

The Master Program in Public Policy, Administration and Law

Writing a Major Research Paper (MRP)*

I – The Purpose of the MRP

Candidates must produce a piece of original research or criticism on any approved topic, and write an extensive paper incorporating this research under the direction and supervision of a faculty member of the Master in Public Policy, Administration and Law program (MPPAL).

MPPAL students are expected to broaden their knowledge in a wide range of public, private and para-public sector issues, through a balanced emphasis on policy and administration; and course content focused on a more comprehensive consideration of social justice issues, public law, administrative law, public sector ethics, and human rights. Students who graduate will not only be able to evaluate and apply research, but will be able to conduct it as well. The paper will require that you demonstrate a thorough understanding of the topic, the ability to work independently, an understanding of research methods, and a degree of originality. The paper will demonstrate that you are capable of independent research, critical analysis, and should result in a paper of publishable quality.

The purpose of the Major Research Paper (MRP) is to develop your ability to do research beyond a normal course paper. In its style, length, and (as much as possible) quality, the MRP should take the form of a publishable academic article of around 40 to 50 pages. The MRP could be developed from a paper or papers submitted for a course within the MPPAL program.

An MRP *should* focus on a meaningful and manageable topic that you can complete. Your MRP must also be more than descriptive. It should go beyond the ‘what’ and ‘how’ to explore the ‘why’ of your research topic. It should also express your own position vis-à-vis the material. Therefore, choose a topic that lends itself to your own evaluation, interpretation, or additions. The first step is to choose a topic.

II – Choosing a Topic

Every graduate student in the Faculty will have to decide which research topic will best suit his or her interests and needs. Throughout one's graduate coursework, at least three kinds of considerations or ways of learning will be helpful in making such a decision.

1. First, as you engage in the specificity of coursework, you are being asked to learn from the course readings, seminar discussions, and the preparation of academic papers. In this context you will be meeting Graduate Faculty who should be considered as possible future Supervisors should your interests converge.
2. Second, as you engage in coursework, you are also being asked to think about new interests and areas you wish to investigate in more in-depth ways. Typically, it is in the space between what graduate courses offer and the specific interests of the Candidate to extend course

investigations that topics are crafted. Therefore, throughout one's coursework, Candidates are urged to initiate informal conversations about their interests with Faculty. In this way engagement with graduate coursework forms the beginning work of the Research Paper.

3. Third, through in-depth conversations with graduate Faculty about your research interests, part of this conversation will also turn to the question of whether your interests are best played out in a Research Paper.

When choosing your topic, make certain:

- (a) that it fulfils the requirements of the MRP;
- (b) that it interests you enough to work on it (choose a topic that is relevant to your passions, concerns, and curiosities);
- (c) that it will teach you something (otherwise you won't remain interested);
- (d) that it is manageable (narrowing down the topic is essential, as is ensuring that the research method(s) used are manageable for the time allowed and resources available);
- (e) that the topic lets you bring something to it (avoid topics that are so neutral you cannot express an attitude towards them or so popular, controversial or emotive it is difficult to bring something new or fresh to them);
- (f) that there is enough available information on the topic (there should be multiple sources from which you can draw);
- (g) that the topic and treatment are suitable for your audience (ask who will be reading your paper, what they believe, what they will have read, what common ground might you share with them, what you want to convince them of, and what they need to know); and
- (h) that the topic will let you show your abilities (if the topic is too broad, narrow, ordinary, or esoteric, it might not let you show your analytical, research, and writing capabilities).

III – Choosing a Supervisor

The Research Paper is supervised by a Supervisor and is to receive a letter grade according to FGS grading scale. After discussing the issue with their Faculty Advisor, candidates are expected to have approached a faculty member in the Graduate Program in MPPAL (who must be a member of the Faculty of Graduate Studies) to serve as a Supervisor. This step normally should take place by the end of the second term of work for full time students.

There are obvious factors to consider in choosing a Supervisor, such as a faculty member's knowledge of your area of interest and her/his familiarity with the methodology or conceptual frameworks you are considering. Further, interpersonal and work style factors that influence close working relationships are important considerations. Previous contacts with faculty members and advisors should guide you.

The role of the supervisor is twofold:

- * To provide guidance on the planning and conduct of the project, and
- * To be the assessor of the work which is submitted.

The supervisor's role is to guide rather than lead; the supervisor acts as a mentor, providing critical comment on the work of the student submitted to him or her during the course of the project. Thus, the supervisor's role is more passive than the student's.

The faculty member who has indicated an interest in your topic, and has indicated a willingness to serve as a supervisor will help with questions about the MRP Proposal. Although the supervisor may have been involved informally in an assistance role at an early stage, his or her formal involvement begins after the proposal has been accepted and an appointment has been made.

IV – Completing the MRP outside of Canada

In some instances it may be entirely appropriate and advantageous for the candidate to complete their MRP outside of Canada. This may be due to personal circumstances, in the case of international students or professional commitments. However, this option should be thought through very carefully and the following procedure must be adhered to. First, it is essential that the option is discussed with the respective supervisor beforehand, including obtaining **written permission**. Second, all candidates must have completed their MRP proposal and gained written approval from their supervisor **before** leaving Canada to complete the remainder of the project. Third, arrangements must also be made to facilitate appropriate and timely communication in order to ensure the completion of the project within specified deadlines. Candidates are personally responsible for ensuring they are able to adhere to communications and deadlines agreed with the supervisor.

V – Writing an MRP Proposal

To help you successfully complete your MRP in a timely manner, you are required to hand in a 2 to 3 page **MRP proposal**, normally after the completion of two semesters for full time students or four semesters for part-time students.

You will need to submit a draft proposal to a supervisor who has indicated expertise and interest in your topic. As part of the process, you should hold a preliminary meeting with the person you have asked to be your supervisor to discuss your MRP ideas and plans.

The MRP proposal is a preliminary guide to your project, not the MRP itself. It should describe your initial ideas about what you propose to investigate, why you want to do so, how you propose to carry out the research, and what you might plausibly expect to discover. It should be seen as a tool for helping you find a topic that is feasible with the resources and time available—and a topic that is worth doing. It will also serve as a checklist as you carry out the project later.

Elements of the MRP Proposal

The proposal must be no more than **2 to 3 pages in length** and have the following elements, most of which should be no more than a sentence or two or, at most, a very brief paragraph:

1. **General subject of interest:** State your broad subject of research interest.

2. **Research topic or question:** State your narrow research topic. This is usually formulated as a question that you will try to answer. While your subject of interest will be broad and multifaceted, your research topic or question should be narrow enough to investigate in an approximately 80 to 100 page paper.
3. **Theoretical framework:** Describe your initial theoretical orientation to your topic. This should include a preliminary identification of concepts, assumptions, models, and hypotheses relevant to your topic.
4. **Justification:** Answer the question ‘so what?’, that is, state why your research topic is worth investigating. This is also a place to mention special qualifications, if any, you have for writing about this topic.
5. **Method(s):** State the method(s) you propose to use to investigate your topic and why. The method should be appropriate to the research question and feasible with the time and other resources available to you. Many good MRPs are based solely on gathering and evaluating secondary sources. Some topics may lend themselves to formalized methods such as document (content) analysis, case stud(ies), interviewing (which be done in person or through letters or email), observation (participant observation or field work), surveys, statistical methods, textual analysis, discourse analysis, and so on.
6. **Sources:** State the types of sources you propose to use in exploring your research topic. The list will aid in planning and prioritizing your data collection. Where appropriate, identify specific types of *primary sources* (those coming straight from the people or works you are researching) and *secondary sources* (those one-stepaway from the direct or primary sources) you plan to use and where you will find them.
7. **Preliminary Bibliography:** Provide a list of a minimum ten citations of specific sources you have or will read on your topic.
8. **Plan of Work:** Include a realistic timetable, including deadlines, for completing the study on time. Mention any difficulties you anticipate, such as problems getting necessary data, the need to travel to get information, and so on.
9. **Supervisor:** State who has agreed to supervise your MRP. The most important point to note in this connection is that the successful conduct of the MRP is mainly the responsibility of the student. However, the supervisor is expected to exercise professional judgment, expressed through feedback and guidance to the student. In order for such feedback to be timely, it is, of course, necessary for the student to provide progress reports to the supervisor, either orally or in writing, as agreed between them.
10. **Proposal approved:** When the MRP supervisor agrees that the proposal is acceptable, the student completes an Approval of MRP Proposal Form and submits it, with a copy of the proposal to the supervisor, and the MPPAL Graduate Office, where the Director will sign the form. The form will outline the timetable, responsibilities, and any ethical issues. Any research proposal in the University which involves individuals or groups as the subject of experimentation or study requires ethical approval. A Human Participants Form must be completed prior to the commencement of the actual research (see guidelines/forms) and must be reviewed by the Graduate Program in MPPAL’s Ethics Committee prior to the commencement of the study. Only after the Research Paper Proposal has been accepted by the Supervisor and has been approved by the Ethics Committee (if applicable), may the Candidate commence the work. This should normally be submitted *at least* three months before the expected completion date.

VI – Submission of MRP

The supervisor reads the completed MRP, and then submits it for a second read (optional) by another faculty member of the MPPAL graduate program. The MRP supervisor, in consultation with the second reader, determine the MRP grade. The third reader can be consulted, but does not determine the grade. Once the supervisor and second reader indicate that the MRP has been approved, the supervisor completes the MRP Assessment Report Form and submits it to the Program Office. Two hardbound copy of the final MRP are required by the University as permanent library copies.

In addition to the above, one electronic copy of the essay on disk should be submitted along with the documents. The essay may be publicized in one of a number of ways by the MPPAL program. A summary of the research will be presented in a student seminar series.

VII – Convocation

The program Assistant completes the Convocation form and submits it to the Registrar's Office, which ensures that the student is placed on the next Convocation List.

(This document has been adapted from the MRP requirements of the Graduate Program in Disaster & Emergency Management)*