## Table of Contents

CHOOSING THE THESIS OPTION 3  
   Why Write a Thesis? 3  
   How Does the Thesis Option Differ from the Standard MSW Research Curriculum? 3  
   Is the Thesis Option a Good Fit for Me? 3  
   What is the Timeline for Completing a Thesis? 4  

SELECTING YOUR THESIS COMMITTEE 4  
   How Do I Choose Committee Members? 4  

REFINING THE THESIS TOPIC AND METHODS 5  

APPLYING TO PURSUE THE THESIS OPTION 5  

ENROLLING IN THE THESIS OPTION 6  

OBTAINING INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD (IRB) APPROVAL 7  

WORKING WITH YOUR COMMITTEE 7  

WRITING THE THESIS 8  
   Formatting Guidelines 8  
   Graduate School Requirements 9  

DEFENDING THE THESIS 10  

SUBMITTING THE COMPLETED THESIS 10  

RESOURCES FOR WRITING AN SUCCESSFUL THESIS 11  
   Suggested Books and Articles 11  
   Suggested Websites 11  

APPENDIX A: THESIS APPLICATION FORM 13  

APPENDIX B: THESIS APPROVAL FORM 15
CHOOSING THE THESIS OPTION

Why Write a Thesis?

The thesis is a comprehensive paper that details an original social science research study. The length of a completed thesis depends on a variety of factors, including the study methodology, but most completed theses exceed fifty pages in length. Completing the thesis provides an opportunity for graduate social work students to delve deeply into a topic of interest to them by conducting a study larger in scope than that required in the standard MSW research curriculum. The thesis provides an opportunity for students to work closely with faculty to develop additional research skills and substantive area expertise. The thesis option may be especially attractive for those students contemplating doctoral-level education in social work or other social science disciplines.

How Does the Thesis Option Differ from the Standard MSW Research Curriculum?

In the USM School of Social Work, all MSW students conduct an original social science research study and present the findings in multiple formats. The thesis involves the same data collection and analysis as the research project completed in SWO 605 and SWO 652. However, the research project for the thesis is typically larger in scope and requires a more extensive written presentation of the findings based on the standardized template for theses (described below). The thesis course, SWO 695, is structured more like an independent study than a traditional course. The thesis process is overseen, monitored and supervised by the Thesis Chair, and consultation from committee members is utilized, but students primarily work independently and arrange regular meetings with the Chair throughout the process. Upon completion of the research and data analysis, a manuscript is written by the student who will present the work orally at a formal defense meeting.

Is the Thesis Option a Good Fit for Me?

- Are you eager to develop additional social science research skills?
- Are you hoping to delve deeply into a specific topic of interest?
- Are you able to motivate yourself to work independently and meet deadlines?
- Do you have strong written and oral communication skills?
- Do you enjoy working closely with faculty members and integrating their feedback?
- Can your schedule accommodate a six-credit, non-clinical elective?

If you answered “yes” to all of the questions above, the thesis option is probably a good fit for you! However, the decision to pursue a thesis is an important one. Consult with your faculty advisor to discuss your interest in the thesis option further.
What is the Timeline for Completing a Thesis?

Deciding to pursue a thesis is a decision best made prior to or early in the semester you are taking SWO 605, Social Work Research Methods II. Before taking this class, let your professor know if you are considering pursuing a thesis. If you do select the thesis option, you will want to have your IRB proposal submitted as close to week 10 in SWO 605 as you can. You can find more information about the IRB process on page 6, and rest assured this will be comprehensively covered in your SWO 605 class.

Your individual timeline for your own thesis, including due dates for chapters and your target defense date, will be created by you in conversation with your chair. If you plan to graduate at the end of the semester during which you will enroll in SWO 695, you should engage in earnest, realistic discussions with your Thesis Chair to ensure your project can be successfully completed during one semester. In the past, several students have had to delay their graduation because their thesis was not complete.

SELECTING YOUR THESIS COMMITTEE

A student wishing to embark on a thesis must first identify a SSW faculty member who will provide initial consultation around the research design and serve as the Chair of the student’s Thesis Committee. Two additional committee members, for a total of three, must be selected with the approval of the Chair, at least one of which should be another SSW faculty member. One committee member can be from another academic department or from outside of USM. All committee members should hold graduate degrees. A student can have more than three committee members at the discretion of their Chair. While your instructor for SWO 605 will support you in the initial development of your project and submission of the IRB protocol, they are not required to be a member of your committee.

How Do I Choose Committee Members?

Students work most closely with their Chair during the thesis process, so it is important that your Chair is a faculty member you trust and whose style of communication and workflow align with your needs. The Chair should also have sufficient background knowledge related to your thesis topic and research methods. Additional committee members should offer additional substantive or methodological expertise to support your work. Past thesis committees have included faculty from the Muskie School of Public Service, the School of Education and Human Development, as well as a range of other academic departments across the University. The online profiles of faculty typically feature information about their research interests which can help you identify potential committee members. Your Chair may suggest USM faculty members who may be appropriate, but it is the student’s responsibility to contact potential committee members and gauge their interest.

Although students enroll in and pay tuition for the SWO 695 Thesis Option course, faculty do not receive any compensation for serving on a thesis committee. As such, faculty are under no obligation to serve on a thesis committee and do so at their own discretion based on their
Finalizing one’s topic and selecting appropriate methods are often the most difficult tasks of any research project. As you will learn in SWO 605, a strong research project is built upon a specific and feasible research question. Usually, the research question indicates specific variables or constructs to be explored in the study. You are encouraged to approach prospective thesis committee members with a rough idea of your possible research question, but anticipating that these committee members will provide you with feedback to help you refine your variables or constructs of focus.

The research question(s) always determines the research methods to be used. Once you have finalized your research question, then you will start thinking about how to collect and analyze data to answer that question. Your instructor for SWO 605 and your thesis committee members will again be important resources for you during this process. As you are considering various methods, you will want to reflect on your own interests and strengths as well as feasibility given time and resource constraints. Students pursuing a thesis are expected to conduct a research project that is larger in scope than the typical project for SWO 652. Often, this means that a thesis project includes more participants, but it could also mean the project aims to answer multiple related research questions or employ a more specialized, rigorous methodology. Your Thesis Chair can provide guidance around ensuring your thesis project meets departmental expectations for scope and rigor.

APPLYING TO PURSUE THE THESIS OPTION

To be approved for enrollment in the thesis option, students must develop a thesis proposal and obtain approval of that proposal from their thesis committee. The proposal for the thesis application is an expanded version of the proposal developed in SWO 605. The proposal is expected to be approximately eight to ten pages in length, exclusive of title page and references, and should contain the following information:

- Title page
- List of committee members
- Brief review of the relevant literature
- Research question(s) and, if applicable, research hypotheses
- Detailed description of proposed study methods, including:
  - Overall research design
  - Sampling procedures
  - Measurement or instrumentation
  - Data collection procedures
  - Data analysis procedures
  - List of required materials (e.g. audio recorder, photocopied questionnaires, incentives, etc.)
- Proposed timeline for project completion
- Proposed budget (if applicable) with information about funding sources
- Reference list of cited sources
The proposal should be developed in consultation with the Chair and, as appropriate, the other committee members. Once completed, the student must arrange an in-person or Zoom meeting with their full committee to discuss the proposal. As needed, the Chair may assist with scheduling and reserving a room for the meeting. A copy of the proposal should be made available to the committee at least one week in advance of the meeting, unless other arrangements have been made.

The committee members will assess the thesis proposal according to the following criteria:

- Potential scholarly contribution of the proposed study to the social work knowledge base
- Alignment of proposed study with the values, ethics, and aims of the social work profession
- Appropriateness of proposed methods for addressing identified research question
- Scope of proposed project and sophistication of proposed methods
- Feasibility of proposed methods for timely completion
- Quality of written communication

If the committee members are satisfied with the proposal, perhaps pending minor changes, the committee members must sign the Thesis Application Form (See APPENDIX A: THESIS APPLICATION FORM). The Thesis Committee Chair is then responsible for submitting the approved proposal and signed Thesis Application Form to the Research Committee Chair, who will complete a second review of the proposal to ensure feasibility of the project. Finally, the Research Committee Chair will submit the approved proposal and signed Thesis Application Form to the MSW Program Coordinator for final approval. The MSW Coordinator should receive the approved application and signed form no later than the due date listed below, corresponding to when you plan to enroll in SWO 695.

Due Date for Spring Semester Enrollment in SWO 695: November 30th
Due Date for Fall Semester Enrollment in SWO 695: August 30th

ENROLLING IN THE THESIS OPTION

The thesis course, SWO 695, is typically taken during the semester immediately following the student’s completion of SWO 605. Students enroll in SWO 695 instead of SWO 652. Unlike most three credit electives, SWO 695 is six credits; because of the three additional credits, thesis students are waived from taking one of the three electives required for completion of the MSW. It is important that students discuss whether enrollment in the thesis option will preclude them from taking the courses needed for social work licensure after graduation. Students do not enroll themselves in SWO 695 as they do for most courses. Rather, submission of the signed Thesis Application Form to the MSW Program Coordinator will prompt the Administrative Specialist for the SSW to enroll the student in the appropriate section of SWO 695.

OBTAINING INSTITUTIONAL REVIEW BOARD (IRB) APPROVAL

Whether you decide to embark on a thesis or complete a project in SWO 605, you will be required to submit a proposal to USM’s IRB. The IRB oversees protections for human subjects in
research. The process will be discussed and supported through your SWO 605 course. Our IRB is overseen by the Office of Research Integrity and Oversight (ORIO), and you can learn more on their website here or at https://usm.maine.edu/orio/new-protocols.

WORKING WITH YOUR COMMITTEE

The working relationship between the student and their committee members is essential to the successful completion of the thesis, but the style of working relationship may vary greatly depending on the personalities and preferences of those involved. Students are strongly encouraged to discuss their expectations for communication and support with their Chair early in the process. Here are some examples of questions to discuss with your committee:

- How often will the student and Chair meet in-person or via Zoom?
- How often will the student and Chair communicate via email or phone, and what is an acceptable time frame for responding to these forms of communication?
- How often and through what formats will the student communicate with other committee members?
- How and when will the student submit drafts of thesis components to the Chair and other committee members?
- How and when will the Chair provide feedback to the student on their submitted work?
- What will the student do if they feel they are not receiving adequate support from their Chair or other committee members?
- What will the Chair do if they are concerned about the student’s progress or professionalism?

If at any point in the thesis process, you feel you are not receiving the agreed upon levels of support and communication from any member of your committee, you are encouraged to address your concerns with that committee member directly. An in-person or virtual meeting is probably the best venue in which to express your concerns and outline your expectations moving forward. If students require additional support, they are encouraged to reach out to their other Thesis Committee members first, rather than School of Social Work administrators or other faculty. In exceptional circumstances, students may need to make changes to the composition of their Committee. This decision should be made jointly with existing Thesis Committee members in consultation with the current School of Social Work Research Committee. The MSW Program Coordinator should then be notified of any changes to Thesis Committee membership.

WRITING THE THESIS

Formatting Guidelines

Most theses follow a standard format that roughly aligns with the sections of a published empirical study in a peer-reviewed journal article.
The elements of all theses and dissertations are commonly presented in the order given below. Collectively, elements 1-7 are referred to as “Front Matter,” number 8 is simply referred to as the “Body” or “Main Text” (which is usually divided into separate chapters) and the remaining elements, 9 and 10, are called “Back Matter.” “REQUIRED” means the section must be included in every thesis or dissertation, optional means the author can elect to exclude that particular section. If an optional section is excluded, omit it entirely and arrange the remaining sections in the order indicated.

Front Matter

1. Title page (REQUIRED--the date must be the month and year in which the student will graduate (the only choices for months are, May, August, or December: Do not number this page.
2. Abstract page which must be double-spaced (REQUIRED—this page is typically numbered Roman numeral ii)
3. Copyright page (optional)
4. Acknowledgments page (optional)
5. Dedication page (optional)
6. Table of Contents (REQUIRED)
7. List of Tables, List of Figures, etc. (optional—only consider if you have one or more of these in the thesis. Use a separate page at the start of each type of list).

Body or Main Text (Suggested Chapters for the Thesis)

   ● Chapter One: Introduction
     ○ Contextual information
     ○ Problem statement
     ○ Definitions of key terms
     ○ Relevance to social work
   ● Chapter Two: Literature Review
   ● Chapter Three: Methods
     ○ Research Design
     ○ Sampling
     ○ Measurement
     ○ Data collection
     ○ Data analysis
     ○ Rigor/trustworthiness
   ● Chapter Four: Results
   ● Chapter Five: Discussion
     ○ Limitations
     ○ Discussion of findings
Implications for future research
Implications for social work practice

Back Matter

9. Bibliography/References/Works Cited, (REQUIRED--however, it is optional here if references are provided at the end of every chapter in the main body of the thesis or dissertation).
10. Appendix (optional).

We recommend using the template available at this link to format your thesis.

USM Graduate School Requirements

The following guidelines are intended to assist students in the preparation of theses, to establish a University-wide consistency of form, and to ensure high standards of quality. Students are responsible for submitting theses that adhere to general University requirements. Students should prepare their manuscripts, including all documentation, in accordance with the APA Manual of Style

Paper Quality. The original copy of the thesis must be on white 8-1/2 x 11 bond paper of at least 20-pound weight containing 25% or more rag content (e.g. Southworth Cotton Business Paper). Submissions printed on standard copy paper will not be accepted.

Typing. All copies of the thesis must be produced with text that is dark enough and clear enough to be easily readable. The thesis must be double-spaced throughout, with the exception of quotations, footnotes, illustrations, bibliographies, and appendices which may be single spaced.

Corrections. The final copy must be clean and neat without visible corrections.

Margins. The margins of the thesis must be at least 1.5 inches from the left edge of the paper and at least one inch from the other three edges, leaving a maximum copy area of 5.75 x 9.

Required/Optional Items and Arrangement of the Thesis. The final copy of the thesis must include certain items; other items are optional. Items should be arranged in the order listed below:

1. Title Page (required)
2. Acknowledgments (optional)
3. Preface (optional)
4. Abstract (required)
5. Table of Contents (required)
6. List of Tables (required)
7. List of Figures (required)
Pagination. A thesis contains two sets of numbers. The preliminary pages (items 1-8 of the thesis) should be numbered consecutively in small Roman numerals. The title page should be considered “i” but should not be numbered. Beginning with the text, all pages must be numbered consecutively in Arabic numerals (items 9-11 of the thesis).

Illustrations and Inserted Material. Graphs, diagrams, photographs, and other material included in a thesis must be on paper that meets the specifications described above.

This link connects to the USM Graduate Student Handbook, which includes many of the formatting suggestions outlined: [Graduate Student Handbook | Graduate Studies](#)

DEFENDING THE THESIS

Upon completion of their project and manuscript, the thesis student will present their work orally at a formal defense meeting. The student typically prepares a presentation of about 20 minutes in length with an accompanying PowerPoint or Google Slides presentation. Thesis defense presentations are open to the entire SSW student body and faculty and are scheduled to include the Chair and all committee members. Students are also welcome to invite community partners, family members, and friends, if they wish. The student should be prepared to respond to comments and questions about their work during this meeting. After the presentation, the Thesis Chair and Committee members make a final assessment of the student’s work.

Upon successful defense of the thesis, the Thesis Committee members will sign the Final Approval Form (Appendix B). Copies of this form should be included in the final copies of the thesis submitted for binding.

SUBMITTING THE COMPLETED THESIS

Copies and Binding. Two copies of the thesis, with all applicable signatures obtained from the student's program/college, must be submitted by the student to the library for binding. All students are required to use the binding service provided through USM's Glickman Library. Students must submit payment for binding services in the form of a check or money order (payable to USM). Binding costs are as follows: first copy, for the USM Library, is free; any additional copies, for the student, $25.00 each. The SSW does not require students to submit a bound copy of their thesis to the School.

Print and complete this content release form to submit with your thesis.
**Electronic Copies.** Students are required to submit an electronic copy (PDF) of their final thesis, once defended, to the Thesis Committee Chair, MSW Program Coordinator, and SSW Administrative Specialist. The thesis will be added to an electronic archive of SSW theses.

**RESOURCES FOR WRITING A SUCCESSFUL THESIS**

**Suggested Books and Articles**


**Suggested Websites**

[10 Ways to Successfully Defend Your PhD](#)

[How to Prepare an Excellent Thesis Defense](#)

[Video: How to Defend Your Thesis](#)
Video: Master’s Thesis Presentation Example

Video: Master’s Thesis Defense Structure
**APPENDIX A:**

**THESIS APPLICATION FORM**

**Student Name:**

**Working Title of Thesis:**

The thesis committee has evaluated the thesis proposal according to the following criteria and determined the proposed project appropriate for a thesis in the School of Social Work.

- Potential scholarly contribution of the proposed study to the social work knowledge base
- Alignment of proposed study with the values, ethics, and aims of the social work profession
- Appropriateness of proposed methods for addressing identified research question
- Scope of proposed project and sophistication of proposed methods
- Feasibility of proposed methods for timely completion
- Quality of written communication

The committee supports the student in their enrollment in SWO 695 Thesis Option.

**Signatures:**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Role</th>
<th>Print Name</th>
<th>Signed Name</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Student</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Committee Chair</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Committee Member</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Committee Member</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

(Form continued on next page)
The Research Committee Chair or other Research Committee representative has reviewed the proposal approved by the Thesis Committee. The proposal is considered appropriate and feasible for completion within the designated time frame:

**Research Committee Chair:** Print Name   Signed Name   Date

The MSW Coordinator has received the approved thesis proposal and the student will be enrolled in SWO 695 Thesis Option:

**MSW Program Coordinator:** Print Name   Signed Name   Date
APPENDIX B

THESIS FINAL APPROVAL FORM

Student Name:

Title of Thesis:

The Thesis Committee members listed below affirm that [Student Name] has successfully completed and defended their thesis entitled [Title of Thesis] in accordance with the requirements of the University of Southern Maine School of Social Work.

Signatures:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Committee Chair: Print Name</th>
<th>Signed Name</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Committee Member: Print Name</th>
<th>Signed Name</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Committee Member: Print Name</th>
<th>Signed Name</th>
<th>Date</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>