

RESEARCH PAPER REQUIREMENT ("SECOND-YEAR PAPER")

Description, Guidelines, and Sign-Off Form

PhD Program in Gerontology
Manning College of Nursing and Health Sciences
University of Massachusetts Boston

Overview

Gerontology PhD students write a quantitative empirical research paper in order to meet one of the requirements to earn a doctoral degree. The research paper (also known as the "second-year paper") is comparable to a peer-reviewed article that would be published in a professional academic journal. The research paper contains all of the elements of a scholarly article: 1) statement of the problem, 2) literature review, 3) conceptual model and statement of hypotheses, 4) research design, 5) presentation of quantitative findings including statistical tables, 6) conclusions, and 7) other supporting materials. Although collaboration with faculty on the research thesis and design is required, the research paper process is designed to give students the opportunity to demonstrate their ability to independently conceptualize, conduct, and report the results of empirical research. This process helps prepare students for the dissertation project.

Guidelines

The purpose of these guidelines is to clarify the roles and responsibilities of second-year paper course instructor(s), faculty Readers, and students in the development and execution of the research paper.

Instructors: The PhD program curriculum requires students to complete two courses designed to help them complete the empirical paper requirement (these courses are usually taken in the 2nd year of their program of study). The courses include **GERON 726**, "*Current National Databases in Gerontological Policy Research*" taken in the Fall semester and **GERON 727**, "*Research Practicum in Gerontology*" taken in the Spring semester. Instructors of the two courses are responsible for guiding the process of individual student research projects, including acting as liaison between the students and faculty Readers. The instructors provide grades for the courses and the Readers evaluate whether the final paper meets the minimum standards for the research paper requirement of the program. Although currently there are two different instructors for the two courses, there are circumstances where both courses could be taught by the same instructor.

Students: In the Fall Semester, students are required to enroll in **GERON 726**, "*Current National Databases in Gerontological Policy Research*." Each student develops proposed research questions to be addressed in his/her empirical paper, using a large national-level database selected by the instructor, such as the *Health and Retirement Study*.

Students are expected to extend the scholarly literature on the proposed topic by specifying new variables to existing models, examining mediation or moderation models, or performing subgroup analyses or some combination of the above.

The proposal for research must be reviewed and approved by the assigned Readers before the student can continue in the process. The Readers may:

1. accept the initial proposal, or
2. reject the initial proposal and advise the student to revise and resubmit the proposal with guidance on how to improve the proposal.

If the two Readers disagree regarding whether the proposed study is acceptable, the instructor can request a meeting with both Readers and the student to discuss the proposed study and potential revisions and changes. The timing of the approval process is determined by the instructor (usually by the 6th week of class).

Once the research proposal is approved by both Readers, students are required to prepare a brief review of the relevant literature. The Readers review the literature review and provide feedback and comments. If any concerns about the relevance and feasibility of the project are identified at this point, Readers notify the GERON 726 instructor about the concerns and then a meeting is called to discuss these with the instructor and student.

Near the end of the Fall semester, students submit a formal concept paper containing an expanded discussion of the research questions, a summary of relevant literature identified thus far, and a conceptual model with hypotheses for the proposed analysis. A copy of this concept paper is reviewed by the Readers to assess the feasibility of the proposed study to be carried out in Spring semester. The Readers may:

1. approve the concept paper, or
2. not approve the concept paper.

The concept paper should be approved by the last week of the Fall semester. Suggestions for the concept paper made by the Readers will be addressed in the Spring semester.

During the Fall semester, students create an analytic research file. This analytic data file contains the variables to be used in the statistical analyses to be conducted by the student in the Spring semester. If serious data problems are identified, students will be required to modify their proposed project to rectify the problem(s). If necessary, students consult with the GERON 726 instructor and Readers for advice in modifying their proposed study.

At the final class meeting in the Fall semester, students present their proposed research projects. To help with the transition to the Spring semester, the instructors for both the GERON 726 and GERON 727 courses may attend these presentations.

Spring Semester

In the Spring semester, students are required to enroll in **GERON 727**, “*Research Practicum in Gerontology*.” Students are expected to carry out their proposed empirical research and to write a paper to satisfy the research (second-year) paper requirement. Homework assignments in this course include drafts of each section of a typical peer-reviewed journal manuscript: introduction, literature review, conceptual model and hypotheses, research design, empirical results, and discussion and conclusion – along with a reference section and relevant tables and figures. Students organize a meeting with the course instructor and the Readers to discuss the proposed study. Prior to the meeting, the student will submit a draft of their paper through the methods section. The timing of the meeting is determined by the course instructor. During the meeting, the participants discuss the proposed study and make suggestions for improvements. Following the meeting, the student produces a summary document that outlines any changes to the study agreed to at the meeting. This document is sent to the course instructor and Readers for review and final approval.

The first complete draft of the research paper is due at the end of the Spring semester on a date determined by the instructor. After reading and commenting on the research paper, the course instructor assigns an incomplete grade for the course. The incomplete grade will be replaced with a letter grade after the Readers make their decision about whether the paper meets the program requirements. The incomplete grade will not harm the student’s progress in the program.

Students make appropriate changes to the paper based on the instructor’s comments and then they submit a clean version of the paper to the Readers for review. Readers return the paper to students with suggestions for improvements no later than two weeks after receiving the first full draft. Students are required to revise their papers and then send the paper back to the Readers for further feedback within one week. At this point, Readers may accept the paper as is or require additional (usually minor) revisions with students having up to one week to make changes and send back to the Readers. Readers have one week to read the last version of the paper. At this point, the Readers notify the course instructor about whether the paper meets the minimum standards for satisfying the research paper requirement. The course instructor notifies students about the Readers’ evaluation.

If the two Readers disagree in their recommendations regarding whether the revised paper is a pass, the Graduate Program Director appoints a third Reader from the full-time, tenure-stream Gerontology Department faculty to review the paper. A vote of the three Readers will determine the final disposition, whereby consensus is not required.

Students whose final papers are deemed by the Readers not to meet the minimum standards for the research paper requirement will be given the opportunity to submit a new, original research paper during the next academic year. The incomplete grade for GERON 727 will stand. The student will be required to meet all research paper assignment for GERON 727 during this next year. The process identified above will be

followed. A second rejection of a student's research paper will result in assignment of a failure grade for GERON 727. In this case, students will not have the opportunity to write a Qualifying Paper Examination and they will not be eligible to receive the Master's degree in Gerontology.

Important note: A sign-off sheet (attached to this document) contains space for signatures of the Readers. After the concept paper is accepted by both Readers, the student submits the form to both Readers for their signatures (electronic signatures are acceptable). The signed form is given to the Graduate Program Administrator at the end of the Fall semester. When the student's final paper is formally approved by the Readers as meeting the PhD program requirements, the student gives the Readers the sign-off sheet for a second set of signatures at the end of the Spring semester. The document is then returned to the Program Administrator.

Readers: Students are assigned two Readers who are full-time, tenure-stream faculty members in the Gerontology Department. In the Fall semester, students may specify their preferences for assigned Readers to the GERON 726 instructor. However, Reader assignments are ultimately based on the content expertise of available faculty and faculty workload. Final Reader assignments are made by the GERON 726 instructor in consultation with the Graduate Program Director. Readers are expected to:

1. assess students' proposed research topic in terms of feasibility, substance, relevance, and scientific rigor,
2. guide the student to appropriate literature and methodology in conducting the proposed research, and
3. provide specific feedback for improvement – if necessary.

Throughout the process, Readers serve as advisors to the students on the proposed research projects.

Revised: July 16th, 2025

**Research Paper Requirement
Sign Off Sheet**

_____ will receive guidance by the undersigned in the preparation of a research paper which is required in the Gerontology PhD program in order to write a Qualifying Paper and to receive the Master's degree.

Reader

Date

Reader

Date

_____ has fulfilled the research paper requirement with a project entitled:

Reader

Date

Reader

Date