
**RIT Department of STS/Public Policy
Public Policy Program
Thesis Guidelines**

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RIT Public Policy Program Thesis Guidelines

1. Purpose

This document outlines the thesis process and general research design considerations related to the RIT Science, Technology, and Public Policy MS Thesis.¹

2. The Role of the Thesis

The thesis is a requirement for the MS in Science, Technology, & Public Policy. It is nominally an 8 credit effort, although some students may request to extend this to 12 credits. The thesis is graded as “R” until complete. Only when complete will a student be certified for graduation.

The thesis is an opportunity for a student to demonstrate independent research capabilities to themselves, the Department, and the science, technology, & public policy field. Conducting a thesis is a time-consuming, tiresome, frustrating, and stressful activity—yet, it has great rewards! Knowing that you have contributed a solid piece of work to the field ought to give you a great feeling of personal and professional accomplishment.

The thesis is much different than a senior project. Since the main point of the thesis is to *contribute* something to the field, it requires understanding the literature in depth, asking and testing research questions, and communicating results to a wider audience. We hope that many of you will turn your thesis into a publication of some sort for a professional audience (or at the very least present your work at a professional conference). When thinking about thesis topics, you must be in the mindset of how your work can push the envelope of what we know a bit further—think about how your work can create new knowledge!

The research questions you will ask will likely be very specific. Importantly, they will also be “testable” in some fashion. Most of you will ask a question or state a hypothesis then construct a research design that will allow you to “test” that hypothesis. Your analytical approach may be qualitative or it may be quantitative—but in the end, it should be getting to the answer of a very specific, well-defined question.

3. Thesis Process

a. Thesis Proposal

Students must first complete a thesis proposal before registering for thesis credit. Thesis proposals will have a sign-off sheet as part of the title page (see attached). This proposal development stage is an important part of your overall thesis effort, and you **MUST** budget time for it. More information about the thesis proposal is contained below.

b. Thesis Committee

¹ The “Basic Research Design” section has been adapted from a similar document developed by Professor Benjamin A. Most Thanks to Professor Rhonda Calloway for introducing this document to the department.

Your thesis committee is very important. The committee includes three people: a primary advisor and two other committee members. The primary advisor will work closely with the student, and time should be allocated in the student's schedule to meet regularly with their advisor. The student may also choose to meet regularly with other committee members, as needed. At the very least, the student should stay in constant communication with all their committee members to inform them about thesis progress. More details about our thesis committee guidelines are in the attached "Policy on Thesis Committees" statement.

In thinking about thesis topics, students should visit various faculty on campus and talk about both the student's and the faculty's interests. Often there are research projects that faculty have "on the back burner" that would make excellent thesis projects. Importantly, the student and thesis advisor should be able to communicate well with each other, as open and frequent communication is needed for a successful thesis.

c. Registering for Thesis

Once a student has sign-off for the thesis proposal, the work begins. The student registers for two quarters of 0521-703. The student registers for thesis under a separate section identified with their primary advisor. The department will arrange for thesis registration once an approved proposal is received.

d. Thesis Defense

The student is expected to defend his/her thesis once completed. This is a public event. Flyers will be printed by the department and distributed on campus. The defense will occur in a classroom setting. The defense involves a 25 minute presentation, followed by a 25 minute Q&A session. After the defense, committee members meet to determine whether the student's thesis is "accepted." In many cases, students are sent back to do some additional work after their defense; however, if you have maintained close communications with your advisors, there should be few surprises and the additional work is minimal. If significant work is required on the thesis after the first defense, committee members may ask that a student defend their thesis again.

e. Final Thesis Deliverable

Once a final thesis is accepted, it must be printed in accordance with library policies. The library will publish the thesis and keep it on record. The student should also have published copies made for the Public Policy Program. (In addition, the primary advisor and committee members typically want a copy). After receipt of a final thesis document, and assuming other graduation requirements are met, the student receives certification from the department for graduation.

4. Components of the Thesis Proposal

You will see many different ways to organize your research. There are books in the library and on-line sources that you should consult. This document presents guidelines that are acceptable within the Public Policy Program.

The thesis proposal should consist of the following parts:

- a. A title page (with room for signature—see attached)
- b. A one-page, single-spaced abstract (approximately 250 words).

- c. The body of the proposal. This should be double-spaced and must consist of the sections outlined below under “Basic Research Design.” Citations should be in APA style.
- d. A detailed milestone chart, preferably a Gantt Chart
- e. A single-spaced bibliography (APA style)

5. Basic Research Design

These notes will inform you about expectations for your thesis proposal. The major headings are provided and must be used. You are encouraged to add your own subheadings.

Abstract (1 page)

The abstract should consist of a short statement of the problem or question and a brief summary of how the problem will be analyzed. The abstract may also end with a statement of your anticipated results.

Introduction (approximately 2-4 pages)

Identify the research problem and tell why it is important to study. This section of the proposal provides the reader with some background about the problem. Explain how and why the question arises. Ask yourself what we would know or understand if we knew the answer to the question. Ask yourself whether or not your analysis could conceivably be expected to provide a definitive answer to the question or a clear-cut solution to the problem.

Literature Review (approximately 7-10 pages)

Present a brief, analytical summary of the major schools of thought or approaches to the problem. This usually involves describing and analyzing the most pertinent 20-30 scholarly documents with respect to their bearing on your general topic and specific research question. Here you need to summarize the state of extant knowledge based on findings reported in other studies. In addition, you are to describe what is not known or well understood; what needs replicating, testing, or further examination; and hence, the reason why you are researching the topic. Note that the purpose here is not to present an encyclopedic or exhaustive survey. The literature should instead be reviewed in a way which sets up what *you* want to do. It should also be designed to build toward the latter stages of your paper in which you will show where your research builds upon or fits into the existing literature.

Methodology (approximately 6-10 pages)

Here, you present a research framework (a model, theory, or set of hypotheses) that will allow you to answer your research question. Simply put, you describe the method that you are going to use to explore your problem and justify the use of this method based on existing literature.

Most of you will want to confront your ideas with data. If so, you must also state your data collection methods and justify these. The data collection techniques must be clearly specified. You can use a subheading such as *Data Collection* for this section. You must specify in detail where and how you will gain access to the data that you will need. This will require a survey of sources in the library, other universities, government agencies, companies, and so on. If you are planning on doing interviews or conducting surveys, specify how, when, where, with whom, etc.

Again, be specific. It will do you no good to get halfway through a project for which some critical piece of information cannot be acquired.

If you are interested in a project which does not include an empirical phase (as is sometimes the case in analytical studies and simulations), explain in this section you will specify the model and undertake some assessment of its utility.

If you are using a case study approach in your analysis, you should discuss which case(s) you will use and how you will use these cases. For example, will you employ a time-series, cross-sectional, single-case study or some other type of design?

Expected Results (approximately 2-3 pages)

You will need to discuss some or all of the following in this section: (a) specifically what you can learn from this study, i.e., what you will be able to infer logically from the different possible results; (b) the likely generality of the results to other cases (i.e., why your work has greater meaning and importance); (c) the limitations of the design; and, (d) the policy relevance of the research.

Milestone Chart and Timeline (approximately 1 page)

You should include a chart that identifies key deliverables and their due dates. It is often useful to start with the end date in mind, and move backwards in time to the present. You should work with your advisor to make sure he/she is “on board” with your milestone expectations.