gather ideas, narrow them down, and craft research questions, it is important that they search for a faculty member who will serve as a First Reader in this process. First Readers serve as mentors through the process and as evaluators at the end of the process. A First Reader-faculty member can help students with a number of things, such as:

- Remaining 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 scientific study
- Offering ideas 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 to the needs of a research project
- Motivating students to keep moving forward with their thesis framework

**Selecting the First Reader and Thesis Committee:** Students are welcome to interact with multiple faculty members in a mentoring capacity, but eventually will select a First Reader who will also act as mentor. At the beginning of the second, but not later than the third semester, the student will form a Thesis Committee with three readers; composed of resident or adjunct MSU DSS faculty only. After the First Reader is confirmed, the student is to notify their Academic Advisor and the Thesis Consultant. The First Reader will be the student's main point of contact throughout the thesis experience. With the Thesis 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 with any plans to change the direction or format of the thesis.

In consultation with the First Reader, the student will also select a Second Reader, and a Third Reader for their Thesis Committee. The Committee's purpose is to offer constructive input and feedback in the development and refinement of the thesis product. The First Reader has primary responsibility in this regard. 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 selecting the Committee, the student should consider which faculty members would best serve the student's needs in terms of thesis topic focus and guidance. Some general considerations include:

- Faculty members' current and previous research and/or their familiarity with the student's interests and academic accomplishments.

- A representation of different specialization areas and analytic expertise
- People who would provide a critical eye to the student's work

**Starting the Thesis Project -- The Concept Paper:** A student starts working on 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, 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
- Bibliography of primary and secondary sources that will support the student's ability to study and research the problem statement, with an emphasis on the primary sources

The Concept Paper may take time and multiple rewrites to obtain clarity and mutual agreement with the First Reader 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 needs to begin working on 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 defend
- Introduce key concepts and dilemmas connected to the proposed study
- Provide a short overview of the study you envision, and the tentative chapter breakdown
- Explain the methods to be used in the research
- Identify key bibliographic and other sources for the study

**Completion of the Thesis Project:** Once a student has written a concept paper, had it reviewed and accepted by the First Reader and coordinated with the other Readers, permission will be granted by the Academic Advisor to enroll in DSS 799 Thesis to complete the thesis project. Collection and analysis of data, and writing of the thesis draft (approximately 80 pages) must be completed by the student's graduation (usually fourth semester) at DSS.

**Use of Course Papers to Advance the Thesis Project Process:** In a major change from past practice, DSS has decided to allow students to integrate directly into their thesis a paper produced for a Regular or Directed Reading DSS course, especially a paper

completed under the guidance of the First Reader and on a matter related to the thesis subject. Only one previously completed paper may be used; it may serve as the methodological and/or substantive foundation of the Thesis. The use of this paper in this fashion must be cited explicitly in the Thesis and discussed in advance with the First Reader. The citation should follow MSU citation and attribution rules.

Students will use the ***Chicago Manual of Style*** per separate DSS guidance. The ***Chicago Manual of Style*** (footnotes and bibliography) offers a comprehensive approach to academic integrity by acknowledging intellectual obligations while 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 eleven (11) weeks before the MSU thesis submission deadline (see MSU submission deadline for each semester at this link:

<https://graduate.missouristate.edu/catalog/graduate-calendar.htm>).

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

- Baseline -- 4 weeks after the semester begins (approximately February 20 for Spring graduates and September 20 for Fall graduates) submit 1st assembled draft to 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 if there are any significant delays or deviations from this schedule. Any delay in the completion of the Thesis process and paper may result in the DSS staff's inability to support with 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 Brightspace course for details

<https://graduate.missouristate.edu/currentstudents/ThesisResources.htm>).

**Student Responsibilities:** A thesis is time consuming and takes great dedication and hard work to complete. Students should expect to exert considerable effort to produce an acceptable thesis. To complete a thesis, it is the student's responsibility to do the following:

- Make a clear timeline for completing all phases of 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 significantly missed
- Expect critically constructive feedback at each stage of the thesis process and be receptive and responsive to suggestions from the Committee
- Work with the First Reader to address any comments from other members of the Committee that seem unreasonable
  - Remain organized; comments from three different readers will need to be adjudicated in total. 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 make for rapid comment adjudication by the thesis committee members and possibly speed up the final reviews
- Follow ethical guidelines and comply with all MSU policies and procedures
- Remain disciplined to the Chicago-style citation format and template guide
- Recognize that the Thesis Committee needs sufficient but reasonable time to answer questions and review drafts
  - Allow for sufficient time at various stages of the process to make corrections or re-direct research efforts in response to Thesis Committee feedback: this provides a “buffer” to deal with unanticipated delays and avoids placing the students or the thesis readers in a time crunch where the paper must be “rushed to completion” to meet the necessary timeline
- Understand that submissions' quality will greatly influence the nature of the feedback received and the effort necessary to address it. If a poor draft is received, a faculty member will hand it back and require a more acceptable draft before taking any further steps
- 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 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 personally with their thesis student to discuss progress, facilitate the thesis process, give major feedback after reading through 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 provide guidance throughout the course of the thesis process but are only expected to read through the third and final drafts while providing constructive feedback on glaring deficiencies and format errors.

Any delay in the completion of the Thesis process and paper may result in the DSS staff's inability to meet MSU's grade submission and graduation timelines.

## **CRITICAL REQUIREMENT!**

MSU requires the completion of a series of tutorials and quizzes prior to final submission of the thesis. Please address any questions regarding this requirement to the MSU graduate college. These requirements are also accessible through MSU's Thesis on Brightspace site:

<https://graduate.missouristate.edu/currentstudents/ThesisResources.htm>

**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 the decision is made to complete a thesis.

*John P. Rose*

Dr. JOHN P. ROSE, Department Head  
Defense and Strategic Studies  
Missouri State University

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Acknowledgment:

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

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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.

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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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