

SAN DIEGO STATE UNIVERSITY

Center for Latin American Studies

Guidelines for Developing a Thesis Proposal

In Latin American Studies

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 and after you have successfully completed LATAM 601. You will need to formalize the committee as discussed in the section below titled “Assembling the Thesis Committee.” Typically you will register for LATAM 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 LAS 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 Latin American Studies.

Option B: LAS has the option of comprehensive exams for the completion of the MA in Latin American Studies. Please see the Comprehensive Exams Procedures outline for more information.

The Thesis Committee

A thesis committee consists of three full-time tenured or tenure-track members from the disciplines you have selected to focus your coursework on. 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 Center for LAS and must be approved by the graduate advisor(s). 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 and third members 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 though the faculty interest may be outside the immediate topic of the thesis.

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. You will want 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 s/he can support your research and serve as the 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 s/he cannot take on more despite her or his genuine interest in your work.

Before the professor definitely agrees to chair your thesis committee, s/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. The clearer your research goals and methodologies, the less misunderstanding, disagreement and disappointment will occur in the future. Always remember that it is up to your thesis committee to decide when and if your final thesis is an acceptable measure of the MA in Latin American Studies.

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”).

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 primary discipline 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, 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.

- 5.1. 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). Information on the process for submitting an appropriate protocol are on the Graduate Division website at <http://www~rohan.sdsu.edu/~cphs/>. 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.

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 securing 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.~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. 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 LATAM 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/or 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 Latin American studies. The faculty of the Center for Latin American Studies 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.