

Thesis Writing Guidelines

By Dr. Katie Foss (updated Sept. 21, 2018)

What is a Thesis Proposal?

The thesis proposal is your first step toward finishing your thesis. It should give your committee an overview of what you intend to do, supported by the justification, background, literature review, and theoretical framework for your proposed study. It is not a “preview” of your findings/results.

Proposal Components (*note: these may vary a bit by project & thesis chair)

1. Introduction
2. Statement of purpose
3. Justification for the study
4. Background for the study
5. Literature Review
6. Theoretical Framework
7. Method
 1. Research Questions or Hypotheses
 2. Methodology
 3. Sample
 4. Operationalization (how you will conduct the research)

How to Finish

“Dr. Foss, I would like to finish this semester.”

I love to read or hear this statement. But how does one finish? More importantly, does the person making this declaration understand what finishing entails.

The general process for writing your master’s thesis:

1. Brainstorm a few projects that suit your interests, strengths, and program. Meet with your adviser and identify the project.
2. Develop a statement of purpose and an outline of the project.
3. Ask faculty to serve on your committee.
4. Work on the proposal, making sure that you and your adviser are on the same page.
5. Submit the IRB paperwork, if applicable.
6. Send a draft of your proposal to your thesis chair/adviser.
7. While you are waiting for feedback, work on other aspects of the thesis (i.e. setting up your study or gathering materials).
8. When you receive feedback, revise accordingly, addressing every comment and suggestion. You will very likely have several rounds of revision.
9. Defend your proposal.
10. Conduct your primary research and write up your analysis.

11. Send the findings/results and discussion to your thesis chair.
12. While you wait for feedback, revise the first half of the thesis.
13. When you receive feedback, revise, revise, revise—addressing every change. Repeat the revision cycle as needed.
14. With your chair and committee, set up the defense.
15. Defend your thesis. Bring copies of the signature form.
16. Revise the thesis per the committee’s suggestions.
17. Submit your thesis to Graduate Studies, following all of the university guidelines.

The Introduction: How do I start this thing?

Writing the introduction to your thesis can feel difficult. You want to grab the reader’s attention, set up your big question or driving purpose, and sound academic all at the same time. You want to give enough info about your topic without giving everything away. So how do you do it?

I recommend writing the introduction after you’ve shaped the other parts of the proposal. You’ll have a better grasp on the literature and understand how your project fits in. It will also seem less daunting.

Some Approaches for the Introduction

I will use media representations of breastfeeding as the sample topic to show different approaches.

- An event related to your thesis topic or that spurred the inspiration for your topic *“In 2012, hundreds of mothers gathered on the lawn of Capitol Hill for the Great Nurse-In, a rally to celebrate breastfeeding.”*
- Legislation that dramatically impacts your thesis topic.

“A mother’s right to breastfeed in public is protected by law in 49 states.”

- Statistics about your thesis topic.

“Although 81.1% of U.S. women attempt to breastfeed, only 44.4% are exclusively nursing at three months.”

- An example from news or entertainment on your topic—USE THIS SPARINGLY IF YOUR THESIS ANALYZES MEDIA (more below).

“In the Game of Thrones episode “The Wolf and the Lion,” Lady Lysa Arryn openly nurses her school-age son, a groundbreaking moment due to the visual aesthetics and child’s age.”

Avoid These Pitfalls

- Using cheesy generalized expressions

“Since the dawn of time, women have been breastfeeding.”

- Writing your introduction like an abstract

“This study explores media representations of breastfeeding”—You will make a statement like this, but not yet. Introduce your topic first.

- Describing your stream of consciousness and/or writing informally

“When I think of breastfeeding in the media, I wonder. . . .”

- Using media examples from your primary sources—i.e. for a study on TV’s representations of breastfeeding, I would not start the thesis with the *Game of Thrones* reference above.
- Taking too much space to get to your statement of purpose. The introduction should be concise and used as a stepping stone to the heart of your thesis.

It’s fine to try out a few approaches. When I wrote my dissertation, I had several files with different openings. Remember, your introduction can change as you move from the proposal to the thesis.

Good luck!

From the Intro to the Statement of Purpose: Making the Transition

Okay, so you’ve done your introduction. Check. The next step is to segue into your project. You need a transition here. You can’t just go, “Big overview. MY PROJECT.”

So how do you create the bridge between the introduction and the statement of purpose? As discussed in my last post, your introduction broadly sets up your topic. Within 1-1.5 pages, you need to get to your project. In other words, this is not the place for pages of background. Start with the problem/statistics/event/anecdote (rarely) for the introduction and then move to your study using 1-2 sentences to set up the gap in the literature. For a study related to media, this transitional part likely brings in media.

Here’s an outline using breastfeeding in media as the sample topic:

- I. Case of woman being ridiculed for breastfeeding in public (as posted on *Facebook*)
- II. Breastfeeding is protected by law
- III. Gap between legal protection and public support—likely influenced by negative media representations
- IV. Statement of purpose about exploring media’s influence on perceptions of public breastfeeding

Notice how the sections flow to each other and set up the current study? All of this is on page one (and backed by scholarly literature, of course :)).

Remember that you need to quickly and clearly established what you are doing and why.

What’s the Plan, Stan? The Statement of Purpose

While this part is about the third section in the thesis/thesis proposal, writing your purpose statement should be job #1 in your overall process. You can't write a proposal (well) without a clear statement of purpose.

As one of my wonderful dissertation advisers taught me, every project has both a conceptual question and an operational question. The big picture concept and the feasible one that can be actually addressed within the confines of your project. You should identify both of these before you start writing your thesis.

So what do I mean? My conceptual question could be "How do media portray breastfeeding?" This is a huge umbrella of a question and good for the overarching concept. However, if I use this question as my statement of purpose ("This study examines how media portray breastfeeding") is far too vague. I've given my reader almost no information about my actual study. This is not laying out a feasible study since I can't study all portrayals of breastfeeding to ever exist in media.

Insert the operational question, a practical framework for the actual study I will conduct. For example, one operational question could be "How does prime-time fictional television portray breastfeeding?" Rewritten as my statement of purpose, it becomes "This study examines breastfeeding portrayals in prime-time fictional television, 1970–2011" (I did this study).

For your statement of purpose, be clear and specific about what you are doing. It should give readers an idea of the time-frame, sample, medium, and type of study (i.e. textual analysis, audience reception, experiment, you get the picture). Keep your statement to a statement. This is not the place to give us a thorough history of your sample or a lengthy explanation of how important your study is.

If you feel confused about the statement of purpose, it can help to talk to a friend about your thesis topic. What would you say? Keep in mind that your friend likely isn't interested in a 15 minute overview of hegemony or a full report of a Pew Research study. You will get to talk about literature, background, and theory. . . .just not yet.

Writing the Literature Review

A good literature review establishes a good foundation and sets up the reader for your study. It should not read like a jumbled mess, but as a linear path, with each addition serving a purpose.

How should you get started? Before writing a word of your proposal, you likely did some reading on the topic, took some notes, and began building your knowledge base in this area. [Google Scholar](#) is a good starting point for any project. Type in your topic.

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"That's Not a Beer Bong, It's a Breast Pump!" Representations of Breastfeeding in Prime-Time Fictional Television
KA Foss - Health communication, 2013 - Taylor & Francis
Breastfeeding has been recognized as one of the key determinant in one's future health. Yet although most people are aware of the benefits, many women do not breastfeed their babies past the first few months. These low rates can be partially explained by negative cultural
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Breastfeeding: Population-based perspectives
MH Labbok - Pediatric Clinics, 2013 - pediatric.theclinics.com
Optimal infant feeding is defined as exclusive breastfeeding for 6 months, followed by continued breastfeeding with age-appropriate complementary feeding for at least 1 year 1 or up to 2 years or longer. 2 Immediate postpartum skin-to-skin contact with early initiation is
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Using an equity lens in the implementation of interventions to protect, promote, and support optimal breastfeeding practices
G Zamora, CK Lutter... - Journal of Human ..., 2015 - journals.sagepub.com
22 Journal of Human Lactation 31 (1) action are considered health inequities, which relate both to the inequalities in health determinants and also to the equitable access to the interventions and programs needed to improve and maintain health or health outcomes,
☆ Cited by 8 Related articles All 6 versions

[book] Nighttime breastfeeding: an American cultural dilemma
C Tomori - 2014 - books.google.com
Nighttime for many new parents in the United States is fraught with the intense challenges of learning to breastfeed and helping their babies sleep so they can get rest themselves. Through careful ethnographic study of the dilemmas raised by nighttime breastfeeding, and
☆ Cited by 7 Related articles All 2 versions

Development of environmentally friendly messages to promote longer durations of breastfeeding for already breastfeeding mothers
AE Hamilton - Health communication, 2015 - Taylor & Francis
Durations of breastfeeding activity in the United States fall short of established recommendations by leading public health institutions. In response to this problem, this study sought to develop environmentally friendly messages to promote continued
☆ Cited by 4 Related articles All 3 versions

leading you to more articles, and so forth.

Once you have gathered relevant literature for your thesis proposal, it's time to put it together. If you are writing your thesis in a media-related discipline, you likely have existing studies (or secondary literature) that addresses content and studies that examine media effects. My advice is

to organize the literature in these broad areas with subcategories within. I recommend putting the content section first so you've laid out what the representations are before moving to how they might affect people.

Begin with a topic sentence and then use your words to weave your literature together. What I mean here is that you don't just want a grocery list of quotes. You are steering this ship.

Tips for Writing the Literature Review

- Begin every paragraph with a topic sentence before jumping to the next citation.
- Be mindful of chronology in the literature. If a study is 30 years old, you need to recognize its age.
- Let your words move along the thesis, telling us how secondary literature sets up your study. You are steering the ship. It should not look like this:
"Johnson found that "BIG QUOTE." Anderson also said "BIG QUOTE," which was illustrated by Newton "BIG QUOTE." We should know why each of these authors are worthy of inclusion in your literature review (Hint: it's not to fill space).
- Don't write so many details about a study that we forget your purpose and your study.
- Don't cite anything you haven't read. Use [Interlibrary Loan](#) and other resources to access the full article and book.
- Always cite **the original source**. Seek it out, read it, then cite it.
- Be selective of what you include in your literature review. Every citation should serve a purpose.

Conclude your literature review by establishing the gap in literature and how your study addresses that gap. Remember, this section sets up the foundation for your primary study!

The Method of Writing the Method

Like other parts of your thesis, there are different ways to approach your Method section. Obviously, studies can be qualitative, quantitative, or mixed-methods. While I will focus on the qualitative side here, for all approaches, you must effectively communicate to your audience what you are aiming to discover, what you will examine for the study and how you will examine it.

Structure of this section:

- I. Research Questions
- II. Methodology
- III. Sample
- IV. How you will conduct the research (operationalization)

Research Questions

These are the big conceptual questions that guide your study (and not super detailed questions that help you in your analysis).

Good example of a conceptual question: How is gender constructed in prime-time television programs of the 1990s? (a nice broad question)

Poor example: What does the dialogue between Chandler and Monica tell us about gender in the 1990s? (not broad–this is an operational question)

Methodology

Which specific methodology will you use (i.e. *focus groups, interviews, narrative analysis, discourse analysis, Critical Discourse Analysis, framing analysis, semiotic analysis*)? Using sources, lay out the methodology, defining key terms and applications. Make sure you clearly convey why this methodology is appropriate for your study.

The Sample

Here's where you explain specifically what you will examine to explore your research questions. For audience studies, identify how you recruited, the demographics of your group, and other details. With textual studies, specify exactly what text you will analyze (i.e. the pilot episodes of seven situation comedies that originally aired in prime-time in the years 1994-1997–NAMING THE SHOWS). You should be so specific that other researchers could easily locate your sample.

In this section, give a brief overview of the text, explaining why you included it, at the same time, explaining why you didn't go another route. Keep your synopsis of your texts somewhat brief. In your Findings section, you can add details of characters as needed. To justify your sample, you may incorporate ratings and awards to justify your choice. . . KEEP IT SHORT THOUGH.

How you will conduct the research (operationalization)

This is the place for the nuts and bolts of your research process, the map, if you will, of what you are doing. For audience research, outline how you will conduct the research (what you will specifically do for the interviews or focus groups, including incentives and the list of questions). For text, describe all of the operationalized questions that allow you to answer your research questions. Depending on the type of text, you might include details about aesthetics, language, dialogue, musical score, character relationships, clothing, text, images, camera shots, lighting, position, setting and other components that make up a narrative. You may use secondary literature to set up what you will investigate for your analysis. For example, in looking at constructions of Roma (“gypsies”) in television, my co-author, Dr. Adina Schneeweis and I brought in studies on stereotypes of Roma in our operational section to explain why clothing and certain costumes were indicative of negative stereotyping. See [Schneeweis. Foss. Representations of Roma](#) for our journal article on this study.

As I stated earlier, this section guides the reader into your analysis.

Defending the Proposal

After you've gone through a few rounds of revision with your adviser (or perhaps more than a few rounds), you'll reach that glorious moment in which you are ready to defend your proposal. You will send your proposal to the rest of your committee and figure out a date for the meeting (warning: this part may seem as difficult as writing the proposal :)).

The proposal defense is often the first time that the committee gets together with you to discuss your work. Take this seriously, but try not to be too nervous. This team is here to support you and guide you toward your ultimate goal: a finished thesis and graduation.

So what happens at the proposal defense? After a bit of small talk and introductions (as needed), you give a short overview of your project, touching on each of the main areas of the proposal (introduction, statement of purpose, justification, background (as needed), literature review, theoretical framework, and method). From this presentation, your committee should have a clear idea of your research questions, how you plan to pursue them, and how your project fits with the existing literature.

Following the presentation, your committee members will ask questions and offer feedback. Make sure you write down their advice. With that, the defense will be over and you move into a new stage—WRITING THE THESIS. You know know that even with the finished proposal defense, you will revise the first part of the thesis as you venture into Findings land. That said, CONGRATS on making it through part 1!

Halfway There—Writing the Findings

Success is perseverance. One step at a time. Never giving up. Whatever cliché gets you by. The most productive people I know are the ones who keep going.

Mini pep talk completed, now back to the *how* part of this blog. Once you pass your proposal defense, you'll conduct your research. Since this step is very specific to the individual project, I will defer to your adviser on the specifics of doing the analysis. My general advice is to set and meet your deadlines, be organized, and don't cut corners.

I will also stick to an overview for how to write the Findings/Results section.

Five Tips for Writing the Findings/Results

1. Organize this part according to your research questions and methodology, incorporating appropriate terminology.
2. Start with an introductory paragraph setting up the section.
3. Use headers and subheads to guide the readers.
4. Your voice and words should lead the way, not your examples. Avoid the “river of tangents” in which you get so far from your RQs that readers forget the topic.
5. Be specific in your examples, while focusing on relevant detail.

What's in a Discussion (and what's not)

The Discussion section is where you contextualize, explain, and give purpose to your findings/results. It is here that you tell readers why the signs/signifiers/discourses/themes/frames (etc.) matter. To begin structuring your Discussion, start with a bulleted list of your findings/results. So if your first finding was “breastfeeding is depicted as a private activity,” then your first discussion point should analyze why breastfeeding was depicted as a private activity

and why, bringing in existing literature to support your findings and the implications. Every theme and point should have an explanation.

Once you've outlined your discussion points, write up the section in essay form, again, relating your analysis to the secondary literature on your topic. Do not introduce new ideas in this section. Rather, use the existing research to expand upon and explain your findings.

Limitations and Implications for Further Research

Ah, the limitations. A downtrodden view is that this is the part of the thesis in which you firmly state what your work does not accomplish. Or, framed in a more positive way, this section lays out what is beyond the scope of your paper. *It is fine, normal, and reasonable that you have limitations. All studies have limitations. Having a limitations section just means that you are aware that you couldn't do everything in your one studies.*

How do you write the limitations? First, clearly remind the readers what you did do—in terms of scope, method, sample, timeframe, and other relevant information. Next, take the reader through different ways to approach your same topic.

So if you did a content analysis of educational video games, you would acknowledge that you used a quantitative method of a particular type of text. You did not do qualitative research, audience studies, or analyze other video game genres.

This brings me to the next part of this section. The more uplifting portion in which you outline possibilities for extending your current work. This is good. You want your study to set up further studies on the same time. For the video game example, you might write “Further research could analyze the educational video games using qualitative analysis. In addition to educational video games, role-playing games may provide insight into [phenomenon studied]. Studies could also explore how various audiences interpret the textual messages in the games. Such reception research is important to understanding how messages in video games are encoded and decoded.”

Layout a few different paths, but no need to go overboard.

Well done so far! You are almost there.

Approaching the Finish Line: The Conclusion

Conclusions are often rushed. Regarded as an afterthought, as an “almost there” to the extent to which they lack one's best effort. Most students I have had err on the side of the too-short Conclusion, screaming “I want to be DONE!!!!”

Here's the deal: the Conclusion matters. Just like you need a solid introduction, you also need to finish strong.

What's the difference between the Discussion and the Conclusion sections? It's the difference between focusing on individual trees and looking at the forest as a whole. In other words, your Discussion goes point by point through your findings, elaborating and contextualizing your

results. The Conclusion is where you examine the big picture, the implications, the so what of your study.

Your approach depends on your topic and statement of purpose. Here are some of the common approaches:

Connecting to the Larger Problem

This approach circles back to your introduction, in which you laid out a specific problem that needs to be resolved. It might be social, economic, environmental, institutional or all of the above. Here, you would situate your findings and discussion, telling readers how your study (a small slice of the pie) relates to the larger pie as a whole. With studies on representations of breastfeeding, this approach would tie together the findings (that breastfeeding has been normalized in a limited way) to the greater problem (that breastfeeding rates vary greatly based on race, geographic region, and other factors). Of course, this approach does not work for all studies.

The Prescriptive Approach

Similar to the “Larger Problem” approach, this one takes an additional step and ends with a “Call to Action,” demanding change and specifying ways in which that change could occur. With breastfeeding, a prescriptive approach would be incorporate detailed actions that media could take to normalize breastfeeding (i.e. diversifying representations to include more breastfeeding mothers of color). Such prescriptive actions could address multiple levels of needed change, across individual, community, and institutions.

The Reflective Approach

For this approach, the writer ponders the findings, as situated in the existing literature and historical context, and seeks to make sense of them. Why these findings at this moment for this text or this group of people? As opposed to the Discussion section, though, a reflective Conclusion would aim to explain the Findings as an overall, macro, or bird’s eye view—telling us the place in history or in a cultural moment.

Of course, there are certainly other ways to approach your Conclusion. The main point here is that you should address the big picture, not introduce new findings, and stay on topic. Your adviser will help guide you through writing this section.

Revision Land

You thought the post after the Conclusion would be on the defense, didn’t you? Ha! Sorry for the disappointment, but you don’t just get to jump from the draft to the finish line. Don’t get me wrong—it is an accomplishment to complete the first full thesis manuscript. Some people never make it to this stage. That said, you have rounds of revision to undergo before your thesis is ready for the defense.

Hopefully, you’ve been in close communication with your thesis adviser this whole time and you’ve already revised the first half of the thesis based on feedback from the proposal defense. If not, do that first. And if your adviser has critiqued other sections, make sure you’ve corrected

those as well (I prefer to look at a draft of the Findings section by itself). Once all feedback has been addressed, it's time to send your first full draft to your adviser.

Give your adviser 1-2 weeks to read the draft. We are busy people and we care about our students so we need the time to read it and give you feedback. It's fine to check up on your adviser after about a week if you haven't heard anything. This email should be more to the tune of "Hi Dr. _____, just making sure you've received my thesis. Thanks!" and definitely not "S'up, First Name, why haven't you read my thesis yet?"

When you receive your thesis feedback, brace yourself. Criticism is not easy for anyone.

Some points to keep in mind about your revisions

- Take a deep breath. If you need to just glance at the feedback briefly and then come back later to do the work, that's fine.
- Recognize that everyone has to do revisions. The more revising you do now, the more smoothly the defense will go.
- If your thesis isn't as marked up as expected, it may be because your adviser wants you to focus on particular changes for this round and save more detailed changes for later (i.e. if your adviser spots some organizational issues, it makes sense to have you fix the structure of the thesis before highlighting grammatical problems).
- Address every note, question, and mark-up from your adviser (and your committee). Your revised draft should not include any of the issues from the last round of revision. If you don't understand something, ask!
- I will say it again, revise everything! Nothing is more frustrating than rereading a thesis with the same issues that I commented on in a previous draft. It feels like the student doesn't care and doesn't value my time.
- Revise everything your committee members suggest. You also don't want your committee thinking that you don't care and that you don't value their time.
- Visit the Writing Center on campus. The folks there can help you with your writing and give you support.
- Push through and complete the revisions! You can do it!
- Don't be surprised if there are more revisions. Most students go through multiple rounds with their adviser before the thesis moves to the committee.

Thesis Defense: The Final Frontier

You're almost there! One step at a time.

Your thesis adviser makes the call about when your defense will be. You should communicate the timeline, but don't demand that it's time to defend. To graduate in a particular semester at MTSU, you must defend by about mid-way through the semester (October for Fall and March for Spring graduations). With these tight deadlines, it's best to plan to defend your thesis proposal in the semester before you intend to graduate. Doing so will set you up to have a draft of your full thesis by the first month or so of the semester, building in time for revisions and for your adviser to read and provide feedback. It also accounts for time to meet with committee members and get their feedback on sections relating to their expertise.

After rounds of revision, you will reach that blessed moment in which your adviser gives the greenlight for the defense. Go over your thesis one more time, making sure that you are adhering to all of the university's guidelines—pagination, margins, etc. Be diligent in this task. Don't rush through or assume you did things right. Now is the time to check the formatting.

At this point, you and your adviser will have the arduous task of arranging an hour in which the whole committee can meet and a conference room is available. I believe that scheduling the thesis is almost as much of an accomplishment than finishing the first draft.

With the thesis defense scheduled, you can begin your preparation. I recommend meeting with your adviser for a pep talk and further guidance. You should also read your thesis and create a PowerPoint presentation to deliver at the defense. Plan to present for about 12-15 minutes.

Tips for your presentation

- Limit the text on each slide.
- Don't add annoying animations or other distractions (i.e. weird font colors, hard-to-read font, sound effects).
- Incorporate relevant images. If you studied a TV show, I want to see images of that show in your presentation.
- Follow the thesis structure to set up your presentation, keeping in mind that the second half of the thesis is your contribution to the field (in other words, don't spend more than a few minutes setting up your study).
- Back up your presentation and store in multiple places. Don't assume the WiFi will be working.
- Remember, you are the expert on your topic. That said, don't talk down to your committee.
- Practice, practice, practice!

For your actual defense, get dressed up. It's not a Black Tie affair, but we should be able to tell that you tried and that you care. You spent 2+ years getting to this moment. It is a big deal. Bring **copies of the thesis signature page** to the defense.

GOOD LUCK!