The Master's Project for MSJ/MSJA Students

Contents

The Project

Every candidate for the MA in Specialized Journalism and the MA in Specialized Journalism, The Arts will complete a master's project for their 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 MA theses.

For the MA in Specialized Journalism, the project can be a multimedia project/website, a magazine article, a set of newspage feature articles, a television or radio magazine segment, 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 for* **JOUR 594Z** *until their thesis is complete.*

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 should also be a member of the Journalism faculty, ideally complementing the experience of the chair, and the third should – 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.*

Students should begin working immediately 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. 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 23 *Wednesday*: **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.

October 21 *Wednesday*: **Appointment of Committee form.**
File the signed "Appointment of Committee" form with Gail Light. The form requires your committee' members' signatures (and collecting them can take some time).

January 11 *Monday*: **First draft due.**
First day of the spring semester. Send the first draft of your project to the committee chair for first review.

January 25 *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 10 *Wednesday*: **Second draft due.**
Send the second draft of the project to the chair and your two other committee members. Expect more comments and suggestions.

February 24 *Wednesday*: **Second draft comments.**
Get edits from chair and committee members. Over the next two weeks, make final corrections to the project.

March 11 *Friday*: **Final draft due**
Deliver the final draft to your committee. Create a profile in the Thesis Center on the Graduate School website: http://www.usc.edu/schools/Graduate School/current_thesis_dissert_02.html. Once you click *create*, the information on the profile, including the exact title of your thesis, can only be changed through your sending a request to the Graduate Schools IT staff <stuserve@usc.edu>. You will receive a verification email once you created your profile/registered. Your account will not be activated until you click the link "IN" on the verification email.

The **Approval to Submit** form is created as you fill out information while creating your profile in Thesis Center. Just so you know *you* are responsible for creating it and ensuring that the

information is accurate. After you have completed your profile, click the Checklist button on the next page, then click **Initiate ASD**, for **Approval to Submit Document.** Then click "**Send email**" so your committee members will receive an e-mail from VPGP (Vice provost for Graduate Programs) and the subject line will be "Action Required for Approval to Submit." Be sure to let your committee members know that they have until **Noon, March 25** to submit their approval electronically. This information will be contained in the emails that go to the committee members.

March 25 *Friday*: **Final manuscript submission**
The Committee members MUST electronically approve your thesis by **noon on March 25.**

On or before **noon on March 25,** upload your **Appointment of Committee** form (you obtained from Gail) to the Graduate School Thesis Center "Document Checklist" page. If possible, you should upload the Appointment of Committee form when you create the profile in the Thesis Center.

Once the Graduate School has approved your **Checklist** (all Checklist items must be uploaded to Thesis Center by noon)**,** you will receive an e-mail from the Graduate School telling you to upload the PDF of your manuscript. You have until **noon on April 1** to upload your manuscript.

Again, the committee members need to have submitted their electronic signature for the approval to submit your thesis by the same noon deadline, March 25.

The deadline to upload the PDF of your manuscript and upload the **Appointment of Committee** form to the Thesis Center Checklist is **noon on March 25.** There are no exceptions to this deadline.

Your final deadline to upload your manuscript to the USC Digital Library is May 13th

In extreme cases and under critical circumstances, some MSJ/MSJA students have stretched out this timetable to give themselves more time to complete their projects, essentially three months. The Graduate School deadline in that case will be **noon on Friday, June 24.** However, the graduation date for the degree will be August 2016. Students will be permitted to participate in the May 2016 Commencement.

Types of Theses

Magazine Articles/Newspaper Series
- 4500-5000 word minimum
- Single magazine or series in newspaper
- Original reporting
- Could be a personal essay with research/reporting
- <u>Samples</u>: Brian Sumer, Matt Stromberg and Stephanie Case

Podcasts
- A 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 to the podcast.
- <u>Sample</u>: Christine Campodonico

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 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.
- <u>Samples</u>: Krisi Crowley, Stephanie Case, Saara Liikaanen-Renger and Christy Lytal

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
- <u>Sample</u>: Susan Valot

Documentary

- A minimum of 15 minutes
- Needs to be complete
- A script with annotated references
- A one- to three-page narrative that describes the documentary and how it was done, and reflects on its significance and/or contribution to public understanding; 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
- <u>Sample</u>: Edward Lifson and Evelyn McDonnell

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 in radio format
- 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

NOTES

- Chicago Style, i.e. author/date/style
- Sources should be in the bibliography including interviews: *Interview with Parks, Michael on December 7, 2014*
- Needs title page, table of content, abstract
- No footnotes except for added idea
- 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

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 faculty member from the School of Journalism.**

The second committee member should be a **full-time faculty member in the School of Journalism.**

The third person on the committee can be a USC faculty member **outside the School of Journalism.** 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.

How do you choose a committee chair/main editor?

There are three ways to approach this task. You can try to find a journalism professor who has some experience or expertise in the topic you have chosen for your thesis/project. For example, if you are working on something about science, K.C. Cole might be a good candidate.

Another approach is to choose a professor you like and respect, regardless of his/her 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 Class of 2014 if you know any. 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 broadcast or radio project should find a member of the broadcast faculty to serve as the committee/chair or main editor.

Which faculty members are available?

Enclosed is a tentative list of full-time faculty who will be available to serve on committees. It is your job to research these faculty members to determine who you want to try to recruit.

Sample of Email to Outside Committee Member

Date

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 will consider the plight of homeless children and its impact on schools and community. I will discuss the issues, document the growing population of homeless children [California has the largest population of any state] and consider solutions now being used by schools and other public and private institutions and organizations.

While a scholarly paper from the Annenberg School of Journalism looks very much like academic work from other USC units, the Annenberg professional project most likely will not resemble an academic thesis. The Annenberg professional project for graduate journalism students is a work of long-form journalism, in text, video or multimedia, or a combination of any one of the three. 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, the outside committee member after reviewing the "treatment" of the project will have an opportunity to offer suggestions for interviews, readings and other data. In the spring semester, **roughly around mid-March** or so, 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: [Print, Broadcast-TV, Broadcast-Radio,]

Project slug (*two words plus last name*):
Example: For a project about violence against teachers in LAUSD, the slug would be: Teacherviolence_Castaneda.

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; Newsweek; California Connected; Morning Edition; Slate; The Huffington Post.

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? <u>This is the most important part of your pitch.</u>
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 Topic vs. a Legitimate Project/Thesis Idea

Students struggle to find and develop story ideas. This problem can continue when it comes to the master's project/thesis. Please remember, there is a big difference between a topic that is broad and general, and a project/thesis idea that is specific.

Take "foster care in Los Angeles" or "the intersection of science and religion." Both are examples of topics that are too broad for a master's project/thesis.

To turn these and other topics into legitimate project/thesis ideas, find something new, compelling, and/or controversial about the topic. Ask yourself: What makes this project/thesis relevant now? What can my project/thesis add that other media outlets haven't already covered?

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.

Even the best first drafts often go through three or four 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.

Specialized Journalism Thesis Travel Grants

The Specialized Journalism Program will award small grants – up to $500 each – to support travel necessary to complete the reporting or research on a master's thesis project. Applications will be judged on the quality of the project being undertaken, the specific objectives for the proposed travel, and support from a student's thesis chair. Grant funds may only be used to reimburse students for transportation and housing. Annenberg faculty members will review applications.

Applicants should submit:

1) A brief summary of their thesis project explaining the topic, the reporting strategy, the thematic approach, and the form of the final product — no more than 250 words. Please include the name of your committee chair.

2) A description of the specific reporting or research activities that will be undertaken with the travel and an argument for their centrality to the project — no more than 250 words.

3) A budget of estimated expenses. Students will be reimbursed for actual expenses according to USC rules and procedures. **Eugenia Gordillo** (egordill@asc.usc.edu) in the School of Journalism office will process the expenses.

Applications should be emailed as Word doc attachments to **Erna Smith** (esmith@usc.edu). Students in The Arts track should send a copy of their application to **Sasha Anawalt** (anawalt@usc.edu) as well. We will review the applications quickly and notify students of awards as soon as possible. Applications will be accepted until **Friday, December 4.**