

Tips on How to Begin the Thesis Process

1. Selecting a Topic:

- Choose a topic you are passionate about (i.e. Why did you decide to go to graduate school?—there must have been a strong motive).
- If you are a Research Assistant (grant supported or work study), you have an opportunity to work with a faculty member on research and possibly could expand or focus on an aspect of that professor's research.
- Know what your faculty's research interests are and ask him or her for suggestions about research topics.
- If your employer is financing your education, or if you are on a leave and will return to your job, choose a work related topic that will be of value to you and to your employer.
- Review current controversies in literature.
- Inspiration!

Whatever the topic is, know why the issue you chose is important: what difference does it make and why is it worth studying? If it involves Human Subjects or Live Vertebrate Animals, be sure to check out the BFR website (see below).

2. Methodology:

- Presumably, the issue you choose to address has not been addressed adequately in the literature (the implication is that you have carefully studied the literature). Have proper techniques been applied? Can insights provided by research in other disciplines improve analysis?
- What is the research question? What are some possible hypotheses?
- What is the appropriate methodology for addressing the issue and why?
- Are there limits imposed by the nature of the methodology or the availability of data? Will these limits significantly affect the results?

3. Putting Your Committee Together:

- Find a faculty member who: (1) has expertise in your area of interest, (2) thinks your topic is interesting, (3) has the time to invest in it, (4) has a reputation of getting graduate students to finish on time. Ask this faculty member to be the Chair of your Committee.
- When you are successful in finding a Chair, ask her/his advice on the other two members (one can be from outside your department). Your chair knows much more about other faculty members' expertise and styles than you do. ***It is important*** that the chair be comfortable with, and has trust in, the other members. Also, you must be comfortable with members of the Committee. Be sure to speak with your Chair about any concerns regarding faculty suggested.
- If your Chair or Committee advises you to narrow the topic ***do it***. Your chair has much more experience in research than you do, and can judge what would take a reasonable amount of time and what would take a lifetime. Areas of research that are cut out by narrowing the topic can always be addressed later in your career. Remember, this is a Master's thesis, not a Ph.D. dissertation.
- Discuss with the Chair or Committee about how your progress on the research will be monitored and reported and how frequently you will receive feedback.

4. Data Collection and Analysis:

- Once you have selected a topic and a methodology, and have an approved committee, establish a work schedule and follow it. Do not compromise or take short cuts.
- Establish a reporting or review schedule with your thesis chair or committee to make sure you are on track.
- Do not attempt to collect all possible data that exists: remember that there are time limits for completing your degree. Financial aid also has a time limit for financial support.

5. Funding Your Research:

- External grants: <http://www.ac.wvu.edu/~bfr/external.html>.
- External contracts to do a specific study of value to a specific client.
- Faculty members' grant or contract, if your work is related to the faculty members' funded project.
- Work-Study funds (currently \$14.95/hr for up to 15 hours a week).
- Graduate School funding: up to \$1000, see guidelines. Travel to present papers: up to \$400, see guidelines.
- Your parent, spouse, rich uncle/aunt.

6. Writing, Presenting, and Defending:

- Consult with your thesis chair and committee, your departmental handbook, and graduate school publications for information, guidelines, and deadlines.
- Remember, the process ends with a product, the thesis. In most disciplines this is a written document. After your committee accepts the thesis, the Graduate Dean then reviews the document. Two hardbound copies of the thesis are placed in Wilson Library for access by other researchers, students, and faculty.