Overview of the MPH Essay

Guidelines for the Master's Essay

Difference between an MPH essay and an MS thesis

An MS thesis must describe original research conducted by the student. It also involves two oral exams. Epidemiology MS students must do a thesis.

An MPH essay can describe the student’s original research, but it is not required. Other options include a literature review, a grant proposal, or a surveillance report (see suggested acceptable formats below). The essay may be in the same format and of similar content as a master's thesis, but it does not have to be.

No oral exams are required for an essay. Epidemiology MPH students are required to do an essay.

Criteria for an acceptable essay

The acceptable formats for an essay are the following:

- a journal article reporting on original research, much like a master’s thesis
- a review of the literature on a specific public health topic
- a grant proposal describing an hypothetical epidemiologic study to be conducted
- a surveillance report based on local or national surveillance data
- another format agreed upon in advance by the student, advisor, and essay readers

If the student is to conduct original research, this can be done in the following ways:

- Collecting new data – e.g., the student adds data to an existing study or executes a small study on his or her own
- Doing something novel with existing data such as applying a new analytic technique, making novel use of an existing technique, or combining datasets
- Overseeing data collection or management
- Developing a new protocol or way of collecting data
- Executing additional laboratory assays or genetic evaluation of existing samples

Timing of committee formation, first draft, and revisions

MPH students should form their essay committees at least 3 months before their expected graduation date. A committee must consist of at least two readers (faculty committee members). There are no MPH committee chairs; all members are considered to have equal standing. However, one of the members is typically the student’s academic advisor.

The student’s advisor should forward an e-mail to Lori Smith, Epidemiology Student Services Manager and Program Administrator, listing the readers, and identifying the type of committee.
being proposed (e.g. MPH Essay). **Pitt Public Health committee composition requirements are identified on the [Pitt Public Health Web site](http://example.com).** Readers must be approved by Lori on behalf of the department chair. Another department-level committee composition review will also be performed by the Epidemiology Master’s and Doctoral Program Directors. Lori will forward the proposed committee lists to the Pitt Public Health Assistant Dean for Student Affairs, Mary Derkach for additional approval. She will then e-mail essay readers to notify them that the proposed committee has been approved at the departmental and Pitt Public Health levels. **Please note that subsequent changes in committee composition must be similarly approved.**

- **NOTE:** If student work involves data, policies, or experiences from an outside agency, organization, or practicum site, they should ensure that they follow the guidelines that may include a requirement to have a member of the agency, organization, or site on their committee. *Any student who will use data or experiences from an experience at the Allegheny County Health Department (ACHD) must include their ACHD preceptor as a member of his/her committee. The agencies with which these members are associated should be identified in the e-mail to Lori.*

The student should describe the nature of his essay to each reader at the time of committee formation so that readers can determine whether the essay topic is suitable.

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### SUGGESTED MPH ESSAY DEVELOPMENT TIME FRAMES

*(The Pitt Public Health [Web site](http://example.com) identifies *specific deadlines* for each graduation period)*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Benchmark</th>
<th>December graduation</th>
<th>April graduation</th>
<th>June graduation</th>
<th>August graduation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Select readers / advisors request approval</td>
<td>By September 3</td>
<td>By December 15</td>
<td>By March 1</td>
<td>By May 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Submit outline to readers</td>
<td>By October 14</td>
<td>By December 15</td>
<td>By April 15</td>
<td>By June 3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Submit first draft to readers</td>
<td>November 8</td>
<td>By February 18</td>
<td>May 17</td>
<td>July 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Submit second draft to readers</td>
<td>November 25</td>
<td>March 15</td>
<td>June 3</td>
<td>July 22</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Final reader sign-off</td>
<td>By December 9</td>
<td>By April 1</td>
<td>By June 17</td>
<td>By August 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Submit final draft to Joanne Pegher, Pitt Public Health Graduation Coordinator, for her review¹</td>
<td>Week of Dec. 9</td>
<td>By April 15</td>
<td>Week of June 17</td>
<td>Week of Aug. 5</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

¹Confirm these time frames on the Pitt Public Health Web site. Formatting changes may still be required.
Guidelines for the written format of the essay

● Original research
Use journal article format, with the goal of publication in a journal (this is the standard to strive for, but actual publication or submission is not required). The length of the article should be that of an original research journal article.

● Literature review
The introduction should include the research question and its importance to public health. The methods section should explain how the literature review was conducted, the results section should summarize the current literature on the topic, and the discussion section should summarize what is currently known and what further research is needed. Suggested length is 20-40 pages.

● Grant application
A hypothetical grant proposal should be in the format of a standard NIH grant application. Suggested length is 20-30 pages.

● Surveillance report
A surveillance report should include text, tables and graphs in a format similar to those used by CDC and state health departments (see MMWR article “Surveillance for Acute Viral Hepatitis --- United States, 2006” at http://www.cdc.gov/mmwr/preview/mmwrhtml/ss5702a1.htm or other MMWR surveillance reports as examples). Suggested length is 20-30 pages.

The abstract of an essay is limited to 350 words as per Pitt Public Health policy. For other format requirements, see instructions provided by Joanne Pegher in the Pitt Public Health Student Affairs office. Please pay attention to formatting requirements early in the process so as to save time and frustration at the end.

Final written paper

There is usually work to be done after the first draft is submitted. If readers indicate that changes to the essay should be made, they should not sign the Report on Requirements for Master’s Degree form or the essay signature page until they have seen and approved those changes. The Report on Requirements Form may be downloaded from the school Web site. Students who do not meet school-wide essay deadlines may not be able to graduate in the term of their choice.

Grading

Readers will grade the essay on a 3-point scale (3=exceeds expectations, 2=meets expectations, 1= does not meet expectations). Readers should assign an overall score, as well as scores for various components: understanding of public health importance, review of the literature, grasp of study design and statistical analysis, strength of conclusions and recommendations, and quality of writing (see attached grading form). The readers should not approve the essay unless it is worthy of an overall score of 2 or 3. After all revisions to the essay are made, the readers should reach a consensus about the final scores, and the academic advisor should complete the grading form. A copy of the Essay Grading Form should be given to the student and to the Student Services Office (A536 Crabtree).
If the student fails to meet passing standards after two rounds of comments from readers, the advisor can ask the student to either continue the editing process or embark on a different essay topic.

Authorship

If the essay is to be submitted for publication, readers may be included as authors on the paper, but this is not a requirement. The primary advisor and student should make this decision and it should be based on the degree to which a given reader influenced or contributed to the paper.

Time limits should be set so that publication is not delayed if the graduate does not submit the paper following graduation. For example, the advisor and student may decide that if the work is not submitted for publication within 6 months of graduation, the materials will be turned over to the advisor so that the advisor can move forward with the publication.

Overview of the MS Thesis

Guidelines for the Master’s Thesis

Difference between an MPH essay and an MS thesis

An MS thesis must describe original research conducted by the student. It also involves two oral exams. Epidemiology MS students must do a thesis.

An MPH essay can describe the student’s original research, but it is not required. Other options include a literature review, a grant proposal, or a surveillance report (see suggested acceptable formats below). No oral exams are required for an essay. The essay may be in the same format and of similar content as a master’s thesis, but it does not have to be. Epidemiology MPH students are required to do an essay.

Definition of a good thesis

A good thesis topic provides the student with an opportunity to apply epidemiology concepts and develop research skills. The thesis should advance knowledge and, ideally, answer one or more important questions. The thesis is an important step in training the student to ask good questions as well as learning how to go about answering them. A good thesis is of publishable quality.

Criteria for an acceptable thesis

The thesis should report on original research by the student. This requires that the student take total “ownership” of at least a piece of the thesis work. Examples of ways that this can be done include the following:
• Primary data collection – e.g., the student adds data to an existing study or executes a small study on his or her own
• Doing something novel with existing data such as applying a new analytic technique, making novel use of an existing technique, or combining datasets
• Overseeing data collection or management
• Developing a new protocol or way of collecting data
• Executing additional laboratory assays or genetic evaluation of existing samples

Through these activities, the student should understand the basic process of data collection and should gain experience in collaborating with others.

Timing of committee formation and oral exams

An MS student should form his thesis committee at least 3 months before his expected graduation date.

The student’s academic advisor (typically the committee chair) should forward an e-mail to Lori Smith, Epidemiology Student Services Manager and Program Administrator, listing the thesis committee members, committee chair and type of committee being proposed (e.g. MS Comprehensive and/or MS Thesis Defense). **Pitt Public Health committee composition requirements are identified on the Pitt Public Health Web site.** Members must be approved by Lori on behalf of the department chair. Another department-level committee composition review will also be performed by the Epidemiology Master’s and Doctoral Program Directors. Lori will forward the proposed committee lists to the Pitt Public Health Assistant Dean for Student Affairs, Mary Derkach for additional approval. She will then e-mail committee chairs to notify them that the proposed committee has been approved at the departmental and Pitt Public Health levels. **Please note that subsequent changes in committee composition must be similarly approved.**

The student should describe his proposed thesis project to each committee member at the time of committee formation so that committee members can determine whether the thesis topic is suitable.

- **NOTE:** If student work involves data, policies, or experiences from an outside agency, organization, or practicum site, they should ensure that they follow the guidelines that may include a requirement to have a member of the agency, organization, or site on their committee. **Any student who will use data or experiences from an experience at the Allegheny County Health Department (ACHD) must include their ACHD preceptor as a member of his/her committee. The agencies with which these members are associated should be identified in the e-mail to Lori.**

MS students are required to have two oral exams, the **Comprehensive** and the **Final Defense**. The exact timing of these exams is at the discretion of the committee chair. The Comprehensive Exam ideally takes place 2 months before the last day of term in which the degree is to be granted (it **must** take place at least one month before the last day of term according to GSPH policy). A written outline should be given to committee members before this exam. The Final Defense should take place at least 2 weeks before the last day of term. A draft of the written thesis should be given to committee members at least 2 weeks before this exam. All committee members should be reasonably comfortable with the student's progress before allowing the Final Defense to go forward. Comments on the draft and the Final Defense should be given to the student within a few days following the exam.
### SUGGESTED MS THESIS DEVELOPMENT TIME FRAMES
(The Pitt Public Health Web site identifies specific deadlines for each graduation period)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Benchmark</th>
<th>December graduation</th>
<th>April graduation</th>
<th>June graduation</th>
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</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>• Select committee members / advisors request approval</td>
<td>• By September 3</td>
<td>• By December 15</td>
<td>• By March 1</td>
<td>• By May 1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Submit outline to committee</td>
<td>Time frames to be determined by students and their committees.</td>
<td>Time frames to be determined by students and their committees.</td>
<td>Time frames to be determined by students and their committees.</td>
<td>Time frames to be determined by students and their committees.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Submit intro/methods to committee</td>
<td>• By December 9</td>
<td>• By April 15</td>
<td>• By June 17</td>
<td>• By August 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Comprehensive Exam</td>
<td>• Week of Dec. 9</td>
<td>• Week of April 15</td>
<td>• Week of June 17</td>
<td>• Week of Aug. 5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>• Submit first draft to committee</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Submit second draft to committee</td>
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<tr>
<td>• Final Defense</td>
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**Content of exams:**

**Comprehensive:** Generally, the student presents the literature review and demonstrates how the proposed thesis will fill a void in the existing literature. Preliminary data may be presented. The committee should focus on whether or not the student has the skills to move forward with the thesis work.

The purpose of this exam is to discuss with the committee issues related to project design and analysis. Enough information should be presented so that any concerns of the committee will be raised at this stage.

**Final Defense:** The purpose of this exam is to present the completed thesis work. Note that it is termed “defense” for a reason. The student must be prepared to defend the research against any and all questions, some of which may not have been raised before. This requires the successful candidate to be fully versed in all aspects of the research. To be ready, the candidate must demonstrate a complete understanding of the material in the thesis, be polished in presentation skills and be able to fluently answer questions about the research. He must be able to put
material in perspective relative to the existing literature. Knowing the answer to all questions is not as important as knowing how to go about answering them.

Conduct of the Oral Exams

When all committee members have convened, the chair asks the candidate to leave the room for a few minutes. At this time, the chair provides a brief description of the candidate’s strengths and weaknesses. It is important for the chair to be honest with any concerns that he or she has. This is the chance for the chair to get opinions and suggestions from other committee members. The chair may wish to bring along the candidate’s school record which can be signed out from the Student Services office (please request these materials in advance). Permission for this is granted only to the chair of the committee. When the review of the candidate is completed, the candidate is invited back into the room and the exam begins.

The candidate presents materials that have been prepared in consultation with the committee chair. It is important to realize that sufficient time must be left for discussion. While the length of the presentation will vary and is at the discretion of the committee chair, 20 slides usually leaves sufficient time for discussion. After the presentation and question and answer period, the chair asks the candidate to leave again, and the committee privately discusses their decision. Recommendations on how to address weaknesses are provided to the chair who relays the comments to the candidate. Committee members are encouraged to provide input directly to the candidate as well.

If the committee indicates that the candidate is not ready to pass the exam, the deficient areas are noted and the criteria for a success are provided to the candidate. This rarely happens because the committee chair should have a reasonable sense of where the candidate is and should make sure that he or she is ready for a given exam before it is scheduled. Students who insist on an exam against the advice of their chair should recognize the potential consequences of such an action.

Assuming the candidate passes, committee members sign the Report on Requirements for Master’s Degree form. The chair is responsible for bringing this form to the meeting. It can be downloaded from the school Web site.

Guidelines for the written portion of the thesis

The thesis should be written in the format of a journal article such that it can be published if of sufficient quality. The abstract is limited to 350 words as per Pitt Public Health policy. For other format requirements, see instructions provided by Joanne Pegher in the Pitt Public Health Student Affairs office.

Options when the master’s candidate is not performing at a sufficient level

Comprehensive Exam: If the committee has concerns about the ability of a student to complete his or her thesis work, then it will not pass the candidate on the Comprehensive Exam. It can recommend switching the subject matter of the thesis. It is critical that the committee be honest with the student and also open with one another. If the probability of the student completing the work is judged to be low, then it is best for all involved for an alternate path to be identified at this time, such as providing the student with more time or switching topics.

Final Defense: If a student fails the final defense, this represents lack of preparation by the student and lack of guidance by the committee. Thus, all committee members should be reasonably comfortable with progress before allowing the defense to be scheduled. If the student insists on going forward without the recommendation of the committee chair, failure is a
possibility. If a student fails, he/she may be granted a second attempt at the discretion of the committee chair.

Final written paper

There is often work that must be done after the Final Defense. If committee members indicate that changes to the thesis should be made, they should not sign the thesis signature page until they have seen and approved those changes.

_Students who do not meet school-wide thesis deadlines may not be able to graduate in the term of their choice._

Grading

Committee members will grade the thesis on a 3-point scale (3=exceeds expectations, 2=meets expectations, 1= does not meet expectations). The committee should assign an overall score, as well as scores for various components: understanding of public health importance, review of the literature, grasp of study design and statistical analysis, strength of conclusions and recommendations, quality of writing, and clarity of oral presentation (see attached grading form). The committee should not approve the thesis unless it is worthy of an overall score of 2 or 3. After all revisions to the thesis are made, the committee should reach a consensus about the final scores, and the committee chair should complete the grading form. A copy of the Thesis Grading Form should be given to the student and to the Student Services Office (A536 Crabtree).

Authorship

If the thesis is to be submitted for publication, committee members are often included as authors on the paper, but this is not a requirement. The primary advisor and student should make this decision and it should be based on the degree to which a given committee member influenced or contributed to the paper.

Time limits should be set for publication of the material following graduation. For example, the advisor and student may decide that if the work is not submitted for publication within 6 months of graduation, the materials will be turned over to the advisor so that the advisor can move forward with the publication.