



# LIMINAL THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

## Masters Thesis

Welcome to the final step in your masters studies! Arriving at the point of your masters degree means you have gained a significant understanding of the field you have committed your time and intellectual and spiritual energy to. Your master's thesis is an opportunity for you to more deeply explore a specific aspect of your field of expertise with detail, dedication, and focus. In many cases, your thesis functions as the stepping stone for richer and deeper work at the doctoral level. Your thesis should not be the paper you rush through to get to that degree; taking time and enjoying your research and crafting your ideas is the most important element of working on your thesis.

At the Liminal Theological Seminary, theses are approached first and foremost from the perspective that you have already achieved the necessary skills required of you to engage in lengthier research and writing. At this stage of your work at LTS you now have the opportunity to expand and define your spiritual frameworks in preparation for service and/or further scholarship.

So remember your thesis is as much about your spiritual and religious unfolding and expression as any sacred activity you engage in.

Welcome to the final steps of your masters degree!

Dr. Deanne Quarrie  
President, Liminal Theological Seminary

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## An Overview of the Thesis Process

The thesis is a lengthy paper that integrates existing literature to illuminate an original idea. Unlike a dissertation that emerges within several chapters, often requires direct research practice, and substantial literature review; your thesis is primarily focused in three chapters: Introduction, Literature Integration, and Conclusion. Specifically, you'll work on four formal steps:

1. Prospectus: your prospectus is the roadmap for the scope of your thesis. This is where you start, which will rarely look similar to your finished product.
2. Introduction Chapter(s): this is the first chapter of your thesis that details where you are going with your work and foundational information.
3. Literature Integration Chapter(s): this is the second+ chapter of your thesis that details how you have come to your ideas for your thesis in greater, elaborative depth. This integrates prior knowledge and demonstrates how your thesis is linked to the spiritual/religious field it is embedded within.
4. Conclusion Chapter(s): this is where you pull together the material AND the process; in other words, you reflect on your goals of the introduction and the outcomes of the literature here. This component brings your work into the field and demonstrates how the field changes by this work, while at the same time speculating on new ideas and questions.

## Choosing Your Topic

The most essential step in thesis writing is the topic.

In most cases your thesis will be the topic you feel passionate about and have a great deal of knowledge in

. Whenever you begin to start thinking you want to keep in mind a few things:

1. You have to love your topic. If you do not love what you are researching, chances are you'll lose interest and find the process unbearable. As such coming to a topic often requires sitting with who you are and the field you are studying and finding what inspires you and what ignites your passion. This is where all your topics should come from.
2. Uniqueness. Like dissertations, theses are essentially one-of-a-kind. This is often strictly associated with coming to a new intellectual idea; however at LTS the uniqueness essentially comes from respecting yourself and your own unique way of understanding the world and your chosen spiritual path. As such, as you come to a "new" topic, the importance is your passion and capacity to develop the topic rather than whether it is wholly unique.
3. Enough research. While nowhere near as lengthy as dissertations, your thesis is still a substantial paper (often a bout 70 pages in length) and requires a fairly dense amount of literature to support your central ideas—literally your "thesis", your proposition. In this fashion, when you select your topics

take time to do a search for literature. The more literature the easier it will be to write your work. If your topic has very little written—it doesn't mean you can't do it, you'll have to singlehandedly develop the literature on the topic. In short you may have more work cut out for you than a topic with a robust literature resource.

4. Religious/Spiritual Context. As you are working on a seminarian dissertation your topic must be situated within a religious and/or spiritual context. Be sure that your topic fits with your spiritual and/or religious identity. If it doesn't it may be more difficult to dig into the topic or fully engage with the topic. Again, this doesn't mean you can't engage in a topic that is in opposition to your own beliefs, just recognize if you opt for this kind of thesis you'll have to be mindful of personal bias (you'll need to be aware of this even if you opt for a topic that resonates with you as well).

5. Skill. For any research topic you select, you want to make sure you have or are able to obtain the knowledge skills required to successfully research the topic.

6. Social Change and Ecological Mindfulness. LTS *requires* that you examine the social justice/change and ecological implications in your work. This does not have to define your work, but as this seminary is seeking to promote ecologically mindful spiritual practitioners and individuals who are vested in the restoration of equality among human beings and a more compassionate world, your topic should examine these dimensions or have implications for these areas.

## Choosing Your Thesis Modality

As seminary education is a unique merging of both scholarship and spiritual exploration, the kinds of dissertations possible must mirror this unique scholastic setting. As such, you have the option of selecting a type of thesis that unfolds in three modalities:

1. Scholarship. The Scholarly Thesis is one that is primarily rooted in intellectual foundations and processes linked to an element of religious practice, spiritual experience, or religious/spiritual frameworks. The Scholarly Thesis seeks to examine something new and explore what research supports this new perspective. It requires specific skills for research that includes acquiring, critiquing, and integrating a large amount of primary and secondary sources. It may also include specific research-design skills ranging from quantitative to qualitative work. An example of the Scholarly Thesis might be applying Process Theology to Neopaganism.

2. Experiential/Personal. Religion and spirituality are deeply felt experiences. As a seminarian this often translates to an even deeper relationship to your spiritual framework than the general public through a sense of calling. Theses through this modality are focused primarily on first-person experience (knowing through one's senses [phenomenological]). It is a reflective thesis that explores the nuances of your personal calling and experience in your chosen path. These experiences are further contextualized and grounded within other first-person accounts and primary and secondary resources. If this is a mode choice, your thesis will typically be broken down into a developmental-revelatory process rather than the outline noted in the prior section (more on this later).

3. Mixed Modality. This is the final option that blends or merges any of the other paths into a cohesive whole. If you opt for this path, the creation of your thesis will often require the inclusion of the standard sections coupled with any unique elements.

## In-Depth Exploration of Modalities

### Scholarship

A scholarship thesis is one that looks very similar to that which is seen at traditional graduate education institutions. It involves conceptualizing something new within an existing knowledge base that allows that knowledge base to expand and grow. While theses can be revolutionary in this front leading to a direct challenge to the paradigm of the existing base, most students work conservatively and often narrowly rather than seeking to overhaul an entire scholastic field. Narrow focus allows for in-depth discovery and exploration and with a topic that has substantial research history can be readily expanded into the typical thesis. However, too narrow or too unique can lead to coming up short on research sources. If you are working on a topic that is either of these cases, I would recommend examining it through a mixed-modality, which allows you to rely on other types of sources for support. Finally, a scholarship paper can include actual research—whereby you design an experiment or work with human subjects. Experimental research or the involvement with human subjects requires what is known as an Institutional Review Board assessment *prior* to beginning this work (more on this later). Scholarship theses may be a rewarding process, not only providing you a firm foundation for future academic-based research, but also providing an opportunity to craft a publishable journal article and dig deeply into a broad function of human behavior and society in greater depth.

### Experiential/Personal Modality

Phenomenological research, knowing through personal experience, has grown in interest in many academic fields. It is based on philosophical work by Edmund Husserl (see *Ideas*) and has been widely elaborated in the work of Maurice Merleau-Ponty and Martin Heidegger. It may be roughly understood as privileging the perspective of the “I” as a viable source of illuminating truth. While clearly we could argue counter philosophical positions, this mode of knowing has become increasingly popular within academia as a means of restoring the first-person experience as having something important to contribute to the world of knowledge. In short, it counters modern-day materialism that views empirical, so-called objective modes of knowing are the only “truth” modes. A thesis within the experiential/personal modality is ultimately a phenomenological thesis.

Structuring a phenomenological thesis can be challenging. Your introductory section highlights the overall trajectory of your experience and personal vision; while your background/literature chapters explore the influences that have shaped this vision. In your research chapter, you are the subject and object of your research. In this you are both researcher and the researched; the knower and the who that is being known. In this fashion, your research section is your “Reflection” chapter—this is where you critically reflect on your spiritual experiences and life. We move out of the influences of your life and its shape to give voice to your reflection and learning. This is how you have learned what you have learned—how you have come to this knowledge, how you experience your knowledge. You may wish to look at as theoretical models for this chapter, such as:

- Flower, J. (1995). *Stages of Faith: The Psychology of Human Development*. New York: HarperCollins. (Original Publication 1981)
- Roehlkepartain, E. C., King, P. E., Wagener, L., Benson, P. L. (2006). *The Handbook of Spiritual Development in Childhood and Adolescence*. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage Publication.

- Campbell, J. (1973). *A Hero with a Thousand Faces*. Princeton: Princeton University Press.
- As well as tradition, religion, spiritual- specific modalities of spiritual development, as well as first-person narratives modeling spiritual development and narrative.

## Mixed Modality

The Mixed Modality thesis is one that allows you to merge any of the three prior modalities into a cohesive whole. This may emerge blending the personal with the academic and experimental as this allows you access to multiple ways of knowing. It may be the blending of the tradition with the academic, examine a religious history, while also exploring a renewed or new manifestation. This allows a great deal of flexibility and options that a single modality does not and it also allows for a multitude of perspectives and thus expands what your dissertation can know and how this knowledge may be applied and generalized.

Page Break

## Prospectus

Your prospectus is the first official document you will write and turn in during the earliest stage of the thesis process. Writing the prospectus should take time and careful consideration as this will ultimately provide you with a roadmap for the full scope of your thesis. A prospectus is essentially a fleshed out outline of your thesis and includes several critical (required) elements that will ultimately help guide your work. It's important to also remember that your prospectus is a document that means *potential* or *anticipated* goals and directions, rather than defining what you will follow exactly. In short, your prospectus gets you thinking and started, but is changeable. Let's look at the required parts of your Prospectus:

1. Title of Thesis—a thesis title should provide a brief (under 12 words) description of your research purpose. Unlike books, a thesis title tends to be a little more dry (although feel free to be creative) as it tends to focus on providing a snapshot introduction of the main purpose of the text to come. In your prospectus, your title is tentative, but again helps get you thinking about the purpose of your text.
2. Type of Thesis Modality—you can change this modality as you work, but thinking about which modality contextualizes your research allows you to begin from a firm structure that can guide the research and writing process.
3. Introduction to Interest Area—this provides a brief overview of what you are doing. This should provide a brief, but supported (referenced) background to your ideas and what you hope your thesis will prove, discover, or describe in relation to these ideas. This is the *context* of your thesis—where it is situated within the larger fields of knowledge.
4. Theory/ies or Conceptual Frameworks—All theses make some kind of knowledge claim; this section allows you to articulate what your hypothesis is (your knowledge claim) and how this hypothesis is grounded. This section may be less defined and would revolve around a more detailed conceptualization of where your ideas are situated and what informs them. In this it may be an extended introduction.
5. Purpose—Ideally all theses have a fundamental purpose—a reason for being written beyond the achievement of a degree. This is the section of the prospectus where you articulate

the goals of the thesis that you allude to in the introduction. This is what you plan/hope to “do” in the thesis.

6. LTS has two main social agendas: Ecological Mindfulness and Social Change. All theses are expected to include and consider their findings within the framework of how they may contribute toward positive social change and justice and/or ecological mindfulness. Both of these are required to be considered within the scope of the thesis.

This is not a graded document, rather it is a document that allows me to better support your research and to guide you in directions that will maximize the outcome of your study and writing. It also allows you and me to spot potential areas of difficulty in the process. Further, this early process requires that you engage in a cursory overview of what research exists to ensure you have enough information to springboard from.

## Introduction Chapter

Your first chapter in your thesis is the Introduction. Your Introduction is a comprehensive overview of what you plan on exploring and the historical context of this exploration. If it’s a personal experience, this introduction situates your experience within your life. Your Introduction is typically the component of your thesis where you spend the most time exploring your own ideas. At LTS the following elements of your Introduction are required:

1. Abstract—this is a short paragraph that is placed before your Introduction and is usually about 120 words. It describes the overall problem/topic being addressed and its purpose and any theoretical foundations or context that is essential. It summarizes the critical questions you are asking or the ideas you are seeking to explore and your chosen design for your research (this would be the rationale for your thesis modality). Finally your abstract would conclude with a statement on the implications of your work—how it would impact the religious structure you are exploring, the ecological implications, and social change implications.
2. Background—your background provides a snapshot of the critical history of the subject area you are developing or exploring. It communicates to the reader the *essential* information about what has inspired your thesis and what has influenced it. You can think of this as the set-up to the bulk of your thesis and what you will explore in greater detail in the next major chapter(s) in the literature review. This ensures that any reader coming into the thesis gets where you are coming from and is given the critical information to make sense of your purpose and goals. The key with this section of your Introduction is to keep it specific to your purpose. The final paragraph of this section should lead into your next section by briefly identifying how the background links to your specific focus.
3. Thesis Focus—this is the section of the thesis where you introduce your purpose that has been briefly stated in the prior section. This is typically the largest area of the first chapter. This is where you define the overall trajectory of your work, what you plan on examining, and why. It also corresponds to your specific methodologies you plan on utilizing (in the case of LTS theses this would typically equate to the selection of your thesis modality, unless you are actually planning to conduct a study). If you are choosing a topic that is linked to or draws upon prior concepts, theoretical foundations, or philosophical orientations that you are

drawing upon in your work; you would take the time to highlight these and how you are incorporating them into your work.

4. Assumptions—this is the section of the thesis where you take time to assess your personal bias and the assumptions the framework you are examining holds. All knowledge comes with truth claims that are often unarticulated but literally “assumed” as facts in evidence. A good thesis has a substantial self- and conceptual reflection to highly what beliefs are held to be true. It is not about refuting these beliefs or truisms, but rather ensuring integrity of your own work, reducing possible bias, and also providing transparency to the reader so that they know where you are coming from. Rigorous examination is required for this section and you are expected to consider alternative, contradictory perspectives to help examine your logic, highlight bias, and illuminate assumptions.

5. Limitations—there are always limitations for any concept or idea or intervention or religion. This is the section, similar to Assumptions, that highlights what your thesis *won't be able to do*. It highlights any potential factors that could inhibit the outcome of your work or impact your work's capacity to be applied for other individuals. If you are writing a personal story, the limitation is that it reflects your own experience and may not reflect others. If you are writing about a tradition, there may be a limitation in terms of *who* may benefit; if it is a spiritual intervention it may be characteristics of individuals who will likely not be able to perform this role. In statistical-based research this is often aspects of the research design that cannot be controlled for and as such places limitation on how the outcomes may be applied or generalized.

6. Delimitations—this is what your thesis *will deliberately exclude* or the boundary around your research. It is the parameters of your work that you will not cross. For example, if you designed an experiment, this would detail characteristics of participant exclusion in the experimental design.

7. Social Change & Ecological Implications—this is the aspect of the Introduction that discusses how your thesis will promote social change and ecological mindfulness. LTS requires that your work have an anticipated beneficial impact on society and the natural world. It is possible that your work will have no impact, but as part of the process careful exploration of how to maximize the chance of a beneficial impact is required.

8. Definitions—this is a section that is exactly as it purports to be—a list of terminology and definitions. In the introduction you will define any terms utilized in your work that may not be understood by someone coming to this thesis without direct experience in your field. This allows any reader examining your thesis to gain a brief and clear background in your field. It also ensures that you describe any term that you may be utilizing differently than how it may be traditionally utilized. For example, if your work re-envisioned traditional concepts in theology, you will need to define each of these concepts in your Introduction. This section will change from the time you write it to the time you complete your whole work as you will likely add to this list or reduce it with each subsequent chapter completion and edit.

There is a lot of leeway within these main headings, depending on your modality and topic. When you begin to write your Introduction you will be required to submit a fleshed-out outline of your introduction to me prior to its writing to ensure that you are on the right track with your chosen modality and subject and your organizational needs. As such, you are not going through this process alone. Also, you may find that one chapter introduction is simply not enough space to fully examine your intentions—as such you



are readily allowed to expand your chapters. In this capacity, it is recommended that you rely on Part Sections to differentiate your introductory chapters from your background and design ones.

## Literature Integration Chapter

Following your Introduction chapter(s) is the Literature Review or the Background Chapter(s). The purpose of this chapter is to provide a rich exploration of the ideas that have come before your own and have giving shape to them. While traditional theses look for *how* you go about collecting your background information, LTS is more interested in what you actually utilize for your background. However, there is one exception: You are required to obtain the *bulk* of your resources from academic journals, relevant primary book sources, or relevant magazines. You should not be relying upon the Internet for work as the quality of information posted rarely meets the standards for academic work. This is not to say that you cannot utilize information posted to the Internet, just be sure it is appropriately documented and reputable. If you have doubts, it's a good sign that it's not the best source. Now with that said, your background chapters explore in-depth all foundational material that supports your underlying thesis direction. Some key things to include in your work:

1. Adequate breadth and depth of research utilized. If you are utilizing one text, than your thesis will not pass. As theses are demonstrations of knowledge *and* academic skill, you are expected to examine a wide range of sources and to critically explore them. Breadth refers to the wide scope of resources—most theses include numerous primary sources. In fact a good rule of thumb is to research until you come down to literature that other writers refer to and that you find yourself being directed to work you've already read. It's a good idea to *read* all bibliographies in journals and books and utilize these as directions for other reading ideas. In writing a thesis it is the literature review that typically takes the longest to complete—precisely because of the breadth requirements. *Depth* refers to your capacity to analyze and integrate what you read. You do not simply quote from material, but *discuss* the implications of the work *to your ideas*. And with this you are *expected* to examine and discuss information that runs *counter* to your own ideas.
2. Justification for Study Focus. Your research review ultimately provides support for the direction of your thesis. When readers are done with reading this in-depth background, they'll be able to say "Yes, I can see why you are going in that direction."

Some critical tips to this section:

1. Do not excessively quote. Quoting from material should be utilized only if (a) you simply cannot reword the material and flow it into the text and/or (b) the quote provides an impactful statement that will serve to impress upon the reader a significant point. Be sure that anytime you do quote, you clearly discuss the quote. Quotes *must* be cited.
2. Map out your chapter(s) so that your literature review flows from point A to point B. It should be organized like a traditional critical essay. If you have a lot of information, consider breaking down topics into individual chapters.
3. You will be reading a substantial amount of information to complete this section correctly. It's a good idea to set up your computer or purchase index cards to begin collecting quotes and relevant page numbers and complete reference information *before* you start writing. Having been through this process myself twice—you lose information quickly when

you have to organize so much. It's also a good idea to sit and write out a summary of a book chapter or article you have just read to help you clarify your reaction to it and identify key aspects that fit with your ideas.

4. What happens if you simply do not have enough literature? If you are working on a thesis that is a relatively obscure topic or something that is so new it hasn't been done, you will need to sit down and think about the topic and what factors gave rise to it. That's where your literature review lies. No concept comes from thin air—it all ties to other ideas and cultural structures or revelations by other people. As such, consider mapping the history of your ideas in terms of what factors gave rise or supported its unfurling. You'd be surprised just how much information suddenly comes to the surface when we move past the confines or limits of our set idea. For example, if you were looking into modern-day hip-hop movement and its role within urban youth, you'd likely look at rock and gospel influences, but you might forget to look at the liberation call-and-response music in pre-Civil War South and the historical linkages and traumas. This might then lead you to examine something called Slave Syndrome, a traumatic intergenerational response to histories of enslavement. In short, when you think you've reached the end of possible resources, dig further.

5. Because this will ultimately be one of the longest aspects of your work—be sure you pick a topic you enjoy because by the time you are done, you will have read *everything* there is to know on it. You definitely do not want to get sick of it half-way through the process.

6. Accessing resources: Your library is your friend. Most libraries now have searchable academic databases that allow you to locate academic journals and many of these have full-text articles. Printing out or writing down citations allows you to go to the library and access journals for copying or reading. Also your local library can generally order you any books you need. Additionally, if you live near a university, you can utilize their library as a guest to hunt through journals. Finally, “Google Scholar” is a great resource for locating material online from reputable resources. These are great ways to save money, but still access a rich plethora of material. Always take good notes and write the complete citation of your book, article, or chapter (more on this in a minute.)

It is through an exhaustive literature review that you'll ultimately be able to shape your argument your thesis makes. This review allows the readers to see your logic—where you are coming from and how you are going about getting to a destination. A good review discusses information that is “pro” your point of view, but also “against” your point of view and allows you to craft an argument as to why you may still be right even under this “against” situations. For example, in a recent paper, I argued that pet ownership lead to distinctly positive health outcomes for all age groups. I provided substantial research to support this position. However, I also found research that ran contrary to this position. In order to make this article as truthful as possible, I had to address these contradictory studies. Thus my hypothesis ultimately had to change to: pet ownership under *most* circumstances was beneficial for health; however in the presence of allergies, phobias, or financial hardship ownership could lead to negative health effects; further individuals may experience negative outcomes due to the death of the pet leading to possible complicated grief and increased stress and thus deleterious health effects. In short a good review allows you an opportunity to see *all* sides of a situation.

## Conclusion Chapter

The final chapter or part of your thesis is the conclusion. And just as it sounds and just as you've read in countless books—it is the summary of your work. It is in this chapter you have several goals:

1. Pulling together all of the work from prior chapters within an amplified discussion of your findings;
2. Discussing any limitations your thesis has that have been further clarified in your prior chapters— what your thesis *can't do*;
3. Discuss social and ecological implications of your thesis—how your work may be expanded into these areas of human life and in what ways, if any;
4. Discuss future issues that may need further examination or development based on your work.

This chapter may be aptly described as the “where-to-from” chapter. It is also the place to locate any ideas you left on the curb due to being overly complex or undoable in your work, so as to provide ideas for any readers who may be inspired to take up your ideas and explore them. Finally, it is the place for final thoughts. LTS privileges the personal so do not be afraid to make this section personally reflective.

### Feedback & Submitting Your Thesis

You're not moving through this process alone. You are encouraged to submit each chapter to Dr. MacDowell for review and feedback to help you clarify your thoughts and raise questions to enhance your learning and your writing process. When you've completed all your chapters, you will submit it to Dr. MacDowell for final review. If your thesis meets all the necessary requirements and has demonstrated appropriate intellectual caliber for the master's degree, you will be awarded a passing grade. At which point you will be informed of your completion of your degree. Theses that fail to meet the standards may be asked for revisions; upon receipt of a revised passing document you will be awarded your degree. Theses that require more than 2 major revisions will not be accepted and you will not be awarded a final degree from Ocean Seminary College. Major revisions often reflect failure to demonstrate breadth and depth, failure to consider alternative arguments, failure to demonstrate clear and consistent logic, failure to adequately match one's ideas with application, and/or failure to demonstrate linkage of ideas with the associated religious or spiritual field. Remember throughout your writing process you will be supervised and are encouraged to turn in sample work as you go to avoid any major revisionary work at the conclusion of your studies.

### Reference List & Other Basic Formatting Issues

I prefer students utilize the American Psychological Association's (APA) *Manual of Style* in the writing and structuring of their thesis. This is generally a clean style that does not typically encourage the use of footnotes. Citations are made within the body of the text and include author last name, publication date, and page number (if relevant) and these correspond directly to a reference list. It also encourages you to include all your thoughts within the body of your text rather than inundate your text with distracting footnotes. However, you may be used to another mode of formatting such as the Chicago Manual of Style or the MLA. You may select which formatting you prefer, providing you are consistent in its application. I am familiar with all major modes of formatting.

Some general rules:

1. Theses are expected to be *at least* 25,000 words, there is no upper limit.

2. Spelling mistakes are not permissible. You are required to meticulously review your work. I generally recommend spell-checking paragraphs as you go.
3. Grammar mistakes are not permissible. Please visit the LTS Writing Center for tips on ensuring your work is grammatically correct. The best option is to do a separate proof for grammar and read your work aloud. This will help catch most grammar mistakes as our brains are innately wired for organization.
4. Theses will be checked for plagiarism; if found you will be dismissed entirely from LTS.
5. Double space your work when it is complete.
6. Margins are set at 1" top, bottom, right, and left.
7. Indent the first line of each paragraph to 0.5 margin.
8. Apply a consistent heading style. Typically, they are:

Heading 1 *Heading*

2

Heading 3

Heading 4

9. Direct quotes longer than 45 words should be indented and flush at 0.5 margin; no quote marks utilized.
10. Periods, commas, and other grammar points are contained *within* the final quote mark, not placed outside—this is American style.
11. Header should include: Last name, partial thesis title, and page number.
12. Always cite any idea or quote that is not your own.