

A Practical Guide to the Master of Social Work Plan A/Thesis

Students may complete a Master's thesis, also referred to as a Plan A. This requires completion of an original research project and should be undertaken in direct consultation with and full support from the student's Advisor/Committee Chair.

Brief Overview: Establish a research committee, write a research proposal, defend the proposal, seek IRB approval, conduct the research, write your thesis, defend your thesis, revise as needed, and then submit everything!

More Thorough Overview:

1. Register for SOWK 5960 (Plan A Thesis) for both Fall and Spring semesters of their final year.

- Students completing a thesis will enroll in two credits of SOWK 5960 each semester of their final year (four credits total).
- Course sections for Plan A are associated with the Committee Chair's name.

2. As you enter the advanced year (2nd year of the MSW program), you will establish a Research Advisory Committee.

- You will need to speak with and gain the acceptance and approval of the faculty member with whom you are interested in working to chair the committee.
 - Be prepared with a general idea of what you would like to study for your thesis.
 - Visit the Faculty Directory to assess professors' specialties:

<http://www.uwyo.edu/socialwork/faculty-staff/faculty-experts/>

- The faculty member then becomes the instructor for the course, the academic advisor, the research advisor, and the chair for your Research Advisory Committee.
- Using the Committee Chair as a resource, select at least two other committee members:
 - At least one Social Work faculty member (inside member).
 - At least one faculty member from outside the Division. If your faculty advisor does not have recommendations:
 - Visit the websites of relevant departments (e.g. Sociology, Statistics).
 - Send an email to the general email address or the Administrative Assistant of the department.
 - Explain that you are writing a thesis and are in need of an outside member, include information about your proposal idea, and ask if your email could be sent to faculty who may be interested.
 - You will likely need to meet with the outside member before she or he agrees to be a committee member. Your Committee Chair may want to attend the meeting with you. Be prepared to give a brief proposal and explain how her or his background knowledge will be helpful in your research process.
 - After confirming acceptance of appointment by committee members, complete and submit the Committee Assignment/Change form to the Division's Office Manager to obtain approval of the Director and Dean:
http://www.uwyo.edu/socialwork/_files/docs/msw/committeeassignmentform.pdf

3. Prepare your Thesis Proposal, a written document of initial requirements for review by Research Advisory Committee members during the proposal component of the process.

- See Dr. Schatz’s “Elements of the Research Proposal and Research Report” for information about what should be included in the paper.
- The proposal should be comprehensive and include a completed IRB application, if necessary

4. Defend your Thesis Proposal in the Proposal Defense, a presentation to the Research Advisory Committee.

- Send your committee your Thesis Proposal paper two weeks before the Proposal Defense so that they have time to read it and think about suggestions.
- Your Proposal Defense presentation should be about 20 minutes long. A PowerPoint is usually included.
- After your presentation, you will leave the room while your committee deliberates on questions, potential revisions, and whether or not you are allowed to move on to the next stage. Research Advisory Committee members must approve the proposal face-to-face in order to move forward in the process. Obtaining Committee approval to move forward is your responsibility.
- You must have your Proposal Approval form completed, signed by all committee members at the end of your Proposal Defense, and turned into the Division Office Manager. The form is available here:
http://www.uwyo.edu/socialwork/_files/docs/msw/approval%20of%20research%20proposal.pdf

5. Apply for IRB Approval, if necessary.

- Discuss your IRB application with your Committee Chair and visit the IRB webpage to learn more: <http://www.uwyo.edu/research/compliance/human-subjects/>

6. After receiving IRB approval, begin your research and write your paper!

- Consult with your research advisor about what will be required in your thesis
- Generally, you will include the following:
 - i. Approval Page (after the Final Defense)
 - ii. Abstract (ask advisor how many words she or he wants)
 - iii. Title Page
 - iv. Copyright (optional)
 - v. Dedication page (optional)
 - vi. Acknowledgments (optional)
 - vii. Table of Contents (including page numbers for your appendices)
 - viii. List of tables and/or figures
 - ix. Chapter 1: Problem Area
 1. Background
 2. Problem Statement
 - x. Chapter 2: Literature Review and Conceptual Framework
 - xi. Chapter 3: Research Design
 1. Research Purpose and Importance of Study
 2. Research Questions
 3. Methods
 4. IRB approval
 5. Consent and Confidentiality
 6. Recruitment
 7. Risks

8. Validity
9. Analysis of Data
- xii. Chapter 4: Results
- xiii. Chapter 5: Discussion and Conclusions
 1. Implement analysis using conceptual framework
 2. Answer research questions
 3. Implications for Social Work Practice
 4. Strengths
 5. Limitations
 6. Further Research Directions
 7. Conclusion
- xiv. References
- xv. Appendices (including IRB Approval letter)

- For information on formatting your thesis, visit the following UW pages

- i. http://www.uwyo.edu/registrar/_files/docs/thesis.doc
- ii. http://www.uwyo.edu/registrar/_files/docs/formatting.pdf
- iii. http://www.uwyo.edu/registrar/_files/docs/thesistemplate10.dotx

7. Prepare your Oral Defense as the Final Exam (Final Defense)

- You must have approval of the final project by your Advisor/Committee Chair, as well as permission to proceed with the final defense.
- Arrange a scheduled time with the committee and reserve an appropriate room for the defense (the room can usually be reserved through the Division Office Manager).

- Send your final project to the Research Advisory Committee 10-14 days before the Final Defense date.
- At least one day before your final defense, contact the Division Office Manager to advertise your Final Defense. Include the name of your project, a few sentences about what the project is about, the date, time, and room number in your message.

8. Conduct your Final Defense

- The following forms must be prepared for your Final Defense. They must be signed by your committee upon passing your Final Defense.
 - i. http://www.uwyo.edu/socialwork/_files/docs/msw/final%20defense%20form.pdf
 - ii. http://www.uwyo.edu/socialwork/_files/docs/msw/reportoffinalexamform.pdf
- At the oral defense, you will describe and critique the project (approx. 15-20 minutes—students often develop a PowerPoint presentation).
- The members of the Research Advisory Committee pose questions to and/or hold discussion with the student regarding the project (approx. 30-45 minutes).
- You are then excused from the room, and the Committee discusses your demonstration of mastery of the project and project process and deliberates a decision (pass, pass w/revisions, fail) without you present.
- You return to the room for final discussion and the Committee decision.
- Committee members sign both final defense forms indicating their decision.
 - i. If you pass with revisions, you will need to make the necessary changes and then submit the revised paper or presentation to your chair or your full committee.

- i. A student failing the initial oral final examination may retake the examination once.
 - ii. Failure of the final examination shall be reported in writing to the Director of the Division of Social Work and forwarded to the Office of Academic Affairs.
- Raw Data & Final Papers
 - i. All raw data generated from research projects must be submitted to the student's Research Chair for archiving with records stored up to three years.
 - ii. In addition, an original copy of the student's final project or thesis must be provided electronically to the Research Chair and Division Office Manager for permanent archiving.

Other Basics

- **Grades:** At the end of each semester, the student's Committee Chair must register a grade of either "satisfactory" or "unsatisfactory."
 - Incompletes are not given for S/U grading.
 - S/U grades do not compute into GPA so there is no jeopardy to the student.
 - The grade does, however, provide the student with feedback regarding progress.
 - An S indicates that the student is working according to expectations
 - A U indicates lack of satisfactory progress.
 - If, over several semesters, a student continues to receive multiple U grades, the Committee Chair will inform the MSW Director in a written memorandum with a copy provided to the student.

- The MSW Director will then consult with both the student and Committee Chair to determine if:
 - there is a remediation plan that could benefit that student toward accomplishing the thesis; and/or,
 - if the student should remain in the program.
- For a completed research thesis, the Research Advisory Committee at the student's final defense presentation determines the final grade decision.
- The thesis presentation (research project and findings) must be publicized and is open to the larger university community.
- The oral exam/defense takes place immediately following the thesis presentation with the student's thesis committee only.
- Continuing Registration Students may take longer than the Spring semester of their second year to complete their research project.
 - If so, students can request to register for one credit of "SOWK 5920/5940 Continuing Registration" per semester with their Chair while completing their research/thesis.
 - If approved, the Chair will request a section of continuing registration be set up before the end of the spring semester.
 - Continuous registration is to be used when a student has not met the deadline for graduation and must register for an additional semester, or when corrections are due but not yet completed by the student, and the Chair indicates continuous registration is needed.

- **Termination from the Program Due to Lack of Completion of Thesis Research at 6th Year**

- The "graduate clock" is what finally indicates to a student that they must finish their research project or they will be dismissed from the University and the graduate social work program.
 - Upon reaching the 6th year of enrollment without completing the final research project, the MSW Program Director may call for a review of the student's progress in the MSW Program.
 - Students must either complete their final project before the end of their 6th year or file a petition for extension.
- The University of Wyoming has policies regarding petition under exceptional circumstances for extension of time, and this information can be found on the graduate student resources web page (<http://webdev.uwyo.edu/uwgrad/enrolled-students/forms/masterspetition.html>).

Elements of the research proposal and research report¹

Problem area of focus/Issue/Concern: Problem statement

What exactly will be studied?

Why is it worth studying?

Does the proposed study have practical significance?

Does it contribute to the construction of social theories?

Literature Review (First Assignment)

What research has already been done in this area, if any? If so, is there consistent findings, or do past studies vary or disagree? Are there flaws in the body of existing research that you feel will be remedied by this study?

What have others said about this area?

What theories address this problem and what do they say?

Research questions/Hypotheses

Identify the study purpose

State clearly and simply, each research question or the study hypothesis(es).

Research Design

State **research approach(es)** selected and describe these approaches citing existing authors. Give rationale why this is the approach or approaches taken.

Identify **key variables** to be studied. How will you measure these variables?

Define each key variable and any key terms relevant to the study instrumentation and design.

Identify **study subjects**. Indicate how permission will be sought.

Discuss if there are subjects you have decided to exclude, and why.

Identify the numbers of subjects sought; is this a sample size appropriate?

Address any concerns, **ethical issues**, and how the research will protect them. (Address in IRB form and prepare a consent form for participants.)

¹ See Babbie's outline on pp. 113-114. And Chapter 17, related to research reports.

Instrumentation: Indicate instrument(s) to be used, and where, if appropriate these instruments came from. (Provide copies.) If you constructed your own instrument, provide explanations about the design of the instrument(s).

Data Collection: How will you actually collect the data for your study?

Will you conduct an experiment or use a survey? If you have more than one instrument, address how each will be analyzed.

Data Analysis: Indicate the kind of analysis you plan to conduct. How will the analysis respond to your research questions or hypotheses? How do you plan to control for variations in data? If you plan to have charts, graphs, etc., give a sample of what the data might look like when presented.

Address any **Study Limitations**. Most studies have some limitations, either due to time constraints, funding, access of subjects, etc. So, address any possible limitations that you are aware of.

Research implementation schedule. (Provide copy.)

Budget information: Provide an overview of how much it will cost to do the study as planned. Indicate any funding sources you plan to use or seek out.

Include an IRB form, completed.