

Elliott School of International Affairs

THE GEORGE WASHINGTON UNIVERSITY

Faculty Guidelines for Graduate Theses in the Elliott School

We appreciate all the faculty members who have contributed their time and expertise to the Elliott School graduate students who have chosen to do theses over the years. The master's thesis is one of the possible culminating experiences (alternative to the capstone) for Elliott School graduate students' academic careers and would not be possible without the support of faculty. We hope that the following guidelines will help you through the process of directing a thesis and sincerely thank you for your time.

- **Eligibility**

To pursue the thesis option, students must obtain approval from the Dean's Office (through the Office of Academic Advising) and must meet the following criteria:

- A minimum GPA of 3.5 after 20 credits of graduate work*;
- The subject must be approved by:
 - the member of the full-time faculty under whom the thesis is to be written,
 - a second member of the faculty who will serve as a reader, and
 - the student's program director;
- The student must file a copy of an approved and signed [Graduate Student Thesis-Subject Approval Form](#) with the Office of Academic Advising and Student Services.

Overview of the Process

The student is responsible for all of the paperwork associated with the thesis process, and the forms are available on the Forms and Applications page of the Elliott School website at <http://elliott.gwu.edu/graduate-student-forms> and the Gelman Library the [Electronic Thesis and Dissertation \(ETD\) website](#). Students are expected to submit their [Graduate Student Thesis-Subject Approval Form](#), signed by the Thesis Director and Second Reader, to the Office of Academic Advising and Student Services **by no later than May 1 of the year preceding anticipated submission of their thesis for students planning to complete their thesis in a fall-spring sequence**. (For students planning to complete their thesis in a spring-fall sequence the form submission deadline is no later than September 1 of the year preceding anticipated submission of their thesis.)** Once the thesis is finalized it is submitted for approval and publication to Gelman Library. Theses are assigned letter grades by the Thesis Director and Second Reader.

**While all grades for the spring semester may not be posted by the May 1 deadline, students should still submit the Graduate Student Thesis Subject Approval Form by the deadline. After receiving the Graduate Student Thesis Subject Approval form, but prior to registering the student for the first three-credits of thesis, the student's academic advisor will check the student's record by June 1 to confirm that the student has earned 20 credits and has a minimum cumulative GPA of 3.5. Students who do not meet eligibility requirements will not be permitted to pursue a thesis and will instead be required to register for the appropriate capstone course.*

***Students who began their program in a spring semester should contact their academic advisor well in advance of these deadlines.*

Thesis Director/First Reader

- Must be a full-time faculty member at GW
- Is identified by the student, perhaps in consultation with their program director, other faculty members, or academic advisor
- Serves as the student's primary thesis advisor

The student works with the Thesis Director/First Reader to write a brief prospectus or research proposal, usually three to five pages in length. The prospectus should also be reviewed by the student's Program Director.

1. The prospectus should be completed before submitting the [Graduate Student Thesis-Subject Approval Form](#) to the Office of Academic Advising and Student Services, but after preliminary research – such as literature reviews– has commenced.
2. Students are not bound by the prospectus, but it should accurately reflect the intended research and give some justification for the project's originality and importance within the field.
3. Depending on the subject matter, a list of relevant source material may also be required.
4. If there are special skills needed to complete the thesis – for work with specific statistical or analytic techniques, for example – these should be identified at this point and specific means for gaining those skills should be outlined in the prospectus.
5. As the student's thesis progresses, the original project may evolve in a way that differs from the original prospectus. Any major changes should be reflected in the prospectus, and the First and Second Readers should receive a copy of the updated prospectus from the student.

Second Reader

- Can be a full-time or part-time member of the GW faculty
- The First Reader often recommends a specific colleague to serve as the second reader based on the topic or prior working relationship with that colleague; however, it remains the student's ultimate responsibility to approach the Second Reader.
- The Second Reader must be aware of the specific time commitments involved.
- In the case of interdisciplinary theses, the Second Reader should come from the second discipline.

The role of the Second Reader is dependent on the nature of the project. Many Second Readers do not participate in the thesis project until it is nearing completion. However, there are Second Readers that serve as a second advisor to students, especially for students completing an interdisciplinary thesis.

At the very least, the student should meet with the Second Reader once each semester before completing the thesis to keep the Second Reader informed of the progress of the thesis.

Writing the Thesis

Usually, (but not always) the First Reader is the only faculty member to work closely with the student on research and text preparation, and it is important that the student be aware of time limitations and be prevented from overtaxing any reader.

1. The First Reader should work with the student to set out a calendar for when the various steps of the thesis should be completed.
2. Sufficient time must be allotted by the student for preliminary revisions before a mostly completed version is presented to the other readers.
3. The Second Reader will require at least two weeks to read the mostly completed version before the thesis can be graded. In consultation with the First Reader, the Second Reader may request edits to the thesis during this time.
4. Grammatical and mechanical problems should be eliminated in preliminary drafts. Students with particular difficulties with grammar and the mechanics of writing are urged to seek help from the GW Writing Center or other outside resources, but the Thesis Director should convey the importance of good writing skills to the student.
5. Master's theses are submitted electronically by the student once the document has been approved as final by the faculty. Information and deadline dates are posted on the [Electronic Thesis and Dissertation \(ETD\) website](#). You can find a lot of information about the thesis on the ETD website, including [formatting guidelines](#). The guidelines are designed to produce documents that are uniform in style, but they also allow for the particular requirements of various disciplines. The student must also submit to the Office of Academic Advising and Student Services the completed [ETD Approval Form](#). Theses will first be sent to the Gelman Library for approval. Once approved by Gelman, the thesis will be forwarded to the Office of Academic Advising and Student Services for a final check. Students may receive instructions from Gelman or Academic Advising to make changes and upload a revised edition of their work. The student will be notified by email once the thesis has been forwarded to ProQuest/UMI.

Although Gelman Library is responsible for verifying that the guidelines have been followed, it is assumed that the readers will not sign a thesis that has not been properly formatted. General guidelines are available at <http://library.gwu.edu/etd>.

The Grade

IAFF 6998 and IAFF 6999 are taken for a letter grade and quality points are earned toward the student's GPA. The grades for both IAFF 6998 and IAFF 6999 are not submitted to the Registrar via the Office of Academic Advising and Student Services until the student has successfully completed the thesis and submitted it to the [Electronic Thesis and Dissertation \(ETD\) System](#).

There is no formal defense process for master's theses in the Elliott School. Each Thesis Director, in conjunction with the Second Reader, can determine the appropriate methods for evaluating the thesis.

If the thesis is unfinished during the two semesters the student is registered for IAFF 6998 and IAFF 6999, then the student is allowed one calendar year to complete the thesis. During that time the student must maintain enrollment by either enrolling in course(s) or requesting [Continuous Enrollment](#). If additional time is needed beyond the calendar year, the student will be required to register again for the entire six credit hours of thesis research.

Pitfalls to Avoid

Although we realize that every discipline has different ways of approaching and evaluating theses, we have seen many problems arise that could be avoided with a little foresight.

1. **Don't let the student take on too broad or difficult of a topic.** Although it is important that the student's excitement for the questions be encouraged, they will not necessarily know what is possible to accomplish in a single year. The burden for that decision rests largely on the readers at the time of the prospectus. Ideally, the work for master's thesis is roughly equivalent to the work for two three hour courses, but the vast majority of students spend a great deal more time on their projects.
2. **Don't let the student take up too much of your time.** We don't want your first experience with a master's thesis to be your last. Discuss frankly with the student what your expectations and constraints are and make sure that he/she is aware of other resources available to students at GW. We do not expect the Second Reader to be heavily involved until the mostly completed version, although individual readers vary in their commitments.
3. **Be clear about deadlines, and the order in which work must be accomplished.** The Thesis Director may set any intermediate deadlines for work that seems appropriate. Students are often helped by having set dates for the completion of the various steps. If it is important to the Thesis Director, for example, that the student complete a literature review before beginning research, the student needs to know this and needs to know how that affects the rest of the scheduling.
4. **Don't lose contact with the student.** There's no other way of making sure that progress is being made toward the thesis. At the beginning of the process, deadlines for reaching certain plateaus should be established and maintained. If the student is having difficulty, everyone will recognize that fact earlier if there's a deadline. There will be less work for the faculty members and the student if there's no last minute rush to finish the thesis.
5. **Encourage originality from the student.** A literature overview is an appropriate project to complete as **part** of a master's thesis. The goal is for the student to contribute new knowledge to the field with their master's thesis.

People to Contact for Help

Questions can be directed to Angela Martin, Associate Director for Graduate Advising (202-994-3002 or angela_m@gwu.edu) or Justin Bernstine, Director of International and Academic Initiatives (202-994-0953 or justb@gwu.edu). Questions may also be directed to Lisa Stephenson, Associate Dean for Academic Programs (202-994-5352) or lstephen@gwu.edu).