A thesis or dissertation is a requirement for academic degree programmes that include a research element. It must be written such that the results presented can be validated and form the basis for further investigations. Writing theses and dissertations requires thought, planning and organization. Theses and dissertations concentrate on a particular subject and require a great deal of time, effort, research, and an extensive bibliography.

First, it is important to check the guidelines and regulations governing the layout for theses or dissertations set by your institution. For students at the University of Manitoba, see:

**Thesis Guidelines for the University of Manitoba Masters and Ph.D. Students:**
http://umanitoba.ca/faculties/graduate_studies/registration/137.htm

**Choosing a topic**

Choosing a topic is often the most difficult part of the writing process. Try to:

- Develop a topic that has interested you throughout your graduate or undergraduate career.
- Think about the top three issues you want to study, then turn them into questions.
- Review papers you have written for classes, looking for a pattern of interest.
- Look at class notes; professors may have pointed out potential research topics or commented on unanswered questions in the field.
- Talk with professors or advisors about possible topics.
- Replicate somebody else’s study.
- Conduct research on a broad topic to discover gaps in the literature.
- Keep the following cautions in mind:
  1. Get feedback on a potential topic from your advisor; your topic may not interest others in the field as much as it interests you.
  2. Do research to discover why your topic has not been studied before.

**Writing the proposal**

The proposal serves as a recipe for the thesis or dissertation. Be as detailed and specific as possible. Remember to:

- Identify gaps in the literature.
- State your thesis clearly.
- Outline the questions you plan to address in the dissertation or thesis.
- Establish a strong research design or theoretical framework for your study.
- Describe the topics you plan to cover in each chapter of the thesis or dissertation.
- Speculate upon potential results of your study.
- Discuss the importance of your study to the field.

For detailed information on writing proposals see our list of suggested publications attached at the end of this handout.
**Conducting research**

Writers often have difficulty maintaining their own voice when they work with sources. The strategies listed below will help you to use your sources effectively:

- Keep a researcher’s notebook in addition to taking notes on specific sources. The notebook keeps you in continual dialogue with your sources and your topic.
- Take summary notes as well as specific information notes.
- Discuss your ideas with others as you conduct research.
- Think about how each source specifically applies to your topic. The authors of your sources are advancing their argument, not yours. Carefully consider which source material you will use.

**Writing the thesis or dissertation**

**Finding model** theses or dissertations can help you gauge how much (or how little) you have to do. A good model can also serve as an inspiration for your project. Look at theses or dissertations that your department has accepted.

**Maintaining your focus** is the key to completing your dissertation or thesis. Try the following strategies:

- Type a copy of the proposal, asking yourself if you have expanded on all of the ideas advanced in the proposal.
- Work "within" your proposal, adding key words and concepts and then expanding upon them.
- Write your first chapter early in order to make sure that subsequent chapters fulfill promises made in the introduction. This strategy helps some writers to focus their writing; for others, however, writing the first chapter proves difficult. See what works for you.
- Know your thesis and let it dictate what you include; refrain from writing everything you know.

**Organizing** both your workspace and your ideas will help the research and writing process proceed smoothly. You may want to:

- Purchase a file cabinet just for the thesis or dissertation; each drawer may contain drafts and research notes for each chapter. Write explanations of the contents of each file folder and file drawer.
- Date drafts to remember the order in which you worked on chapters.
- Set deadlines for submitting drafts of each chapter. Meet your deadlines even if you cannot deliver everything you promised.
- List what each chapter or section should cover, including both general ideas and specific examples.
- Look at style guides; they may provide an organizational formula for your field.
- Use outlining software or the outline tool on your word processor.

**Obtaining feedback** from advisors and colleagues will help refine your ideas as you write. Try the following strategies:

- Present sections of your thesis or dissertation as conference papers or submit them for publication. Audience members and editorial boards frequently provide valuable comments.
Meet regularly with committee members to get feedback on your work-in-progress.
Get advice on your work throughout the writing process (while developing and organizing ideas, during the drafting phase, as you revise).
Form a dissertation or thesis group that focuses on presenting and critiquing work-in-progress.
Bring your dissertation or thesis to a writing center consultant for feedback.

Revising is essential to the thesis/dissertation writing process. Often, you will discover new ideas as you write, or your ideas will change as you research your topic and receive feedback on your work.

Managing your time
Finding time to write is often challenging for students with jobs, families, and other commitments. The following techniques should help you manage time effectively:

- Make the completion of your thesis or dissertation a top priority. Do not waste time on points or questions outside the scope of your research.
- Spend time on your dissertation at least five days a week. Even if you only have one hour on some days, consistent work will help you keep ideas and source material fresh in your mind.
- Know your personality and choose a working style that goes with it. For example, if you are a social person, you may want to work in a computer lab instead of at home.
- Know your distractions and schedule your work time when distractions are at a low level.
- Give yourself time to think; you often will need more time to think than to write.
- Set aside time for yourself, your partner and your children (negotiate the time together so that you will be available at the same time). It is important to communicate with those around you.
- Try out different schedules, for example, shifting from morning to evening hours.

Working with your advisor or a committee
For information about the roles and responsibilities of graduate students and faculty see the guide prepared by the University of Manitoba Faculty of Graduate Studies:
http://umanitoba.ca/faculties/graduate_studies/media/roles_and_responsibilities.pdf

Information presented here is taken from the Web page created and maintained by The Claremont Colleges Writing Centers:
http://thuban.ac.hmc.edu/www_common/writing/centweb/diss.html

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