The Thesis Process
Approved by Graduate Committee: February 17, 2004

The policies in this manual are intended to govern the graduate educational experience of all History and Area Studies students entering the History Department graduate programs after August 15, 2003.

There are several stages involved in preparing for and writing your master's thesis. The following document contains the specific thesis requirements approved by the History Department graduate program and the Virginia Tech Graduate School. This document also offers useful tips for successfully completing your thesis.

The First Step: Finding a Thesis Adviser
The first step in the thesis process is to identify a member of the faculty interested in historical and/or cultural issues similar to those you want to propose for a thesis topic.

Steps you can take to find a thesis adviser: attend seminars given by the faculty in History, Foreign Languages and Literatures, and Geography; check out the research interests of individual faculty by reading their published books and articles; schedule appointments with faculty members to discuss your interests and theirs; talk to the Director of Graduate Studies or the Area Studies Coordinator; talk to other graduate students. [Note that advice from other students is listed last in this list of steps. It's important that you do your own research on the faculty.]

A faculty member must agree to act as your adviser, and it is your responsibility to ask him/her.

Finding a thesis adviser and a thesis topic is the most important thesis work you will do during your first year as a graduate student.

Statement of Thesis Topic

The next step is to write a brief statement outlining your thesis topic to submit to the History Department Graduate Committee (HDGC). This statement should be no more than a page in length and should indicate your topic and question and a list of the sources you anticipate using to research and write your thesis.

Develop this statement with your adviser and ask your adviser to sign the statement before turning it in to the Graduate Committee.

With your adviser's help, create a list of 4 or 5 professors who could might serve on your thesis committee and append this list to your thesis statement. Please keep in mind that the Graduate Committee has the final authority in deciding who will be on your committee.
This statement of thesis topic is due on April 1st of your second semester of graduate study. (If you entered the program in January, please consult the Graduate Coordinator to determine the deadlines for your thesis.)

The HDGC will review your topic and the proposed members of your committee and advise you about the final composition of your committee. At this point it is your responsibility to meet with these faculty members to let them know of the HGDC's recommendation and to request their participation.

The Thesis Proposal

The fall semester of your second year you must submit a thesis proposal and defend it publicly. The purposes of this proposal are to justify your topic, submit a plan for researching and writing the thesis, and receive suggestions and criticism from the general faculty and your peers.

A draft of your thesis proposal must be submitted to your adviser no later than September 15.

The final copy of the thesis proposal must be submitted to the Director of Graduate Studies by September 30. Students in the Area Studies track must also submit the final copy to the Coordinator of Area Studies.

At this time you must also submit a completed Program of Study form (required by the Graduate School). This form lists the classes the student has taken and the classes that still need to be taken prior to graduation, and also lists the student's thesis committee. Students should meet with the Director of Graduate Studies (students with history concentrations) or the Area Studies Coordinator (students in the Area Studies concentration) to discuss and complete this form.

Any subsequent changes in classes or research hours need to be reported to the Director of Graduate Studies, the Area Studies Coordinator, and the staff in the History Department. A change in the thesis committee requires a formal request which must be processed through the Graduate School. All committee changes must also be approved by the HDGC.

The purposes of the thesis proposal are:
1. to help you clarify what you are writing about and why you have chosen a particular topic;
2. to help you identify weaknesses in your research base and in your argument before you are so far along in the process that you are unable to rectify the problem;
3. to help you narrow the topic to one that is manageable for the thesis project; and
4. to enhance your awareness of the fact that the thesis you write has an audience beyond the narrow limits of your own curiosity and your thesis committee.
You should write the proposal after you have defined the topic and refined the question with the advice of your thesis director and after you have done enough research to formulate an outline of your thesis and organize a bibliography of the major primary and secondary sources you plan to consult.

**Length:** Your proposal should be **ten to twelve pages**, double-spaced, of narrative, excluding your proposed research-and-writing calendar and your bibliography.

You might want to think of this proposal as the first draft of the introduction to your thesis. As you continue to research and write, you will refine this draft and, likely, include it in the final version of your thesis.

**Your proposal should respond to the following questions:**

Part I: What are you writing about?

What significant question are you asking and how does your topic address the question?

Part II.: What are the historiographical, cultural, literary, or theoretical issues your thesis addresses?

What is the current state of the literature? Include references to the most important secondary sources that inform the discussion of your topic. What are the questions scholars in your field have already asked? How have they answered the questions? What sources have they consulted?

Use this section to develop a critique of the existing literature.

Part III: Why are your question and answer significant?

It is not enough to propose a topic just because it has never been done before. You must explain why the topic is significant by setting it within a larger, ongoing conversation.

What will your thesis contribute to that ongoing conversation? Are you asking a different question or providing a different answer to an old question?

Part IV: How will you answer the question? What are your sources and where is that evidence located?

What is your interpretative perspective? Are you looking at the question as a political historian? A cultural theorist? A social historian? A student of gender? A literary critic?

Is there a particular theoretical framework that has influenced your proposal? If so, how?
What are the sources you plan to use? What are their strengths and weaknesses?

Part V: What is your own critique of your proposal? What problems do you see in the design of the question or the research? In the evidence you will be consulting?

These five sections will comprise the narrative of your proposal. In addition, the proposal should include:

A calendar for completing the thesis:
This calendar should include the status of your research (what research remains to be done and when you will do it) and a chapter breakdown with dates by which you intend to have chapters completed.

A bibliography:
Your bibliography should be organized into primary and secondary sources.

Defending Your Proposal
Copies of your thesis proposal will be made available to all members of the History Department and Area Studies program. Soon after you submit your proposal, the Director of Graduate Studies (working with the Area Studies Coordinator and the instructor responsible for History 5104) will assign a date for your proposal defense. All defenses are held in conjunction with History 5104: Historical Methods.

It is your responsibility to alert your committee members to the date of your defense and request their attendance.

Writing Your Thesis
Most theses include three to four chapters, with an introduction and a brief conclusion. They usually range from 75 to 125 pages in length (not including the bibliography).

The thesis writing process varies from student to student. However, you should keep in mind the following guidelines and suggestions.

Structure: One of the most important decisions you will make in writing your thesis concerns the structure of your work. How will you organize your thesis and your argument? If you are writing a narrative history, you may, of course, progress in a chronological format, but you might also want to consider a thematic or topical framework. However, you may also wish to avoid a strictly chronological retelling of events. Consider your argument and choose the most effective means of presenting your evidence. This will help you to frame your arguments and improve the flow of your thesis.

Drafts: You should keep your committee apprised of your progress in writing your thesis. Establish a series of due dates for your chapters, and set a final due date for your project. This helps you budget your time and will give your committee time to read your work.
Most students submit their work by the chapter. Committee members can then provide feedback on your work as it progresses, eliminating errors as they arise and offering suggestions for improvement. Submitting drafts of your work enables you to correct errors and makes the writing (and reading) process less stressful. Ideally, you will have a draft of the first chapter of your thesis by the end of January if you expect to graduate in May.

You should NOT foist your unread "completed" work on your committee two weeks before your defense. This does not permit you adequate time to correct your errors, nor does it allow your committee the time they need to properly evaluate your work. This could also jeopardize your thesis defense. If there are significant problems with your thesis, your work will not be approved by the committee.

Citation Style: You will need to follow a consistent citation format throughout your thesis. The History Department recommends that you consult the *Chicago Manual of Style* before formatting your bibliography. The Department of Foreign Languages and Literatures uses the *MLA Stylesheet*.

The Thesis Defense

Once students complete the thesis they must "defend it." The thesis defense typically lasts one hour. Students are permitted to defend a thesis only after it has been approved by the chair of the thesis committee and the other committee members believe that the student is ready to defend.

At least two weeks prior to your defense, you must submit a form to the Graduate School stating the title of your thesis, your committee members, and listing the date, time, and location of your defense. You can pick up a copy of this form from the Administrative Assistant for the graduate programs; it is called a "Request to Admit Candidate to Final Examination."

The day before your defense, you must pick up from the Graduate School office an "Exam Card." This card must be returned to the Graduate School immediately after your thesis defense.

A student typically begins the defense by briefly summarizing what the thesis argues. You should not restate your entire thesis. Instead summarize your main points and point out the originality of your work. The committee members then ask questions for the remainder of the session. The committee members may then sign the "Exam Card," stating they approve the thesis. If a member of your committee declines to sign the "Exam Card" until you have made recommended changes, additions, or editorial revisions, it is your responsibility alone to make those changes, additions, or revisions and your responsibility alone to coordinate completion of that work with the committee member.
Electronic Submission of Theses and Dissertations

Virginia Tech requires all graduate students to submit their theses/dissertations electronically so that they are available via the internet. You must submit a final copy of your thesis properly formatted on a computer disk to the Graduate School within two weeks of your defense date. For preparation and submission instructions, see the web site at http://www.etd.vt.edu/etd.

The Graduate school also conducts several workshops throughout the semester to teach students how to convert their thesis to Portable Document Format (.pdf). You will receive notification of these workshops via e-mail.