

What to Expect from a Masters Thesis in Psychology

An Honors Thesis (HONRS 499)

by

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Statement of Purpose (for the Honors College)

This thesis was written to act as a guide for undergraduates in psychology considering pursuing a post-graduate degree in psychology. Graduate students at Ball State were interviewed for information and opinions on the thesis writing process, and this material was consolidated for easy reference. The Graduate Information Resources Office contains mainly information on how to get into graduate school, not what one will go through when one gets there. The author would hope that this thesis will help other students make a more informed choice about continuing their education in psychology. The thesis could also be helpful to first year graduate students who really don't have a good idea of when or how to get started on a graduate thesis. The graduate students interviewed provided good advice on pitfalls to watch for which might be useful to other graduate students as well.

WHY SHOULD YOU READ THIS?

As an undergraduate, you may not know very much specifically about graduate school unless you have close friends involved in a Masters program. This article is a general guideline of what you will likely do when writing a masters thesis in psychology. My hope is that you will be able to get a good idea of the graduate thesis process in psychology before you commit yourself to continue work or study in the field. The thesis is probably the most difficult and time consuming project you will complete during a Masters degree, and knowing what to expect can help you prepare for the task (or avoid the task by changing majors, as the case may be). This guide, however, does have limitations in that it is based on the process at Ball State University, and while that process may be generally translatable to other schools, some of the specifics will surely be different. Keep this in mind when you are looking at graduate schools -- it will be very important to know all of the facilities on each campus which are available to you, as well as general deadlines, faculty makeup, etc.

Be sure that you want to go through the extracurricular rigors of undergraduate work to even get in to good graduate programs in psychology before you start worrying about what goes on with your thesis. Psychology professor Dr. Patricia Keith-Spiegel lectures at least once a year on how to prepare yourself academically to get into graduate schools in psychology, and it would be a good idea to attend one of these lectures as soon as possible. Keith-Spiegel has also published a book -- The Complete Guide to Graduate School

Admission: Psychology and Related Fields (1991) -- which is available in the Psychological Science office for your reference.

CHOOSING A TOPIC

You can start thinking about a general topic area in which you would like to work even before you get to graduate school. Graduate students suggested that once you start graduate work, jot down ideas you hear in class which interest you. Also, read articles to find out what has already been done as well as to generate your own ideas. Pick an idea that you won't hate after working with it for a year or so. It is probably inevitable that you will get sick of seeing your thesis topic, but you must keep plodding on, and it is easier to do that with an interesting topic than one which you did not choose carefully (e.g. according to a professor, not the first idea to come off the top of your head, and not an idea that only your advisor or another professor is interested in).

Before you are absolutely set on a very specific topic, graduate students encouraged that you start talking to faculty with that area of interest. Not only should one of these faculty end up being your advisor, but faculty members often have a better idea of how much research has been done in an area and which areas would be good to avoid. If you have no clue what interests you (or you can't decide what interests you most), consider which faculty you would like to work with and their areas of interest. Once you have

an advisor, use him or her to help you narrow down your topic to something workable. Two grad students recommended that you have a specific idea of what you want to do and how you want to do it by the end of your first year of graduate school. Another encouraged that by June after your first year, you should have a general topic, a potential advisor, and some literature reviewed in order to narrow the topic down to a research question by July.

CHOOSING AN ADVISOR AND COMMITTEE

Your advisor will be the chairperson of a three member committee which reviews and gives final approval on your work. Your advisor will help you pick your committee, so choosing the right advisor is very important. First, the most cut and dried prerequisite is that your thesis topic should be in your advisor's area of research. It is exceedingly important (unless you like constant frustration, dysthymia, or major depression) to pick an advisor with whom you can work. Grad students advised spending the first semester of your first year (longer if you have time) getting to know the faculty, gathering both student and faculty opinions of your potential advisors. If you attend graduate school at the same place you got your undergraduate degree, you have a head start. You may even want to continue working with the person with whom you did undergraduate research. Get to know the department secretary, who not only knows all of the professors, but knows many of the resources which are available to you. He or she can help you find the answer to almost any department- or campus-related question,

and is a valuable person to be friendly with.

In class and in the hallways of the department, observe personality styles and working styles. Decide what is important to you. Working style questions you might want to consider: Do you need a set schedule to get anything done, and if so, will this advisor set one up for you? (One grad student suggested that it would look better to set your own schedule and have an advisor review it to see if it is plausible.) Will this faculty member push you to do good work, and how much do you want to be pushed? Will the working relationship be casual or very formal? Personality style questions to consider: Can you put up with a personality which clashes with your own style if this faculty member will get the best work out of you? Or will you do your best when you are happy with the person with whom you are working? Do you need to be treated in a certain way to work effectively (e.g. do you respond negatively to authoritarian figures or do these people make you work)? An advisor with whom you do not get along will add a great deal of stress to an already stressful time in your life, and you must decide if you want to deal with this. One graduate student did mention that at places like Ball State, with its limited faculty, you may end up having to work with an advisor with whom you are not compatible anyway. This is something to consider when choosing a graduate school.

Once you have chosen an advisor, you can collaborate with him or her to choose your committee members. Your committee members do not have to be from your department, but they should be in some way

related to your area of research. According to some graduate students, your advisor may develop a list of possible committee members from which the two of you can decide with whom you cannot work and with whom you would most like to work. Again, use faculty and student information on potential committee members to help you make your final decision. All of the faculty members on the committee should be able to work together, so your second committee member may be involved in the choice of the third.

CLINICAL VERSUS NON-CLINICAL PROGRAMS

As far as the thesis goes, there is not much difference between clinical and non-clinical programs. Clinical students are not restricted to research of psychopathology, while non-clinical students may study psychopathology if it interests them. Research basically comes down to your area of interest, regardless of your area of specialization.

THE PROPOSAL

The literature review is where your research starts. Depending on your topic and how much work has been done in the area, your lit review, which is essentially the introduction part of the paper, can be based on as few as 20 articles to as many as 100 or more. Graduate students advise you to get started on your lit review the summer before or the first semester of your second year. One recommended that you try to have it finished by the end of the summer. A good goal (although maybe not a likely goal) to

have is your proposal and Institutional Review Board (IRB) materials done and approved by winter break of your second year. This way, you can start running subjects when you come back spring semester. At Ball State, you can pick up a packet at the graduate school office on guidelines for writing a thesis which includes margin requirements, font requirements, and other technical information. If you plan on going to a different graduate school, check to see if one of these packets with specific school guidelines is available. Contained in the proposal are the lit review, hypotheses, proposed method, proposed statistical analyses, predicted results, and instruments that you will use in your research, e.g. questionnaires. You will choose all of the questionnaires yourself, as well as decide how to code information into the computer -- your advisor only approves or rejects your choices. Your advisor edits your writing as you develop the lit review, proposed method and results, and when both you and the advisor are satisfied with the work, you set up a meeting with the committee. A grad student stressed that your advisor will not be infallible and may miss some important things, so you might want to try to get a second and third opinion as well. This will hopefully be your final copy of the thesis introduction and method (except changing from future to past tense), so the proposal should be a good, solid, detailed, finished piece of work. This is not a rough draft. The committee must have copies of your proposal for a period of time before the meeting (two weeks is the required period at Ball State, but more might be better). Depending on how busy

your committee members are, setting up the meeting to fit into all four of your schedules may be a huge pain, so give yourself some extra time to get things set up and worked out. One graduate student was set a month behind schedule trying to coordinate a meeting, and she suggested that you may want to give your committee a deadline to be ready by in order to avoid this problem.

THE PROPOSAL MEETING

When you meet with your committee, you will give a presentation on your proposal, after which the committee will ask you questions and mention concerns which they think you have not covered over the lit review and proposed method. A professor suggested that you ask committee members for comments after you have given them a copy of the proposal but before the meeting, while one grad student recommended meeting with committee members several times before the proposal meeting so that there are no surprises. This way, with the help of your advisor you can correct potential problems before the actual meeting begins. Two graduate students with very different advisors related that how this meeting proceeds will depend on the styles and personalities of your committee members. The meeting may be very formal during which your advisor offers no help except to clarify questions and field the questions which he or she may think are unfair, or the meeting might be very informal, during which the committee members explain misunderstandings to each other and your advisor helps you with the questions. When the meeting is over, the committee will

tell you which areas of the proposal need to be rewritten before approval is given, which you rewrite and resubmit until you get approval. One grad student advised that you keep track of comments and concerns during the meeting, and then type these up and send them to the committee to make sure that there are no misunderstandings while you still have time to fix things. Also, another grad student advised that you make your changes carefully so that you do not drop anything essential with sections which your committee asks you to delete.

THE IRB

Officially, you should have your proposal approved before you submit to the IRB. This way, if your committee wants you to change anything, you don't have to resubmit to the IRB. However, grad students encourage you to have your materials written and collected for IRB approval while your proposal is still in limbo so as soon as you get approval from the committee the IRB packet can go in. The IRB will provide you with a packet describing what is needed -- usually a brief form of the lit review, proposed method, all of the materials that subjects will be exposed to, risks and benefits to subjects, etc. The IRB is very, very picky, so grad students say it would be a good idea to have one or two faculty members go over your packet before you submit it because the IRB does not approve packets pending changes. The packets must be resubmitted and go through the entire process again. At Ball State, the IRB meets once a week, and if there are no problems the packet will be

approved in about two weeks. An example of how picky the IRB is: they sent back a proposal because it did not have the investigator's phone number on it for students to contact her. This was the only problem with the proposal.

GRANTS

Depending on the kind of work you are doing, you may need money to get materials, prize packages, transportation, facilities, etc. You can apply for grants through the university, government, and professional organizations to help you with these costs. A grant proposal will be similar to the IRB proposal and will differ with each grant source. If you don't know where to apply for grants, ask the departmental secretary, who is the person I asked so that I could tell you where to apply for grants. Ball State's Office of Academic Research and Sponsored Programs publishes a monthly pamphlet which lists opportunities for external grants (those grants funded from organizations outside the university). If you were seeking an internal grant -- a grant funded by the university -- you would apply to this office. You may not be able to get a grant, so always have a backup plan for how to get the money that you need.

RUNNING SUBJECTS

If you've done research as an undergraduate, you know how frustrating running subjects can be. Rarely do all that sign up show up, and rarely do as many sign up as you think will. The

number of subjects you need will depend on the design of your study and what kind of statistical analysis you plan to do. Obviously if you are doing interviews you will have fewer subjects than if you are running 50 subjects at a time through a multiple choice questionnaire. As with everything, start as early as possible just in case something horrible goes wrong (e.g. no one signs up for your study). It is a good idea to have everything approved so that you can start running subjects at the start of a semester (and not during the summer if you ever want to get enough subjects), because there are surges of students at the very beginning of the semester and surges of procrastinators at the very end of the semester. Often there will be small surges throughout the semester right after tests or right after research credit hours have been posted. A grad student studying psychopathology remarked that the surge of students at the end of the semester is an unusual population, and this is something you might want to consider with your advisor when you decide at what time in the semester to run subjects. Since this student was doing research on schizophrenia, she wanted a psychologically "abnormal" population, but you might not. You may want to avoid multi-phase testing with freshman research credit subjects, because as with all multi-phase studies, subject mortality will be a problem. Also, be aware of the limitations of your population. College freshmen are not a random population, nor are volunteers or people who get paid or people who answer mail surveys... You get the idea. One helpful little hint if you haven't done research before: put up signs that will direct

students to your room. Remember, these are usually freshmen, and even seniors who spend most of their time in other buildings have been known to get lost in the 50 year human frustration-aggression experiment we call North Quad.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

When you decide what research questions you would like to answer, you might want to consider what kind of statistical analysis you will have to do to answer those questions, recommended a grad student whose statistical analysis required graphs, figures, explanations, and practically half of the math department at MIT to figure out. No matter how interesting your results might be if you answer that fascinating question, you may regret asking when you have to bring in an army of statistical specialists to help you figure out how to program your analysis into a computer. A good rule to go by: if no one in the department has even heard of the statistical test you want to perform, or if you mention it and they get really big eyes and say, "You're going to do what?!" you might want to change your research to something more reasonable.

When all your subjects have been run and all of your data is in, you can start your data analysis. There are several statistical programs available on the VAX system, IBM mainframe, and professors' office computers at Ball State (SPSS, SAS, BMDP) which you can use. One professor familiar with all of the programs recommended that you use the one with which you (or your advisor) are most familiar since all can perform about the same amount of

tests. Another professor suggested that to save time, you can start coding and entering data before all of your subjects have been run. Your advisor might help you figure out what kind of tests to run, particularly if you need to use an unusual or obscure test. Statistical experts in the math or computer departments might also be able to help you with difficult tests that the basic statistics programs cannot run. A grad student stated that you can expect to take up to a semester to calculate results and write the results and discussion section of your thesis. This does not include the time it will take to run subjects.

Similar to the process for the proposal, your advisor will edit your results and discussion as you write them. When both you and your advisor find the thesis acceptable, you must set up a time for the final defense.

THE FINAL DEFENSE

This is the culmination of your entire thesis. The committee members get copies of your thesis to review for a period of time before the meeting. Again, it would be a good idea to ask your committee to indicate problems to you before the defense meeting. You sit in a room with your committee, present the entire thesis to them, and then you get the third degree from the committee, e.g. what do your findings mean, questions about your data analysis and results, questions about your topic and those tangential topics which might be important, etc. One professor suggested that the

committee basically wants to know that you really know and understand your thesis topic and didn't just do 50 pages of quote and cite writing. This is similar to the proposal meeting except the whole thesis is under the gun. Again, depending on the personalities and styles of your committee members, the defense may be formal or informal. However, it will most likely be more formal and in depth than the proposal meeting.

You will want to be aware of the deadlines for theses to graduate. The deadline for spring graduation at Ball State is in early April, which means that the thesis must be finished, defended, and approved by the deadline. This is not likely if you start running subjects at the beginning of the second semester of your second year. According to grad students, the final thesis will probably be between 50 and 100 pages depending on how long your lit review was, how complicated the method and results are, and how much you have to explain in your discussion. A professor suggested that you ask for copies of old theses to get an idea of what the finished project will look like. It will probably take you at least one full year of work from the beginning of your lit review to the final thesis defense. All of the graduate students warned that your thesis will always take longer than you think.

WORDS OF WISDOM FROM ALL-KNOWING GRADUATE STUDENTS

Some second year grad students added a few other things you might want to know. If you want to go on in psychology, remember with a huge project like a thesis procrastination can kill you.

You might want to set a schedule for yourself and have your advisor back that up with a schedule of his or her own. Also, allow yourself a few more weeks than you think it will actually take so if something goes wrong, not everything falls apart. In any event, think ahead to eliminate as many problems as possible and get as many things done simultaneously as possible. For example, if the IRB and your grant proposal include similar items, do them at the same time, and have IRB packets ready to go before proposal approval so only minor changes need to be made. Dedication and tenacity are important ingredients for actually getting around to doing and then finishing a thesis. Once it's done, and you have received a Masters in general or clinical psychology, you will choose whether to continue your education or try to find a job.

SO WHAT CAN YOU DO WITH A MASTERS IN PSYCHOLOGY?

The answer used to be not much, but with the advent of managed care, and group homes and places like the Youth Opportunity Center, those with Masters in clinical or counseling psychology can work as behavioral clinicians (counseling less difficult problems). Since Masters graduates can be paid less than those with PhDs, they are becoming more popular with HMOs and social services. You can also work as a school guidance counselor. In a few states, you might be able to be certified as a practicing psychologist. With a Masters in general psychology, you might be able to work in business in something like marketing research or personnel. Psychology is useful in and transferrable to many fields, so you may be able to

find something that isn't specifically in your degree. An article in the Psi Chi Newsletter (1996) also suggested grant writing, research, advertising, management, and various other careers which use not necessarily psychology, but what one learns how to do when majoring in psychology. Many students, however, decide to continue their education in psychology rather than enter the workforce with a Masters degree. Six of 10 second year students at Ball State in 1996 went on to PhD programs in psychology (clinical, counseling, educational, and industrial) and one to law school; however, the other three plan to go on to more post-graduate school after a short break.

If you are seriously considering graduate school in psychology, make an informed choice by learning as much as possible now. Ball State has many resources available through the Psychological Science office and Graduate Information Resources Office (G9). You can also talk to graduate students, your favorite professors, or possibly senior psychology majors planning on continuing in psychology. These people can give you advice not only on how to prepare academically and professionally for graduate school, but how and when to start filling out applications, searching for schools, etc. Good luck.

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