

“The Thesis Process”

Notes from Dr. Terri Fine’s presentation
to the GPS on March 5, 2003

The thesis is the point where the most dropouts occur!

But following some simple guidelines can keep that from happening to you.

THE TWO LAWS OF THE THESIS:

Pollock's Law -- the law of available data

You might have a great idea for research, but if the data is not available, you're going to be in trouble. Make sure the data is accessible to you. It is usually best for the thesis to use data that already exists, rather than trying to create new data. Your advisor can help you during this process.

Ladd's Law -- never confuse the following things:

- 1) the MA thesis
- 2) the PhD dissertation
- 3) pre-tenure research
- 4) post-tenure research

A tenured professor might be able to spend 3 years writing a book, but you cannot. The dissertation is going to be 150+ pages of exhaustive research.

Hopefully, your thesis will not be that long. Remember that you are writing a thesis and you want to graduate soon.

THE THESIS PROPOSAL:

UCF requires you to have an approved thesis proposal. The proposal gives you a framework from which to start and ensures you have an appropriate plan and idea before you get 3 months into your research. The proposal can also protect you in case someone on your committee has a change of heart about your topic or methods.

The proposal format is:

- 1) Introduction:** Statement of purpose. What is the central focus of the paper? What historical event(s) occurred that make this topic worthy of investigation? Was this event somehow different from similar circumstances that occurred in the past?
- 2) Literature review:** How have other scholars investigated similar phenomena in the past? What scholars' work will you be using to inform your own research?
- 3) Primary focus of the investigation:** Here, you state what exactly you will examine in your thesis. You will discuss how your proposed focus for investigation fits in with the larger phenomenon introduced in Part 1. A more comprehensive discussion of how examining what you plan to investigate will help us better understand why the

phenomenon occurred (and/or to develop a better understanding of the conditions that might facilitate a similar situation in the future) would follow at this point.

4) Data and methods: A discussion of the data that you plan to analyze. It is critical that you be as specific as possible regarding your data and methods. What data set will you use? When were the data collected? What cases will you be looking at? What variables? Will you be analyzing the works of different theorists?

5) Discuss your primary hypothesis. What questions will you be using your data to answer? What do you expect to find?

6) Conclusions: This paragraph will summarize how your investigation will contribute to emerging/established research and/or policy questions in your proposed (or related) field of study.

Prescribed 1-4 length: 4-5 double spaced pages.

7) Bibliography

THE WRITING PROCESS:

Your relationship with your committee chair is crucial. You must be able to trust your chair and work well together. It is good to have someone who has similar research interests and writing style. If someone agrees to be your chair, assume that he or she wants to help you. Use that person for guidance. Ask questions. Send drafts for review often.

Your committee will have 3 members: a chair and 2 readers. You will communicate with your chair. When your chair is happy with a chapter's draft, the chair will send it to readers. After that, you will get feedback.

DEFENSE:

The defense is simply an opportunity to share what you have learned. The defense is scheduled for 1 hour, but the room is reserved for 90 minutes. You get about 30 minutes to relax in the room. Then, there is 20 to 40 minutes where you share what you learned. After that, there is an opportunity for people to ask you questions. Once the questions are done, you will be sent out of the room, and the committee will discuss your work. The committee will come to 1 of 3 conclusions:

- 1) Your thesis is done.** There may be some minor changes they will suggest, but they will sign-off and approve your thesis.
- 2) There are some changes that need to be made before they will sign-off.**
- 3) There are major revisions needed that will delay your graduation.** This situation is caused by not working closely with your chair. A good relationship with your chair ensures that by the time you get to the defense, any problems have already been addressed.