The Thesis

The thesis is the culmination of independent supervised research and should be approximately 15,000 words in length.

The thesis provides you with an opportunity to write a substantial piece of scholarship on a topic of interest to you using the research skills and knowledge you have developed during your course work and field study in the NYU IR Program. Your thesis will demonstrate the following skills:

- defining and outlining a research topic;
- defining a clear research question;
- identifying the salient issues;
- finding or generating the relevant information;
- evaluating its reliability and validity;
- weighing up the evidence on all sides of a debate;
- arriving at a well-argued conclusion;
- organizing and presenting the results of your work critically, cogently and coherently.

Choice of thesis topic

The thesis component of the Master of Arts degree allows students to pursue topics of interest without the restrictions of a taught course with a specific content. They only require a fit with the general themes and concerns of the MA. Students should feel free to pursue the topics that truly interest them, although it is hoped that they will take advantage of the research specialties available in the IR Program and related departments at NYU such as History, Politics, Economics, Sociology, Anthropology, Middle East & Islamic Studies, Russian & Slavic Studies, French Studies, German Studies, and Portuguese & Spanish Studies. You need to find a manageable topic – one that has not been researched excessively nor so under-researched that there is no literature available for you to build on.

The thesis supervisor

Ideally, students should meet with their IR full-time faculty Academic Advisor in the semester PRIOR to their final semester to discuss their proposed thesis topic and to identify a Thesis Supervisor.

*Thesis Supervisors must be full-time or part-time faculty in the IR Program or in the Graduate School of Arts and Science (GSAS).* Students and Supervisors must complete the Supervision Form below and submit to the Program Administrator Tina Lam. The IR Program Director has final approval on all supervisory relationships.

IR Program faculty members can supervise a limited number of students for the thesis per semester, and the acceptance of students is at the discretion of the faculty member. Faculty members with a heavy teaching load or external commitments may not take on students every semester. It is best to reach out to potential thesis supervisors as early as possible to avoid disappointment. *Students should be aware that these supervisory places will be filled on a first*
After a supervisor is officially confirmed by the IR Program, students should arrange to meet regularly with their thesis supervisor during the academic semester. **It is the student’s responsibility to contact supervisor to arrange meetings and to keep the supervisor informed of the progress of the research.**

NYU faculty hold regular office hours in the Fall and Spring Semesters. In January Term and Summer Sessions I & II, students should book appointments with their supervisors by email. It is recommended that students continue to meet on a regular basis with their thesis supervisors in person or virtually during J-Term and Summer Sessions.

On the rare occasion the supervisory relationship does not work and breaks down, immediately contact the Director of the IR Program, Professor Williams, to address the issue. **Students should not attempt to write their thesis alone – all theses must have two readers, one of which is the supervisor.** Students cannot submit their thesis for graduation without two readers (Reader One is your Thesis Supervisor, Reader Two is the Instructor of the MA Thesis Seminar you enroll in during your final term).

**Submission and Grading**

Once the thesis supervisor has read and approved the thesis, the student may submit his or her work. The thesis deadline is established three times per academic year: May, August, and December. The thesis can receive a high pass, a low pass, or a fail. If the thesis does not pass, the student may revise and resubmit the thesis.

**Reusing old material**

Students are allowed to use previous research as the basis for their MA thesis. Students should not directly reuse over 1/3 of any paper for their MA thesis. They can use ideas and research from previous work, but they should not re-use more than 1/3 of the written work, a violation that would constitute self-plagiarism. Students should work closely with their supervisor and/or academic advisor to make sure that they are producing a predominately, new piece of work.

**The research question**

Having read relevant literature on the topic of interest to you, you must focus more specifically on a 'research question'. This is of fundamental importance as it will ensure that your thesis has a clear focus. It is not the same as your research topic; **it is a specific question that you want to try and answer.** Your research question needs to be defined with care and your thesis supervisor will help you to do this. Your research question is integral to the structuring of your dissertation.

**Methodology**

As you are choosing your topic and defining your research question you will also have to decide
upon the conceptual approach, or 'methodology', that you will adopt. Methodology concerns the relationship between your theoretical stance and the manner in which you conduct your investigation.

**Empiricist**

All theses involve the use of empirical evidence (even if it is existing evidence reported in the relevant literature), but what is called empiricism is an approach to evidence that is aligned to the conventions associated with the natural sciences. It is concerned to explain external realities from an objective standpoint.

**Interpretive**

These are no less rigorous in their use of evidence than empiricist approaches, but interpretivism is a stance that characterizes a major strand within the social sciences. It is concerned to understand the nature or meaning of the social world from the subjective standpoint of the people involved. It tends to deal in processes of qualitative observation.

**Critical**

Any theoretical approach can result in criticism of international relations, but a critical approach to the use of evidence is one that is grounded in the analysis of social conflict or relationships of power (for example, Marxism, feminism, or post-structuralism). A critical approach may draw on elements of either or both of the other approaches insofar as they help to explain or understand international relations, but it is skeptical of empiricism and interpretivism because they do not necessarily question the underlying basis of the status quo.

Many International Relations theses are 'applied' rather than 'theoretical', and you may find it difficult to be explicit about your chosen methodology. It is important nonetheless to acknowledge that no dissertation can be free from the conceptual assumptions and the values that you yourself bring to it. You are encouraged to take any of these approaches, but you are required explicitly to reflect within the dissertation upon the basis of your approach.

Following are guidelines to structuring your thesis for an empirical study and for a literature-based study.

**STRUCTURING YOUR THESIS – An empirical study**

If you are doing a piece of empirical research, a common structure is as follows:

- Abstract
- Introduction, including research question and structure of essay
- Literature review and policy context
- Methodology and research methods
- Findings and analysis
- Discussion and implications for policy
- Conclusion
It is also a good idea to look at the structure used in published peer-reviewed empirical studies.

**Abstract** The abstract (summary) outlines what you did and what you found.

**Introduction** The introduction will give details of the research topic you have decided to focus on, why the topic is of interest, what the gaps are in knowledge, how your dissertation 'adds value' to previous research (i.e., what is new). It should also include your research question (and any sub-question(s)). The introduction should provide a brief overview of the structure of your dissertation (i.e., what different sections/chapters will focus on).

**Literature review and policy context** The literature review should include literature that is pertinent to your research topic and the policy context. It should critically evaluate earlier work in the field, paying due attention to its contributions, and to any methodological problems and limitations involved.

Your literature review might draw on:

- policy documents
- legislation
- statistics – from government sources, from surveys
- research studies
- relevant theory

Having identified gaps in the literature and ways in which you can add value to the research, you need to give your research question and explain how answering this adds to knowledge. This is one of the most important parts of your dissertation as it links with your methods and can help with structuring your dissertation.

**Methodology and research methods** Give details of the methods you have used (sample, procedure etc.). Why have you used these methods? How do they enable you to answer the research question? Why are you using a quantitative or qualitative approach? What are the strengths and limitations of your methods? To what extent, if any, will you be able to generalize on the basis of your research?

If you are carrying out primary research you need to say how you obtained your sample, how you have ensured anonymity of participants, and any other ethical issues. You need to explain how you obtained data, via interviews, questionnaires etc. If you are carrying out secondary data analysis you need to describe the data set you are using and relevant variables.

If you have carried out empirical work, remember the need for informed consent and confidentiality (do not use actual names of individuals or organizations, institutions etc.). (See Research Ethics on GSAS website for more information)

**Findings and analysis** These can be presented in different ways and will vary depending on
whether your research uses quantitative or qualitative methods.

**Discussion and conclusions** (these can be separate sections) The discussion links your findings with the research question and literature review. Where there are differences, discuss possible reasons. It is important in this section that you reflect critically on the limitations of the empirical research you have undertaken. The conclusions drawn should be substantiated from within the body of the essay. What are the implications for policy and for future research?

**STRUCTURING YOUR THESIS – A literature-based study**

For a literature based dissertation a possible structure is as follows:

- Abstract/summary
- Introduction - explain the purpose of the long essay, give research question, describe the structure
- Describe types of source material used (methodology and research methods)
- Critically analyze theory, concepts and bodies of research and other literature relating to your research question
- Discussion and implications for policy
- Conclusion
- References

A well-argued dissertation is easy to follow. Essentially, you are trying to tell the reader a story. You will aid clarity if you break up the argument into clear steps.

**Abstract** The abstract (summary) outlines what you did and what you concluded.

**Introduction** This will give details of the research topic you have decided to focus on, why the topic is of interest, what the gaps are in knowledge, how your dissertation 'adds value' to previous research (i.e., what is new). It should also include your research question (and any sub-question(s)). The research question should help with structuring your dissertation. You may be putting forward a particular argument and you can give this in your introduction with the issues that you are going to address. The introduction should provide a brief overview of the structure (i.e., sections or chapters).

**Methodology and research methods** This is likely to be a short section giving details of the types of material you have used, books, peer-reviewed articles, grey literature, press reports, internet based materials. It will also highlight any limitations. You need to be aware that some internet sites may be putting forward particular perspectives, so you will need to take this into account in your dissertation. You should also be aware of the limitations of 'grey' research (i.e., material that has not been through a peer review process).
Analysis of literature  You are likely to have several chapters/sections that focus on different aspects of your research question/argument. You will also need to explore the policy context. Your analysis might draw on:

- policy documents
- legislation
- statistics – from government sources, from surveys
- research studies
- relevant theory

Your analysis should critically evaluate earlier work in the field, paying due attention to its contributions, and to any methodological problems and limitations involved. It should also pay due attention to theoretical problems and controversies, and to key findings.

Since there is no major empirical component to the dissertation, the examiners will pay particular attention to matters of scholarship. They will expect your dissertation to be especially thorough and critical in its handling of the issues and in its development of the arguments it puts forward.

Discussion and conclusions (these can be separate sections)  The discussion links your findings with the research question. The conclusions drawn should be substantiated from within the body of the dissertation. What are the implications for policy? Are there implications for future research?

THESES LENGTH AND COMPONENTS

The thesis should be approximately 15,000 words in length. Theses are allowed to be 10% higher or lower than the approximate length. Theses that fall outside of this range may be penalized.

Components of your thesis may include:

- title page
- acknowledgements
- list of acronyms
- glossary of terms
- table of contents
- statistical tables and illustrative material
- footnotes/endnotes
- index

The reference list (bibliography) and appendices are NOT included in this word limit.

Tables, graphs, figures must be clearly numbered, titled and sourced. It is advisable to use the chapter number as a prefix. Tables in chapter 2 will, therefore, be numbered Table 2.1, Table 2.2 etc. Figures will be numbered in the same way, i.e. Figure 2.1, Figure 2.2 etc.
Thesis Research Outline

Before proceeding to write the thesis students have the opportunity to submit a research outline to their supervisors for discussion. The outline is meant to assist students in preparing their research strategies and clarifying the tasks that need to be undertaken to complete a satisfactory piece of work. There is flexibility in the structure of the outline, but it should contain the information as outlined below. Outlines will be further developed and refined in the MA Thesis Seminar, however, it is in your best interest to attempt to organize your thoughts and ideally conduct reading and research over the winter break before you start the thesis seminar.

Guidelines for Thesis Research Outline

1. **Title:** This should be carefully phrased to give a clear indication of the aim of the project and should not be too long. Direct the reader's attention explicitly to the central problem. The thesis title should relate clearly to the focus of the research. The title will become clearer as your research and write – it is normal to pick a title for your thesis after writing it, rather than before.

2. **Problem or Issue:** There is a central issue or group of related issues at the core of any project. You should say what the problem for investigation is; provide a context for its consideration and a justification of its importance for study. Delineate the crucial aspects of the problem requiring investigation and what areas will need to be considered to provide a better understanding of the chosen problem. Your case for studying an issue and the strategy with which you approach it will be strengthened if you demonstrate that the subject has not been adequately dealt with in the existing literature. You will not be able to review all the relevant literature but you should be able to reflect some major differences of viewpoint or approach by becoming familiar with some of the principal works that have touched on the problem. These should be stated succinctly, not summarized extensively. Remember that there is a significant difference between a field of enquiry e.g. international finance, and a specific problem e.g. the feasibility of control by national states over capital flows.

3. **Theoretical Framework:** This is where you consider the means appropriate for understanding and confronting your research question. What this involves is a discussion of the theoretical elements and guiding assumptions of the study. Whatever your approach there will be some hypothesis that will guide your research and that will suggest which factors or variables of the problem must be investigated in order to answer your central question. You should use the literature studied in your courses to bring in concepts and theories to structure your study.

4. **Structure of Argument:** This should be a rough outline of the way in which the research will be reported. This requires a chapter outline presented not just as a list, but also as a logically connected series of distinct points. It could finish with mention of the principal points on which you would expect to be able to reach a conclusion (but, of course, not the conclusions themselves).

5. **Bibliography:** List the principal sources that will be used to guide research with reference to: the theoretical framework; the substance of research; primary sources; possible interviews or
Please NOTE: all sections should reinforce each other and stand together as a coherent whole. For example, discussion of the problem will be influenced by the choices made regarding the theoretical framework and will make reference to texts in the bibliography.

Rough Guide to Length and Space Allocation

- Problem 1 page
- Theoretical Framework 1/2 page
- Structure of Argument 1 page
- Bibliography 1 page

Total 4-5 pages

As outlined above, a thesis may be either a critical analysis of a theoretical problem or the result of an empirical project. In either case it must review the literature and include a full bibliography. There is no one prescribed structure for thesis. There must be a statement of the aims of the thesis either as the first section or included in the Introduction. We generally recommend subdivision into sections or chapters, including an Introduction and a Conclusion (5-7 chapters or sections would not be unreasonable). Judicious use of subheadings within chapters can be helpful to readers but remember to be consistent about style (use of bold type, italics, etc.) for a given level of heading.

You may wish to include additional material in appendices, for example, depending on your topic, supplementary statistical material, extracts from official publications, a technical glossary, literature search strategies, methodological details, etc. All essential material, however, should be contained in the main text.

Thesis presentation

The thesis should be typed or word-processed, with either 1.5 or double spacing for the main text, and include a bibliography following a recognized style (preferably Harvard). Pages must be numbered. A high standard of presentation, grammar and spelling is expected.

MA students should follow the guidelines for doctoral students in GSAS at NYU. A precise PDF document outlining formatting issues can be found here: http://gsas.nyu.edu/docs/IO/4474/formattingguide.pdf
Cover page

Your cover page will differ slightly from that for the GSAS PhD formatting guidelines and should be as follows:

Title
by
Your Name
An thesis submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in International Relations Program in International Relations New York University
Month, Year

Advisor Names & Signatures

The Thesis Timeline Checklist

In the penultimate semester to graduation:

- Meet with Academic Advisor to Discuss appropriate faculty for Thesis Supervision and Possible Thesis Topics.
- Select Thesis Advisor
- Complete MA Thesis Proposal Form, submit Supervisor Form to IR Office

In your FINAL semester

- MA Thesis Seminar, bring Thesis Proposal to first meeting
MA Thesis Supervision Form

Complete and return this form to Tina Lam, IR Program Administrator @ 19 University Place, 5th Fl

Name of Student: ________________________________________________________________

Student University ID: ____________________________________________________________

Expected Date of Graduation (MM/YY): _____________________________________________

Student Email Address: __________________________________________________________

Proposed Thesis Supervisor: ______________________________________________________

Email of Thesis Supervisor: _______________________________________________________

NYU Affiliation of Supervisor: __________________________________________________

Thesis Topic: ________________________________________________________________

____________________________________________________________________________

Please attach your proposed thesis topic description (typed, 12pt, double-spaced). It should be approximately a paragraph in length.

____________________________________________________________________________

Student Signature ______________________________________ Date ____________________

Supervisor Signature ______________________________________ Date ____________________

For office use:

Student enrolled in MA Thesis Seminar ☐

Thesis Seminar Instructor/Second Reader: _____________________________________________

Program Director Signature ______________________________________ Date ____________