

Guidelines for SWLF 4005: Research Essay

Department of Social Welfare and Social Development

The Research Essay is an elective course in Social Welfare and Social Development (SWLF) for students completing an Honours program and who have an average of at least 75 per cent in their SWLF courses. The Essay, written on a topic you have selected, is 10,000 to 12,000 words (roughly 30 to 35 pages) in length and is based on primary and/or secondary research.

The Essay is normally in the form of an argument and a sustained defense of that argument. Unlike a doctoral dissertation (and, to a lesser extent, a Master's thesis), the Research Essay does not have to be original, in the sense of constituting a substantial "addition to knowledge" (generally defined as "saying something that no one else has said before").

The Essay should, however, be a sophisticated work that makes effective use of the scholarly literature in a project that demonstrates a thorough understanding of the topic under investigation. The Essay is occasionally descriptive but must be primarily analytical.

You work largely independently but under the supervision and guidance of a full-time faculty member. You need to be self-motivated and a good manager of time.

Students register for SWLF 4005 in the Winter term of their third year. Before you register, though, you should meet with a full-time faculty member to discuss possible Essay topics. After this meeting, you can begin the process of registering in WebAdvisor, under *Apply for Individualized Study Course*.

Shortly after registering, students meet with a faculty supervisor in order to develop a formal proposal. This proposal should be completed by April 30.

The main sections of the proposal are five to seven double-spaced pages (1,500 to 2,000 words), with a separate cover and a references list. The proposal provides details of your topic, develops a tentative argument, and sets out a timetable for research and writing.

The proposal includes the following sections (with suggested page lengths in brackets):

1. **Background/Context** (one page): Provide a succinct summary of the topic you propose to address. Why is this topic important/interesting/timely/problematic? What is the central question you want to address?

Note that it is important to have a research *question*, as opposed to stating that you are going to “investigate” something or that the Essay is “about” a certain topic. Planning to write “about” a topic is a good beginning, but this plan needs to be elaborated into a research question.

Instead of a question, you may want to frame the proposal as a *critique* (that is, as challenging the “truth claims”) of some theory, perspective, argument, interpretation, or public policy (though note that this critique can be easily reframed as a question).

2. **Research Process** (one page): What research have you conducted on this topic, through university courses, fieldwork, community service-learning, and/or employment? What other tasks will you need to undertake in order to complete the Essay? Elaborate on anything that goes beyond reading reference materials, such as developing interview questions or questionnaires, learning new software, and so on. Do you have access to the resources you need to complete the Essay?
3. **Tentative Thesis** (two to four pages): Based on your preliminary research, what do you expect to argue in the Essay? What is your defense of this argument likely to entail? What theoretical perspective(s) frames the argument? Why are you using this particular perspective(s)? What have scholars had to say on this topic?

Include a list of six to eight sub-titles (in addition to the Introduction and the Conclusion) to indicate the basic organizational framework of the proposed Essay.

4. **Timetable** (one page): What are the tasks you need to accomplish and on what dates will these tasks be completed?
5. **References** (two to three pages): Provide a list of 20 to 30 references in *Chicago Manual of Style* format. For further information, see:

<http://faculty.nipissingu.ca/larryp/resources/downloads/ChicagoManual-of-Style.pdf>

Divide the references in your list between: (a) those you have read and (b) those you plan to read. The references may include but must go beyond readings assigned for your courses.

Note that a research ethics protocol needs to be completed and submitted to the university's Research Ethics Board (REB) if your research involves human subjects. This includes interviews, tests, questionnaires, observations, and focus groups. You should receive any necessary approval from the REB after you hand in your proposal but before you leave for the summer. For further information, see the REB's web page:

<http://www.nipissingu.ca/academics/research-services/ethics/reb/Pages/default.aspx>

It is important to spend significant time developing your proposal. A solid proposal will help you write a solid Essay. It should be evident that you have conducted some research and reading on the topic. At the same time, the proposal is not expected to have definitive conclusions nor must it be based on copious research. It is a *plan* of work. The proposal is not the Essay.

The student and the supervisor meet in late April or early May to revise the proposal so that the project is of manageable proportions. (You must be able to answer your central question in 30 to 35 pages.) At this meeting, you also discuss the research process and develop a timetable for the summer. A follow up meeting is held in early September to revisit the timetable and agree on expectations for the upcoming academic year. The meetings in the Fall will likely be every week or every second week, though they may become less frequent as the Essay progresses and perhaps more frequent again as deadlines approach.

Throughout the academic year, you should be submitting drafts of sections of the Essay to your supervisor for comments. Drafts should be handed in at least one week before a scheduled meeting. By December 10, you must have a significant portion of the research completed and a solid draft of some sections of the Essay written (at least 10 pages). The first draft of the entire Essay must be submitted by March 15. The supervisor reads the draft and provides comments by March 31. The final Essay is due on April 15. The Essay is graded by your supervisor.

As the Essay progresses, much of what is in the proposal is likely to change. Some proposed sections will be moved; others will be dropped; new ones will be incorporated. Some books and articles will be deleted from the references list, while others will be added. And so on. The proposal guides your research; it is not a template to be followed fastidiously. The Essay will undergo numerous changes as you conduct further research and especially as you begin writing. Indeed, this process of discovery and rethinking is part of the enjoyment of higher-level research.