

**GUIDE FOR DEVELOPING A THESIS OR GUIDED RESEARCH PAPER AT
HARDING SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY
January 2013**

PROCEDURE

The following is the normal procedure in writing a Thesis or Guided Research paper at Harding School of Theology:

- 1) The student registers in the usual manner of registration and pays all fees incurred.
- 2) The student then consults with the faculty member(s) in his or her area of concentration (and other areas, if an inter-disciplinary study is envisioned) for help in choosing a topic, defining the problem, and understanding the method and sources of research to be employed.
- 3) In conversation with the appropriate faculty member, the student prepares a prospectus. Bearing the approval of this advisor, the prospectus for a thesis is to be presented to the Dean in sufficient quantity for distribution to all faculty members, along with a letter to the Dean indicating a request for faculty approval of the topic. This letter and prospectus must be submitted to the Dean no later than **December 1** of the academic year in which the student expects to receive a degree. Distribution of the prospectus will be made by the Dean's office. A prospectus for a Guided Research paper should be given to the student's professor for evaluation and feedback.
- 4) The thesis prospectus is considered by the faculty. The prospectus may be approved or rejected or suggestions made for improvement of the proposal.
- 5) The student will be notified by a letter from the Dean concerning the faculty's decision and the thesis committee, which consists of a chair and two readers.
- 6) The student writes the thesis in consultation with the thesis committee. The role of the committee is determined at the outset with the chair. Normally, the chair will work with the student to revise the chapters and determine when they are ready to be read by the members of the committee.
- 7) The student must apply for candidacy for degree by the **first week of November** of the academic year in which he or she hopes to graduate.
- 8) The first draft of the thesis must be submitted to the chair of the thesis committee by **January 15**, and must have the approval of the readers no later than **March 1**. All drafts must be typed. In submitting the thesis the student should allow ample time for the committee to read it and for making the recommended revisions. The final draft will be due no later than **April 1**. Deadlines for various stages of a Guided Research paper should be specified in the prospectus. All deadlines must allow time for the

faculty advisor to read the paper and recommend revisions, and for a staff member to read the paper for proper form and typing before the final draft of the paper is typed. All theses and Guided Research papers must follow the 7th edition of Turabian's *A Manual for Writers* and the latest HST "Supplement to Turabian." Further specifications for both types of papers are found in the Student Handbook.

- 9) The student will be notified by the thesis committee chair of the particulars of an oral examination. The exam will usually be of one hour's duration over the thesis and related matters.
- 10) The student must present two approved and unbound copies of the thesis or Guided Research paper to the chair or major professor in time for the faculty member to present both copies, along with a letter of acceptance, to the library by the appropriate date specified in the school catalog. Both copies must be on 8 ½ by 11 inch, 20-weight, 50% or more rag content bond paper.

THE PROSPECTUS

In developing a prospectus, a student should state clearly what he or she is going to do and how he or she is going to do it. This should be stated in clear, precise language. Every prospectus should not be exactly alike, but each should cover some basic steps. A good prospectus entails a precise statement of the problem, reflection on related literature, a statement on how the evidence will be collected and treated, a statement on how results will be reported, a general outline of the document, and a good working bibliography.

The evidence gathered, the method of gathering evidence, and other matters will vary with the type and area of research, but in every case the following items should be stated: the problem, method for gathering evidence, and method of treating and evaluating the evidence gathered. The research may be studying the problem of the authorship of Hebrews, or a statistical study of counseling effectiveness, but in both cases there is a problem, a methodology of attacking the problem, and a method of reporting the results.

Everything in a research paper should help advance and deal with the problem of the paper. Only evidence that helps answer the question of the problem should be included. Likewise, only conclusions that are directly related to the problem should be included. There should be a thread going all the way through the problem, the statement of purpose, the related literature, evidence, results, and conclusions, tying the entire paper together.

The Study Being Proposed

Title

The student should select a descriptive title for the proposed research and prepare a title page according to the instructions in Turabian and HST's Supplement.

The Problem

State in a clear and precise manner the problem which you propose to resolve. In addition to problems, you may wish to have sub-problems in your prospectus. These must help solve the problem. You can thus think of sub-problems as tasks necessary for the solution of the problem. Then, state your purpose somewhat as follows: “The purpose of this study is to” If at all possible, the statement of purpose should be made in one sentence. Examples: “The purpose of this study is to evaluate the effectiveness of Parent Effectiveness Training.” “Who wrote the book of Hebrews?” “Why do church mergers usually fail to produce numerical growth?”

Significance of the Problem

Show the importance of your proposed undertaking. The study may hold importance to you in your own ministry, or it could have significance for a wider audience. Make sure the problem at issue is one worthy of your time.

The Study’s Relation to Other Inquiries and the Researcher’s Preparation

The importance of the study should be demonstrated in the context of the research that has already been completed by others. A statement also might be included concerning the contribution this study might make to others.

Indicate (1) an awareness of the area in which you propose to work and an acquaintance with scholars in the area, and (2) your preparation in the use of research tools and data.

The Direction of the Study

Basic Assumptions and Rationale

Give your “beginning place.” Set forth what you will assume – things you do not wish to prove but that are necessary for your study. Discuss with your professor what assumptions need to be specifically stated.

The student may also need to state the rationale for the design of the study. What is the rationale for the methodology chosen? Why is the research design valid? This is a difficult but important part of your prospectus.

Delimitations

Define your scope exactly. Let the reader know what you consider to have direct bearing on your project. Establish the bounds of your research so that you do not get caught in the pursuit of endless points. A sharp focus will result in higher quality research and enhance the reporting of your findings. If, for example, one’s problem is to study the effectiveness of preaching in Memphis, one should delimit the study to preachers in Memphis.

One should then be aware of the dangers of over-generalizing conclusions beyond the limits of the study.

Hypotheses

Hypotheses are not always needed. They are perhaps used more often in the Ministerial division than in the Biblical, Doctrinal or Historical divisions. However, they may be used in any area of study. The student may have one or more hypotheses which are stated in terms of the problem or perhaps the sub-problems. They may be stated in three forms: a positive statement, a question, or a negative statement (the null form). Examples of these:

- 1) The Client-Centered Method of counseling is more effective as a counseling method than cognitive restructuring.
- 2) Did Paul write the book of Hebrews?
- 3) There is no significant difference in the effectiveness of various preaching methods in growing a local church.

A student is not required to take a position on the evidence in order to make a hypothesis.

A hypothesis is a hunch. Your research will either verify it in part or in whole or prove it false. The purpose of a hypothesis (or hypotheses, if you have several) is to give guidance to the project. It provides a focal point toward which all your efforts are directed.

Definition of Terms

If there are terms which may be ambiguous to the reader, define them. This will be the case with words you intend to introduce with a technical or uncommon meaning. If there are no ambiguous terms, you need not have any definitions of terms.

Methodology

This section should explain how the student plans to gather evidence with which to solve the problem. It should also explain what he or she plans to do with the evidence after it is collected. Every student will have the task of data collection and data treatment. You should think through ahead of time how you plan to do this. If your problem is Biblical, historical, or doctrinal you will more likely gather evidence from historical sources, primary and secondary. The student in the ministerial division may also use the historical method of investigation when appropriate for specific problems. For example, a student might do a historical study of preaching.

If the method chosen is experimental, the data may be collected by means of a before and after test. The method of treatment of the data may involve statistical tests to evaluate the effects of the treatment.

A third broad method of research is descriptive. Examples of this type of research are: survey studies, interrelationship studies, and developmental studies such as growth studies and trend studies. Interrelationship studies include case studies, causal-comparative studies, and correlation studies. The Content analysis study has been a useful descriptive study for ministerial students. This is similar to the historical method, but differs in that the content being examined is more recent than would be the case in historical studies. An example of this type of study would be a content analysis of lectureships of Harding University.

It should be remembered that regardless of the type of research or the method chosen, the student must collect data or evidence and treat it. This method of data collection and treatment should be stated in this section of the prospectus. Are you going to collect the data from libraries, from people, from archaeological diggings, or by other methods? Are you going to treat the data by analysis, by statistical tests, or by some other method?

Data collection and treatment should be thought of in terms of the problem or hypotheses. The evidence you collect should be designed to help answer your problem. The way you treat your evidence should contribute to the solution of your problem. If it does not, your research design is not valid.

Expected Results

This should be a short section in your prospectus. In this section you should say something about how you are going to report the results of your investigation – your evidence. Will you use tables? Will you state your main arguments and the results of your investigation? Every detail possible concerning your plans for reporting results should be thought out and stated in this section of the prospectus. The more you have thought out, the further along you will be with your project. It should go without saying that your results should be reported in terms of either your problem or your hypothesis. If you have a hypothesis and it covers the entire problem, you should work from the hypothesis for the remainder of the study. If you do not have a hypothesis, you should work from the problem. Information that does not contribute to the solution of that problem confuses the issue and should not be included.

Tentative Outline

Provide in outline form a general overview of your proposed paper. This will help both you and the reader to sense the balance and congruency of your plan.

Conclusion

In the prospectus, the student should include a short statement that conclusions will be drawn in terms of the problem and in line with the evidence, and will reflect the results of the investigation. One might also include a statement of recommendations that might grow out of the investigation.

Select Bibliography

Before submitting the Thesis or Guided Research paper, the student should be reasonably certain that information needed is known and available. A select bibliography should accompany the prospectus. It is here that the reader will sense a good deal about the student's readiness for the proposed research.

SOME COMMON MISTAKES IN PROBLEM FORMULATION¹

- 1) Collecting data without a well-defined plan or purpose, hoping to make some sense out of it afterward.
- 2) Taking a "batch of data" that already exists and attempting to fit meaningful research questions into it.
- 3) Defining objectives in such general or ambiguous terms that your interpretations and conclusions will be arbitrary and invalid.
- 4) Undertaking a research project without reviewing the existing professional literature on the subject.
- 5) Failure to base research on a sound theoretical or conceptual framework which would tie together the divergent masses of research into a systematic and comparative scheme, providing feedback and evaluation for educational theory.
- 6) Failure to make explicit and clear the underlying assumptions within your research so that it can be evaluated in terms of these foundations.
- 7) Failure to recognize the limitations in your approach, implied or explicit, that place restrictions on the conclusions and how they apply to other situations.
- 8) Failure to anticipate alternative rival hypotheses that would also account for a given set of findings and which challenge the interpretations and conclusions reached by the investigator.

¹ Taken from Stephen Isaac, *Handbook in Research and Evaluation* (San Diego: Robert R. Knapp, 1971).