What to Expect When you’re Expecting…To Write A Thesis!

Writing a thesis to obtain your Master of Nursing degree is a significant and exciting venture in your life! However, let’s be honest, writing a thesis can seem like a daunting task. Knowing what to expect as you move through the process can help to alleviate some of the anxiety and make the experience of writing a thesis enjoyable!

The Graduate Program Handbook (http://umanitoba.ca/faculties/nursing/media/Revised_July_07.pdf) outlines the formal regulations for the Master of Nursing program, including the completion of a thesis. We intend to complement this information by offering further insights about the process of writing a thesis from a student perspective. It is our hope that the tips we offer here will help you find your way and make your life easier!

Some of us enter the graduate program with perhaps only a general idea of the area we would like to develop our research in, while others come to the program with a more specific research question in mind. Wherever you find yourself on this continuum, it is important to remember that a Master’s level thesis is about learning the process of research. All theses should contribute to developing nursing knowledge and many projects form the foundation for future empirical work, but the most important outcome of your thesis is that you have learned the process of developing and conducting a research project. Keep this in mind!

To make the process of writing a thesis seem a little less overwhelming, it is helpful to think of it as a number of small tasks to be accomplished along the way to your final product. Focusing on one task at a time is much more manageable and much less intimidating! As you plug along tackling one task at a time, you will achieve small successes along the way and before you know it your thesis will be done!

Perseverance is not a long race; it is many short races one after another.
~ Walter Elliott

So, what can you expect as you set out to write your thesis? Let us tell you…
Choose an Advisor
First things first, you will need one of the members of the graduate faculty in the Faculty of Nursing to fill the role of your advisor. Your advisor will help guide the scholarly work required of you to complete your program, chair your thesis committee, assist you with funding applications, and act as your mentor.

Your advisor is somebody that you choose. When choosing an advisor, think about the area of research or clinical practice that you are interested in and plan for an advisor accordingly. The Faculty of Nursing website has a list of academic staff available (http://umanitoba.ca/faculties/nursing/aboutus/academic.html) where you can review the biographies of the graduate faculty including their research interests, clinical interests, teaching areas and recent funding and publications. Keep in mind that your thesis advisor must be a member of the Faculty of Nursing and the Faculty of Graduate Studies (typically these are faculty who are PhD prepared).

Once you have identified one or two individuals who you think might be appropriate to fill the role of your advisor, make an appointment to see them and discuss your area of interest, their potential availability, and what each of your expectations would be should you enter into a student-advisor relationship. As well, take this opportunity to get a feel for their personality and style of doing things. Because you will be working very closely with your advisor over the course of your graduate program, it is very important that you are able to develop an effective student-advisor relationship.

Sometimes after a discussion with a particular faculty member, it becomes apparent that perhaps their area of expertise is not best suited for your area of interest, or they are not able to take on a graduate student at the time. If this is the case, ask them if there is another member of the graduate faculty who would be appropriate to fill the role of your advisor and set up another appointment to meet with this individual in pursuit of finding an advisor.

Your advisor will become one of the most important individuals in your graduate education experience. Therefore, it is a really good idea to take some time to think about the selection of your advisor and choose an individual that you will be able to work well with and that will help you succeed.

Once you have chosen your advisor, you have achieved the first major task in completing your thesis!

I may not be there yet, but I'm closer than I was yesterday. -Author Unknown
Formulate a Research Question
While you do not have to have a specific research question narrowed down to start your program, you should have a general idea of the area that you are interested in. This is important, because generally speaking, the assignments for each of your courses can be shaped and developed in such a way that they will contribute to your final thesis and save you a lot of time down the road! If you can hash out a specific research question with your advisor early in your program it will be extremely beneficial to you. Bottom line, the sooner the better!

Shape Coursework
As mentioned above, generally the assignments for each of your courses can be carried out in such a way that they will contribute to your final thesis. As you move through your coursework, approach your assignments with your research question in mind. Some assignments will contribute directly to your thesis work, while others will perhaps broaden your understanding of a certain aspect of your area of research interest. Either way, shaping your coursework assignments with your research question in mind will help you to develop a strong knowledge base in your area of interest and save you time and effort when you officially start the process of writing your thesis.

Don’t let the fear of the time it will take to accomplish something stand in the way of your doing it. The time will pass anyway; we might just as well put that passing time to the best possible use. ~Earl Nightingale

Establish Thesis Committee
Your thesis committee will normally consist of your advisor, an internal member (from the Faculty of Nursing), and an external member (not a member of the Faculty of Nursing and a non-nurse). Each of these individuals will provide certain expertise related to your thesis content and/or methodology. You will select your internal and external committee members in consultation with your advisor. Much like the process of choosing your advisor, once you and your advisor have identified the individuals that you would like to have as your internal and external committee members you should make an appointment to see them to discuss your research ideas and their potential availability to sit on your committee. It is a good idea to establish your thesis committee fairly early in your program as nursing faculty and those individuals who serve as external members are busy and have many commitments. It is equally important to practice good communication with your committee members with respect to your expected timelines.

Your thesis committee must be approved by the Graduate Studies Committee of the Faculty of Nursing by submitting a letter to the Associate Dean of the Graduate Program. You can find a sample letter to use as a guideline in Appendix C of the Graduate Program Handbook:
http://umanitoba.ca/faculties/nursing/media/Revised_July_07.pdf
Once your thesis committee has been approved by the Graduate Studies Committee, a *Thesis/Practicum Title and Appointment of Examiners* form must be completed and submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies:  
http://umanitoba.ca/faculties/graduate_studies/media/thesis_title_examiners-masters.pdf

**Proposal Defense**

Towards the end of your coursework you will develop a proposal for your research. If you have applied for funding earlier in the course of your studies, you likely will have already developed your proposal to some extent reflecting your general area of interest and research ideas. Whether you have drafted a proposal or not, as you approach the completion of your coursework you will need to refine your research question and develop a detailed proposal for your research. You should be developing your proposal under the direction of your advisor and in consultation with your other committee members.

Once your proposal has been developed, you will meet with your committee in a closed forum to defend it. Typically you present your proposal with a brief powerpoint presentation followed by discussion. This may sound somewhat intimidating, but do not fear! While it is important to be well prepared for your proposal defense, the purpose of it is not to grill you and make you uncomfortable! More so, the proposal defense is meant to allow you to come together with your committee to discuss your research, refine the details of your study, and be sure that you and your committee are on the same page. Think of it as meeting with your thesis committee to tell them *what* you want to do, *why* you want to do it, and *how* you are going to carry it out. Through discussion, your committee will offer you insights and feedback that will help you to plan and conduct a sound study.

After your proposal defense is complete, and both you and your thesis committee are satisfied with the details of your proposal, you need to have your committee members sign a *Master's Thesis/Practicum Proposal* form to be forwarded to the Faculty of Graduate Studies:  
http://umanitoba.ca/faculties/graduate_studies/media/thesis_proposal-masters.pdf

At this point, you have reached another major milestone on your journey! Congratulations! You are ready to proceed with your thesis research…!

*Consider the postage stamp: its usefulness consists in the ability to stick to one thing till it gets there.* —Josh Billings
Ethics Approval
Once you have successfully completed your proposal defense you need to obtain ethics approval from the Education/Nursing Research Ethics Board (ENREB) at the University of Manitoba prior to implementing your study.

The Education/Nursing REB generally meets every month to review submissions. It takes approximately 4-6 weeks for the committee to review your protocol and send you their decision. You may receive ethics approval right away, but usually the committee requests that some revisions be made to your research protocol before ethics approval is granted. Making the required revisions and receiving feedback on those revisions takes approximately another 2-3 weeks. When you are developing your timeline for your thesis, it is a good idea to keep in mind that the process of obtaining ethics approval takes a significant amount of time.

The following information can be found on the Office of Research Services website: http://umanitoba.ca/research/orserthics/human_ethics_index.html

- Meeting schedule of REBs and applicable deadlines
- Complete list of REB Forms and Guidelines
  - Guidelines for Submission Form & Informed Consent
  - Protocol Submission Form
- Contact information for submitting your protocol

Access Approval
After you have received Ethics approval for your study, you will need to obtain access to the facility/organization in which you wish to conduct your research. Each facility has their own process by which they grant access to researchers.

Typically this process is facilitated by a committee whose mandate is to evaluate the impact that the proposed research projects will have on the facility’s resources, including their human resources. Each facility/organization calls their committee by a specific name e.g. CancerCare Manitoba has a Research Resource Impact Committee. A facility’s website or research department should be able to provide you with this specific information.

Similar to the process of applying for Ethics approval, when applying for access you will be required to submit your research protocol and any other forms that a particular facility’s access committee requires. You should contact either the Chair or the administrative assistant of the access committee to learn the appropriate procedure for submitting your application. Also, it is a good idea to contact the manager of the unit/site where you wish to conduct your research to discuss the feasibility of your study. It would serve you well to have this discussion and gain the support of the manager prior to submitting your protocol to the access committee.
The process of obtaining access approval takes some time as often a number of
signatures are required prior to submitting your application, committees often only meet
at designated times, and revisions to your submission may be necessary before access
to the facility is granted. As such, it is a good idea to allow for a substantial amount of
time (~4-8 weeks) when planning a timeline for your thesis.

Despite our most diligent efforts, sometimes there are unforeseen glitches or delays in
obtaining Ethics and/or Access approval. This can be frustrating. Don’t be discouraged;
try to remember that these things can happen whether you are a student or a seasoned
researcher. What’s more, there is no part of life that does not contain its lessons.

Once you have been granted access to the facility at which you will be conducting your
study, you are ready to start data collection.

Data Collection/Data Analysis

The process of data collection and data analysis will depend on the type of study you
are conducting.

If your study requires human subjects to be recruited, your Ethics approval will likely
have stipulated that you cannot approach potential study participants yourself, but rather
will require others to act as an intermediary for you and facilitate the process of
recruitment. If this is the case for your study, it may feel like things are largely out of
your control during the process of recruitment. In some sense, they are! It is important
to recognize this and be patient! That said there are things you can do to increase the
chances of successful recruitment.

Most facilities are busy and those who are recruiting for you may need to be reminded
about our study. If it is appropriate, you may want to consider being a presence at the
facility where recruitment is taking place – your presence may serve as a friendly
reminder about your study for those who are doing the recruiting. In any case, it is
important to maintain frequent and regular contact with those who are recruiting for you
either by phone, email, or drop-in visits.

Data can be collected in many ways. The type of study you have designed will
determine the method by which you collect your data. Likewise, the process of data
analysis will depend on the type of study you are conducting. Data collection and data
analysis are two major processes in the course of conducting a research study. It is
important to practice good communication with your thesis advisor to facilitate optimal
learning and conduct a sound project.

Data collection and data analysis is really the crux of a study. This is where your ideas
start to come to life, but it takes time…and determination. Stick to it…
Perseverance is the hard work you do after you get tired of doing the hard work you already did. ~Newt Gingrich

Set Thesis Defense Date

Towards the end of your data collection and data analysis it is time to start thinking about setting a thesis defense date. You are getting close!

When choosing a defense date, you need to consider:

- The availability of your thesis committee members
- When the final copy of your written thesis needs to be submitted to the Faculty of Graduate Studies (FGS) in order to meet the requirements for a specific graduation date

Keep in mind that your written thesis needs to be submitted to your thesis committee in advance of your thesis defense date. Also, upon completion of your thesis defense, you may have to complete revisions to your thesis as required by your thesis committee prior to submitting to FGS.

The deadline dates for thesis submissions can be found on the Faculty of Graduate Studies website:
http://umanitoba.ca/faculties/graduate_studies/deadlines/index.html

Your timeline and thesis defense date should be decided in consultation with your thesis advisor. Remember to book a room for your defense as well! You can contact the Graduate Program assistant at the Faculty of Nursing to make these arrangements.

Thesis Defense

Here you are, ready to defend your thesis!

Prior to your thesis defense, your thesis committee members will review your written thesis in preparation for your oral examination. Your thesis committee becomes your examining committee at your oral defense.

At the oral defense, you will present the findings of your thesis followed by an examination by your examining committee. The Graduate Student Handbook provides a detailed description of the format for the conduct of an oral defense:
http://umanitoba.ca/faculties/nursing/media/Revised_July_07.pdf

Unlike the proposal defense which is a closed setting and involves only you and your thesis committee, the thesis defense is open to anyone who would like to attend. This can be a little intimidating if you are already nervous about defending your thesis.
However, try to view your defense as an opportunity to share the important work you have done, and keep in mind that those who choose to attend your defense are there because they are interested in your work and want to support you. You have worked really hard to get here – enjoy!

Following the examination, your examining committee may require that some revisions be made to your written thesis prior to submitting it to the Faculty of Graduate Studies (FGS). Remember to keep in mind the date that the final copy of your written thesis needs to be submitted to the FGS in order to meet the requirements for a specific graduation date.

As well, there are a number of forms that need to be filled out and submitted to the FGS. These forms can be found on the FGS website:

*Thesis/Practicum Final Report*
http://umanitoba.ca/faculties/graduate_studies/media/final_report-masters.pdf

*Thesis/Practicum Copyright Permission Page*
http://umanitoba.ca/faculties/graduate_studies/media/thesis_copyright_page-insert.pdf

*Thesis Release Form*
http://umanitoba.ca/faculties/graduate_studies/media/thesis_release-all.pdf

Deep breath! You made it!

**Disseminate Findings**

After you have had a chance to celebrate your accomplishment, you need to think about how you are going to share your work with your colleagues. It is very important to disseminate the findings of your thesis project. You have worked really hard to complete your research and your findings are an important addition to nursing knowledge – you don’t want the fruits of your time and effort to stop at your thesis defense! As well, to make research worthwhile it is important that we speak to our work and facilitate research utilization.

There are a number of ways in which you can disseminate your thesis findings. Publishing articles that discuss your research results is a good way to distribute your work. Presenting your findings at conferences is another way to share your findings with colleagues. There are plenty of opportunities to submit abstracts to various conferences for oral or poster presentations. You may also want to find opportunities, such as academic rounds, at your workplace in which to share your findings with your colleagues and encourage ways to put your research into practice.
It is quite likely that your thesis advisor will have expectations of you with respect to disseminating your thesis findings in some way. It would be a good idea to have a discussion with your advisor about each of your expectations and appropriate ways in which you can share your work. Life can quickly become busy after you have defended your thesis and moved on to other things. Yet, it is important that you consider the dissemination of your findings as part of completing your thesis work. It may be useful to plan some goals with your thesis advisor around the dissemination of your findings and develop a timeline for reaching these goals.

**Resources**

The following are links to helpful resources as you endeavor to write a thesis:

Faculty of Graduate Studies website: [http://umanitoba.ca/graduate_studies/](http://umanitoba.ca/graduate_studies/)

Forms: [http://umanitoba.ca/faculties/graduate_studies/forms/index.html](http://umanitoba.ca/faculties/graduate_studies/forms/index.html)

Dates & Deadlines: [http://umanitoba.ca/faculties/graduate_studies/deadlines/index.html](http://umanitoba.ca/faculties/graduate_studies/deadlines/index.html)


Faculty of Nursing Graduate Program Handbook:
[http://umanitoba.ca/faculties/nursing/media/Revised_July_07.pdf](http://umanitoba.ca/faculties/nursing/media/Revised_July_07.pdf)

*It always seems impossible until it’s done. ~ Nelson Mandela*

*Congratulations!!!*