

M.S.J. Thesis and Professional Project Steps and Guidelines

STEPS IN THE THESIS AND PROFESSIONAL PROJECT PROCESS

1. **Preliminary Idea.** The student develops the general idea for the thesis or professional project.
2. **Concept.** Based on research conducted during the first two semesters, the student develops the idea into a single theoretically grounded concept for the thesis or professional project proposal.
3. **Chair.** The student identifies a Reed School of Media and Communications faculty member whose area of expertise aligns with the proposed thesis or professional project and asks the faculty member to serve as chair. The chair must be a [regular graduate faculty member](#). Once the faculty member agrees to serve as chair, the student notifies the graduate program director and graduate academic adviser.
4. **Proposal Development.** During Year One, the student develops and writes the pre-proposal (preliminary proposal), typically completing it while enrolled in JRL 520. During the first semester of Year Two, the student develops the full proposal under the guidance and supervision of the chair.
5. **Committee.** The student, with guidance from the chair, selects one additional Reed School graduate faculty member and one external member from outside the School to serve on the graduate advisory committee. The additional committee members may be [regular or associate graduate faculty members](#), as long as two of the three members, including the chair, are regular graduate faculty. More details are provided in the M.S.J. Graduate Program Handbook. After the prospective members agree to serve, the student submits the [M.S.J. Committee Request & Approval Form](#) to the graduate program director for approval of the complete committee.
6. **Proposal.** The full proposal must meet the applicable components for a thesis or professional project outlined in this document.
7. **Proposal Defense.** The student must defend their proposal before their established graduate advisory committee. The student coordinates with the chair and committee members to schedule the proposal defense. Students must provide the full proposal to all committee members at least two weeks prior to the defense. At the defense, the student presents and defends the proposal and responds to questions and feedback from the committee. The student must complete any required revisions and receive committee approval before proceeding with the proposed work. To have successfully defended the proposal, all committee members must agree that the proposal provides an appropriate and sufficiently rigorous foundation for the thesis or professional project.
8. **Graduation Application.** The student applies through STAR during the semester in which the final thesis or professional project will be defended. Students in the accelerated program (4+1) must apply separately for BOTH the M.S.J. degree AND the undergraduate degree.
9. **Thesis or Professional Project.** The student researches, writes and develops the thesis or professional project under guidance of the chair and incorporates suggestions from the committee provided during the proposal defense.
10. **Thesis or Professional Project Finalized.** The student provides the complete written thesis or professional project report to the chair for review. Once the chair determines that the work is ready for committee review, the student distributes it to all committee members.
11. **Final Defense Scheduling.** The committee must have at least two weeks to review the complete written thesis or professional project report. Once the committee tentatively determines that the work is ready for a defense, the student coordinates with the chair and committee members to schedule the final defense. The student must notify the graduate program director and office administrator of the defense date, time and location by email and copy the committee chair.
12. **Final Defense.** Student defends the thesis or professional project before the committee. At the defense, the student presents and discusses the completed work and responds to questions from the committee. After the student leaves the room, the committee deliberates and votes to approve the thesis or professional project, often with required revisions, or to reject it. Approval requires a majority vote of the committee. One dissenting vote does not prevent approval.

13. **Revisions and Final Approval.** Following a successful defense, the student completes all required revisions under the chair's direction and submits the revised thesis or professional project document to the chair. The chair determines whether the revisions have been sufficiently completed and whether the final document is ready for submission to ETD. The chair notifies the committee members that the required corrections have been made, and the student provides the committee with a digital copy of the final document. The student must also complete the WVU Libraries ETD Committee Signature Form and provide a copy to the graduate program director and office administrator for program records.
14. **ETD Submission.** The student submits the final thesis or professional project document and any applicable supporting materials through ETD by the University deadline for the semester in which they intend to graduate. University ETD deadlines and guidelines are strict, and the student must follow current ETD formatting, required forms and submission instructions.
15. **Graduation.** The student graduates with the M.S.J. degree after completing all program and University requirements. Congratulations!

PROPOSAL OVERVIEW: THESIS AND PROFESSIONAL PROJECT

Before beginning the thesis or professional project, the student must submit a detailed written proposal for approval by the committee. A well-developed proposal is essential to ensure that the student and all committee members agree on the scope of the proposed work and how it will be conducted or developed.

Both thesis and professional project proposals require a substantial commitment of time, focus and effort. Students should plan to devote the equivalent of at least one semester of full-time academic work to complete the proposal.

The following components should be included in the thesis or professional project proposal:

Introduction: The student clearly articulates the purpose of the proposed thesis or professional project and provides relevant background. For a *thesis*, the introduction should identify the research problem and introduce the applicable theoretical framework. For a *professional project*, it should identify the professional problem, need or opportunity the project will address, and applicable theoretical guidance. The section should also establish relevance, explaining the significance of the proposed work and the contribution it is expected to make to the field.

Literature Review: A review of related, relevant research and professional literature is essential in any scholarly endeavor to situate the proposed work within the current context of the field. A detailed discussion of the theoretical basis/bases for the work and key variables should be included, guiding the reader from the origins of the topic to the most recent findings in the field. In short, the literature review grounds the proposed work in prior research; identifies key gaps in knowledge; and allows the student to develop a narrative leading to specific research questions and/or hypotheses for a *thesis* or to clear objectives and a research-informed approach for a *professional project*.

Research Question(s), Hypotheses and/or Objectives: Based on the reviewed literature and the nature of the proposed work, the student proposes research questions, hypotheses, and/or scholarly or professional objectives that the thesis or professional project will address.

Thesis: Based on the reviewed literature, the student proposes research questions, hypotheses and/or scholarly objectives to be addressed through data collection and analysis.

Professional Project: Based on the reviewed literature and professional context, the student identifies the questions or objectives that will guide the project's development, execution and evaluation. These questions or objectives are not necessarily intended to test theory; instead, they guide the project and help address the professional problem, need or opportunity on which the project is focused.

Method/Approach: In addition to demonstrating mastery of the theory and literature that will guide the student's work, the proposal must provide a detailed plan of how the research questions, hypotheses and/or objectives will be addressed.

Thesis: Specify in detail how the research questions, hypotheses and/or scholarly objectives will be answered (RQ), tested (H), or addressed (RO) and why the selected method or approach is appropriate. Define terms, variables and any other words that have specialized meaning in the study. Discuss the sampling technique(s) and how the sample will be selected. Explain how data will be collected, what instruments (e.g., questionnaires, interview scripts, codebooks) will be used, and how the data will be analyzed. Describe any primary and secondary sources to be researched and how they will be found/obtained.

Professional Project: Provide a detailed description of the work to be completed, including where and when the project will be carried out. Identify the applicable area of journalism, media, strategic communication specialty or area of emphasis for the project, such as advertising, public relations, news-editorial, broadcast, documentary or visual journalism. Explain the project timeline and work schedule; the research and approach that will guide its development; the materials or physical evidence that will document its completion; and how the project will be formally assessed, published, disseminated or delivered to its intended audience.

Bibliography/References: Include a complete list of the scholarly, professional and other sources used to develop the proposal, including background or informational interviews when applicable.

Appendices: Include relevant supporting materials, such as research instruments (e.g., interview script, questionnaire, code book) and a proposed timeline for completing and defending your thesis or professional project.

When in doubt about any aspect of your proposal, consult your committee chair.

COMPLETED THESIS AND PROFESSIONAL PROJECT OVERVIEW

A completed thesis or professional project incorporates all the applicable elements of the approved proposal, with the method or approach section updated to reflect the work as completed (i.e., the past nature of the activity). The final document should also clearly demonstrate how the student fulfilled the commitments established in the proposal. The following sections should be included:

1. Title page
2. Abstract
3. Acknowledgements
4. Table of contents
5. List of tables (if used)
6. List of figures (if used)
7. Introduction
8. Literature review
9. Research questions, hypotheses and/or objectives
10. Method/Approach, updated to reflect the completed work
11. Findings or Professional Project Review

Thesis: Analysis of the data collected to answer the research questions, test the hypotheses and/or address the scholarly objectives.

Professional Project: A chronological or logically organized description and documentation of the completed project, including evidence of completion, implementation or dissemination, as applicable.

12. Discussion and Implications/Evaluation

Thesis: Interpret the findings, explain their meaning, discuss the study's limitations and identify implications and recommendations for future research.

Professional Project: Evaluate the completed project, including an assessment of what was learned, what worked, what did not work, and recommendations/suggestions for future professional practice or further development.

13. Appendices (as relevant)

Research instruments or data-collection protocols (e.g., questionnaire, interview script, code book)

IRB approval documentation

Participant consent forms

Professional project deliverables, supporting materials or evidence of completion

14. Bibliography/Reference List

Reminder: The complete written thesis or professional project document must be provided to all committee members at least two weeks before the final defense. The final document and any applicable supporting materials must be submitted electronically through ETD in accordance with current University formatting, documentation and submission requirements.