

Guidelines for Journalism Project in Lieu of Thesis

Who should complete a professional project in lieu of thesis?

There are no hard and fast rules for who should and shouldn't complete a traditional thesis versus a professional project. Your decision should be dictated by your educational background, professional goals and the question you want to explore. In general, if your long-term goals after completing the master's degree include going on for a doctorate, you should write a traditional research thesis. A Ph.D. is generally considered to be a research degree, and completing a thesis can give you a better understanding of how to carry out successful mass media research. In addition, some doctoral programs now will not admit students whose master's work did not include the completion of a thesis.

On the other hand, if you are fairly confident that you don't intend to pursue a Ph.D. and are interested primarily in professional work as a journalist, then it may make more sense to complete a professional project in lieu of thesis. A professional project can help you to demonstrate the ability to plan and complete a significant journalistic work. Ideally, your project should be something you can use to demonstrate your professional competence to prospective employers.

One further consideration that will help you decide between a thesis and a professional project is the question or issue you want to explore in your work. Some questions – for instance, those examining how journalists approach a particular problem, how a particular issue has been covered, what influences journalists to take or not take certain actions – may be more appropriately examined via a traditional thesis. However, if issue you want to explore is likely to be of interest to a non-academic audience – for instance, the sort of issues that might be discussed in newspapers, magazines or websites – then a professional project may be the best approach. Your advisor can help you define clearly the questions you want to examine and determine which approach will be most suitable.

What kind of work can I do for a project in lieu of thesis?

Students have developed a variety of professional project ideas. Perhaps the most common approach is to write an in-depth series of articles, generally all revolving around a single topic. For instance, previous students have written series examining the decline of the Washington state salmon fishery and the impact on traditional fishing communities, on the Green Party in Florida and its impact on national elections, and on sexual harassment of students and teachers in the public schools.

However, professional projects need not be limited to writing. Some students have chosen to develop prototype magazines, complete with business plans, for their projects. Others have developed Web-based projects. Some students have produced series for which they did both the writing and the photography.

Perhaps the smartest choice you can make is to choose a project that fits with your professional goals. If your goal is to work as a health care reporter for a metropolitan newspaper, then it would make sense to write a series of articles on a significant health-related topic. If your goal is to write for a sports-related magazine, then it would make sense for your professional project to involve the kinds of stories you'd expect those magazines to publish. If you want to work in online journalism, you may want to develop a Flash project or some other type of web-based professional content.

How do I get started on a professional project?

This first step – coming up with your project idea – is really up to you, although discussions with your advisor and/or other faculty members certainly can help. Initially, you'd probably want to decide what type of project you want to complete – a series of articles, a magazine prototype, a web-based project, etc. Then, you'll want to decide on a topic of some sort – something appropriate to the type of publication you've chosen. In addition, the project ideally should be connected somehow to the coursework you've completed or that you intend to complete as part of your program. So, for instance, if you've taken several courses related to gender studies, it would make sense to choose a project that has some relation to gender studies. If you've chosen outside specialization courses in environmental issues, it would make sense to plan a final project related to environmental journalism. As you can see, this suggests that it's wise to begin thinking about your project focus before you've finished all of your coursework so that you can take a course or two to help prepare you for your project.

Similarly, your professional project should be closely related to the skills you've developed as part of your master's program. If you have taken most of the courses we offer in online journalism, then it makes sense to choose a Web-based professional project. Do not attempt to use the project as a forum through which to learn a whole new skill. If you have no experience whatsoever with Web design, you're not likely to succeed with a project whose focus is building a Web site of some kind.

One reason for choosing a project topic relevant to coursework you have taken is that it should make building your committee significantly easier. Although you do not have to limit your committee to faculty members with whom you have taken courses, in most circumstances, at least one of your committee members should be someone with whom you have taken one or more classes.

How do I put my committee together?

In most cases, after you have a fairly good idea of what sort of project you want to do, you should make an appointment to meet with the faculty member who seems most appropriate to serve as chair of your committee. This person may have been serving as your adviser (formally or informally), may have been the instructor for one or more courses you have taken or might simply have a particular interest in your topic. During this initial meeting, you will discuss your project idea, seeking the faculty member's

guidance about a specific focus, approach and other faculty members who would be helpful as committee members. (Of course, the final choice of committee members is up to you, so long as those you choose are willing to serve on your committee.)

Prospectus

Either before or after your meeting with the potential chairperson but before approaching other committee members, you normally will write a brief prospectus for the project. This paper, usually about five pages long, explains what you plan to do, the need or purpose you see for the project, the methods you plan to use, etc. It is also helpful if you include a timeline for completing the project. (You'll find more about setting realistic expectations for how long you'll need to do your project later in this document.) The prospectus is important because it helps prospective committee members decide whether they believe they can provide useful guidance for you on the project. Take care with the writing – faculty members may be reluctant to agree to work with a student who is sloppy in producing his/her prospectus.

Most committees consist of three members of UF's graduate faculty. College rules require that at least two members of your committee, including the chair, must be graduate faculty of the College of Journalism and Communications. In some cases, it may make sense to have your third committee member be someone from outside the College, particularly if your project will require some subject area expertise (i.e. health, environment, education, business, computer science). You can have more than three committee members, if you wish, but be aware that the more committee members, the harder it is to find meeting times that fit everyone's schedule. Instructors who do not have graduate faculty sometimes are allowed to serve as "special members" of master's committees; in these cases, the chair of the committee writes a letter to the associate dean for graduate studies explaining why that individual's expertise is needed on the committee. There could be more than one "special member" on a committee, but each committee still must include two members of the graduate faculty of the college.

How long will it take to complete the project?

Although it may sound flippant, the correct answer to that question usually is "longer than you think." In most cases, a student who works consistently and diligently on his/her project can complete it in two semesters – one semester to develop the project proposal, meet with committee members and refine the project plan and one semester to gather the necessary content and produce the work. Because the graduate school considers a project-in-lieu-of-thesis to be a type of comprehensive exam, there is no early deadline for completion, as there is for a thesis. **HOWEVER**, be aware that you must have **ALL** the work completed and defended to your committee members' satisfaction before the end of the semester in which you hope to graduate. The norm is that a student will need to make revisions, sometimes substantial revisions, to the project after he/she "defends" the project before his/her committee. Thus, it is best to plan to schedule your defense **at least** two weeks before the end of the semester. Courtesy requires that, in most cases, the committee members will have 10 working days to read/review the project

before the defense meeting, which means that you will need to have completed the final pre-defense draft a month before the end of the semester.

IMPORTANT: Poor planning on your part does not constitute a crisis for your committee members to solve. Committee members are under no obligation to review your work on short notice or to accept a project that does not meet professional standards, regardless of how close it is to the end of the semester. If you do not set a reasonable timeline or if circumstances make it impossible for you to complete the project to an acceptable level of professionalism before the end of the semester, you will not be able to graduate that semester. Do not expect your committee members to accept an incomplete or unprofessional project to prevent you from having to register for another semester's worth of project credit.

In addition, you should be aware that doing most or all of the work you expect to do on a project before your committee has met to approve your proposal most likely will mean you've wasted your time and have to start all over again. Get your committee's approval of your completed proposal before you start writing the series, building the website, etc.

What does the project proposal include?

Your project will include at least two major elements – the proposal and the actual product, whether that product is a series of articles, a website, a Flash-based interactive database, a photo essay, a magazine prototype, etc. The proposal represents the critical planning stage of your project; hence, you should take as much care with developing the proposal as you will take with the part of the project intended for presentation to your target audience.

Section 1—Purpose and Need

The first section is, in essence, your answer to the question “Why should we care?” In this first section, you will describe the background that leads you to believe the work you propose to do is useful to and/or needed by the intended audience. For instance, if you're proposing to write a series of articles about the problem of homelessness in Florida, your first chapter would include statistics about the numbers of homeless people in Florida, descriptions of the problems the homeless face and the problems they create for local governments, etc. In addition, you'd probably provide some discussion of the key issues related to homelessness. Much of this information will end up doing double-duty, given that it's highly likely that you'd include most, if not all, of this same information in the articles you'll ultimately write. The section also would include a discussion of which target audience you hope to reach and why that audience needs the information your articles would provide.

Obviously, if you're proposing a project other than a series of articles, the rationale for your project may be somewhat different. Nonetheless, the purpose is the same: to build a case for why the work you intend to complete through your project is needed. In some cases, it may be appropriate to think of this first section as a kind of extended memo you might submit to an employer if you were seeking support to do the project for a publication for which you were working. In addition, the information-

gathering process you will do for this section is the kind of backgrounding you normally should do before beginning the reporting of an in-depth journalism project. The length of this first section will vary from one project to another, but you should expect it to be at least 5 pages long.

Section 2—Analysis of Previous Work

The second section is analogous to the literature review chapter in a traditional thesis. As such, your purpose in the second chapter is to investigate and analyze work that already has been done professionally that may be similar to what you're proposing to do. This analysis gives you the chance to learn from what others have done, with a view toward emulating the best work you find and avoiding the mistakes you identify in others' work. Using again the example of a series of articles about homelessness in Florida, for the second section, you might conduct a Lexis-Nexis search to identify longer articles dealing with homelessness published in newspapers throughout the United States. You would not formally content-analyze those articles, but you would read through at least the longer, more substantial articles to help you see what approaches others have taken to the subject. Again, the goal for this aspect of the project is to develop your own sense of "best practices" for the particular type of project you'll be doing. In addition, in some cases this analysis will help you to avoid producing work that duplicates something that already has been done. As with the purpose section, the length of this section will vary from one project to another, depending in part on how much similar work you find to examine to help you in planning your project. However, in many cases this section may require five to 10 pages.

Section 3—Methods

As is the case with the methods chapter of a traditional thesis, this section is dedicated to an explanation of what, precisely, you propose to do for the project. If you are proposing a series of articles, how long will they be, how many stories will there be, and what do you foresee as the primary focus of each? (Obviously, this may change to some extent as you get further into the reporting process, but it is still useful to begin with an idea of what you believe you'll cover in each story.) If you're proposing to produce a Web site, what type of content do you expect it to include, and from what sources will that content be drawn? Will you produce all of it, or will some be drawn from other sources? For content you don't produce, you will need to explain how you will obtain permissions for use of the content. The main purpose here is to state explicitly what the end product will be and what steps you will take to produce that end product.

Discuss the particular skills, knowledge and assets you will need to complete the project and indicate which ones you already have and which remain to be learned or acquired. For instance, if you are primarily trained as a writer but intend to include photographs in the final project, how will you develop the necessary expertise to produce professional-quality photographs?

This section should include an analysis of the target publication or venue in which you'd expect your final product to appear. For instance, if you're proposing a new section of an existing Web site, you will need to conduct a thorough review of what's already

available on the Web site and how your proposed addition will fit in or what it might replace. If you're proposing a series of magazine articles, you will need to analyze the target magazine to ensure that you have a thorough understanding of the magazine's audience, what needs the magazine attempts to serve for its readers, what tone the magazine typically uses to address readers, etc. Including this analysis, the methods section may well run eight to 10 pages.

What happens after I've completed the proposal?

The exact procedures you'll follow will depend upon the preferences of your committee members. Some will want to review your proposal at each stage of development; others prefer for the student and chair to work together to develop a final draft of the proposal before other committee members are asked to read it.

In any case, after you have completed the proposal, you will give it to committee members in the form each prefers – electronic or printed. It's appropriate at this time to schedule a meeting of the entire committee to discuss your proposed project, but make sure you give committee members at least five business days in which to read the proposal before the proposal meeting.

The primary purpose of the proposal meeting is to make sure that your committee members understand and agree to what you propose to do. During the meeting, committee members will raise questions about whether the project is substantial enough to satisfy the requirements for a project in lieu of thesis, has significant value for the intended audience, constitutes original work (rather than merely duplicating or re-hashing something that already has been done) and is feasible. In some cases, committee members may insist that the student add to what he or she has proposed to do, while in other cases, the committee may recommend that the student scale back the scope of the project.

After this proposal meeting, it's a good idea for the student to write up a summary of the issues discussed at the meeting and how the committee resolved those issues. In particular, the summary should describe any changes the committee approved in what the student has proposed to do. This summary should be emailed to all committee members to ensure that everyone agrees on what the student will be expected to do.

Committee approval of this proposal, along with the changes agreed to at the proposal meeting, does not guarantee approval of the final project. The student still must actually produce what he/she has proposed to produce, and it must meet the standards the committee deems acceptable. However, it is crucial that everyone has agreed in advance about what the student will be expected to do.

OK, my proposal is approved. Now what?

Now you do the work you have proposed to do. Again, depending on committee members' preferences, you may work only with the chair on each draft or piece of the project, or you may seek all committee members' input at each stage. In any case, you should take responsibility for doing the best possible work at each stage of the process.

Do not expect your committee members or chair to copy-edit your work. You should proofread and/or review each part of the project carefully before submitting it to your chair and/or committee members.

Also understand that committee members will need time to review each element of the project every time you submit it to them. Your project may be the only major task you're working on during this period, but that will NOT be true for your committee members. Do not expect to submit a section of your project to members of your committee and receive immediate feedback.

It will be up to your chair to decide when your project has been completed successfully enough that you are ready to defend it. If the project is not ready, the defense meeting should not be scheduled – EVEN if you're still hoping to graduate that semester. Because the Graduate School considers professional projects to be more akin to an exam than to a thesis, you can defend a project later in the semester and still graduate; however, you're better off to plan to finish at least a month ahead of the end of the semester in which you hope to graduate. Remember, you'll need to give your committee members 10 business days in which to review the project work before the project defense, and you should have at least a week or two to make revisions after the defense and before the semester ends. Setting your own deadlines earlier in the semester will give you the time and flexibility to deal with problems and delays that may arise.

How do I prepare to defend the project?

After the chair has approved the project for defense, you will need to deliver copies of all the materials – usually including the original proposal – to all committee members. Some committee members want printed copies of stories and/or photographs. Others prefer to review the materials on the computer. Each committee member should receive all your documents/materials in the form he/she prefers. Either before or after sending the project materials to your committee members, it is your responsibility to arrange a time when the whole committee can meet for the project defense. Committee members will expect the student to accommodate their preferences for the timing of the defense – not the other way around. Committee members should have at least 5-10 business days to review your project before the defense.

When you have delivered copies of the project to your committee members, it is customary for the chair of the committee to e-mail other committee members to ask them to notify the chair if they perceive major flaws in the project – flaws significant enough that they judge the project not ready to defend. If a committee member does have a serious concern and believes you could not successfully defend the project in its present form, the committee still may meet with you to discuss the problem and help you work out a plan for correcting the flaws. However, this meeting is not considered to be the defense.

It is your responsibility to contact staff in the graduate division to reserve a room for the defense and to reserve any equipment you might need (i.e. PowerPoint projector, speaker-phone if a committee member can't be physically present, etc.). You also should

make sure you bring the examination form, which you can get from graduate division staff, to the defense.

What should I expect at the defense?

A project defense normally begins with the chair asking the student to leave the room briefly so that the committee members can confer about whether the project is ready to be defended. This also gives the committee members time to let the committee chair know if they see problems in the project that are significant but which they believe the student may be able to address successfully during the defense. After this conferral, the chair will ask you to come back into the room.

In most cases, your chair will have asked you to prepare a brief (15 minutes) presentation about your project, reviewing what you did and why and explaining any deviations from the proposal the committee originally approved. Sometimes this presentation will include your discussion of problems or flaws you yourself have identified with the project and what you would do differently if you were starting over on the project. Stick to the time limit. Spending 30 minutes going over your project in detail is unnecessary and wastes everyone's time.

After your opening presentation, the committee members will ask questions and offer comments on and criticisms of the work you have done. In some cases, these will lead to agreement on revisions you need to make before the committee will consider your project complete. In other cases, committee members may have concerns about aspects of the project that cannot be fixed in a reasonable period of time. When these concerns exist, it does not necessarily mean the committee will not approve the project. Instead, approval may depend on how well you respond to the questions and concerns committee members raise – whether you seem to understand the nature of the problem and can explain how you would resolve the problem. You should take notes about the issues the committee discusses. Some students choose to tape-record the defense so that they can review the discussion later while planning final revisions.

After each committee member, including the chair, has had the opportunity to raise questions and make comments about the project, the chair will ask you again to leave the room. The committee members then will discuss whether they are willing to approve the project at all and what revisions they believe you need to make. In some cases, all committee members will wish to see the project again after you've made revisions and before they sign the examination form approving the project. In other cases, they may be willing to sign the form at the meeting but still expect revisions to be made. Occasionally, committee members agree that everyone except the chair will sign the form at the meeting; the chair will review the project again after revisions are made and will sign the form only after he or she believes it has been revised in accordance with the committee's requirements. When the committee has agreed on how they want to handle exam form signatures and what revisions they believe you should make, your chair will invite you back into the room – usually to be congratulated by your committee members.

The vast majority of the time, students who have put their best efforts into

developing and executing the project and who have carefully followed committee members' instructions and advice will defend their projects successfully. However, one possible result of the defense meeting is that committee members may decide the student has not successfully completed the work he or she proposed to do and/or that the work is not of acceptable quality. If the committee judges the work to be so far below an acceptable standard that revisions cannot salvage the project, then the project will fail. In such cases, the chair will ask the student to return to the room so that the committee members can explain what will need to be done for the project to be completed successfully or to discuss alternatives the student can consider to complete the degree requirements (i.e. completing a thesis or taking comprehensive exams).

Assuming the committee has agreed that your work either already is of acceptable quality or can be brought up to an acceptable standard through revisions, you will meet with your chair after the defense (often immediately after the defense). At this time, your chair will review with you the revisions the committee has agreed you need to make before the final version of the project can be approved.

Hurray – I'm finished. Or am I?

Almost – in most cases. It would be relatively rare for the committee members to agree that the project needs no revision whatsoever. In most cases, you'll have some revisions to make. You should make these revisions as quickly (and thoroughly) as possible, especially if committee members wish to see another revised version of the project before they sign the examination form. At this point, you may be experiencing some project burn-out, leaving you tempted to do the minimum amount of work on the revisions. Resist this temptation. In most cases, committee members are demanding revisions because they want you to understand what it takes to produce professional quality work. In the real world, major journalistic projects take time, effort, commitment and many revisions, and you should work hard to ensure that your project-in-lieu-of-thesis is good, not merely "good enough."

After you have made the required revisions, give the revised version of the project to your chair and/or other committee members (depending on what was decided at the defense). In some cases, it may make sense to mark the changes you've made in some way and/or to provide a memo explaining what you've revised and where the revisions can be found. This will enable your chair and/or committee members to review the revisions more quickly and easily.

When all revisions have been made and approved and all committee members have signed the examination form approving the project, either you or your chair will return the examination form to the graduate division staff for processing. At this point, students usually provide all committee members with a copy of the final version of the project, along with the original proposal and any other supporting materials. At this point, you really *are* finished. Congratulations!