

Handout: About theses; Prospectus; Task Breakdown

Welcome to the senior thesis seminar!

What is a thesis?

A thesis is a project that culminates your major, and is likely the largest research project you will have done to date. It is also a chance to do an in-depth exploration of a topic you find exciting, flex your research muscles, call the shots (more or less) yourself, with faculty guidance and support.

- Length: as long as it needs to be (25-40 pages is normal).
- Scope: should start narrow, can be adjusted as you go and are aware of how much time you really have, and is unlikely to end up being exactly what you first envisioned!

Why write a thesis?

- Performance/evaluation: To show us that you can conduct research like an active scholar in the field.
- Education: To learn how to better conduct research like an active scholar in the field.
- Experience: To get a taste of what your career as a researcher in the field might be like (if you're continuing in it).
- Professionalization: To become an expert in your own corner of the field.
- Fun: To explore a topic you're curious about, and to have fun doing so!

How to identify a topic

- A thesis topic should try to answer a question. Examples include:
 - “How can anaphora resolution / syllable structure / the genitive construction / negation in Central Pomo be formally modeled?”
 - “What role does language play in nation building as reflected in Post-Soviet ethno-futurist hip-hop in the Volga-Kama region?”
 - “How can an existing speech recognition system (speech-to-text) be adapted for

Marshallese?”

- There should be some source of data that you use, whether it’s your own field recordings, new interviews with speakers, examples from someone’s grammar documentation, or your roommate’s text message history (with their consent).
- The topic should engage with relevant literature, beyond simply a source for data. For example, to work on each of the above topics, you would want to consult these types of literature:
 - Theoretical literature on anaphora resolution / syllable structure / genitive constructions / negation, sources on Central Pomo syntax / phonology / morphology / etc.
 - Theoretical literature on nation-building ideologies and linguistic minorities, any literature available on Post-Soviet ethno-futurist movements, any popular literature on the music genre you’re investigating (interviews with artists, concert reviews, etc.)
 - Scholarly works on and implementations of text-to-speech systems and especially the system you’d like to adapt, literature on Marshallese phonetics and phonology.
- The topic should be able to be motivated as important to the field in some way.
- The topic should be relevant to your interests. There will be moments no matter what when you don’t love the process, but the more interested you are in your topic to begin with the more you’ll enjoy the process along the way.

What is a prospectus?

A good prospectus:

- Explains the topic clearly;
- Motivates why the topic should be addressed;
- Presents the problem to be solved, and contextualizes it;
- Explains the current plan for approaching the problem;

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- Ideally engages with the literature;
- Is short and to the point;
- Provides a frame from which a first draft of the thesis can be built.

Assignment #1: Write a prospectus & task breakdown (in class)

Write a one-page prospectus on your thesis topic. Explain the topic clearly, and provide framing to explain the importance of the topic. Why is this topic worth investigating? If you've already started your research, summarize what you've done.

Then think about all the steps required to complete your thesis. What research tasks do you need to do? What reading, writing, data gathering, analysis, etc.? Break it down into bite-sized pieces, and lay them out in (roughly) chronological order. Put approximate due dates on each task.