

# **SAN DIEGO STATE UNIVERSITY DEPARTMENT OF ANTHROPOLOGY**

## **Guidelines for Developing a Thesis Proposal In Anthropology**

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### **Before Beginning the Thesis**

You should begin thinking about your thesis project as early as possible in your graduate program. It is recommended that you select a thesis mentor no later than the second semester of full-time graduate work (or after you have completed four of the core seminars of 601,602,603,604, or 605). You will need to formalize the committee as discussed in the section below titled “Assembling the Thesis Committee.” Typically you will register for ANTH 797 Research the semester prior to completing your thesis, followed by 799A Thesis Writing the next semester. However, it is possible to take both concurrently. Before you register for 799A you must be advanced to candidacy. Advancement to Candidacy in Anthropology occurs after you have satisfied your language requirement, constructed a thesis committee, and have written a thesis proposal that becomes accepted by your entire committee. If you cannot form a committee, you cannot be advanced to candidacy. Thus, it is critical that you establish a positive and professional relationship with your faculty. Completion of the required coursework alone does not indicate that you qualify to produce a thesis and complete the MA in Anthropology.

### **The Thesis Committee**

A thesis committee consists of two full-time tenured or tenure-track members of the Department of Anthropology and a third full-time tenured or tenure track faculty member from another department related to your thesis topic. An emeritus faculty (retired) may serve as a second or third member but may not serve as the chair of the thesis committee. If you desire someone from outside the university, such a person may serve as a fourth reader. However, the fourth reader must meet the standards of scholarly achievement set by the department and must be approved by the graduate advisor.

Your thesis committee should consist of faculty that you have taken courses with and with whom you have a good professional relationship. The chair should be a faculty member that you feel can guide you theoretically, topically, or geographically. This person will be your primary mentor and will serve as the point of mediation with the rest of your committee. The second member should also have an interest in your thesis topic although it is not unusual for students to ask a faculty member with whom they have established a good relationship to serve on their committee even when it is outside their immediate academic interest. The chair and second reader are your primary advisors. The third member may be a faculty member with research interest in your topic or someone with whom you have taken courses. The third, as an outside member, normally serves in a less active role providing feedback on your work as it relates to the topic on a broad, interdisciplinary scale. Occasionally, the third may be more active and play a critical role in the theoretical or methodological development of your thesis. You will need to establish the level of involvement with the third at the time you invite them to serve on your committee.

## **Choosing a Thesis Chair**

In searching for a thesis chair, you should approach a professor with whom you have had one or more graduate classes. It is a good idea to approach the prospective chair with a fairly good idea of what your thesis project will be; the more clearly you can articulate your idea, the better the chances that the professor understands clearly what you are proposing to do. This makes it easier for the professor to make up her or his mind whether to be your chair. Generally, if the professor and you share a mutual interest in an area of the professor's expertise and the professor knows that your work is of acceptable quality, the professor will agree to chair your thesis. In some cases, the professor may already be chairing so many theses that she or he cannot take on more despite her or his genuine interest in your work.

Before the professor definitely agrees to chair your thesis committee, she or he may want you to prepare a full thesis proposal (see the guidelines below for what a thesis proposal should look like). Each professor has a different policy on this. The purpose of the proposal is to help you articulate your ideas to a point where it is clear to you and to the professor what it is you want to do and how exactly you are going to proceed. The professor will usually help you prepare the proposal for review by the other professors that you are interested in approaching to serve as second and third readers. However, while a professor may agree to work with you on the thesis proposal, this does not mean that the professor is as yet committed to be your chair. A signature on the thesis proposal form alone denotes the commitment to serve as chair or reader.

## **Assembling the Thesis Committee**

As you work on your thesis proposal, you may begin to assemble the other members of the thesis committee. Some professors will agree immediately; others will ask to see your thesis proposal first. You should consult your chair as to when your proposal is ready to submit to prospective committee members. Your proposal may help you in assembling the committee by articulating your goals and describing the proposed project. If they wish, you may discuss the proposal briefly with prospective members of the committee and give them a copy of the thesis proposal. They can study it before they make their decision as to whether they wish to serve on the committee.

**IMPORTANT:** Please read the section "Thesis Committee" in your edition of the SDSU Graduate Bulletin (in the section, "Basic Requirements for the Master's Degree").

## **Preparing the Thesis Proposal**

**IMPORTANT:** Please read the section "Thesis, Plan A and Non-Thesis, Plan B" in your edition of the SDSU Graduate Bulletin (in the chapter, "Basic Requirements for the Master's Degree"). The Department of Anthropology only offers Thesis, Plan A; we do not allow students to take a comprehensive exam for the Master of Arts in Anthropology or Applied Anthropology.

A sound thesis proposal should contain the following elements:

**1. TITLE**

Take this seriously and construct a title that represents your research project.

**2. ABSTRACT**

This should follow the rules of the particular subdiscipline within which you are writing. It should not normally exceed 250 words and should be followed by five key words that will serve as the Library of Congress key word search for your published thesis.

**3. STATEMENT OF THE TOPIC/PROBLEM AND LITERATURE REVIEW**

A description of the “problem area” of the proposed study. This section should demonstrate a familiarity with the major issues and scholarship involved. Think of this section as providing the context for your proposed study. You should provide a brief description of the situation, issues, debates, and questions that motivate interest in the topic by demonstrating your knowledge of the existing literature. Depending on your topic, this may include background data on the particular region/group/problem as well as the theoretical paradigm(s) you intend to employ. This section should also serve as the rationale for the proposed study by demonstrating the need for such a study: Why is the proposed study relevant, interesting, called for, or worth doing?

**4. MAJOR QUESTIONS**

This section elaborates upon the Statement of the Topic by posing the general questions that you will attempt to answer. Alternately, this section may pose and explain the hypothesis or assumption that you seek to substantiate, explain, extend, test, or question.

**5. METHODOLOGY**

This section explains the proposed method of proceeding (archival research, oral histories, ethnography, empirical, textual analysis, observation, data analysis, and so on). This section should also detail the relevance of your methodology to the goals of the study, e.g., how do they complement and strengthen one another? This will also serve as a checkpoint for compatibility with your theoretical paradigm.

If your study involves human subjects in any way, including observations, interviews, or previously collected data from another study, you must secure appropriate permits from the SDSU Committee on the Protection of Human Subjects (CPHS). Contact CPHS at 594-6622 for the procedures and paperwork. The thesis proposal must contain a statement that indicates the research will respect the guidelines set out by the CPHS. For more information on this important topic, consult the section “Thesis Research Involving Human Subjects and Animal Subjects” in your edition of the SDSU Graduate Bulletin (in the chapter “Basic Requirements for the Master’s Degree”) as well as the guidelines put out by CPHS. You should also contact CPHS directly; they are very helpful.

**IMPORTANT:** Begin work on your Human Subjects proposal before beginning any active research: you must secure CPHS approval before you begin data collection or

analysis of existing data from an earlier study. In addition, you will have to work with the committee's deadlines and requests for revision before beginning your research. The CPHS website is <http://www~rohan.sdsu.edu/~cphs/>. Included on this website is an outstanding tutorial. To access it, click on Research Administration and Technology Services, and then click on Research Integrity/Regulatory Compliance. Scroll down to the bottom of the page and click on Education and Training in Research Ethics. Click on the Human Subjects Tutorial and take the tutorial followed by the quiz. You have to take and pass the quiz before submitting an IRB protocol.

## 6. CHAPTER OUTLINE

This section lists the tentative chapters or sections of the thesis and briefly describes their proposed content.

## 7. TIMETABLE FOR COMPLETION

This section presents the timetable for completing the thesis. Allot sufficient time for research, writing, reviewing, and revising. Remember that while interviews are exciting, rewarding, and a primary source of data, they take time. The normal interview will consume about ten hours of your personal time between making the appointment to secure the interview, driving to and from the location, and then conducting the interview. This does not include transcribing the material, coding it, and then interpreting it. If you are unable to complete your data acquisition and interpret the data in time to write your thesis within the same semester then DO NOT register for 799A Thesis Writing. See Below.

Remember that each faculty member should be given a minimum of two weeks to review your thesis for editorial comments. If you are asked to rewrite (most of you will do at least one rewrite) then the entire committee must see the revised thesis before you can schedule your oral defense. Only when all three members have read and agreed that you are ready to defend can you schedule a thesis defense.

**IMPORTANT:** Please make sure to read the section "Submission of Theses" in your edition of the SDSU Graduate Bulletin (in the chapter "Basic Requirements for the Master's Degree") as well as the academic calendar at the beginning of the current edition of the Bulletin for appropriate deadlines for the submission of the thesis. Also helpful is the Thesis Review Service website at <http://www~rohan.sdsu.edu/~gra/Graduate/Thesis/thesis.htm>

## 8. WORKING BIBLIOGRAPHY

This section is a list of primary and secondary sources that will be used in the study. For a well-focused study, about 20 to 25 sources would constitute a working bibliography. The number of sources will be dependent on your Thesis. You should therefore consult your committee chair for further advice.

## **Registering for 799A: Thesis, OR Not Registering, This is the important question.**

Once your thesis proposal is written and then accepted by your Chair, you are ready to send it to the other members of your committee. At this point, get a Thesis Committee Form from the Anthropology Department. This must be signed by all members and the Graduate Advisor before you can be advanced to candidacy. If the committee decides you can accomplish the goals of your Timeline within the same semester then you may register for 799A, Thesis Writing. You will then need to obtain the Thesis Committee Form from the Graduate Division to formally establish the committee. Have the form signed by the chair, readers, and Graduate Advisor. Turn it into the Graduate Division. Now you are ready to register for ANTH 799A. Go to or call the Graduate Division to obtain the schedule number. Before a schedule number will be released, you must:

- Have an official program on file
- Have an accepted thesis proposal
- Be able to complete your data research and thesis writing within the same semester
- Be advanced to candidacy
- Have a completed Thesis Committee Form (either on file or in hand).

If your thesis chair and committee do not believe you can complete the data collection and interpretation in time to produce a final thesis within a single semester then they will recommend that you register for 797 Research and a Special Study 798. Do not rush through a thesis: Remember that you cannot take back the written word and what you write may have a much larger impact than you anticipate. Once you have completed and published your thesis it is there for a very, very long time. This is a professional document and will be read for generations to come – do you really want to be remembered as the person with that awful thesis???

In the event that you register for 799A Thesis Writing and do not complete the thesis, you may register for 799B until you complete the thesis and your oral defense. This course, however, does not qualify for Financial Aid.

Your thesis is the culmination of your coursework, research, writing skills, and oral defense that demonstrate your mastery of the topic in the field of anthropology. The faculty of the Department of Anthropology will work with you to produce not only a fine thesis but an outstanding professional in the field. We wish you the best of luck in your pursuit and look forward to working with and mentoring you through this goal.