

**M.A. in Specialized Journalism and Specialized Journalism  
(Arts and Culture) Master's Thesis Handbook**

Updated August 2023

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## The Project

Every candidate for the M.A. in Specialized Journalism and Specialized Journalism (Arts and Culture) will complete a master's thesis project for his or her degree. The project is a substantial work of journalism that is submitted to the USC Graduate School following the procedures and format that the Graduate School sets for all M.A. theses.

The project can be a multimedia project/website, a magazine article, a set of new feature articles, a television or radio magazine segment, a video documentary or podcast, or a book chapter—among the many forms of journalism today. The quality should be such that it could be published on a well-trafficked and respected website, published in a metro daily or a regional or specialized magazine, or broadcast on television or radio in midsize markets. The form should be appropriate to subject matter and to the discipline in which the student is concentrating. The choice of topic rests with the student, though experience suggests students should select a subject in which they are truly interested that meets the test of relevancy as information in the public interest.

Students will enroll in **JOUR 594A** in the fall semester and in **JOUR 594B** in the spring semester of the academic year in which they expect to complete their master's project. Both of these are two-unit courses. *Those not completing their project in the academic year are obliged to register, and pay, for **JOUR 594Z** until their thesis is complete.*

In the fall semester, students enrolled in JOUR 594A are required to take a half-semester course that will help them prepare for their thesis work.

Two initial steps are critical:

- 1) The choice of topic and the narrowing of its focus;
- 2) The recruitment of a three-person thesis committee, notably the committee chair. The committee chair plays a key role, acting as the student's principal editor, and should be experienced in the medium the student has chosen. The chair must be a full-time member of the School of Journalism faculty. The directors of each program are happy to work with students on refining their preliminary pitches and choosing a committee chair. The second committee member must also be a member of the Journalism or Communications faculty, ideally complementing the experience of the chair, and the third may also—but does not have to—be a USC faculty member outside the School of Journalism who has expertise in the subject matter. *In recruiting a faculty member outside Journalism, students should make clear that the project is a work of journalism and not a traditional academic thesis.*

The following pages contain a timeline for submission of your thesis by the April 12 deadline. By this date you will need to have secured signed approval of your completed thesis by your entire committee and upload your appointment of committee form to the Vice Provost of the USC Graduate School. If you miss this deadline, your next chance to submit your thesis will be in early September.

Students should begin working immediately in mid-September with the committee chair to refine their topics; to plan their reporting and research; and to establish a timetable for the delivery of an early draft, subsequent readings by the committee and completion of the project. We strongly advocate that you and your chair follow the timeline provided in this document. It is easy to procrastinate on these projects because they are time-consuming and students are busy with classes, but delay will diminish the projects' quality and could ultimately affect a student's graduation date. If the project changes direction as a result of your reporting and research, you should be in touch with your committee chair and perhaps other committee members for advice, and to avoid surprises.

## Timetable

### **September 11, Monday: Pitch development.**

Develop the pitch for your project based on your preliminary reporting and research and recruit a committee chair. Proceed with reporting and research after discussion with your chair. Recruit other committee members with the advice of your chair (*complete instructions appear later in this manual*).

### **October 9, Monday: Appointment of Committee form** (*link to form included in this manual*).

File the signed “Appointment of Committee” form with Mike Ploszek. The form requires your committee members’ signatures (and collecting them can take some time).

### **November 17, Friday: Outline due.**

Send the outline for your project to the committee chair for first review. Give your best effort, allowing room for fruitful conversation with your chair about structure, direction, intellectual development and research. Plan on getting feedback from your chair before the winter recess. Spend the recess concentrating on your first draft.

### **December 14-January 7, Winter Recess: Complete all interviews and reporting.**

### **January 8, Monday: First draft due.**

Send the first draft of the project to the chair. Expect more comments and suggestions.

### **January 22, Monday: First draft comments.**

Your committee chair returns the draft with comments and suggestions. Additional reporting and research may be necessary as well as rewriting.

### **February 5, Monday: Second draft due.**

Send the second draft of the project to the chair and possibly to your two other committee members. Expect more comments and suggestions.

### **February 19, Monday: Second draft comments.**

Get additional edits from chair and committee members.

### **March 1, Friday: Third draft due.**

Send the third draft of the project to the chair and possibly to your two other committee members. Expect more comments and suggestions.

### **March 15, Friday: Third draft comments.**

Get final edits from chair and committee members. Over the next two weeks, make final corrections to the project. Format your thesis if you have not already.

**March 29, Friday: Final draft due.**

Deliver the final draft to your committee. Create a profile in the Thesis Center on the Graduate School website: <http://grad.usc.edu/ThesisCenter>.<sup>1</sup>

**April 12, Friday: Final documentation submission.**

**The deadline by which all of the following must occur: (1) your thesis is completely finished, as no further changes will be allowed, (2) a PDF of your signed, completed Appointment of Committee form is uploaded to the Checklist page in Thesis Center, and (3) your committee members have electronically approved your thesis in Thesis Center.**

If all of the items above are completed by the deadline, you will receive an email confirmation from the Graduate School in 2-3 business days indicating that your manuscript may be uploaded. The subject will read: "Upload Thesis/Dissertation to Thesis Center." You will then have until **Friday, April 19 to upload your manuscript:**

**April 19, Friday: Final thesis manuscript submission.**

**The final deadline to upload the PDF of your thesis manuscript to Thesis Center.**

The Graduate School will review your manuscript for format and presentation and, should any changes be required, send a notification email. Normally this takes place within 3 weeks and the subject of the notification email will read: "Formatting Changes Available." You must then upload the final, Graduate School-approved version of your manuscript to the USC Digital Library by the deadline specified in the notification email in order for your degree to be conferred on time in May.

If you miss the April 12 deadline, your next opportunity to submit your thesis will be in September. If you choose this option, your formal graduation date will be moved to December. Note: in exceptional circumstances, you may be eligible for a June thesis submission date. However many Annenberg faculty are traveling for research and vacation in late May and June, and will likely be unavailable. If you strongly prefer to submit your thesis in June, you must obtain written permission from all of your committee members that they will be available in June to read, edit and approve your thesis.

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<sup>1</sup> Please note that the Graduate School's complete and official final submission instructions are included in the "Guidelines to Submission" section at the end of this manual.

## Types of Theses

### Magazine Articles/Newspaper Series

- 4500-word minimum
- Single magazine or series in newspaper or web outlet.
- Original reporting
- Could be a personal essay with research/reporting.
- Thoroughly researched with full sourcing/attribution.

### Multimedia Projects

- Original reporting and research to tell a **single** story
- Text, audio, visuals (photos and/or video), and interactivity
- An interactive element (quiz, a click-through photo gallery, a rollover map, calculator, etc.)
- Video and/or audio should be accompanied by script
- One- to three-page summary that (1) explains the origin of idea and its significance (nut graf(s)), (2) summarizes the research/reporting, and (3) includes a link.

### Web Sites

- Original reporting and research to tell **multiple** stories
- Text, audio, visuals and interactivity
- More emphasis on site navigation, overall presentation and user experience
- Social media entry points or embeds on home page
- Use of appropriate graphics and data visualizations
- Modern and clean design
- Includes a business plan (where appropriate) and written a preface or introduction.

### Documentary

- A minimum of 15 minutes
- Needs to be complete
- A script with annotated references
- A narrative that describes the following:
  - Your project concept
  - What you chose to do and why
  - What you found along the way
  - The rationale behind your choice to use video and how it worked as a medium
  - What you were able to accomplish
  - What you were unable to accomplish and why
  - Conclusions
  - The narrative should be accompanied by a bibliography.

### **Book Chapter**

- Proposal that describes what the book is about and what makes it significant
- A sample chapter(s)
- 5,000 word minimum

### **Broadcast TV**

- TV magazine piece (*60 Minutes* is an example)
- 10-15 minutes long
- Original reporting
- Script in TV format
- A one- to three-page summary that describes the piece and how it was done, and reflects on its significance and/or contribution to public understanding; the narrative should include link to piece and be accompanied by a bibliography.

### **Radio Documentary/Series**

- Original reporting
- Strong narrative structure
- 15 minutes long
- Use of ambient sound and actualities
- Script
- A one- to three-page summary that describes the project and how it was done, and reflects on its significance and/or contribution to public understanding; the narrative should include link to piece and be accompanied by a bibliography.

### **Podcasts**

- 1-3 episodes with a narrative structure. It can include Q&As, but they must be incorporated into a narrative story. Discuss appropriate length with your committee chair.
- Strong research and original reporting
- A script
- A one- to three-page summary that (1) explains the origin of idea and its significance (nut graf(s)), (2) summarizes the research/reporting, and (3) includes a link to the podcast.



## **Notes on Formatting and Content**

- Associated Press (AP) Style required
- Manuscript needs title page, table of contents, body text, references/bibliography
- If you are submitting a video, audio, and/or multimedia thesis, your content must be posted on a website and you will then simply paste the link in the body text section of the manuscript.
- Sources should be in the bibliography, including interviews
- No double dipping. Student can take a document/documentary/website/blog, etc. started in a class and embellish on it but cannot take the document/documentary/website/blog, etc. as-is and also use it as their thesis.

## **Links to Sample Theses**

- [All SJ theses submitted from 2010-present](#)
- [All SJAC theses submitted from 2010-present](#)

## Choosing a Committee

### How does it work?

Each student who is working on a master's project/thesis must recruit a three-person committee to read and approve the final version. This is the student's responsibility. The committee chair must be a **full-time (i.e., non-adjunct) faculty member from the School of Journalism**.

The second committee member must also be a **full-time (i.e., non-adjunct) faculty member from Annenberg**.

The third person on the committee can be a **full-time or adjunct faculty member from the School of Journalism or outside the School of Journalism/Annenberg**. For example, if your project focuses on education, you may want to recruit a professor from the Rossier School of Education as your third committee member. In rare cases, the third person on the committee can be an **“external member,” or, a faculty member from an institution other than USC**. You should work with your committee chair to get approval for a non-USC committee member.

### How do you choose a committee chair/main editor?

There are three ways to approach this task.

1. Look for a journalism professor who has experience or expertise in the topic you have chosen for your thesis/project. For example, if you are working on something about arts as social and political action in a radio format, Professor Sandy Tolan might be a good candidate.
2. Another approach is to choose a professor you like and respect, regardless of their expertise. All faculty members have had long careers in journalism and education, and are well-equipped to edit any sort of thesis/projects.

Students should also do their homework about various faculty members. Talk to members of the previous class about their experiences with the faculty on their committees. The program directors can give you contact for former students. You want to work with faculty members who are not only good editors but are accessible and easy to reach.

There is one caveat: For technical reasons, students working on a broadcast or radio project should find a member of the broadcast or radio faculty to serve as the committee chair or main editor. Additionally, students should be taking coursework that supports the format of their thesis. For instance, if a student wants to produce a podcast for their thesis, it's advisable to take audio classes.

## Which faculty members are available?

Below are links to School of Journalism faculty biographies and contact information. It is your job to research these faculty members to determine who you want to recruit.

## Journalism Tenured, Tenure-Track and Non-Tenure Track Faculty (Full-Time)

[Biographies](#) (including email addresses)

## Journalism Adjunct Faculty (Part-Time)

[Biographies](#) (including emails addresses)

## Sample of Email to Outside Committee Member

Dear [\[outside committee member\]](#)

I'm writing to request your participation as the outside member of my master's thesis committee at the Annenberg School of Journalism. Your expertise in [fill in the blank](#) will prove beneficial to this work of journalism in terms of providing suggestions for readings and other material that will add depth to my reporting.

[One succinct paragraph description here of your project, emphasizing either professional project or scholarly paper.](#) EXAMPLE: My professional project the first-ever cultural biography of The Runaways, the first all-girl teenage hard-rock group to achieve international success. I will discuss the issue of institutionalized sexism in the music business, document the rock world of the '70s Sunset Strip and show how The Runaways inspired the dawn of punk.

One note, the theses produced by journalism students are considered professional projects and most likely will not resemble a traditional academic thesis. The Annenberg professional project is a work of long-form journalism, in text, video, audio, or multimedia, or a combination of any one of these. As such, it does not typically carry footnotes or a bibliography. The rigor in the professional project will be evident in the use of primary and secondary sources, with attribution [journalism's form of footnoting], and from the use of other data and analysis that will also be found in the project.

As has been the custom of the Annenberg School of Journalism, after reviewing the "treatment" of the project, the outside committee member will have an opportunity to offer suggestions for interviews, readings and other data. In the spring semester, **roughly around March**, a penultimate draft of the thesis will be sent to you for your review. I will then incorporate your suggestions while working with my chair, a faculty member of the Annenberg School.

I'm happy to send you an extended treatment of my proposed professional project for your review and consideration. In the meantime, my thanks for considering my request.

Sincerely,

Tommy Trojan  
Specialized Journalism Student

## Master's Project/Thesis Pitch Form

**Name:** [Your name]

**Major/Story Type:** [Text, Broadcast-TV, Broadcast-Radio, Website]

**Project slug** (*two words plus last name*):

Example: For a project about The Ashram Tapes of Alice Coltrane, the slug would be: AliceColtrane\_McNeill.

**Target publication/program:**

List where your project might appear. List just one specific title, not “newspaper” or “TV documentary program.” Examples: Los Angeles Times; LA Weekly; Atlantic; California Sunday Magazine; Morning Edition; Slate; The Frame, KPCC; ArtBound, KCET.

**Story focus/angle:**

Describe what your project is about in 100 words. Answer the basic who, what, when, where, why and how questions.

**Why is this project relevant? This is the most important part of your pitch.**

What's your nut graf? Why would a reader/viewer/listener be interested in this project? Why is the project important? How does your project differ from what has already been published or aired? In other words, how does your story about this subject contribute to the existing conversation and move the topic forward? Like most nut grafs, it should be one or two paragraphs long (100 words).

**Interviews (at least five for the pitch):**

List specific people and their titles. You should investigate the availability and willingness of your interview subjects *before* submitting your pitch.

**Bibliography/Background materials:**

List other works that have appeared in the last 2 years about your topic. These include books, documentaries, major news articles, etc.

**Other research and elements needed to tell the story:**

Examples: events, news conferences, publications, data analysis, government data.

## **A Rough Draft vs. a First Draft**

**Many students submit rough drafts instead of first drafts to their committee chairs. What's the difference?**

A rough draft has major holes, is badly organized, poorly written, and often lacks even a rudimentary nut graf. In other words, it looks as though the student simply emptied his or her notebook. **This type of draft is unacceptable.**

A first draft should be as complete as possible. It should be carefully organized and well-written. It should not have any missing data or interviews. In fact, it should resemble something you would turn in for a course final. You should consult your committee chair along the way for advice and suggestions.

Even the best first drafts go through multiple edits before they are approved. You will save yourself – and your committee – lots of time and anxiety by turning in the best possible first draft.

## Addenda

Link to [Appointment of Committee form](#)

Link to [Guidelines to Submission](#)

Link to [Manuscript Formatting Guidelines](#)