

MPA 898

Master's Research Project: Guidelines

The Master's Research Project (MRP) provides students with the opportunity to engage in independent research and analysis of a defined policy issue or topic in greater depth than possible in a course. The MRP is designed to fit three of the SPS Competencies for future policy and government relations actors:

Competency	Descriptor
Strategic Thinking	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Operative understanding of institutional, legal and administrative context for policymaking • Operative understanding values and principles of Canadian parliamentary democracy in comparative context • Operative understanding of key elements of policymaking
Analysis & Application	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Identification and application of theories to practice • Critical thinking about emerging issues in policymaking • Active analytical comprehension of information • Discernment of appropriate policy options given costs and consequences
Engagement & Communication	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Collaborative work with others • Effective oral and written communication • Effective knowledge transfer and advice through professional modes

It is a time-intensive undertaking that is the equivalent of two 3-credit courses with each course comprising approximately 36 instructional hours and 84 personal study hours. In considering the MRP, students should carefully consider their ability to undertake such a time-intensive project while meeting the demands of their other courses. Ideally, students taking MPA 898 will have strong demonstrated research potential, excellent writing skills, and excellent analytical abilities.

The MRP is completed under the direction of an SPS faculty supervisor with established and recognised academic expertise or extensive and recognised practical experience or credentials in the topic or field of study of the proposed MRP subject to the approval of the MPA Program Director. Faculty availability to supervise an MRP may be precluded by time commitments, interest and current expertise in the topic, and ongoing obligations or priorities.

In the full-time program, the MRP will normally replace one Winter term and one Spring term course although the research work will extend over the December break and into the summer of this 12-month program. In the PMPA, the MRP will replace the two final elective courses in the third year of the program. Note that the MRP may not combined with the MPA 897 Directed Reading Course elective.

ELIGIBILITY

To be eligible to undertake an MRP, a student in the full-time program must have obtained an average of A in the Fall term core courses. If the student has commenced research on the MRP but does not have an A average when the marks are posted in January, then the student must stop work on the MRP and enroll in Winter and Summer term courses. Students in the PMPA must have obtained an A average in the previous courses. If a student must or chooses to withdraw from the MPA 898, then the student may use any work undertaken to date in a Directed Reading course (MPA 897).

To be considered for eligibility to take MPA 898, a student must submit to the Program Director an MRP topic proposal with a work-plan that complies with the MRP deadlines and the name of the faculty member who has consented in writing to supervise the work. In the full-time MPA, this proposal must be submitted prior to the second week of courses in the Winter term. For the PMPA, this proposal may be submitted as early as the fall of the second year or no later than the fall of the third year.

ROLE OF THE SUPERVISOR

The faculty supervisor plays an important role in the MRP work so students are encouraged to discuss the research idea with more than one faculty member before choosing a supervisor to determine intellectual compatibility. The supervisor will be the primary person for consultation on the MRP topic, research, quality of argumentation and analysis, scope of work, and timeline in accordance with department and School of Graduate Studies and Postdoctoral Affairs guidelines: <https://www.queensu.ca/grad-postdoc/grad-studies/supervision/overview>

The MRP proposal and the final draft must be approved by the Faculty Supervisor in written form before submission to the MPA Program Director. Any submissions should be done through the SPS MPA Coordinator who maintains the files for the MRPs and any associated documentation.

RESEARCH ETHICS

Research involving study of an organization (for example, a case study) or individuals (for example, interviews or survey research) requires research ethics approval from the Unit Research Ethics Board (UREB) or the Queen's General Research Ethics Board (GREB). Research that relies only on publicly available information does not require ethics review, but research based on interviews or any other gathering of data that is not publicly accessible generally does. Students are responsible for familiarising themselves with and abiding by research ethics guidelines. Note that ethics approval, if required should be factored into the MRP timelines. For these guidelines and ethics forms, see <https://www.queensu.ca/research/ethics>.

ACADEMIC INTEGRITY

The School of Policy Studies follows and enforces the policies and procedures on Academic Integrity as outlined by the School of Graduate Studies. For further information regarding policies and procedures related to academic integrity for instructors and graduate students at Queen's, see <https://www.queensu.ca/secretariat/policies/senate/academic-integrity-policy>.

FIELD WORK SAFETY

MRPs involving field work require a Field Research Safety Planning Record. Students are responsible for acquainting themselves with the Off Campus Activity Safety Policy (OCASP). For these guidelines and forms see <https://www.queensu.ca/risk/safety/OCASP>.

MRP PROPOSAL

DEADLINE: The MRP Proposal should be submitted via the MPA Coordinator by December 15 to obtain approval prior to the last date for course changes in the Winter Term.

The MRP Proposal should be five to seven double-spaced pages (approximately 1200-1800 words) in length, excluding title page and bibliography. The proposal should be developed under the guidance of the proposed supervisor. It includes the following elements:

1. Title page including title of the MRP, student name and contact information, name and contact information of proposed supervisor, and signatures of the student and proposed supervisor;
2. Abstract of 150 words with project purpose and statement of importance of topic;
3. Identification of format;
4. Outline of principal issues, scope and nature of the research, methodology, framework or theory used to build the argument;
5. Description of primary and secondary sources that will be used, supported by a bibliography;
6. Indication of whether ethics or OCASP review and approval is necessary and sought;
7. Timeline for completion of the MRP, divided according to tasks and stages of the work. This timeline should encompass the major components of research, submission of first and subsequent drafts with time allotted for assessment by the Supervisor, and submission of the final draft with approval of Supervisor, time for second reading and possible revisions.

The MRP Proposal must be submitted via the MPA Coordinator to the MPA Program Director for approval before formal work commences. Note that the Program Director will be concerned with ensuring the project has a consenting Supervisor, demonstrates serious thought, contains a workable plan and commitment to timely completion of the MRP, and has a statement on ethics approval.

MRP GUIDELINES

Experience has governed the creation of these guidelines and deadlines. Please consider seriously, especially the timelines. The stated deadlines must be observed to ensure completion on time otherwise graduation cannot be guaranteed

Learning Objectives

Each format corresponds to the SPS competencies outlined at the outset of this document. Overall, the MRP is intended to develop key skills required by future policy analysts and decisionmakers.

Format

The MRP may be written in one of three formats. The Supervisor and Student will select the most appropriate format for the desired learning objectives. The formats are:

1. **An academic research paper.** This format emphasizes strategic thinking, analytical skills and effective written communication skills. Learning objectives include the ability to synthesize and analyze key theories and apply them to fact sets, the ability to identify and prioritise information and contextual factors, and the ability to engage in effective knowledge transfer through excellent writing skills. In this format, the MRP would consist of a table of contents, an introduction, a review of the academic literature on the topic, original research presented in defined chapters, and a conclusion and footnotes and a bibliography. The style rules for regular term papers apply.
2. **An action research case study.** This format emphasizes strategic thinking, analysis and application of theories to practice and effective written communication. Learning objectives include the ability to understand the context and determinants of policy, the ability to discern and evaluate important policy objectives and options given costs and consequences, and the ability to communicate efficiently and effectively to a multidisciplinary audience. There are various forms of case studies. While the appropriate form of the case study will be determined in consultation with the supervisor, case studies normally have these components: executive summary identifying topic, issues, theory and plan; background outlining issues, relevant information and key facts; evaluation and findings; proposed solutions and discussion; conclusions and recommendations; implementation plan; references; appendices (if necessary).
3. **A briefing note.** This format emphasizes strategic thinking and an operative understanding of policymaking, and effective written and oral communication skills. Learning objectives include mastery of key nuances in the policymaking process, development of critical analysis of emerging issues in policymaking and the efficient and effective transfer of knowledge and advice through professional modes of

communication. Briefing notes come in various forms. While the appropriate form will be decided in consultation with the supervisor based on the purpose of the note, it should follow the GOVTalk guidelines (see <https://www.queensu.ca/sps/govtalk>). In some cases, the briefing note may consist of two or three related briefing notes on a topic or a briefing note with appendices documenting the supporting research. This format may include an oral briefing component to the Supervisor and second reader.

Length

The MRP should be approximately 50-60 double-spaced pages (12 point font) in length including references but excluding any appendices, although the briefing note format may be shorter if an oral component is incorporated. In any case, the MRP may not exceed 70 double-spaced pages (12 point font). Depending on format chosen, a table of contents and abstract may be appropriate but it is not necessary to include a vitae or acknowledgement or to bind the final work.

Submission of drafts

Submission of the final draft in electronic form is sufficient and preferred. Submission of earlier drafts will be at the discretion of the Supervisor.

Grading and Evaluation

The normal grading standards of the School of Policy Studies will be used to assess the quality of the MRP, having regard to the Graduate School regulations that “the research must be of high scholarly standard” and the project “should demonstrate that the candidate is capable of original and independent work.” A project using primary sources satisfies this standard while a project using secondary sources requires an original argumentation or an innovative approach. A project that just describes or reviews and systematizes the existing literature will not be sufficient. However, the MRP is not a thesis. As such, it should involve a project of manageable scope, an appropriately sized literature review or issue discussion, and a suitably limited research question or purpose.

Once the Supervisor is satisfied that the MRP has met these standards and is in a satisfactory state, then the Supervisor will assess the work and assign a grade. The Supervisor will then request that the student submit a clean copy to the MPA Coordinator and to the Supervisor. The Supervisor will then send an email to the MPA Program Director with the clean copy of the MRP attached as well as a separate document with the assigned numerical grade (percentage) and justification for the grade. The supervisor may indicate any tolerance in the grade assigned.

Once the clean draft and grade has been received, the Program Director will select a second reader with acknowledged expertise or professional experience in the subject matter and

send the draft for grading. Within a reasonable time of no more than three weeks (15 working days), the second reader will read and assess the draft. The second reader will send an email to the MPA Program Director with an attached document specifying the numerical (percentage) grade and with the option to send reasons for the grade in the document. The identity of the second reader is confidential and students should not expect to learn the identity of this person.

If the two grades from the Supervisor and second reader are within five percentage points, then the Program Director will average the two grades to ascertain the final grade. If the variation between the two grades exceeds five percentage points then the Program Director will invite the second reader to suggest revisions to raise the grade to within five percentage points or will ask the two assessors to reach an agreed final grade. If no agreement is possible, then the Program Director will assign a third reader to assess the MRP and will reconcile the three submitted grades. The Supervisor will submit the final grade, converting the numerical grade to its letter-based equivalent.

Note: while students often welcome comments from the second reader, no revisions are necessary unless it is to reconcile the two assessors' marks. Also, given that the Grad School requires submission of the final grade by the end of the calendar month following that in which the project was submitted, the Program Director may in exceptional circumstances appoint another reader to take the place of a Supervisor who is on leave, vacation or authorized absence to ensure compliance with this deadline.

Appeals of the Grade

A student wishing to appeal a grade on the MRP must notify the Program Director (or School Director if the former is the Supervisor or second reader) within two weeks of receiving the grade. The student must provide written reasons justifying the appeal in the notification. If the Program Director decides the appeal is justified, then a meeting of the two (or three if appropriate) graders will be convened with the Program Director present for the student to discuss the reasons for a reassessment of the grade. After the meeting, the two readers will submit their grade to the Program Director who will use the normal process to award the grade. At this point, the grade is final subject to the School of Graduate Studies and Postdoctoral Affairs appeal process (<https://queensu-ca-public.courseleaf.com/graduate-studies/general-regulations/>) under "Appeal of an Assigned Grade in a Graduate Course."

KEY DATES FOR COMPLETION OF THE MRP

These dates are important for a timely completion of the MRP. Please take special note of the final submission dates highlighted in red font. If a student does not meet these deadlines then graduation may be delayed. If a student does not meet the deadline for completion then the student must remain registered in the School of Graduate Studies and Postdoctoral Affairs.

The student will be assessed fees for the new Fall term. Should the student complete the MRP prior to the end of term, the fees may be prorated and reimbursed in part.

MPA Program

Note: **Students who fall behind in the timeline for completion of the MRP by August will simply not be in a position to complete this program requirement in time to convocate in the Fall.** A new cohort of MPA students arrives in September. As the new academic year begins, faculty and staff in the MPA all take on new commitments and cannot guarantee prompt attention to MRPs that are submitted after August 15th. Lingering students may be required to pay additional tuition fees for September and then the full term.

Thus, it is imperative that an MRP be completed within the 12 month duration of the MPA. The School of Graduate Studies requires program completion by September for students to be eligible for Fall convocation.

Key Dates	Milestones
October	Attend an MRP information session
November	Find a Supervisor. Discuss the project with faculty members and determine a good fit for your project and work style.
December	Conduct the preliminary research and write the MRP Proposal. Submit the proposal by December 15 for approval by the last date for course changes in the Winter term.
January 15	The proposal and enrollment in MPA 898 must be approved by the last date for course changes in the winter Term. Register for the course as soon as the proposal is approved.
March 1	Submission of first draft of a substantive portion of the MRP. If the draft is not submitted by March 15th , then the student may be advised to withdraw from the MRP and enroll in a Spring course.
June 1	Submission of the complete first draft of the MRP to the Supervisor. Supervisor provides comments and student revises draft.
July 1	Submission of the “final” version of the MRP to the Supervisor. If this deadline is not met, then reasons for an extension must be submitted in written form to the Program Director. Student undertakes any last revisions.
July 15	MRP approved by Supervisor, clean copy and numerical grade submitted to Program Director
July 31	Second reader receives MRP for review
August 15	Second Reader submits numerical grade
August 15-31	Grades Averaged or feedback provided to student who makes any necessary changes to MRP
August 31	Final, graded and approved MRP submitted to the SPS by student
September 1-7	Program completion status reviewed and prepared

PMPA Program

Key Dates		Milestones
Year 1 Late Fall/Early Winter Term		Student attend information session on MRP and seek a Supervisor. The Program Director may be of assistance in this choice
Year 1 May 15		Submit the Proposal for the MRP. Once approved, enroll in the course.
Year 2		Undertake research for the MRP
Year 2 July 15		If the MRP proposal has not been submitted and accepted and the research is not underway, then the student should register for two or more regular courses to ensure timely completion of the degree.
Year 3 Spring Graduation	Fall Graduation	
February 15	July 15	Submission of final MRP to Supervisor
March 15	August 15	Final Deadline to submit MRP for review by second reader
April 15	September 15	Final submission of approved MRP to ensure graduation

Note: Under the School of Graduate Studies and Postdoctoral Affairs regulations, all requirements for a Master’s degree program must be completed within five years from the initial registration in the program. Only in rare circumstances will the Graduate School approve a request for an extension of time to complete the program submitted with the approval of the Program Director.

Updated: October 2021; links updated in 2026.