



## **Master's Project Manual**

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## ***An Overview: The Process of Writing the Master's Project***

Writing the Master's Project can be divided into steps. The following list provides an overview of the project. The sections that follow describe these steps in greater detail. Please consult each section for further information and website links. You can access websites and other documents referenced in this manual by simply clicking on the underlined text.

- Information about the master's project is usually distributed in the NUSC 526: Nursing Inquiry I course
- Identify a general area of interest and a faculty project advisor with expertise in this area who agrees to work with you.
  - a) Clarify availability of the faculty over the period you will be working on the project, including major times away from UIC (e.g., planned sabbaticals, whether available during the summer).
  - b) Develop a timetable and identify which semesters you will register for master's project hours (NUSC 597 – 3sh total).
- Identify the type of project and a research question with your project advisor.
- Write a draft of your proposal (parts of the proposal may be done in conjunction with NUSC 527: Nursing Inquiry II).
- Review the proposal with your project advisor; make revisions as recommended.
- In consultation with your project advisor, identify a second committee member, and ask this person to be on your committee.
- Give the revised proposal to both committee members. Committee members may approve your proposal or may want to schedule a meeting to discuss the proposal before approving it. If your committee decides to meet, you will need to schedule the meeting and reserve a room.
- If IRB and/or HIPAA approval is needed, submit the appropriate forms to the Office for Protection from Research Risks [see *Human Subjects and Ethical Considerations* section]. Do **not** proceed with any type of recruitment, data collection, or analysis until you receive written approval.
- Complete the project.
- Write a complete draft of your project, submitting completed sections for review by your project advisor according to the schedule you have agreed upon.
- Submit the draft to your project advisor and make requested revisions.
- Submit the revised project to your committee and schedule a meeting to discuss it. Be sure to reserve a room for the meeting and bring the completed Certificate of Approval form ready for signatures [see *The Completed Project Approval Meeting* section].
- Hold the committee meeting; make any requested revisions; meet again if necessary.
- Submit your completed project for department head approval and signature.
- Submit your completed project and the Certificate of Approval form signed by your committee to the Office of Academic Programs at the College of Nursing (Room 138) or your regional office.
- Consider opportunities to disseminate project findings via poster presentation, journal article, or other forum.

### Additional Considerations:

- At the beginning of the semester you intend to graduate, be sure to file for graduation before the deadline [see *Graduation Deadlines* section]. This will often be the semester in which you finish your project.

- Find out the date that the final project needs to be submitted in order to meet graduation deadlines [see *Graduation Deadlines* section]. The deadline is posted on the [Registration & Academic Calendar](#) section of the College of Nursing website.

## **The Purpose of Research in the Master's of Nursing Curriculum**

Research and research utilization are integral parts of evidence-based nursing practice. At the baccalaureate level, nurses are prepared to be able to apply research results to their practice. At the doctoral level, nurses are prepared for entry into a career that involves conducting independent research. What level of expertise is appropriate for the master's prepared nurse? Master's prepared nurses should understand the importance of evidence-based practice in nursing and be able to facilitate evidence-based nursing in their own practice. Master's level advanced practice nurses often bridge the gap between the production of knowledge and the clinical application of knowledge. They are frequently expected to help write clinical nursing standards and guidelines for their practice setting that reflect current research findings. They play an important role in supporting research and helping to integrate research activities in their clinical setting. Many master's prepared nurses also participate as members of a research team or conduct small research or research utilization projects.

As an advanced-practice nurse with a master's degree, you should be able to:

- use research for evidence-based practice,
- explain the research process and identify strengths and weaknesses of various common types of practice-related research,
- critically review and integrate a body of research around a specific concept or issue, and derive implications for clinical practice,
- facilitate nursing research in your own clinical setting, and
- participate in nursing research as a member of the research team.

The first part of your training in research involves completion of three required courses. The two-semester sequence in Nursing Inquiry builds your understanding of the theory and process of nursing research. An intermediate level statistics course will help you understand the analyses and results of most current research reports.

The master's project provides you with an opportunity to apply critical thinking to a specific research or clinical practice problem. The project is a faculty-guided scholarly experience that provides evidence of your critical thinking, ability to integrate information, and understanding of research. It is an opportunity to integrate your research skills in an area of practical interest to you.

## **Types of Master's Projects**

There are several different types of master's projects that are accepted by the College. For all types of master's projects, the student first identifies a research problem in an area of interest, reviews and summarizes the literature dealing with this problem area, and refines a problem statement. The student then investigates the problem systematically using one of the following approaches:

- *Integrative review of the literature*: Performing a critical synthesis of the literature in a focused topic area that results in conclusions about the quality and quantity of knowledge development in the area.
- *Research utilization project*: Developing a detailed plan for evaluating and incorporating research findings into a specific practice setting, such as reviewing and updating a practice protocol, developing an in-service for colleagues on the latest research in an area, or reviewing or developing educational materials for a lay audience based on the latest research findings.
- *Clinical case study*: Investigating a clinical phenomenon by synthesizing and analyzing observations, and evaluating and recommending nursing therapies. This can be a single longitudinal case or multiple related cases.
- *Concept analysis*: Systematically reviewing the literature on a particular concept to clarify the meaning of that concept.
- *Data collection*: Gathering data in the context of a larger project being carried out by a faculty member. The student identifies a research question related to the larger study, reviews appropriate literature, and collects, analyzes, and reports the data. The project may be a methodological paper.
- *Data analysis*: Analyzing data already collected, usually as part of a larger study by a faculty member. The student identifies a research question, reviews appropriate literature, and analyzes and reports the data.

Students may work on projects independently or in small groups, which is a decision reached in consultation with their project advisor.

## **The Difference between a Master's Project and a Master's Thesis**

The master's project is a scholarly paper that addresses a theoretically and clinically relevant problem in nursing today. The paper is typically written in the format of a journal article. The committee requires only two members [instead of three for a thesis], and the formalities required for format, committee membership, and approvals are simpler. Ideally, the master's project will be submitted for publication; however, it is not a requirement for your degree that the master's project be submitted or published. This submission is usually done after the completion of the master's project, often with additional help from the committee chair or members, who will then be co-authors.

The *master's thesis* is usually an independent research project that includes designing a study and performing most of the aspects of the research process. The finished product is a thesis, in the official "thesis" format. The format is determined by the Graduate College and is quite specific [see [Graduate College Thesis Manual](#)]. A thesis generally takes more time to complete. International students often come from countries where the thesis is still the only recognized product of master's level study. *It is very rare for other students to do a thesis.* If you decide to do a thesis, you must find a research advisor who is willing to work with you to do this. The formal differences between the project and the thesis are clearly summarized in the College of Nursing Student Handbook]. If you do a thesis, it is your responsibility to make sure you follow all the guidelines and use the approved thesis format.

## ***Identifying a Topic for the Master's Project***

The earlier you identify what you will do for your master's project, the easier it will be for you to complete your work on the schedule you have chosen. The first step in doing the master's project is identifying a topic area and faculty project advisor, who is the person who will provide the major guidance for your master's project. Then you narrow your focus to a more specific question and identify the type of project you will be doing, in consultation with your project advisor. It is essential that you and your project advisor agree on the question and type of project before you proceed further. You will probably make further refinements to the question as you proceed, but you won't change the general question or the scope of what you are doing.

Students are encouraged to use assignments in the Nursing Inquiry courses [NUSC 526 and 527] to develop their ideas for the master's project. The Nursing Inquiry course sequence encourages students to use their projects as subject matter for their assignments and papers in those courses. Thus, if you have identified a general interest and possible topic, you can become familiar with the literature in the area, clarify the concept, etc. It is not at all required that you do this, but you can see that this plan really facilitates your progress through the program. However, the assignments completed for these courses are not the same as the master's project proposal. At the minimum, students will need to rework the assignments before they are considered an appropriate proposal, and often the project will turn out to have little to do with the work previously done for these courses.

There are many different ways to identify a project advisor and a topic:

- You may discuss project ideas with your academic advisor and find that this person is willing to work with you on a project arising from your own clinical interests.
- Your faculty academic advisor may recommend that you work with a particular faculty member who shares your interests.
- Lists of faculty research interests can be found on the [Faculty Profiles](#) pages of the College Departmental websites.
- At a Research Day, either within your department or College-wide, you can hear faculty members describe their areas of research and ongoing projects, and briefly identify some potential student projects that might be possible in the context of that research.
- A research assistantship (RA): if you are a research assistant, the faculty member who directs you may have an additional project that is an extension of the work you are already doing for them. Look across all five regional programs of the College of Nursing (Chicago, Peoria, Quad-Cities, Rockford, and Urbana). While most people find that the projects that interest them are more likely to be occurring within their own department, so many projects are interdisciplinary that you may also find an interesting project in a different department of the College of Nursing or a different college altogether. If you select a project advisor and topic from outside your department, you need to be sure to select at least one committee member from your department.

Make an appointment to talk with the faculty member you are interested in working with. Usually, the faculty member will listen to your interests and then discuss possible topics for your project. These suggestions are based on what you seem likely to find interesting, practical considerations such as feasibility, etc., and the faculty member's perceptions as to what sort of project will be the "right size" for you.

Usually, after this first discussion, you will go away and think. You may want to explore several

possibilities and talk to several faculty members before you make a final decision. However, the best advice is not to spend too long in this stage of the process.

### ***The Project Committee***

The committee for the Master's Project typically consists of two members: the project chair and at least one other member, also called the second reader. The committee must contain one graduate faculty member, one member of the College of Nursing, and one member from the student's department. One person may fulfill all of these requirements. Once these criteria are met, the other person can be internal or external to the College. The Project chair does not have to be the committee member who holds graduate status. A master's-prepared person may serve on the committee, but cannot serve as chair.

### ***The Project Advisor***

Each student is assigned a faculty academic advisor upon entry to the program. The academic advisor is familiar with program requirements and advises you on your overall progress through the program. The project advisor is the person who guides your master's project experience and chairs your master's project committee. The academic advisor and the project advisor may be the same person, but it is quite common to work with a different person for your project based on common interest.

When you are ready to make a final commitment to a particular project, you need to have a very clear understanding with your project advisor as to what the project will be.

- It should be clear exactly what you will and will not be doing for your master's project paper (the research question).
- You should have a pretty good understanding of any limitations in what you are doing, and be able to live with them (for example, if the sample is not random, no opportunity for publication, etc.).
- You should discuss with your project advisor an overall plan of work and a time schedule for completion. You also need to discuss how you will stay in touch and how the faculty prefers to be contacted when you need help. Some faculty like to schedule regular meetings to review your progress. Others prefer to have you return at various progress points (for example, you identify a process for finding the relevant literature, then come in to discuss what you found and how to proceed). Remember, it is your responsibility to keep faculty informed of your progress.
- If you are working as a research assistant for the same person who is your project chair, it is important to separate your responsibilities as a research assistant from your work on your master's project.
- Sometimes, a faculty member and a particular project may have special requirements. For example, if data collection is not complete for the larger project and you are analyzing just completed cases, the project may want you to agree not to publish results until data collection is complete and you can analyze the entire sample.
- You should have a clear understanding about potential publication and authorship. Most faculty are eager to see your work published. They may stipulate that they expect you to publish within a year of completion as first author, but if you haven't done so, they will do the necessary revisions and submit it as senior author. Usually, when faculty members help you

with your Master's project, they will expect to be co-authors, with you as first author.

After this detailed discussion, you need to make a final decision about whether this is the project you want to do and the faculty member you want to work with. You should have a generally positive feeling about working with this faculty member and this project before you make a final decision. You need to have a good working relationship, and sometimes people have different work styles or other traits that make such a relationship difficult to establish.

### ***Writing a Proposal for Your Project***

You will learn the components of a research proposal when you take the Nursing Inquiry II (NUSC 527) course. Doing the assignments in this course may be an opportunity for you to begin developing components of your proposal. You will get suggestions for revisions and improvements from your instructor in this course. You can also consult with the faculty person who may eventually chair your project committee as you work through the details of your project. It is appropriate to register for Master's Project (NUSC 597) credit hours when you are working with your project advisor on your project.

The proposal for a master's project can vary in appearance. Proposals should contain an introduction to the problem, a statement of the problem and its significance, the aims of the project, and a description of the methods that will be used to examine the problem or carry out the project. The length of proposals can vary, and some may be only a couple of pages, depending on the project. Students may find that they need to rework their proposal several times to achieve clarity, brevity, and completeness.

### ***Selecting a Second Reader***

Usually, you discuss the selection of a second reader with your committee chair, who is your Project Advisor. The second reader should be someone you can both work with harmoniously. Look for someone who brings an expertise related to your project that is a bit different from what the chairperson offers. For example, one member might be a specialist in a particular style of analysis and the other might have experience working with the population you are studying. You may already have someone in mind, and, if so, you can suggest this person. Otherwise, your project advisor usually suggests someone. If you are not comfortable with the first person your project advisor suggests, just say so - you don't need to elaborate the reasons. You have every right to look for a second member with whom you feel comfortable working.

There are College requirements for your committee members [see *Project Committee* section]. Your project advisor will know who meets these qualifications. Once you have identified a mutually acceptable second member, go and talk with this person about your proposed project and whether she/he would be willing to serve as a second reader. You should be able to give this person a verbal or written summary of what you are planning to do.

### ***Obtaining Approval for Your Proposal***

Some project advisors will want a meeting to review and approve the project proposal. Other advisors will allow you to proceed with your work once they approve your proposal, without a formal committee meeting.

If your advisor recommends a formal meeting to approve the project proposal, the meeting will include the advisor, the second reader, and you, the student. The student provides a copy of the proposal to each committee member. A date is agreed upon and a two-hour block of time should be reserved, although most meetings require much less than that. **You should give your committee members at least two weeks to review your proposal before the meeting.** You also need to start arranging for a Committee meeting well ahead of time, since it is sometimes difficult to identify a time/day for the three persons involved (including you!).

It is your responsibility to reserve a room for the meeting and let the committee members know the date, time, and location for the meeting. The department secretaries can help you sign up for most conference rooms.

**Before you come to the meeting, you should prepare a 5-10 minute presentation of what you propose to do and why.** Usually, the committee chairperson will begin the meeting by asking you to briefly describe your research question and plan.

Then the two members will discuss what issues they feel are important. You need to keep a careful record of the discussion. You can expect the committee to discuss the merits of your research question, the strengths and weaknesses of your approach to answering the question, any realistic and feasible changes they think you could make to improve it, and the limitations of what you are doing that cannot be reasonably overcome. They will also discuss any ethical and privacy concerns and the need for appropriate approvals and clearances, including Institutional Review Board (IRB) and/or Health Insurance Portability Accountability Act (HIPAA) approvals.

At the end of the meeting, the committee may approve the proposal as it is or with relatively minor changes. They may ask for substantial changes, and want to meet again after you make those changes. Sometimes they will agree on fairly extensive changes and have you go over the changes with the chair (your project advisor) rather than having a second meeting. You need to make sure that several things are very clear at the end of the meeting:

- What changes you need to make,
- The approval process for the proposal once you have made the changes,
- When you can submit your papers for IRB/HIPAA approval, and
- When, once IRB/HIPAA approval is obtained, you can begin your study.

### ***Human Subjects and Ethical Considerations***

Research with animal or human subjects conducted by our students must meet the ethical standards for research, including informed consent and safeguards for the rights and privacy of human participants and adequate care of animals. Student researchers are held to the same ethical standards as any researcher at the University and must follow all of the prescribed procedures and maintain the same records as other researchers. The standards for the protection of private health information under HIPAA legislation are addressed in the IRB application and review process.

The IRB office is located in the Administrative Office Building (AOB) (2nd floor, 1737 W. Polk St., Chicago, IL 60612-7227, across the street from the Library of the Health Sciences). The IRB forms, along with the dates for submission are found [here](#).

The procedure for submitting IRB forms is:

- discuss your study and the type of review it requires and any special ethical considerations with your research advisor,
- fill out the forms and have your advisor approve and sign them,
- if necessary, give the completed forms to the departmental surveillance committee for review and signatures,
- give the signed forms to the department head for a signature, and
- take the signed forms to the Office for Protection from Research Risks.

When you submit forms to IRB, we recommend that you hand-carry them to the office. The receptionist will generate a receipt page showing the application's tracking number and the date and time it was submitted and will give you a copy of the receipt. **Since this number is the only way to document that the application was turned in on time and to track what happens to it subsequently, it is extremely important to get this receipt and keep it where you can easily find it.**

You cannot proceed with your data collection until you have **written** notification of IRB approval. You should give a photocopy of your IRB approval letter to your research advisor.

### ***Keeping on Schedule***

There is no doubt that this can be a big challenge! Your project advisor will help you to develop a reasonable timetable. All the obvious strategies that you have developed and used successfully to get this far along in graduate education are relevant and useful for the research project as well. Probably the most important piece of advice regarding planning is to allow for some problems – you may not be able to predict exactly what they will be, but you can be pretty sure you'll have some!!

When you are developing the schedule for your project, be sure to leave enough time at the end for writing and revising the paper. Unlike a course paper, your project will need to be revised until it is acceptable to your committee. This takes time, because after you prepare a draft, you have to give your committee members a reasonable amount of time to read it (a minimum of two (2) weeks); and then you will almost always need to make revisions. It is probably wise to allow for at least two or three fairly extensive revisions and a final editing.

**Remember that the timely completion of your project is YOUR responsibility.** This includes identifying a project and faculty person to work with, persisting in working on the project through completion, and staying in touch with your project advisor along the way. You should routinely expect faculty to take a minimum of two (2) weeks to respond to your written work.

### ***Writing the Project***

There are several strategies that can help you in writing the project. What you've already written in your proposal forms the basis for your final project. You will need to review what you've already written, incorporate recommendations from your advisor or committee, and update and edit your work.

One helpful strategy is to look at examples of completed student projects that are similar to the

type of project that you are doing. Ask your advisor for a couple of examples of completed projects. You may also want to examine articles of a similar format in the journal in which you hope to publish.

Though there are several ways to develop your project, the format should match the style presented in NUSC 527: Nursing Inquiry II. The cover page is the only portion of the Master's Project that is uniform for all students. An example of the Title Page is located in the Appendix of this Manual and is also available on the College of Nursing website under the [Forms](#) link.

It is a good idea to divide your writing tasks into smaller parts, and focus on only one part at a time. Sitting down to "write up your project" is an overwhelming task. However, describing the demographic characteristics of your sample and making a summary table is a task you could complete in a day.

Perhaps the hardest part for most students is writing the discussion section. For some students, it helps to sit down with a friend and explain what they found and why it is important. Some students choose to tape record this conversation and use it as the basis of the first draft of the discussion section. A simple way to approach the discussion is to write what you found, why it is important, what it means in terms of existing research, and the implications of your findings for future research and for clinical practice. The limitations of your findings are also addressed. Consultation with your project advisor is especially helpful during this phase of the project.

### ***Keeping in Touch with Committee Members***

The most common way committees operate is for you to work primarily with your project advisor. Usually, the two of you will set up regular meetings so that you can continue to make progress. You show initial drafts to your project advisor, and make revisions based on that person's comments. When your advisor thinks that your project is ready, you will give a copy to your second reader and arrange a meeting to review the entire project.

**Don't forget to file for graduation and check project submission deadlines for the semester when you expect to finish [see *Graduation Deadlines* section].**

### ***The Completed Project Approval Meeting***

The procedures for the final committee meeting are very much like the proposal meeting. You set a date in consultation with all the committee members and reserve a room for the meeting. You give each member a draft of the project at least two (2) weeks before the meeting. You should be prepared to give a twenty (20) minutes oral summary of your project and its significance or implications for theory, future research, clinical practice, and/or health policy.

**Before you come to the meeting, be sure to have the Certificate of Approval form typed and ready to be signed at the meeting.** Click [here](#) to download a PDF version of the Certificate of Approval form.

During the meeting, you will begin with an oral summary of your project. Handouts, overhead transparencies, or PowerPoint presentations may be appropriate [you can discuss this with your project advisor before the meeting]. Then, the committee members give their comments. Sometimes they will go through page by page, or sometimes each person will discuss all his/her

comments and concerns at once. They may also ask you more questions regarding the purpose and overall implications and limitations of your project. Often you will discuss publication and dissemination of your findings.

The committee has three options: they can accept the project as is; they can ask for minor revisions to be done but go ahead and approve the project pending these changes; or they can ask you to make specific changes and review these changes before the project is officially approved. Generally, the second option is used only for quite minor or straightforward changes such as table format, grammatical corrections and the like. If substantive changes are necessary, the committee will determine whether these changes are extensive enough to require another meeting. If not, they may all want to see the revised version but not meet, or they may delegate one person, usually the project advisor, to oversee the revisions. When all the requested changes have been made, the members will sign the approval form.

### ***Final Process***

After your committee has signed your Certificate of Approval, you will need to submit the Certificate along with an electronic copy and a printed copy of your final paper to the Office of Academic Programs. The electronic copy should be a Microsoft Word Document titled with your name and UIN (i.e. Last, First - xxxxxxxx.doc). The printed copy should be printed on clean standard paper and does not require any additional binding. The original Certificate of Approval and the paper copy must be delivered to the Academic Operations Coordinator (Room 138 in the College of Nursing for Chicago students; or to your regional office for regional students); faxed or scanned Certificates of Approval will not be accepted. The Office of Academic Programs will obtain the Director of Graduate Studies signature. Your final step is to give any requested bound copies to your committee members. You should also keep a copy for yourself. Only electronic copies will be saved long term at the College of Nursing.

### ***Graduation Deadlines***

There are two deadlines that you must consider when preparing for graduation: the deadline for filing for graduation and the deadline for submitting your completed, approved project.

If you want to officially **graduate** in a particular semester, you must file for graduation by the deadline specified in the Academic Calendar as "Last day to file for graduation." This date will be early in the semester, usually within the first few weeks. Instructions on how to file for graduate can be found in the College of Nursing [Student Handbook](#).

Your project must go through the Office of Academic Programs at the College of Nursing to get final signatures, and for this reason, the College of Nursing requires that you submit your project approximately two weeks prior to the Graduate College deadline. The deadline for completing your project is posted on the [Registration & Academic Calendar](#) section of the College of Nursing website.

### ***Disseminating the Results***

Your first responsibility is to share your results with the clinical site and/or subjects who are interested, if this is relevant for your project. For some studies, it is appropriate to share results

with participants, and if you have offered to do this, it is important to do so promptly.

To share your results more widely, you should revise your paper and send it to a journal to be reviewed for publication. Your committee will generally advise you about whether they think it is publishable and where they think it would be accepted. You usually will need to do some additional editing. Look in the journal you are targeting for the Guidelines for Authors to get specific requirements as to length and format.

You improve your chances for publication by having your manuscripts reviewed by others. Your reviewers can be clinical experts, persons who have published in the journal you are considering, or other experts on your topic. You may also choose to have the manuscript reviewed for clarity by someone who is not an expert in the topic. The process of peer review is an important part of scholarship and one you will want to use whether you are preparing reports at your work site or writing for publication. You may want to negotiate with your project advisor to review your manuscripts, abstracts, and publications.

You should also think about submitting your research to be presented as a poster or a paper at a regional or national meeting. This is a good way to disseminate findings with clinical relevance. It is also a good way for you to meet people with similar research interests and to begin establishing yourself as a master's prepared nurse with research as well as clinical skills and interests.

***Appendix A***

**SAMPLE TITLE PAGE**

TITLE OF RESEARCH PROJECT

BY

JANE A. DOE

B.S.N., UNIVERSITY OF ILLINOIS AT CHICAGO, 1984

RESEARCH PROJECT

Submitted as partial fulfillment of the requirements  
For the degree of Master of Science in Nursing  
in the College of Nursing of the  
University of Illinois at Chicago, 2007

Chicago, Illinois