

RESEARCH ESSAY GUIDELINES

Masters Coursework Degree Programs

Value: 18 credit points

Length: 12,000 words

Duration: projected over two semesters

Students may only enrol in a research essay if they have achieved a grade point average of 1.8 or better [i.e., for example, = 20 Cs + 4Ps] (equivalent to 72%), except in those masters programs where the research essay is a compulsory component.

Developing a Research Question

Upon enrolling in the research essay students go through a number of steps.

In light of their area of interest, they find a supervisor. With the supervisor they develop a research question to pursue. The question must (1) be of sufficient quality to be pursued at master's level, (2) be able to be completed within the length and time constraints, (3) show competency in the area, and (4) be methodologically sound within the discipline/s. As the research essay is neither a thesis nor purely a research paper contributing new knowledge in a field, it can take a broad range of forms. Students are required to work under supervision, within the set parameters of length and time, and through the structures of the Sydney College of Divinity. The research question is to be developed and written up according to the SCD Research Essay Proposal form.

Where applicable the research must conform to the SCD Ethical Review of Research Involving Human Subjects, and clearance sought from the Ethics Committee (using the appropriate form) before any research involving human subjects has been undertaken.

Ethics clearance

All research involving living human subjects must be carried out in such a way that it protects the welfare and rights of the participants. Every research proposal must also show that the research is justifiable.

Consequently research within the Sydney College of Divinity involving living human subjects requires the review and approval of the Ethics Committee following the guidelines established by the *National Statement on Ethical Conduct in Research Involving Humans*

Research involving living human subjects includes

- information collected directly from or through a person (e.g. interviews, questionnaires, observations of an individual, focus groups)
- accessing secondary sources or non-public materials (e.g. interviews about an individual, personnel records, student records)
- identifiable private information about a living individual (e.g. private papers).

Applications for clearance are forwarded to the Ethics Committee. Ethics clearance must be obtained before the research takes place.

Quality at Masters Level

Students should be able to show an in-depth knowledge of the topic chosen, demonstrate skills in researching that topic, expound the topic systematically employing the appropriate methodology, and appreciate the complexity and ramifications of the topic.

The SCD handbook states: *Masters students are expected to give evidence of a breadth of research and a depth of understanding beyond that of an undergraduate student. In particular, their work should manifest the higher order skills of:*

- *Analysis - the ability to break down what is presented into its component parts and indicate the relationship among those parts;*
- *Synthesis - the ability to re-assemble those component parts into a new whole;*
- *Evaluation - the ability to think critically and originally, making judgments based on relevant principles.*

Supervision

The role of the supervisor is a crucial part of the process. The supervisor directs the candidate. Only when the supervisor has approved the topic can the proposal be submitted. The supervisor is responsible for ensuring the proposal progresses through the various committees, and is the point of contact between the various committees and the student. It is the supervisor who recommends that the essay is ready to be sent for grading. The supervisor, in keeping with the practices of the Member Institution, offers recommendations about suitable examiners.

Approval of research question

The topic and research question must first meet with the approval of the Member Institution where the student is enrolled. Each Member Institution has its own structures for examining the viability of the topic, the authenticity of the methodology within the discipline/s and any ethical considerations. The Member Institution will submit the research essay to the SCD Research Degree Committee for final approval. This committee will set out a series of deadlines for research essays submissions during any semester.

Examination

Students and examiners are to be sent the SCD information sheet *Assessment Criteria and Reporting Guidelines: Masters (Coursework) Degree Level* enabling them to understand the requirements of the research essay. This is to avoid any confusion in the examiners' minds between grading an essay and grading a research thesis. As well, it will inform them of the common requirements for grading. The research essay requires two examiners, one of whom is normally from outside the Member Institution. The supervisor is not eligible to act as an examiner.