
A GUIDE FOR STUDENTS PREPARING WRITTEN THESES, RESEARCH PAPERS, OR PLANNING PROJECTS

ESSENTIAL INFORMATION FOR WORKING
WITH ANN FORSYTH

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INTRODUCTION

Having Me as Chair

This document outlines the minimum expectations that I have of each student whose thesis or project committee I chair, along with some indications of what you can expect of me. It is intended to help you get the most out of having me on your committee. Following these guidelines means we spend more of our time together making your work of a higher quality. It will also get done faster. If you are doing an unusual document (for example, a children's story book on land use issues), I am happy to explicitly negotiate variations. Otherwise this document contains my minimum set of requirements and I will return work that does not meet these criteria.

I have also written a series of blogs on Planetizen outlining my general ideas about the exit project in planning and continue to write about related topics. The blogs to date are cited in the reference list but you should check the blog at <http://www.planetizen.com/blog/10386> for more recent entries (Forsyth 2007, 2008).

In terms of interaction I am happy to set up a schedule of meetings, preferably during office hours and I typically have four to eight office hours per week during semester time. I will also set up regular meetings during summer when I am chair. I am happy to read multiple drafts but please read the section on logistics so that they are easy to read.

Having Me as a Minor Member

If I am a minor committee member I will respect the committee chair's specific wishes to vary these requirements. Below I describe what you can expect from me as a minor member.

My policy as a minor member is that I am happy to meet with students as much as they like as long as they sign up for office hours during semester time. While I am happy to attend defenses during the summer I typically don't hold office hours.

In addition, as a minor member you can expect me to read the document 1.5 times—which means once thoroughly and once in less depth, or I will read one full version and one partial version. This is more interaction than many committee chairs provide but less than some students would like from a minor member. If you expect more interactions or reviews than that, you should select someone else as your minor member.

PROPOSAL

Structure of Proposal

One common way of structuring the proposal is in four parts (listed below). Although you do not need to follow this outline exactly, any variations should be simple and clear.

1. Introduction.

This is an overview of your thesis, project, or paper. You should state your central question or hypothesis on the first page. (In my own research I generally use research questions but if you want to test a hypothesis I am happy to work with you in doing that.) You should also provide an overview of the contribution of your study, your proposed product, and your methods. A thesis proposal describes its intellectual contribution, that

is what (modest) new knowledge you will generate or what theories you will test or extend.

2. *Review of Current Literature and/or Practice*

This will cite research and/or professional practice and show where your study fits. Remember, this is a review. Merely listing a number of sources is not adequate. Rather you should describe and analyze the sources, relating them to your specific research question or hypothesis. You should explicitly identify where your thesis, project, or paper fits in relation to the works being reviewed (e.g., filling a gap, replicating a previous study in a new context...). A *project* proposal should show a *good working knowledge* of relevant current research and professional practice. A *thesis* proposal should show a *thorough grasp* of current research and in some cases current professional practice. (See below for further guidance on literature reviews.)

3. *Description of Product.*

This section should describe the kind of product you will develop.

- *For a project:* This section should describe the kind of product you will develop (a recreation plan, an educational package...). You should clearly state how the product meets the needs of the client or demonstrates professional competence. Place a detailed outline with headings and subheadings in an appendix.
- *For a thesis:* You will explicitly restate its intellectual contribution (identified in the literature review). Place a detailed outline with headings and subheadings in an appendix.

4. *Research/Study/Planning Methods.*

State specifically how you will go about each stage of your research. Describe all your methods explicitly. Describe all your data sources and how you will go about getting access to them. Provide a summary timeline of about one page. In addition, a *thesis* proposal should demonstrate familiarity with the literature on methods in your particular area by citing specific books and articles. Some of these may be books about methods—e.g. ones about archival research or telephone surveys. The methods section may also analyze the methods used in studies in the area of your thesis, project, or paper—e.g. methods used in post-occupancy evaluation or case studies of urban development.

You will conclude with a *reference list and appendices*. You may like to add an abstract at the beginning.

Several of my Planetizen blogs deal with this topic:

- Getting Started on an Exit Project or Thesis in Planning:
<http://www.planetizen.com/node/29520>
- Common Problems with Proposals...: <http://www.planetizen.com/node/29949>
- Resolving to Graduate on Time: Troubleshooting Your Exit Project or Thesis:
<http://www.planetizen.com/node/29121>
- Writing Literature reviews: <http://www.planetizen.com/node/36600>

WRITING—ARGUMENTS AND EVIDENCE

Arguments

If X and Y both exist in the world and you claim X leads to Y it is important to have evidence for their relationship (vs. alternatives), the strength of the relationship, an explanation of when it

does not hold (qualifications), and some description the causal mechanism linking X to Y. Booth et al.'s (2008) section on "Making a Claim and Supporting It" is an excellent introduction to this issue. Start with pages 103-119 but read the whole section. In general:

- Arguments must be substantiated with evidence.
- They should have appropriate qualifications.
- It can help to try to diagram the argument—what leads to what? If you can't diagram it, it may not be a good argument.

It is very important to me that exit projects have well crafted arguments. I will return drafts unread if the argument is not of a reasonable standard. I will, however, explain what has to be done so that you can provide a better next draft.

Use of Sources (likely the most important section of this memo)

It is very important to use sources well so that you are true to the content of the sources and also demonstrate respect for the need of the reader to make her own independent judgments about the strength of the evidence provided by sources.

- *A work that only contains sources available on the internet is likely to give the reader the impression that you were not very energetic in your research.*
- *You need sources for everything that is not common knowledge to your readers.* It is not enough to say you found something in multiple places. You need to specifically cite those places.
- *Sources are needed for both the conceptual framework of the piece* (e.g. levels of public space in squatter settlements, types of planning responses to disasters) *and for the facts and figures you use to support your argument.* Sources are also typically need for the methods you use to show that you are building on earlier work, even if modifying it in some way.
- *Use sources critically* in a way that respects the reader's need to be able to judge evidence for themselves. Don't make them believe you on faith. Weave material about the source into the text: "According to the XYZ housing advocacy organization...", "based on 150 interviews with clients of CDCs...", "reflecting 10 years of experience working with Russian immigrants". Saying "Harvard professor X claims that..." is not a strong source of evidence. Harvard professors have personal opinions. Tell the reader about the evidence.
- *Not all sources are equal.* Better sources are published by reputable presses (e.g. University Presses), are refereed (blind reviewed articles), or are by reputable organizations. They cite sources and are clear about methods so you can check their facts (see Booth et al. 2008, 77-79, for a terrific explanation of this). Better sources use better methods overall.
- *Wikipedia, ask.com and other similar web sites are not appropriate sources.* If you use Wikipedia, scroll straight to the bottom and look at its sources. However, for many questions it is better still to use a scholarly dictionary or encyclopedia such as the *International Encyclopedia of the Social and Behavioral Sciences* (2001) which is online through the Cornell Libraries at <http://www.sciencedirect.com/science/referenceworks/0080430767>.
- *One source is frequently not enough,* particularly for controversial or complicated issues. Provide multiple sources to allow the reader to see the balance of evidence.
- *A study done by someone at an organization is not necessarily a study by the organization.* Be careful.

I will return theses and projects without reading them if you fail to use sources in a sophisticated manner.

Citations

Unless you ask in writing and get written agreement from me *before* you hand in a draft, you should use the parenthetical reference/reference list style of citation. In this you refer to the source in the text using an author-date-page system, e.g. (Fabos 1994, 3). You then list the *full* details for the source alphabetically by author's name in a reference list at the end of the proposal. This list will not only include books and articles, but also reports, interviews, web sites, and archives. It is a large part of your evidence and should be clearly set out so that others can find things easily. However, I require a reference list that refers *only to works you actually cite* not ones that may be of general interest.

All quotes quoted directly should include the page number in the citation, for example, (Sanchez 1994, 3). Also cite with a page number all ideas not quoted directly but coming from a specific part of a document. *Only when you refer very generally to an entire work should you merely cite the author and date e.g. (Marris 1987).*

When you do a first draft cite *liberally*—not just at the end of a paragraph. Use page numbers if you are at all close to the words or ideas of a person—you can always remove them later but it is a total pain to add them back in. If you do not do this you are likely to lose track of sources as you move things around. This can lead to plagiarism. It can waste a great deal of time.

For more information see a style manual such as Turabian's (2007) *A Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press). You should note that Turabian shows two kinds of citation--footnote and bibliography, and parenthetical reference/reference list--and it is the second of these that I prefer. It is very important to have *only one* alphabetical reference list when using the parenthetical reference form of citation (that means do not break the list up into, say, articles and books). If you feel it is necessary to have a reference list organized by category we should talk about using a different citation method.

I will return theses and projects without reading them if you fail to cite sources, if you use a format I have not agreed to, or if they are not listed systematically in the reference list.

Taking Notes

In order to make a good argument, it is important to take good notes. In doing this you should focus on the work's methods and approach as well as recording key quotes and findings. Using an approach like the one described below will save a great deal of time in the later part of the work.

- Read each article first before taking typed notes. However make short notes and comments in the margin (using pen if it is in paper, or the notes and comments features if is electronic). Some people also like to underline.
- If you decide that it is unimportant, note this somewhere so you don't re-read again.
- If it is important enough to make notes a simple process uses a Word document. For each article create a first entry filling in the following fields. I literally copy the following text into the document and fill in brief answers after each question.

Author, Date

- What is the core research area? [e.g. ethnic use of space]

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- What are the basic methods? [could be literature review, survey, observations, quasi-experiment; letter, memoir, basic report]
 - How many observations were made/people interviewed/cases studied?
 - Is the survey/measurement instrument included?
 - Basic type of space [e.g. cohousing, neighborhood, new town]
 - Location of study?
 - Is this an archival item?
 - Any special features of the research?
 - Basic findings?
- Subsequent entries follow two standard formats:
Author, Date, Page
Quote in quotation marks, or paraphrase. I typically find actual quotes in quotation marks are more useful as one can always paraphrase later.
OR
Author, Date, Page
“Reflection by me:” followed by a reflection that is based on the reading. This clearly distinguished your own impressions from those of the author, but also gives a context for this reflection that may be important to cite later.
 - Keep the full reference (author, date, title, journal or publisher, relevant issue and page numbers for journals etc) either in a computer data base like Refworks or in a Word file.

SOME SPECIFIC INSTRUCTIONS ABOUT THE THESIS, PROJECT, OR PAPER ITSELF

Introduction

The introduction should contain:

- A succinct statement of the research question or hypothesis, preferably on the first page.
- It should also give an overview of the entire thesis, project, or paper including a chapter-by-chapter outline of the work and a *clear and specific statement of your basic findings and possibly recommendations.*

The chapter-by-chapter overview gives the reader a sense of your overall story and of how the pieces fit together. In particular it describes what you *found*, rather than merely what you did. **Thus do not just say that chapter two describes the methods, but tell the reader what those methods are.** The brief statement of your specific findings likewise helps the reader see where you are heading. *Never make me wait until the conclusion to find out about your findings!* People who do not do this (the research question, outline, and statement of findings) often have unclear arguments, chapters that do not make sense together, and are confused about their findings in a way that is detrimental to the whole thesis, project, or paper.

For me to sign off on work you need to (a) state your central question or hypothesis in the first few pages, (b) provide a chapter-by-chapter outline, and (c) clearly state your basic findings in the introduction.

Literature Review

I do not require a separate literature review chapter in the thesis, project, or paper itself. Sometimes it is more logical to place the literature review throughout the thesis, project, or paper. I do require, however, that you use the literature intelligently: citing relevant literature accurately and relating it to your specific research questions and hypotheses. To conduct a literature review you must:

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- *Locate* what others have done
 - Figure out what is *significant* about the past work
 - *Categorize* or find patterns in the literature, and
 - *Show* where your study fits, perhaps filling in a gap in the literature, replicating a study in a new context, extending an idea.

You need to do this for both the substance of the proposal, and for the methods.

If you are unfamiliar with literature reviews read a few volumes of journals such as *Progress in Human Geography* or the *Journal of Planning Literature* that specialize in review essays. I am also happy to show you examples of past thesis and project proposals.

More information about conducting literature reviews is available on my Planetizen blog at <http://www.planetizen.com/node/36633>.

Charts, Graphs, Tables, and Images

Illustrations, figures, and other visual material should be used as carefully as other sources. The following tips

- Matrices, timelines, and tables can convey information quickly and efficiently. They can also clarify your thinking. Use them.
- Provide sources for illustrations, tables, and charts even if they are of your own making. Say so.
- Provide descriptive headings and captions. I think better papers can be understood by reading illustrations and their captions/headings. Better headings and captions help the reader interpret the image.
- When you provide data, place it in context e.g. compare the neighborhood to the county or the city to the state and nation; compare data at year n to data at year n +/- 10. Data without context is almost meaningless.
- Do not use visually misleading representations of data such as three dimensional pie charts.

Conclusions

Typically conclusions do one or more of the following:

- Summarize your argument (your key questions, evidence, findings). This involves stating what you found (substance) not just what you did (e.g. types of analysis)
- Provide implications for policy, planning, and practice.
- List specific areas where more research is needed.

Style

Do not use future tense in a paper to refer to the content of the paper. By the time someone is reading it, it is at most present tense.

Checklist

The checklist later in this document provides more detail about the body of the work.

FORMAT AND STYLE

Style and Grammar

In terms of more general issues of style and grammar you should also follow a manual such as Turabian's (2007) *A Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertation* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press).

Quality of Writing

Before giving me materials to read, try to do one of the following:

- Put the piece aside for at least a day and then go back and edit it for clarity,
- Get a sympathetic friend to read it for clarity, or
- Read it out loud and change any sentences that don't make sense.

This will be easier if you use the writing checklist later in this document.

Headings and Subheadings

Within the sections or chapters of proposals, projects, and theses you will probably need to use a number of subheadings. These should follow a clear and sensible hierarchy and you should check that they are clear and sensible by writing them out in one list and then critically evaluating them. My preference is for a legal numbering system (e.g., 1.1, 1.2, 1.2.1...). Any other clear and orderly system is acceptable, however.

Style Sheet/Formatting Styles

It is advisable to create a style sheet or checklist that summarizes your approach to such issues as formatting, the capitalization of words, comma usage, and layout of illustrations. This will save you a great deal of time.

If the rules for your thesis, project, or research paper allow it, then having a separate style sheet for layout is also helpful (e.g. title 1 is 14 pt Arial bold; subtitles are 12 pt Arial bold; pictures are aligned left; captions are Verdana 10 pt; etc.). At Cornell only the research paper has such flexibility—theses and projects need to follow graduate school guidelines.

In addition, using formatting styles in your word processing or layout program will also save a great deal of effort and allow you to do useful things such as automatically generate tables of contents and change heading formats in one go.

LOGISTICS

Managing Me

I have written a blog on managing your exit project committee. Please read it:

<http://www.planetizen.com/node/30572>

Drafts and Meetings

- I would prefer to set up a timeline at the beginning of the writing process stating clearly when drafts will be handed in. If a timeline is set up I can agree to turn around drafts in a *week to ten days* (and I can warn you when I will be out of town and so on). If you hand in a draft unannounced I will read it but cannot promise to take less than *three weeks* to do so.
- I have many hours of office hours each week during semester. As noted above when I chair I am available for appointments during summer and am also happy to supervise by correspondence.

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- *If you hand the previous draft with the next draft I will be a more sympathetic reader.* Alternatively hand in a track changes version. It takes a *lot* longer to read a draft when I don't have the previous version so it goes to the bottom of the pile.
 - I do prefer to read whole drafts—the entire project front to back. I can accommodate reading one section at a time but find it more time consuming.

Tentative Schedules

- For those wishing to complete a proposal and paper or thesis in one semester the following schedule is recommended.
September 1/February 1: Clarify questions in relation to the literature
September 15/February 15: Complete proposal
October 1/March 1: Mid-point for data collection
October 8/March 8: First draft of paper/thesis
October 15/March 15: Complete all data collection
November 1/April 1: Second (defense) draft
November 15/April 15: Defense
December 8/May 8: Final paper
- For those who wish to complete a thesis or paper over two semesters the following schedule is recommended:
September 15: Clarify questions in relation to the literature
October 15: Complete proposal
November 15: Mid-point for data collection
January 1: First draft of paper/thesis
February 1: Complete all data collection
March 15: Second (defense) draft
April 1: Defense
May 1: Final paper

Cornell Specific Items

In City and Regional Planning at Cornell the student defends a masters level exit project. This as a number of bureaucratic components—contact the graduate field office well in advance and/or look up the regulations.

Defenses typically have the following components with a time frame of 60-90 minutes:

- Student and faculty assemble
- Student leaves room for faculty to discuss their broad approach
- Faculty invite student back in and student typically presents a 5-10 minute overview of the project. I typically provide students and other committee members my written comments in advance. This is the time to address major concerns.
- Faculty members then ask student questions with an aim of getting to a punchlist of items for completion. The discussion may also turn toward lessons learned from the exit project and/or future plans.
- The student then steps out so that faculty can come to agreement about changes to be made. This step is sometimes skipped.
- The student then comes back and various forms are signed.

Naming Files

Keeping track of computer files is important. While there are many ways to name files and create folders the following will help avoid some of the more common problems.

For PDFs of articles I used the following convention which allows me to store PDFs alphabetically:

- FirstAuthor_Year_KeyWord, for example Forsyth_1995_Diversity.

Other Files should be named according to a clear protocol. This means that if you can't find the file you can always search for the project code.

- ProjectCode_FileDescription_Date

For a thesis, project, or final report by someone called Xavier Zee the following would be possible where THESZX is the project code for the thesis, the file is the proposal, and the version is December 19, 2008:

- THESXZ_Proposal_121908

I will often add my initials to such a file if I've commented on it e.g.

- THESXZ_Proposal_121908_AF

Do not name something "Final Report," "Thesis," or "Draft." You'll never find it again. Worse, your advisors will never find it among all the other "final reports" they have received.

Do not use very, very long file names—you'll come across problems transferring to CD etc.

Guidelines for Computer Documents

Also please follow these guidelines for documents:

General

- If the file will be used on more than one computer *avoid unusual fonts*; they won't show up on the other computers. They are just not worth it.
- Back up your USB stick as such devices get lost and corrupted. You can automate this through the backup system tool under accessories on Windows. Do it daily.
- Back up your hard drive. There are cheap external hard drives now. Remember hard drives on laptops and desktops fail all the time—they have life spans that are shorter than many graduate degrees.

InDesign

- Documents must be laid out with heading and *paragraph styles*--no style, no document.
- Images must be *placed* (linked) not pasted into documents.
- Documents must be *backed up* every day onto a separate drive, with automatic backup every few minutes.
- Documents must be "*packaged*" to send to others, no less than once a week. No packaging, no document. (Packaging copies fonts and images into one folder and preserves the links—if you don't do this you'll waste a huge amount of time repairing broken links.)
- Use *master sheets* to set up all pages. If you don't understand what this means, go to help in InDesign. This will save an enormous amount of time.
- *Using the story editor is a simple way of editing in InDesign—it will save you lots of time.*

Word and PPT

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- *Compress image files* in Word and PowerPoint. Double click on any image, hit compress, choose to compress all images at 200 DPI (the web compression at about 90 dpi is noticeably worse). This can turn a 100mb file into a 10mb file.
 - *Always use formatting to create paragraph indenting*, not tabs. A word processor is not a typewriter. If you need tips, see Ann.
 - Use *heading and paragraph styles*.

PDFs

- *Optimize PDFs*. Depending on the version of Adobe Acrobat this may be called “reduce file size”, “optimize PDF”, or “optimize scanned images”. You often have to try a couple of these to find the right one. This can achieve similar levels of compression. Never email a PDF that has not been optimized.

THESIS, PROJECT, OR PAPER CHECKLIST (MODIFY FOR A PROPOSAL)

1. What is this thesis, project, or paper about? Is this clearly stated on the first page?
2. What is its main point or argument?
3. Is the general outline of the thesis, project, or paper made clear in the introduction?
4. Who is the audience for this paper? Is it clearly communicated in the introduction?
5. Are there any abrupt changes in direction? Do these make sense or are transitions needed?
6. Are all assertions and conclusions backed up by evidence?
7. Are sources for information clearly cited?
8. Are all tables, figures, maps, diagrams and appendices referred to in the main text? Are they all numbered? Do they all have headings?
9. What points were clearest and most interesting?
 - A.
 - B.
 - C.
10. What points did not seem to make sense? What needs clarification or cutting?
 - A.
 - B.
 - C.
11. Do the conclusions flow logically or sensibly from the analysis?
12. Are the conclusions or findings clearly stated?
13. Are there recommendations for policies, further research, and implementation? If these are missing is it clear that they are not needed?
14. Is the project/thesis organized into chapters with headings and subheadings following a logical hierarchy?
15. Overall is the thesis, project, or paper clearly written? (Hint: if you read it out loud you will pick up many of the worst problems.)

USEFUL REFERENCES

- Becker, Howard. 1986. *Writing for Social Scientists: How to Start and Finish Your Thesis, Book, or Article*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
 (Written in a direct and conversational style this book aims to help writers overcome common problems starting and finishing academic projects. Aimed more at doctoral students but still interesting.)
- Booth, Wayne, Gregory G. Colomb, and Joseph M. Williams. 2003. *The Craft of Research*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

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- (A “must read” introduction to the research process aimed at advanced undergraduates and masters students. Their section on making an argument is really excellent.)
- Cornell Institute of Public Affairs. 2009. *Professional Writing Requirement*.
http://www.cipa.cornell.edu/cip_writrequire.html#Guidelines
A well-written document that combines specific information about degree requirements in public affairs with more general guidance on writing theses and projects.
- Forester, John. 2007. *Notes on Writing for the Cornell Urban Scholars Program: On Craft, Structure, and Your Readers*.
<http://www.people.cornell.edu/pages/jff1/NotesonWritingforMastersStudents.htm>
(A clearly written set of guidelines for learning to write well and convey important information to your audience.)
- Forsyth, Ann. 2007, 2008. Planetizen blogs on writing exit projects in planning and related topics. These include:
- Resolving to Graduate on Time: Troubleshooting Your Exit Project or Thesis: <http://www.planetizen.com/node/29121>
 - Getting Started on an Exit Project or Thesis in Planning: <http://www.planetizen.com/node/29520>
 - Common Problems with Proposals...: <http://www.planetizen.com/node/29949>
 - Writing Literature Reviews: <http://www.planetizen.com/node/36633>
 - Managing Up: <http://www.planetizen.com/node/30572>
 - Finishing the Exit Project in Planning: <http://www.planetizen.com/node/30995>
 - Online Advice About Writing for Planners: <http://www.planetizen.com/node/35327>
 - Time vs. Quality Opportunity Curve: <http://www.planetizen.com/node/35866>
 - Images for Panning: <http://www.planetizen.com/node/34290>
 - Producing Learning vs. Receiving Instruction: Tips on How to be a Terrific Student: <http://www.planetizen.com/node/28094>
- Goldberg, Natalie. 1986. *Writing Down the Bones: Freeing the Writer Within*. Boston: Shambhala.
(Written in easy-to-read two to four page sections, this book gives many strategies for overcoming writers block. Author is a poet.)
- Marshall, Catherine, and Gretchen Rossman. 1995? *Designing Qualitative Research*. Second Edition. Newbury Park, California: Sage.
(An overview of qualitative research in the context of proposal writing—aimed at people writing dissertations.)
- Stiftel, Bruce. 2008. Notes for My Students.
<http://garnet.acns.fsu.edu/%7Ebstiftel/studentnotes.html#masters%20paper>
(This shows another faculty member’s take on this kind of document. You will notice many similarities).
- Turabian, Kate. 2007. *A Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.
(A basic resource—and much shorter than the *Chicago Manual of Style* on which it is based.)