Guidelines for the Preparation of

THE MASTER'S THESIS

DIVISION OF EMERGING MEDIA STUDIES

COLLEGE OF COMMUNICATION
BOSTON UNIVERSITY

Revised, January 2019

This guide has been prepared to assist students in completing their Master's Theses in a form that is acceptable to the faculty of the Division of Emerging Media Studies and also acceptable within the requirements of Mugar Library. It incorporates the rules of both of these academic units into a single document. Read it very carefully to avoid situations that may delay or prevent your graduation.

INTRODUCTION

Before any work is started on a thesis, the student should obtain and study the *EMS Guidelines for the Preparation of a Proposal for a Master's Thesis*. That document sets forth all the steps and considerations that must be followed in developing a thesis project and getting it approved.

After the project has been approved, actual work on the thesis can begin. To avoid possible misunderstanding, it must be made clear that all work on the thesis it the responsibility of the student. Advisors, First Readers, Second Readers, or other faculty members may assist in initial design and in offering suggestions for improving the final product, but they cannot be expected to gather data, search for references, perform copy-editing or rewrite any portion of a student's thesis.

All deadlines set forth in the *Thesis Deadline Statement* (found within that document) must be met. These deadlines have been designed by the Division and the Mugar Library to protect you from getting caught in time demands that cannot be met. It is inappropriate to ask Readers or other faculty to devote their weekends, nights, or vacation periods to your thesis if you fail to complete your work by the required deadlines. Therefore, study the timeline carefully and be sure to meet all obligations. If you do not meet the deadlines, you may have to wait a full semester to graduate.

HOW LONG IS A THESIS?

There is no set length for a thesis project. A concisely written thesis might total 50 pages, double-spaced. Others will range up to larger sized.

The length of the various chapters and sections of a thesis should be planned before writing even begins. The Thesis Proposal requires that the overall structure of the document be laid out systematically. In this process, it should not be difficult to estimate how many pages will be required for each chapter (suggestions for candidate chapters are included in the next section of this document). If the thesis manuscript appears to be getting too long, the thesis structure should probably be redesigned to narrow and refine the focus.

HOW MANY CHAPTERS SHOULD BE IN A THESIS?

The number of chapters in a thesis will vary from one project to another. However, the *EMS Guidelines for the Preparation of a Proposal for a Master's Thesis* set forth a series of sections and headings that can serve in many cases as the chapter titles of the thesis itself. For example, most theses will have the following features and sections:

1) A short <u>title</u> that clearly identified what the thesis covers. This will be on a separate title page. A template is included in this document.

2) A <u>Table of Contents</u>, with page numbers displayed for each chapter an major subsection.

3) An <u>abstract</u>, which is a succinct summary of the content of the thesis. Mugar Library insists that the abstract be no more than 250 words. It should be on a separate page, types double-spaced and centered on the page.

4) Chapter 1: <u>Overview</u>. This initial chapter should be relatively brief. It is actually a kind of road map that tells readers where they will go and why. In other words, it is a brief account of what the thesis is about, how it was conducted, and what was concluded. Suggested length is 4-5 pages.

5) Chapter 2: <u>Background and Goals of the Thesis</u>. This chapter may be developed in two separate sections. Collectively, the two sections below explain *the significance of the thesis* – that is, why it is important to study, analyze, or do research regarding the topic, problems, issues, or questions under investigation.

The first (Background) can lay out and explain any general information that will help the reader understand the context of the question(s) addressed by the thesis. It can contain historical information about the area, trends that may aid in understanding how certain issues came about, theoretical considerations that place the thesis into a particular context, or anything else that rounds out the broader picture of what is being addressed. That is, this section provided rationale for why

the thesis topic is socially, historically, theoretically, and/or practically important. Suggested lengths is 5-6 pages.

The second section (General Goals) of the chapter can explain in some detail just what the thesis seeks to show, test, or analyze. That is, generally, speaking what are the aims of this project in terms of advancing our collective knowledge about and understanding of the topic described above. Note that this should not be a statement of hypotheses that will be tested, but a general explanation of what is under study. Suggested length is 5-6 pages.

6) Chapter 3: <u>Literature Review</u>. The importance of this chapter cannot be overstated, and, practically speaking, some effort should be put into this chapter's content when previously completing the initial Thesis Proposal. Replication of past research designs and findings is a crucial component of scientific endeavor. However, thesis projects should consist of original contributions the wider literature on the topic of interest. To ensure that one's thesis offers novel knowledge and further advances our collective understanding in this manner, it is critical to make a thorough and exhaustive review of what is already known about the topic of study. There are many ways to go about this process. One efficient way is to do an electronic search of key words related to your topic to gather relevant published materials in various databases. Scientific articles are regularly abstracted in online databases maintained by the Mugar Library. Articles that have appeared in magazine and newspapers can be found in Nexis. Additional search tools, such as Google Scholar, can also assist you in identifying relevant publications in the academic literature on your topic. The electronic sources are the first step. Then, when articles have been identified it may be possible acquire physical or digital copies and then check their bibliographies for further studies (some of which may not be listed in computerized databases). In any case, it is essential that you become an <u>expert</u> in the subject matter related to your thesis and that you know fully what earlier work has been done.

In terms of then writing up your review, this chapter should accomplish the following:

   a. Provide the reader <u>a general introduction to and description of the topic of study</u>, assuming no previous knowledge on the part of the reader.

   b. <u>Summarize the relevant previous research on this topic</u>. That is, guide the reader through the extant literature on the topic of study. This summary should (i) cover all past, relevant findings related to the topic, (b) highlight any gaps in knowledge and/or contradictory past findings, and (c) integrate, as appropriate, particular theoretical frameworks for understanding the topic of interest.

   c. <u>Include clear organization and flow</u>. Rather than provide a series of disjointed sections, the literature review should have a natural, sensible

coherence, with transitions from one section to the next.

    d. <u>Provide rationale for your research questions and/or hypotheses</u>. That is, your review of the wider literature on a topic should clearly identify for the reader (i) what is still unknown about the topic and (ii) whether past findings are consistent or mixed. In so doing, you highlight the significance of your own thesis, as a project meant to address these gaps or inconsistencies. More, you study may be considering new and interesting moderating variables, historical contexts, populations, or applications. In any case, your literature review should fully, directly, and clearly point to past findings and/or theory-based expectations for the hypotheses and questions driving your study.

    e. <u>Formally state the research questions examined and/or hypotheses tested in this thesis</u>. The exact placement of these statements varies across theses. In some cases, it may make sense to list all of these statements together at the end of the literature review. In other cases, it might be better to insert different research questions and hypotheses within specific subsection of your review. In the end, you should place these statements in locations that clearly connect them to your rationale. That is, echoing the previous bullet, it should be abundantly clear to the reader (i) how you derived these questions and hypotheses from the existing literature and (ii) why they are worthy of study in light of our collective knowledge (or lack thereof).

The length of this chapter will obviously depend on how much prior work has been conducted on your topic. Anything under 10 pages is likely too cursory of a review. Even with respect to a new media technologies, the variables of interest and theoretical understanding of the processes and effects related to its usage may actually be quite established in other contexts.

7) Chapter 4: <u>Methods</u>. In this chapter it is important to explain exactly how the information used in addressing your major objectives (e.g., answering your research questions, testing your hypotheses) was gathered. Was it through direct interviews or focus groups? A survey? A content analysis of relevant messages? An experiment with specific kinds of subjects and/or stimuli? Whatever the steps and procedures, they must be made very clear in this section of the thesis. The entire quality of the conclusions you reach will be judged against the methods that you used to gather the information needed to reach them. The length of this chapter will vary, but it will be one of the major parts of the thesis document. With subsections containing a full description of your study design, materials (e.g., messages used in content analysis, stimuli used for an experiment), participants (if applicable), measures (e.g., operationalizations of variables of interest, including description of codebooks, survey instruments, or other metrics and tools), and data collection procedures (recruitment of participants, step by step process of collecting data), this chapter can get quite large. Suggested length is 8-10 pages.

8) Chapter 5: <u>Findings (or Results)</u>. This chapter should present the results of whatever investigation has been completed. It should avoid extensive discussion of their implications and concentrate on what was found. If the data is quantitative in nature, formal statistical reporting should be included (including any steps related to data cleaning and preparation that took place prior to analysis), and tables and charts may be appropriate (though included in an appendix). If the work has been more qualitative, summaries of the patterns of behavior or other insights gained should be presented. The length of this chapter will be related to the scope of the project, but it should seldom exceed 8-10 pages.

9) Chapter 6: <u>Conclusions</u>. Normally, this chapter will refer back to the discussion of the general goals and specific research questions and hypotheses set forth earlier. In this chapter you have the obligation of explaining how and why the information you have gathered and presented in your Findings/Results chapter brings you to accept, reject, or modify the research questions, hypotheses, or topics that were specified in your literature review. This is a major chapter, but it should not exceed 10-12 pages in length.

10) Chapter 7: <u>Discussion</u>. This final chapter provides a reflection on the thesis and what may be considered in terms of next steps. Specifically, it should cover:

a. <u>Contributions and implications of what you have found, both theoretical and practical</u>. Beyond iterating the conclusions you reached (and summarized earlier), discuss your conclusions in a larger context. How do your findings advance theoretical understanding of the topic? Do these suggest refinement of a particular theoretical framework, with respect to the context to which you've applied it here? How might your findings inform particular decisions or considerations with respect to media design, production, usage, or policy? It is permissible to be a bit speculative and suggest what important your findings may have beyond the narrow hypotheses or research questions that you addressed.

b. <u>Limitations to the current study</u>. Did your thesis include particular limitations, with respect to messages used, participants sampled, or contexts considered? Are there limitations to the generalizability and/or depth of your findings? Are there particular threats to the validity of your study design that should be considered?

c. Directions of future research. Given the findings and limitations of your thesis, what's next? What could a follow-up study do to further extend your conclusions or to address the limitations encountered in your thesis? Given new and emerging trends in media use and design, what new platforms, populations, or processes might be tackled by future work?

Suggested length for this chapter is 8-10 pages.

11) <u>References</u>. The various sources that you have cited can be collected at the end of the thesis in a References section. Unless otherwise specified by your First Reader, references should adhere to APA formatting guidelines (as should the internal citations of these references within the main body of your thesis document).

12) Figures and Tables. Again, particularly if your thesis centers on quantitative data, it may be appropriate to display certain types of information in the form of figures or tables. These should be formatted in accordance with APA guidelines (unless otherwise specified by your First Reader) and placed a separate section after your References.

13) <u>Appendices</u>. Your thesis may contain elements that are appropriate for fuller display in the form of an appendix. For instance, the full details of a codebook used for a content analysis may be presented in an appendix. Additionally, any questionnaire items used should also be included in the thesis document within an appendix section.

GENERAL PROCEDURE AND AN ACCEPTABLE STYLE

The Mugar Library does not require a specific style for Master's theses, leaving the matter to individual colleges and departments. However, the Library does have rules concerning the appearance and formats of manuscripts. While that permits a great deal of freedom, it is probably a good idea to provide students with more specific instructions that will meet the requirements of both the Library and the Division of Emerging Media Studies. For that reason, the following are strongly suggested guidelines, as simple and workable rules of style that provide clear guides for preparing the final manuscript:

1) Since this is the College of Communication, an absolute requirement is that any thesis must use totally accurate spelling and accepted grammatical constructions. Do not give your First Reader even a rough draft until this requirement has been met. Do not expect faculty to do your copy-editing or any re-writing, as that is strictly your responsibility.

2) Unless they request otherwise, do not provide your manuscript to your First Reader in piecemeal chunks or parts. Prepare the full document in the proper style before giving it to your First Reader. Expect to have to revise the manuscript MULTIPLE TIMES prior to gaining the First and Second Readers' approval.

3) Usually (but not always) the Second Reader will not see a final draft of the thesis document until the First Reader is satisfied with it, then permitting you to share it with the Second Reader. Discuss this with the two parties before any writing begins.

4) All final copies of a thesis should be prepared with word-processing software and

printed in an acceptable font. Times New Roman, Size 12, in proportional style (the font used for this document) is highly recommended. It is recommended that you do NOT include right justification in the document. Specific margins are required by Mugar Library (see their own documentation at http://library.bu.edu/theses).

5) Chapter titles should be bold and in 14 point font. For headings, subheadings, citations, and notes, see the current style specifications of the APA formatting manual (unless an alternative style is requested by your First Reader).

6) In your Table of Contents be sure to provide page numbers for all major sections (i.e., those with their own headings or subheadings).

7) A separate title page is required by the Library. An example is attached to this document.

8) All pages should be numbered according to Mugar Library requirements (see their own guidelines at http://library.bu.edu/theses). Note, front matter (e.g., title page, reader's approval/signature page, an acknowledgments page, a page of the abstract, a preface (optional), a Table of Contents page, a separate page for the listing of any figures, a separate page for the listing of any tables) are numbered separately and differently.

A Final Note: While the foregoing document covers what the Division of Emerging Media Studies requires in a thesis, it is up to you to obtain and consult the Mugar Library's Guide for Writers of Theses & Dissertations (available at http://library.bu.edu/theses). The Library may have additional requirements that you must follow. Their document also provides a checklist of items that they require. Note that there is a Multiple Copy Bill to be filled out for the Library. It must be presented when delivering the thesis. There is also a fee of $25 USD that must be paid to the Library. Sample title and approval pages are also from the Library's guidelines.

BOSTON UNIVERSITY

COLLEGE OF COMMUNICATION

Thesis

THE TITLE OF THE THESIS IN ALL

CAPITAL LETTERS BOLD AND CENTERED

by

YOUR NAME IN ALL CAPITALS BOLD AND CENTERED

B.A., University of Jupiter, 2000

Submitted in partial fulfillment of the

requirements for the degree of

Master of Arts

201_

Approved by

First Reader   _____
                    Name of First Reader, Ph.D.
                    [TITLE, e.g., Professor of ....]

Second Reader   _____
                    Name of Second Reader, Ph.D.
                    [TITLE, e.g., Assistant Professor of ....]