

## **Guidelines on Writing the Major Paper for Grad Students and their Supervisors**

### **1. What is the Major Paper?**

A major paper is an original, scholarly work based on both primary sources and secondary literature. According to our current guidelines, a major paper must be between 40 and 60 pages in length. We suggest you aim for the lower end of that range.

Format options are:

**a) Journal article (preferred)** – Including notes, this type of paper would be about 40 pages long. We strongly recommend this approach, which enables you to revise the paper for publication more easily.

**b) “Mini-thesis”** – This type of paper has separate chapters (a historiography chapter, one or two chapters presenting and analyzing evidence from your primary sources, and a conclusion).

### **2. Choosing a Topic:**

First, keep in mind that you do not have to stay with the topic you proposed in your M.A. application. Students often change their minds during the first months of the graduate program as they get a better sense of what is possible regarding the availability of primary sources. They also encounter new ideas, perspectives, approaches and ideas in the graduate courses. So, be open to new ideas.

Begin by talking to the various professors working in the area most closely connected to your area of interest. Tell them about your ideas and ask for suggestions for readings and places to look for primary sources. It is a good idea to start doing this in your first semester as a graduate student, but keep in mind you will not have to decide on a topic until your second term, usually while you are taking our core course on historical methods, 504. In this course, you will start building a historiography and eventually a proposal and research plan.

### **3. Supervision:**

**Supervisor:** Deciding on a supervisor usually happens in the second term of the graduate program. By that time, the student has a clearer idea of his or her major paper topic. Supervisors are decided after discussions involving the student, the Graduate Coordinator, and faculty members (and whoever is teaching 504). While subject area and ability to supervise a particular topic is the main consideration in assigning supervisors, the size of the faculty member’s existing supervisory load must also be taken into consideration.

**Co-supervision:** If a student’s project would benefit from the expertise of two faculty members, and the faculty members are in agreement, a co-supervision can be arranged. If a student has co-supervisors, a second reader is not needed for the defence.

**Second readers:** A second reader is someone else from the History Department who reads the major paper and is present at the defence to ask questions along with the supervisor. A second reader is decided upon by the student and the supervisor. The supervisor/student will need to approach the potential second reader well in advance of the defence to ensure availability (more on defence timeline below). The second reader may be consulted informally in the early stages of the student's project and may offer advice if it seems appropriate.

#### **4. Writing and Editing the Major Paper**

Graduate students are often surprised by how long the editing process takes. In fact, you will probably spend as much or more time editing your paper as you did creating the first draft. This is different from undergraduate papers where you typically spend most of your time writing the first draft, and relatively less time in making changes. Editing your own work is an acquired skill, and practice is the only way to learn. Get into the habit of printing your drafts and using a pen to mark it up. It is much harder to edit effectively on the computer screen alone.

When you get your draft ready to show your supervisor, make sure you edit it thoroughly first. If your supervisor has to spend time correcting grammar and typos, he or she will have less time to concentrate on the more substantive issues in your paper. You should also be aware that your supervisor will need time to read, edit and make comments. Tell your supervisor in advance when he or she can expect your paper, and then count on waiting between one and two weeks to get it back, in most cases. Sometimes your supervisor will be able to get it back to you sooner. Other times, it could take longer, particularly in the summer when supervisors are also attending conferences, going on research trips and vacations.

**Be prepared for it to take ten weeks from the time you have a complete draft until your defence.**

#### **5. Finishing and Defending your Major Paper**

First, if you have a firm deadline when you want to have your paper finished and defended, make sure you discuss this plan with your supervisor well in advance (i.e. 4-5 months). You and your supervisor should come up with a timeline (preferably in writing). This is particularly important if you want to finish by the end of the summer, and you need to fit the schedule around research trips, conferences and vacations.

Before a defence date can be set, the major paper must have final approval from the supervisor, as well as the second reader. Once the supervisor has approved the final draft, the paper is given to the second reader. Once the second reader has read it and agrees the paper is ready for defence, then a date can be set. The defence can be arranged for a time convenient for both student and readers, but keep in mind that the Faculty of Graduate Studies requires eight days' notice to schedule a date. At that point, the second reader will give suggestions for revisions to the student so he or she can make these changes before the defence.

**Timeline for defence:**

Below is a timeline to give you a general sense of the **minimum** amount of time required to take a major paper from first complete draft to defence. The actual pace and length of the reading and revision stage will be up to you and your supervisor.

- a) First full reading of complete draft by supervisor -- two weeks.
- b) Revisions by student on draft-- this varies, but count on two weeks minimum.
- c) Second draft to supervisor: two weeks. If the supervisor believes the paper is ready for defence, the paper goes to the second reader. If not, the student will revise until the supervisor agrees it is ready to go to the second reader.
- d) Final draft to second reader – two weeks.
- e) Once both supervisor and second reader agree the paper is ready for defence, final approval is given and the date is set. Second reader gives editorial comments and suggestions for revision to the student.
- f) Notice given to Faculty of Graduate Studies – eight days.

**Total** = Approximately ten weeks (**minimum**) from final draft to defence.

**The defence:**

The defence is open to friends, family and supporters, so you are welcome to invite them. The defence begins with the M.A. candidate giving a 5-10 minute introduction, summarizing the main findings. Then, the second reader asks questions, followed by the supervisor. Often, a second round of questions from both second reader and supervisor will take place. After this is finished, members of the audience will be given the opportunity to ask questions. The formal part of the defence lasts 1-1 ½ hours.

Once the questioning is finished, everyone leaves the room except for the supervisor and second reader. They discuss the defence and paper and decide on any revisions to be made. Major papers do not receive letter grades, but are evaluated as follows: Pass, Pass with Minor Revisions, Pass with Major Revisions or Fail. Pass with Minor Revisions means primarily stylistic changes are needed, with perhaps some alterations required in the conclusion. Pass with Major Revisions means more substantive changes in the content and argument are needed. Most students in our department receive a Pass with Minor Revisions. In most cases, the supervisor and second reader will not let a paper go to defence unless they feel it can pass with minor revisions.

Once the defence is finished, the student will need to do the final revisions, let the supervisor see the final version (if required) and submit it to the Graduate Studies office. Most often, the revisions can be made in a few days or a week. Keep in mind the format for the final version must follow the guidelines set by the Faculty of Graduate Studies. The guidelines are on the Graduate Studies website.