Overview

The master's essay provides evidence of the student's ability to independently produce, organize, and complete a substantial piece of professional work for academic credit. As a professional product, the essay should demonstrate the capacity to address a real-world issue or problem relevant to planners. As a final component of a graduate professional program, it should measure up to the academic standards of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences. Since the essay is an opportunity to demonstrate and exercise knowledge and skills developed over the course of the MUP program, enrollment in the Master’s Essay will normally occur after the completion of most, if not all, course work. The essay is normally completed under the direction of a full-time Department faculty member chosen by the student.

Selecting a Topic and an Essay Advisor

Defining the problem and the analysis question is one of the most challenging parts of preparing the essay. The topic must be interesting and substantial enough to constitute a significant learning experience for the student – one worthy of focus for an entire 3-credit course. On the other hand, it must also be narrow and sharply-defined enough that it can be analyzed well in a single semester. Enough literature and data must be available to support a good analysis. It will normally be related to the student’s area of concentration, although this is not required.

Students should begin thinking of possible topics early in the program. Coursework in subjects of deep interest to the student will commonly raise more questions than can be answered in a single course, and some of these may be good candidates for the essay. Coursework also provides an initial basis on which to assess whether enough is already known about the subject to permit a sound analytical framing of the problem; it may also furnish insight into what kind of data would be needed to address the problem well and whether such data are likely to be available within a one-semester time frame.

Good essay questions may also develop out of the student’s observation of planning practice. Practitioners commonly confront challenges that can be better met if good analysis can be brought to bear. Reflecting on the challenges facing public officials or senior staff of nonprofit organizations and the kinds of analysis that would help them do their jobs better can lead to very timely topic/ideas. Working from this perspective, the student might seek to develop an essay that would help a respected professional address a

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1 Under special circumstances the Director of the Program may approve an advisor from another department at WSU or an adjunct instructor with extensive experience with the MUP.
current problem, as if that individual were a professional client, or a prospective employer.

Some students find it helpful to review examples of good essays to get a flavor for the range of possibilities, the desired level of detail, and the quality standards applied by the Department. A binder containing examples of recently completed essays is available for review in the DUSP office.

Whatever the source of topics ideas, students are encouraged to discuss possible topics with as many faculty members as are appropriate. Faculty can help students screen out ideas that are not likely to be feasible, and can help develop and refine promising ideas. Working with faculty in this way can help the student determine which member of the faculty s/he would like to work with.

**Students cannot register for the Master’s Essay (UP 7999) until a faculty member has agreed to serve as their Essay Advisor. The Advisor shall inform the Program Administrator of her/his agreement to serve in this capacity; the Administrator then notes instructor approval in the registration system so the student can complete registration. The Essay Advisor should approve the essay topic before the student registers for the credits.**

Students are normally expected to complete the essay in one term. However, students expecting to graduate in the semester when they write the essay must submit the final copy of the essay before the end of the semester. (For example, a student writing the essay in the fall term and expecting to graduate in December must normally submit the bound essay to the Dean’s office by the first Friday in December.) If the student does not have a well-developed, approved topic in hand at the start of the term, completing the essay on time is extremely challenging.

**The Proposal**

The proposal is the foundation from which the master's essay is developed. Students should view the proposal not as just a description of what they intend to accomplish in the master's essay, but as the first step in the development of the work. In addition to serving as a guide to the student throughout the development of the master's essay, a well-developed proposal demonstrates to the Essay Advisor that the student has a clear vision and plan for accomplishing his/her goals. Thus, it serves as the basis on which the Essay Advisor agrees to supervise the student's work.

The proposal is typically a two-page statement that includes:

- An abstract of one or two paragraphs that states the central question, theme, or problem that the essay or project will address. It is often helpful to formulate the topic in the form of one [or more] succinct questions. The discipline of narrowing a subject so that specific, one-sentence questions can be written proves extremely
helpful in clarifying the focus and scope of the topic. Do not use generalizations.

A discussion of the rationale for the topic. This should include a description of the academic and/or professional context for the work: what is already known about the topic? What is not known? How does this information relate to the proposed work?

A description of the methodology that will be employed.

A preliminary bibliography and, if appropriate, a preliminary scan of available data to support the analysis.

Depending on the topic, the Essay Advisor may require that the proposal be revised or expanded to include additional elements or detail. Students should expect that more than one draft of the proposal might need to be developed before the topic is approved.

Student-Advisor Relationship and Responsibilities

The student and faculty advisor will work together from the development of the initial proposal through to the completion of the final revisions. They agree on a timetable for meetings and submission of drafts. It is the student’s responsibility to keep the advisor apprised of progress. In most cases, students and advisors need to meet four to six times: initially, to finalize a topic, then to review drafts. Keep in mind that the advisor must have enough time to read and evaluate the draft before returning it with comments, and with sufficient time to incorporate comments. Students should also be prepared for the possibility that the advisor will request significant changes to every draft, including the proposed final version.

It is important for both the student and the advisor to understand their responsibilities to insure that the student-advisor relationship is successful.

The faculty advisor should:

• Ensure that the student's proposal is sufficiently detailed so that it communicates the intent and viability of the proposed topic;
• Ensure that the student is meeting the goals of the proposal during the development of the official draft;
• Serve as an academic subject expert to the student, helping to identify source materials, etc.;
• Assist the student in writing a clear, well-argued, cogent essay;
• Provide prompt feedback on drafts, and other interim products; and
• Evaluate the essay and assure that it meets the quality standards of the Department and the College.
The student should:
• Ask the advisor for help when necessary;
• Submit drafts in timely fashion, leaving the advisor adequate time for review;
• Implement changes suggested by the advisor; and
• Keep in contact with the advisor on a regular basis.

The Master's Essay

The essay must measure up to the quality standards of both College and the planning profession. To do this, the essay must exemplify both solid analysis and professional presentation. In general, good analysis has the following characteristics:

• The problem is precisely defined, clearly stated, and placed in context.

• There is a clear and logical framework that guides both the analysis and its presentation.

• The analysis is based on the best available evidence.

• The presentation of the analysis is clear, well organized, supported by the evidence, and illustrated with specific examples.

• The conclusions or recommendations follow logically from the analysis.

The essay should be approximately 45 pages in length (double-spaced) to allow the student to fully introduce and develop the topic, incorporate the relevant literature (as applicable), present the analysis, and summarize the conclusions. It should be structured in several sections or chapters, selected to facilitate a clear and compelling exposition of the important issues and arguments. Additional pages should include references and appendix materials, as appropriate. The title page must be in the format specified by the College; the template is available on the College web site.

Students should select and consistently follow a good style guide that includes guidelines for referencing both printed material and material taken from the Internet. A very good one that is commonly used in planning publications is:


It is inexpensive and widely available. An abbreviated version of this manual can be found at [http://www.press.uchicago.edu/books/turabian/turabian_citationguide.html](http://www.press.uchicago.edu/books/turabian/turabian_citationguide.html). The university library also provides electronic access to several style guides. The portal is [http://www.lib.wayne.edu/resources/guides/reftools/guide.php?id=2](http://www.lib.wayne.edu/resources/guides/reftools/guide.php?id=2); use the American
Psychological Association (APA) rather than the MLA format since it is closer to the formatting commonly used in urban planning publications.

The presentation of data or other technical materials in tables, charts, or maps should also conform to professional quality standards. Excellent guidelines for preparing good tables and charts can be found in:

*Analysis with Local Census Data: Portraits of Change* by Dowell Myers, 1992, Chapter 5.

**Submission of the Essay**

Once the master's essay or project is completed, the student must submit 2 copies, bound according to College specifications; both copies must be signed by the Essay Advisor. Both copies must be submitted to the DUSP office. One copy will then be submitted to the College Dean's office, along with the appropriate WSU Essay Submission form. This form should be completed and provided to the student by the Essay Advisor. An electronic version of the completed Essay should also be submitted to the DUSP Office. The Essay Advisor may also request a copy, and will specify the desired format.