



# NEW BRUNSWICK THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

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## MASTER OF ARTS CAPSTONE THESIS OR PROJECT

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# MASTER OF ARTS CAPSTONE THESIS OR PROJECT

All Master of Arts students must complete either a capstone thesis or project as part of their degree program.

- MAMS students will complete a capstone project.
- MATS students can choose to complete a thesis or project.
- MAPCC students ordinarily will complete a project but could choose a thesis.

These options can be confusing for students. The best course of action is to discuss the what's best for you for you and your career goals.

## Difference between a professional and academic MA

A professional MA involves taking graduate courses that focus on the practice of ministry. It includes academic study and critical thinking. It is considered an entry-level degree where students will graduate with a mastery of the fundamentals of a particular area of ministry. A capstone project will showcase the student's ability to research and develop a program for a need in ministry.

An academic MA involves taking graduate courses that focus on the process of academic research and analysis. Its focus is on a narrowed topic, such as biblical studies or pastoral care & counseling. It prepares students to master the skills involved in practice and analysis of the field. A clinical project will demonstrate a student's clinical and analytic skills in a particular area of pastoral counseling. A thesis will showcase a student's ability to name, research, and analyze a particular issue or problem in a specific field.

NBTS degrees have professional or academic designations. The degrees also have designated requirements for the capstone project or thesis.

Degree	MAMS	MATS 1	MATS 2	MAPCC 1	MAPCC 2
Professional or Academic	Professional	Professional by student selection	Academic by student selection	Academic	Academic
Project or Thesis	Project	Project	Thesis	Clinical Project	Thesis

This thesis or project is completed in the last year of study under the direction of an NBTS faculty member. This part of the program involves independent work for the student. Students will regularly meet with their thesis/project advisor and submit work for comments and improvements. This guide will help you in preparing your capstone thesis or project.

## Timetable:

[MATS Students with 0-24 credits](#)

[MAMS Students with 0-12 credits](#)

Students should meet once a semester with their advisor. MA students should consider a specific concentration that fits their needs. MA students can choose a concentration at any point, but it is

best to do so as soon as possible. Each concentration has particular requirements in addition to the required courses. See the relevant sections of the Student Handbook for more information about each degree concentration.

Students should also begin the discernment process for their capstone thesis or project during the first fifteen credits of coursework. To aid in that process, all students will take a 3-hour workshop: MA001 Preparing for a Project or Thesis Workshop.

### MATS Students with 24-36 credits

### MAMS Students with 12-24 credits

MATS students should decide between the thesis and project with their advisor and, if needed, be reassigned to the faculty member best suited to be their thesis/project director. MAMS students will complete a capstone project.

Students should begin thinking about the topic for the thesis/project and discuss it with their advisor. The topic should be selected, and the student should begin independent reading well before the summer before the thesis or project work begins.

### MATS Students with 36-48 credits

### MAMS Students with 24-36 credits

This year the students will work with the faculty advisor to complete either the capstone thesis or project using the instructions below.

## Option One: Capstone Thesis for MATS & MAPCC students who select this option.

**Definition:** A thesis is an academic research paper on a topic of interest to the student. The thesis is an original research work designed and written by the student that demonstrates the student's ability to

- engage in the review of existing literature on the topic,
- conduct either original literary commentary or engage in a specific research topic,
- collect, organize, and present their original research,
- discuss the implications of your research and draw conclusions.

This type of thesis work requires self-discipline and demonstrates the student's ability to engage in scholarly discourse, complete a substantial project, and communicate the results of their research to others.

### Benefits of a Master's Thesis

MATS students who plan to continue their studies beyond the master's level should choose the thesis option. The thesis demonstrates the student's ability to engage in the type of research required at the doctoral level. Students in the MAPCC should consult their advisor on the best option for their future.

A thesis is chosen by students who enjoy intensive and independent research. This research can be text-based (biblical and historical studies) or use social sciences to address a complex issue or problem. The thesis also gives the student an extended mentorship with a faculty member.

### Structure/Format

The MA thesis template will be used for all MATS Students writing a thesis. A Master's thesis **should**

**be 50–60 pages (12500-15000 words) with a maximum of 75 pages (18750 words).** The latest edition of Kate L. Turabian’s, *A Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations* is to be followed in all matters of style, format, footnotes, and bibliography, except where the NBTS Style Guide indicates otherwise. The standard template can be found in the documents and resources of the Theological Writing Center site on Brightspace.

Faculty advisors may specify another method of scholarly conventions for notations if that style is the standard in the student’s area of interest. If another method is selected, the faculty member must contact the Theological Writing Center to ensure standardization of the form and that exception would then be noted for the student. It is understood that the writing will be careful and of publishable quality. Students must complete MA515 Integrative Capstone Project or Thesis Development prior to beginning work on the thesis.

### Phase 1 – Thesis Proposal

The Abstract—the thesis topic and two to five paragraphs (no more than 300 words)—describing the project will be turned in to the faculty advisor by **week seven of the first semester.** The Abstract will be further refined throughout the thesis development process. It presents all the significant elements of the work in a highly condensed form, i.e., the thesis statement, a brief introduction, a summary of how the issue will be addressed, and possible implications. (See the template for more information). **The required template for MA theses can be found on the Theological Writing Center site in Brightspace.**

### Phase 2: Researching and Writing the Thesis

**Further development of the Thesis** should include the following:

- The Abstract
- Preliminary Introduction
- Setting the topic in its academic, scientific, and/or sociological context
- Preliminary Chapter on the Research Design and Methods
- Bibliography developed to this point.

Any surveys, questionnaires, oral history or observational prompts, archives to be consulted, or critical sources for further exploration must be included in this Phase 2 paper. **Phase 2 of the thesis is due to the faculty advisor at the conclusion of the first semester. Like all assignments, this paper will be submitted via the Brightspace class portal.** Note: while this is the minimum due to the advisor at the end of the first semester, the complete thesis will be due ten weeks into the second semester, so plan accordingly.

During the entire thesis process, the student should be in regular contact with the advisor (i.e., weekly or bi-weekly meetings) and engage in the writing groups offered by the Theological Writing Center.

During the first semester, the advisor and the student should work with the MA director for their program to secure a second reader for the thesis or project. This second thesis reader is ordinarily another NBTS faculty member or a faculty-designated Doctor of Ministry graduate. Phase 1 of the thesis will be shared with the second reader. If required, it will also be submitted to the Institutional Review Board (see below).

### Internal Review Board Approval or Waiver

Theses that involve “human subjects” (working with and collecting data from communities via surveys, case studies, observations, interviews, etc.) require special attention to protect participants. As a

researcher, the student bears responsibility for how their research affects participating individuals and communities.

In conformity with “The Common Rule” guidelines established by the U.S. Government Office of Human Research Protections and general practice in academic research, NBTS requires all research that is formally conducted as part of a project or thesis to be reviewed by the IRB to protect human subjects and minimize potential risks or harm. The Common Rule, formally entitled “Protection of Human Subjects,” is part 46 of Title 45 of the Code of Federal Regulations (“45 CFR 46”). Thus, when students conduct research that includes participants, they must account for how they are protecting participants from harm. Harm can include loss of confidentiality, negative personal or professional repercussions from participation, or emotional harm. Only after the research receives IRB approval can the student implement the research. **IRB approval can be requested at any point in the first semester; however, the student must submit the proposal to the IRB, or the faculty advisor must sign a waiver and send it to the MA director and the Registrar by the end of the first semester of work.**

The advisor will assign a pass/fail grade for the first three thesis credits, provided the student has submitted the required work and it is deemed sufficient. This pass/fail grade will change when the final grade for the whole thesis is submitted to the Registrar.

### Phase 3: Completion of the Thesis

In the second semester, the student should complete the research and writing of the remaining thesis. **All materials should be submitted as a final product of 50-60 pages (12500-15000 words) with a 75-page (18750 words) maximum—see the style guide and Template for specifics. The thesis must be submitted to the advisor and the second reader and loaded to the Brightspace class site no later than week 10 of the second semester. The style guide and template can be found on the Theological Writing Center Brightspace site.**

It is also highly recommended that students submit sections and/or chapters to the faculty advisor and second reader throughout the year-long thesis process. Most theses require extensive editing as the student replies to questions and comments from the faculty advisor and second reader, so allowing time to edit the project is essential.

### Phase 4: Thesis Defense

**In weeks 11-14, the student will defend the thesis and make the final grammatical edits required by the committee and the library staff.**

The word “defense” is a frightening one. It is the classic term for thesis completion. A thesis defense is an oral presentation and discussion of the thesis with your advisor, second reader, the MA director, and students in the MA program. The purpose is to share your work with others and receive feedback. It begins with you describing the process of study and what you learned. Questions from the faculty members present follow this presentation. Once the thesis defense is complete, you will receive comments and corrections from the committee. Do not worry; your advisor and second reader have been reading your work and commenting throughout the process. These final edits are the final polish to your work.

The second-semester course grade of three credits will be assigned a letter grade, agreed upon by the advisor and second reader. This grade will also replace the pass/fail grade in the first semester.

A copy of the successfully defended thesis may be housed in the library of the Seminary.

## Important Dates for Students and Advisors in the Thesis Process

- **Week seven of the first semester:** Abstract must be submitted. A second reader should be assigned by this week.
- **End of the first semester:** Phase 2 of the thesis should be submitted to the advisor, second reader, and IRB no later than the last day of the semester.
- **Week 10 of the second semester:** Phase 3, the entire thesis must be submitted to the faculty advisor and the second reader. Your thesis advisor and second reader should have read your work throughout the process. The thesis defense will be scheduled if this full draft is deemed acceptable.
- **Weeks 12-13 of the second semester:** The thesis defense will be scheduled, and the final editing of the thesis will be done.

## Option Two: Capstone Project for MAMS & MATS students who select this option.

Students who plan to apply their studies in a contextual setting should choose to develop a project as part of their MA program. This is a two-semester project. **The student will enroll in MA515 Integrative Capstone Project or Thesis Development in the first semester.** This course will involve the research portion of the thesis and will provide the needed study and background for the project. Prior to enrolling in MA515, the student and advisor should discuss the project and determine the elective class or directed study that will aid in its development. The student should meet regularly with their advisor during this preliminary period.

This option prioritizes a creative output or development of an artistic asset, digital resources, teaching tools, worship resources, interpretive work, advocacy platforms, or community engagement. This option allows the student to:

- Complete one semester of field education or work with a supervisor in the field, in collaboration with the faculty advisor, to design a project.
- Develop and research the project for use in a church or other non-profit organization.
- Research the identified topics and provide an academic foundation for the project.

This project design allows students to bring a range of their gifts and passions to their research and help them address contextually relevant questions about their faith traditions, worship communities, or social and cultural organizations.

Specific parameters and implementation must be discussed and approved in consultation with the project advisor (faculty advisor or field education supervisor).

Possible projects could include, but are not limited to:

- podcasts,
- digital humanities resources like timelines,
- geospatial analysis platforms,
- arts-based projects like community-based artistic interventions (dance, poetry, spoken word, visual arts, etc.),
- liturgical resources, public/church community installations around a particular theme,
- film-based resources,
- faith community or community education curriculum tools or resources,
- community engagement or advocacy events or resources,
- oral histories or archival preservation or content management work,

- or some other resource created for church or public audiences.

**Projects must include a formal writeup of no less than 20-30 pages (5000 – 7500 words) with a maximum of 50 pages (12500 words)** and will be evaluated on the quality of the following components:

- An introduction of the topic or themes explored through the project and a guiding thesis statement or research question at the project's core.
- Engagement with scholarship that informs the project, with a discussion of critical thinkers and scholarly sources that speak to or are reflected in the project. This must include the development and inclusion of a significant bibliography.
- Discussion of their development of creative output or artistic asset, digital resource, teaching tool, or community engagement.
- Discuss how the project addresses or advances thought or work in or is responsive to a particular discipline. Students shall indicate how disciplinary perspectives and methods are identified and discussed in the project. These may include theology, philosophy, history, biblical studies, preaching, and liturgical studies, Christian education, pastoral care and counseling, anthropology, social sciences, cultural studies, fine arts, or performance studies.
- Critical reflections on the contextual relevance of the project, its design, and its implementation, learnings and outcomes, or implications for further study and practices.
- A complete bibliography

**The required template for MA projects can be found on the Theological Writing Center site in Brightspace.**

### Phase 1: MA515 & Project Proposal and Field Education Supervisor Appointment

During this semester, the student will begin to research the project's academic background and practical aspects. Students should also meet regularly with their advisor or field education supervisor during the semester and discuss their progress and project development. The MA Director will also monitor student progress throughout the project.

Students **must provide a 1- page proposal abstract of the project as directed by the professor teaching MA515.** The abstract will consist of the thesis statement for the project and two to five paragraphs describing the project, including all the significant elements of the work in a highly condensed form, i.e., the thesis statement, a brief introduction, a summary of how the issue will be addressed, and possible implications of the work. (See the template for more information. The template can be found on the Theological Writing Center Brightspace site.)

### Phase 2 – Further development of the project should include:

- The Abstract
- Preliminary Introduction
- Setting the topic in its academic or scientific/sociological context
- Preliminary Chapter on the Research Design and Methods or process
- Bibliography developed to this point

This longer project-in-progress should be accompanied by any surveys, questionnaires, oral history or observational prompts, archives to be consulted, or critical sources for further exploration. **Phase 2 of the project is due to the faculty advisor at the conclusion MA515.** Note: while this is the minimum due to the advisor at the end of the first semester, the entire project will be due eleven weeks into the semester the student is registered for the project, so plan accordingly.



During the entire project process, the student should be in regular contact with the advisor (i.e., weekly or bi-weekly meetings) and engage in the writing groups offered by the Theological Writing Center.

Projects that involve “human subjects” (working with and collecting data from communities via surveys, case studies, observations, interviews, etc.) require special attention to protect participants. As the researcher, the student is responsible for how their research affects participating individuals and communities.

In conformity with “The Common Rule” guidelines established by the U.S. Government Office of Human Research Protections and general practice in academic research, NBTS requires **all** research that is formally conducted as part of a project or thesis to be reviewed by the IRB to protect human subjects and minimize potential risks or harm. The Common Rule, formally entitled “Protection of Human Subjects” is part 46 of Title 45 of the Code of Federal Regulations (“45 CFR 46”). Thus, when students conduct research that includes participants, they must account for how they are protecting those participants from harm. Harm can include loss of confidentiality, negative personal or professional repercussions from participation, or emotional harm. Only after the research receives IRB approval can the student implement the research. **IRB approval can be requested at any point in the first semester; however, either the student must submit the proposal to the IRB, or the faculty advisor must sign a waiver and send it to the MA director by the end of the first semester of work.**

### Phase 3: Completion of the Project

During the semester, the student is registered for MS693. The advisor and field supervisor will work with the student to complete the research project.

**All materials should be submitted as a final product no later than week 11 of the semester.**

### Phase 4: Defense of the Project

**In weeks 12-13, the student will defend the project and make the final grammatical edits required by the committee and the library staff.**

The word “defense” is a frightening one. It is the classic term for thesis completion. A project defense is an oral presentation and discussion of the project with your advisor, second reader, the MA director, and students in the MA program. The purpose is to share your work with others and receive feedback. It begins with you describing the process of study and what you learned. Questions from the faculty members present follow this presentation. Once the project defense is complete, you will receive comments and corrections from the committee. Do not worry; your advisor and second reader have been reading your work and commenting throughout the process. These final edits are the final polish of your work.

It is also highly recommended that students submit sections to the faculty advisor and field supervisor throughout the semester. Most projects require extensive editing as the student replies to questions and comments from the faculty advisor and second reader, so allowing time to edit the project is essential.

The project course will be assigned a letter grade, as agreed upon by the advisor and field supervisor.

A copy of the successfully defended project may be housed in the library of the Seminary.

## Important Dates for Students and Advisors in the Project Process

- **Week seven of the first semester:** Abstract must be submitted. The Advisor, the MA Director, the Field Education Supervisor, and the student should determine a field supervisor by this week.
- **End of the first semester:** Phase 2 of the project should be submitted to the advisor, second reader, and IRB no later than the last day of the semester.
- **Week 11 of the second semester:** Phase 3, the entire project must be submitted to the faculty advisor and the field supervisor. If this draft is deemed acceptable, the project defense will be scheduled.
- **Weeks 12-13 of the second semester:** The project defense will be scheduled, and the final editing of the thesis will be done.

## Option Two: Capstone Project for MAPCC students who select this option.

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**Definition:** A MAPCC project is more specific than a MATS or MAMS project. It involves engaging in original research, often using human subjects. A MAPCC project is also considered an academic project and has a significant research component.

The construction and writing of a research project is an option offered to all students in the MA concentration in Pastoral Care and Counseling/Pastoral Theology, depending upon the student's interest. The project shall consist of the write-up of a significant action research project in ministry and investigates some topic of significance to theological study and demonstrates the student's creative competence in the field of Pastoral Care and Counseling/Pastoral Theology. It must represent a carefully conceived, researched, and executed project.

### Structure/Format

Students will use the project template and Style Guide to develop and present their project. **The project will be 40-50 pages (10000 to 12500 words) with a 65-page (16250 words) maximum.** The bibliography, notes, and all other matters of style and form matters, any other issues shall follow the most recent edition of Kate L. Turabian's, *A Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*, except when the N BTS Style Guide indicates otherwise. If other scholarly conventions prevail in the student's area of interest, the advisor may specify another manual or style sheet. If another method is selected, the faculty member must contact the Theological Writing Center to ensure standardization of the form, and that exception would then be noted for the student.

It is understood that the writing will be careful and of publishable quality.

### Prior to beginning the project: Project Development and Initial Registration

A student learns the process of social-scientific research in the Research Methods for Pastoral Care (PC511). It is advised that the student explore their interest in the project during the Research Methods course, which should be taken prior to the final semester of the MA(PCC) program.

Normally during the semester prior to the student's final academic year in the MA(PCC) program, they shall register for the directed study course (PC592), under the supervision of their advisor, to implement and write up the Project.

### Phase 1: Directed Study of Project

Students enrolled in PC592 will engage in the research for the project selected over the first semester.

Students **must provide a 1- page proposal abstract of the project by week seven of the first semester.** The abstract will consist of the thesis statement for the project and two to five paragraphs describing the project, including all the major elements of the project in a highly condensed form, i.e., the thesis statement, a brief introduction, a summary of how the issue will be addressed, and possible implications of the work. (See the template for more information).

### Phase 2 – Further development of the project should include:

- The Abstract
- Preliminary Introduction
- Literature Review
- Preliminary Chapter on the Research Design and Methods or process
- Bibliography developed to this point

This longer project-in-progress should be accompanied by any surveys, questionnaires, oral history or observational prompts, archives to be consulted, or critical sources for further exploration. **Phase 2 of the project is due to the faculty advisor at the conclusion of the first semester.** Note: while this is the minimum due to the advisor at the end of the first semester, the entire thesis will be due eleven weeks into the second semester, so plan accordingly.

During the entire project process, the student should be in regular contact with the professor (i.e., weekly or bi-weekly meetings) and engage in the writing groups offered by the Theological Writing Center.

During the first semester, the faculty member and the student should work with the Dean to secure a second reader for the thesis or project. This second thesis reader is ordinarily another NBTS faculty member or a faculty-designated Doctor of Ministry graduate. **Phase 1 of the thesis will be shared with the second reader and the Institutional Review Board (IRB).**

Projects that involve “human subjects” (working with and collecting data from communities via surveys, case studies, observations, interviews, etc.) require special attention to protect participants. The student, as the researcher, is responsible for how their research affects participating individuals and communities.

In conformity with “The Common Rule” guidelines established by the U.S. Government Office of Human Research Protections and general practice in academic research, NBTS requires all research that is formally conducted as part of a project or thesis to be reviewed by the IRB to protect human subjects and minimize potential risks or harm. The Common Rule, formally entitled “Protection of Human Subjects” is part 46 of Title 45 of the Code of Federal Regulations (“45 CFR 46”). Thus, when students conduct research that includes participants, they must account for how they are protecting those participants from harm. Harm can include loss of confidentiality, negative personal or professional repercussions from participation, or emotional harm. The student may implement the research once an applicable thesis receives IRB approval.

The advisor will assign a letter grade for this three-credit directed study course based on the quality of the required materials.

### Phase 3: Completion of the Project

In the second semester, the advisor and the second reader will work with the student to complete the research and write-up of the remaining project. **The project will be 40-50 pages (10000–12500**

**words) with a 65-page (16250 words) maximum. The complete thesis must be submitted to the advisor and second reader no later than week 11 of the second semester.**

It is also highly recommended that students submit sections and/or chapters to the faculty advisor and second reader throughout the second semester. Most theses require extensive editing as the student replies to questions and comments from the faculty advisor and second reader, so it is essential to allow time to edit the project.

#### Phase 4: Project Defense

**In weeks 12-14, the student will defend the thesis and make the final grammatical edits required by the committee and the library staff.** At this point, the project form is completed by the faculty advisor.

After the successful review of the project, the student shall submit one copy of the project to their advisor prior to the day of Commencement.

#### Important Dates for Students and Advisors in the Project process

- **Week seven of the first semester:** Abstract must be submitted. Faculty and student should assign a second reader by this week.
- **End of the first semester:** Phase 2 of the project should be submitted to the advisor, second reader, and IRB no later than the last day of the semester.
- **Week 11 of the second semester:** Phase 3, the entire project must be submitted to the faculty advisor and the second reader. If this draft is deemed acceptable, the project defense will be scheduled.
- **Weeks 12-13 of the second semester:** The project defense will be scheduled, and the final editing of the thesis will be done.