Completing the Master of Arts:
Writing a Master’s Thesis or Report

This document includes important information about completing the MA in the Department of and Center for Middle Eastern Studies. It focuses on reports and theses. Throughout, we try to distinguish as clearly as possible between university policy — to which there are few, if any, exceptions — the practices of this and other degree programs on campus, and advice offered about how to make the process as painless as possible for all, especially you.

This document does not provide information about how to do research and says only a little about how to write academically.

This information is correct and accurate to the best of our knowledge at the time it is distributed. Be sure to verify all details as deadlines approach.

Matters of Definition

No university document distinguishes clearly between a report and a thesis in terms of length or scope. Some programs or individual faculty define a report as a library project, or reviewing what scholars have said about a particular topic, and a thesis as an original contribution to knowledge in which a novel analysis or argument is offered, a text or problem is analyzed using a new or previously untried framework, or data about a subject is collected and analyzed. Others may distinguish between the two solely on the basis of length. Hence, one of your first challenges will be to ensure that your supervisor and reader(s) agree with one another and with you about the scope and nature of your project as well as its likely length. If, for example, the reader believes a thesis should be at least 150 pages while the supervisor does not want to read over 50 pages, you are in for a rocky ride.

Supervisors & Readers

Both a report and a thesis have two readers. These can serve as joint supervisors, or one may serve as the supervisor while the second is a reader. In either case, both must find the document acceptable and sign it before the graduate school will accept it. The supervisor—or at least one reader in the case of joint supervision—must be a member of the Graduate Studies Committee (GSC) in your major department. Please note that lecturers can serve as supervisors or readers only if special permission is granted by the Office of Graduate Studies (OGS). The second reader or supervisor may be from a GSC in any UT department or program. An updated list of GSC members is maintained on the UT website (http://www.utexas.edu/ogs/pdn/pdf/gsc-listing.pdf)…page 81 (MEL/DMES) and page 82 (CMES.)

Please understand that the success of your thesis or report project will depend on your ability to work well with your readers. Although the graduate advisor and graduate coordinator can provide you information about policy matters, the graduate advisor does not intervene in your relationship with your readers except in the most unusual of circumstances. Because of the autonomy of faculty in making assessments about matters of instruction, including the supervision of thesis or report research, the graduate advisor plays no role in evaluating the thesis or report project, its quality, or its completion.

There is no oral defense for either the report or the thesis unless your committee requires it. Once all the documents are signed and the graduate coordinator has a copy of them, you will turn them in, along with the thesis or report, to OGS.
**REPORT/THESIS COURSES**

In order to register for any report or thesis courses, you must obtain the appropriate form from the graduate coordinator. The form will require some basic information along with signatures from supervisors, readers, and/or the graduate advisor. The form must be presented to the graduate coordinator, who will then clear you to register yourself in the restricted course.

Students doing a report sign up for the report course 398R. The assumption is that the report is begun and finished in the same semester, the student’s last term in the program.

Students taking the thesis option will sign up for 698A one semester and 698B the next. The thesis is officially begun one semester and finished the following. Thus, these courses must be taken consecutively; they cannot be taken concurrently. Note that A must be taken before B. You could enroll in the sequence in fall/spring, spring/summer, spring/fall or summer/fall. The summer is considered a single term for these purposes. Students not completing a thesis in two semesters continue to sign up for 698B until they have finished or until they are no longer eligible to re-enroll because their coursework has lapsed. Coursework lapses when it is too old to be counted toward the MA, currently six years from the time a student enters the program.

You should note that once you submit a report or thesis, you are officially out of the program and the Graduate School unless you are continuing to a PhD program at the university. OGS is very strict about enforcing the rule requiring the submission of a thesis or report during the semester you graduate. Very few exceptions have been granted. Thus, if you plan to take courses in the semester after you have completed your report or thesis, be advised that special arrangements must be made in advance, regardless of whether or not these courses will apply to your degree.

According to OGS, the 698A course is a ‘reading’ course, when the student should be doing research, and 698B is a ‘writing’ course, when the student should be writing up the research. We don’t know of any cases where the project has progressed in quite that fashion. Obviously, however, OGS expects that a thesis project will take about twice the time and effort as a report project; this represents the only official evidence we have of the distinction between the two options. Thus, because there is no set of guidelines that we all follow, as soon as you have chosen your supervisors/readers, make sure to establish what their expectations are as to what should be achieved during each one of these courses.

**OFFICIAL DOCUMENTS**

The OGS website ([http://www.utexas.edu/ogs/pdn/](http://www.utexas.edu/ogs/pdn/)) contains vital information about completing a thesis or report and graduating. Current deadlines are posted there as well as copies of all the necessary forms. These forms include: degree candidate form, Master’s degree certification, format guidelines, copyright information, copyright disclaimer, photocopy permission, and thesis and report template information.

As you can tell by some of the forms listed above, you will need to be concerned with matters of format and copyright. You can use the template to maximize the likelihood that your final completed thesis or report will be accepted by the OGS. Beginning in Fall 2008, students will also have to submit an electronic *program of work*, which outlines the coursework applied to degree requirements. Dual-degree students still submit a paper version of the *program of work*. 
Some Useful Advice

Report or Thesis?
When you think about choosing between a report and a thesis, you may want to think about the following:

- **Will I possibly continue my education?** If yes, do a thesis, even if you may continue in another field of study. Some programs and institutions, including many abroad, do not recognize an MA with a report as a valid degree. As we understand the situation, MA programs offering the report option are few in number, and many institutions are unfamiliar with them. In particular, if you may pursue a doctorate in any field, do a thesis. In other words, an MA with a thesis likely has greater credibility and value on many markets.

- **Am I enrolled in the FAO program?** If yes, you must complete a thesis, and its topic must relate to the modern military in some way. You must sign up for 698A your second semester in the program as you are required to complete your degree in three semesters, not including summers.

- **Do I simply need to be able to show proof that I hold a Master’s degree?** If yes, you may consider the report option.

Finding a Supervisor and Reader
With the rarest exception, you should expect your supervisor and reader to be professors who have taught you. Approaching someone you have not had a course with is quite risky because you do not know her expectations of a student’s written work, nor does she know your work.

Approach the person you hope will agree to be your supervisor first. If he agrees on your project, ask his advice about possible second readers, suggesting anyone you have in mind. Avoid asking someone to be your second reader if it is fairly clear your first reader is not interested in working with him.

When approaching a faculty member, it is usually a good idea to have a 3-to-5-page prospectus explaining the topic of your thesis or report. In this document, you will want to state the research question you hope to answer, give some background on the problem or issue, including background on how scholars have approached the issue, explain how you will approach the subject, and describe what you foresee the structure of the thesis as being (i.e., chapter one will…chapter two will…). Attach a bibliography with works cited in the prospectus as well as works you know that you will read.

One of the earliest things you will need to do is negotiate a timeline with each reader. If a supervisor or reader is going on leave or if she is going to be away at conferences, these facts will influence the deadlines you must set for yourself.

Remember that you are participating in the intellectual marketplace. It is your responsibility to ‘sell’ your idea for a thesis or report to two faculty members. If you cannot find two people who will agree to work with you, you cannot complete the program. Remember, also, that your project, though perhaps the most important thing in the world to you, is only one of many tasks for which your readers are responsible. With many faculty members, it is first-in-first-out; your draft will go into a stack of drafts, manuscripts, papers, etc., and the faculty member will get to it as he can. Never submit your work late, expecting the readers to drop everything and accommodate you. This will not happen.

Questions for Your Readers

- What do you have in mind with regard to the usual length of a thesis/report?
- Is there a particular style sheet or publication manual you want me to follow with respect to matters of documentation and format? (Recall that the OGS dictates matters like margins, kind of paper on which the document must be printed, etc. These dictates trump the dictates of any style sheet or publication.)
Can you point me to any theses/reports you have supervised/served as reader for that you think are especially good?
Should we meet on a regular basis to discuss the project?
Should I send you progress reports and/or drafts on a regular basis?
Do you have travel plans or other commitments, especially during the term I hope to submit my report or thesis that will dictate deadlines for me getting work to you?

**Finding a topic**

In most cases, topics grow out of coursework. They expand or build on an idea or problem raised by readings, class discussions, or papers you’ve written. Many people expand a term paper into a thesis or report, especially if the professor for whom they wrote the course expresses interest in the topic and offers any sign of encouragement.

If you read a scholarly article you find interesting about one Middle Eastern country (or about another part of the world), try to apply the method of analysis to another Middle Eastern country. Before you start, though, it would be wise to establish that other researchers have not already done so.

As you go through the term, if you find yourself interested in a particular issue, topic, or method, ask a professor after class if she thinks that idea might be a good one for a thesis and ask for additional readings in the area.

Narrow is better than broad. We can easily fill a room with books on any of a number of topics about the Middle East—the Arab/Israeli conflict, the Ottoman Empire, French colonial governance in North Africa, Shi’ism, etc. These topics are all much too broad for a thesis or report, even though there is much research on each of these topics that needs to be done, research that can teach you and your readers important things. The key will be to pose a specific question, one that can be answered in detail in the course of your thesis or report, and which, in the great scheme of things, will be short. For example, if you are interested in women’s issues in North Africa, you might think about questions like, “What was the educational situation of early 20th-century Muslim and Jewish girls in Tunisia under colonial rule?”

Be honest about the skills you have to answer the questions you might ask. Someone interested in answering the question posed above would have to have a very strong reading knowledge of French because most of the materials needed to answer that question will be in French, whether primary or secondary sources. A reading knowledge of Modern Standard Arabic would be useful for certain aspects of the question, although it might be possible to refocus it so that reading Arabic sources wouldn’t be required. Interestingly, a reading knowledge of Hebrew might not be especially useful, even for dealing with the situation of Jewish girls at that time because Tunisian Jews had a strong literary and journalistic tradition that involved writing the dialect of Tunisian Arabic they spoke using Hebrew characters. The point is that if English is the only language you read, you cannot do a thorough job with the question above, so it is not a good thesis project for you. At the same time, don’t hesitate to use the report or thesis as an opportunity to use source materials in the Middle Eastern language you’ve been studying.

If you are thinking about applying to graduate programs after you leave the MA program and you hope to build on what you’ve learned here, choose a thesis topic that relates to the program you would like to get into. Many students leave this program to go to PhD programs in various areas or to professional programs at places especially interested in people with strong area-studies backgrounds. In these cases, it will be to your advantage to include your thesis (or part of it) as your writing sample in the application. Likewise, if you do an outstanding thesis, your advisor will be able to write an outstanding letter for you.
**Give a Colloquium**

Especially if you’ve done a report or thesis that you and your advisor are proud of, if it has involved original research, and particularly if you plan to continue your education or to work in Middle Eastern Studies, volunteer to give a colloquium about your research in your last term here. Giving a lecture offers you the chance to get experience talking about your work before a sympathetic and interested audience, it helps students who are not as far along as you are by providing them with a role model and an example, and it looks great on your vita or resume.

**Getting Finished**

Start counting backward immediately. If you hope to be here only four semesters, you must have the thesis finished so that you can turn it in by the last class day of your fourth long semester here. Before you can turn it in, you will need to spend at least a few days reformatting it after you’ve completed all the revisions your readers require. Keep in mind that it may take your readers two to three weeks or more to get you feedback on your drafts. Many second readers will wish to defer to the supervisor, as they may not want to read the draft until the supervisor has deemed it (nearly) finished. The period between the end of spring break and the last class day is about six weeks. They go by very fast!

You should be able to see where this is all headed. Those who hope to graduate in May are wise to have submitted a completed draft of the entire thesis (with bibliography, notes, etc.) to their supervisor before spring break. Generally, the supervisor will have seen and commented on parts of the thesis before he gets the completed draft. In other words, you should plan to be giving drafts of sections of the thesis to the supervisor and perhaps the second reader long before spring break. Note that we now require a full draft of the thesis six weeks before the OGS deadline, and a full draft of the report four weeks before the deadline.

If you are applying to another graduate or professional program or applying for positions in which your research will be relevant, you will need to be far enough along on your project for your advisor to be able to comment on the outcome of the project and, in many cases, for you to submit part of the report or thesis as your writing sample.

For most students, a thesis or report represents the longest and most complex piece of extended writing they have ever completed. Many writers—not just students—find it easiest to complete such large writing tasks not by starting at the beginning but by writing the heart of the piece first. So, whether you’ve analyzed data or cases or literary texts, write up your analysis first—that is, write up your novel contribution to the research literature. Then, working backward, write the section on methods (if there is one), the review of the literature, and the introduction, and finish by writing the conclusion. Writing the parts of the thesis or report in this order helps writers avoid many common problems, including (a) getting bogged down in reviewing previous literature. Once you’ve completed your analysis and know exactly what the review of the literature is leading to, the question for that section of the thesis/report becomes, “What is the least my readers need to know about the prior research in order to understand my contribution to it?”; (b) a huge gap between a review of the literature that points out every flaw in earlier research and your contribution to the literature, which cannot live up to the promise of the earlier critique. It is much easier to find the holes in earlier research than it is to do research that overcomes those problems; and (c) an uneven text—to create the text in this order, you will be more likely to have a text that reads smoothly from beginning to end.

Completing a thesis or report is lonely work: one must work alone for long periods of time. There are many jokes about how the bathroom in one’s apartment is never cleaner than when one is writing a thesis or report. It is easy to find ways not to work on a thesis or report. Trying to complete such a large task often raises all sorts of issues for people—feelings of inadequacy or the practice of persistent procrastination, for example. If you find yourself confronting these and especially if you seem to have trouble dealing with them and working through them, don’t hesitate to visit the Student Counseling
Center (SSB, 5th floor) to get help. The counselors there are trained professionals, and they can help you determine if your thesis problems are something short term or part of larger issues that may need dealing with. Remember, too, that the Counseling Center maintains a 24-hour help line, 471-CALL or 471-2255. These are services you’ve paid for; use them.

**Finishing In Absentia**

You are expected to finish your project while you are in residence. The challenge of finishing a report or thesis when you are in another city or country or when you are working full-time and are no longer a student is very, very great. Equally challenging is the task of completing all of the required paperwork. Remember that it is not the responsibility of the faculty or staff to ensure that the necessary signatures are collected, documents turned in on time, or turned in by walking them to a particular office in person, etc.

The *in absentia* option is officially only offered by OGS at the end of summer semesters. In other words, if you miss the deadline to submit the document and its accompanying paperwork, the program can petition OGS to have you registered *in absentia* in the fall semester. This buys the student approximately 10 more days to submit everything. However, this option is generally not available between fall/spring and spring/summer semesters.

**Government Jobs & Your Thesis**

In particular, if you plan to take a US government job with a security clearance, be aware that once officially employed, you may be required to get clearance from a government office or official before submitting drafts of your report or thesis. Such a requirement is a near guarantee that you will not be able to complete your degree, especially since your employer may not want you, as an employee, to treat your subject in ways that are necessary in order to please your supervisor(s) and/or reader, who are academics and not government employees. Should you seek to complete a report or thesis while working for the US government, expect it to take several extra semesters and to be a source of frustration to you and to all here. While the Center and the University are especially proud to train future employees of the US and other governments, you should appreciate that we cannot alter our standards or policies in order to accommodate the needs of individuals who accept government jobs before finishing their degree programs.

We hope this document will help the completion of your thesis or report go as smoothly as possible. Please do not hesitate to discuss any difficulties or concerns you may have with the Graduate Adviser or Coordinator. Good luck!