GRADUATE EDUCATION
CALIFORNIA POLYTECHNIC STATE UNIVERSITY, SAN LUIS OBISPO

MASTER'S THESIS FORMATTING GUIDELINES

Effective Fall 2026

University standards for the presentation and organization of master's theses



About These Guidelines

These guidelines establish the university-wide formatting requirements for master's theses submitted to Cal Poly. They are intended to promote consistency and professional presentation while allowing flexibility for disciplinary conventions where specific formatting is not prescribed. Students should use these guidelines together with the Thesis Template and consult their thesis advisor regarding discipline-specific style and citation practices.

General Formatting

General

All theses must be written in the **English** language. All theses are submitted and published in PDF format. The document page size is **8.5 x 11 inches**.

Accessibility

Students are responsible for ensuring that all thesis files comply with Cal Poly and California State University (CSU) accessibility requirements under the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA). This includes submitting an accessible PDF for publication to Digital Commons.

To help you create an accessible thesis, we recommend the following resources:

- Use the built-in **Accessibility Checker** in Microsoft Word (and Adobe Acrobat, if applicable).
- The Cal Poly Center for Teaching, Learning, and Technology (CTLT) provides guides and resources for creating accessible documents.
- Access additional self-paced accessibility training through CTLT.

For more information, visit the CTLT Accessible Learning website.

Margins

All pages must have **1.0-inch** margins on the top, bottom, left, and right. The left margin may be increased to 1.5 inches when necessary for binding. No margin may be narrower than 1.0 inch. This requirement applies to all content, including preliminary pages, headers and footers, tables, figures, references, and all appendix materials.

No text, figure, or table may go into the margins.

Typeface

One typeface must be used **consistently** throughout the document, including body text, page numbers, titles, tables, figures, and references. Acceptable typefaces include Times (including Times New Roman), Arial (including Arial Nova), Calibri, Helvetica, and Garamond.

Font Size

The font size must be **between 10 and 12 points** and used consistently throughout the document, including titles and references. Figure and table captions, and footnotes may be reduced to 8 points where necessary, provided they remain clear and legible.

Text Color
Only **black** font may be used, including website links.

Spacing
The thesis must be **double-spaced (2.0).** Exceptions may be made where **single spacing (1.0)** improves readability, including some preliminary pages (Table of Contents, List of Tables, List of Figures), table titles and figure captions, references, and appendix materials.

When single spacing is used, double spacing must be maintained between separate entries (e.g., between chapter entries in the Table of Contents, between references, etc.).

Use of Emphasis
Italic, bold, and underlined text should be used **sparingly and consistently** with established professional and academic writing conventions in the student's discipline. Examples include scientific names, mathematical notation, and technical symbols.

Emphasis may also be used to distinguish chapter headings, section headings, and subheadings, provided it is applied consistently throughout the thesis.

Titles and Headings
Titles and headings must use a **consistent** formatting and capitalization style (e.g., Sentence case, Title Case or ALL CAPS) throughout the Main Text. Headings on preliminary pages must follow the formatting and capitalization shown in the Thesis Template.

Chapter headings may be centered. All other headings must be left-aligned.

Heading Hierarchy
Headings must clearly reflect the document hierarchy (e.g., chapter, section, subsection) through **consistent** formatting and placement.

Chapters
Each chapter must include a chapter number and begin on a **new page**. Other major sections (e.g. References and Appendices) must also begin on a new page.

Single Words on a Page
Avoid page breaks that leave only a single word or short line of the Main Text on an otherwise blank page before the next chapter or major section.

Page numbers
Page numbers must appear at the bottom of each page and be either **centered** or **right-aligned**. The page number position must remain consistent throughout the document. For landscape-oriented pages, page numbers must appear in a consistent location when viewed in portrait orientation.

Page Numbering

Preliminary pages must be numbered using lowercase **Roman numerals** (i, ii, iii, iv, …). The title page is counted but not numbered. Roman numeral page numbering begins on the page following the title page and continues through all preliminary pages.

Arabic numeral page numbering (1, 2, 3, …) begins with page 1 on the first page of Chapter 1 or the Introduction and continues consecutively through the remainder of the thesis, including References and Appendices.

Parts of the Thesis

The thesis must follow the order of components shown in the Thesis Template. The sections below outline the formatting requirements for each part of the thesis in the order they should appear.

Preliminary Pages

The preliminary pages are standardized and must follow the Thesis Template. Formatting elements such as headings, capitalization, spacing, and emphasis must match the template.

Title page

Match the Thesis Template and pay particular attention to the following:

- □ The thesis title must appear in ALL CAPS and be double-spaced. The title must be centered (do not use distributed or justified alignment).
- □ Include the month and year of the thesis publication deadline for the semester in which you are graduating (typically December, May, or August), **not** the month the thesis was submitted.
- □ The Title Page is counted but not numbered.

Copyright page

Match the Thesis Template and pay particular attention to the following:

- □ The copyright year and student name must match the Title Page.
- □ ALL RIGHTS RESERVED must appear in ALL CAPS.

Committee Membership

Match the Thesis Template and pay particular attention to the following:

- □ The thesis title must appear in Title Case
- □ The Date Submitted must reflect the month and year of the thesis publication deadline for the semester in which you are graduating (typically December, May, or August), **not** the month the thesis was submitted.
- □ List each committee member's full name (including degree, e.g., Ph.D.) on the first line and their full faculty title (e.g., Professor of Biomedical Engineering) on the second line. Department and college names are not required.
- □ The thesis title and student name must remain consistent throughout the thesis.

Abstract

Match the Thesis Template and pay particular attention to the following:

- □ The thesis title must appear in Title Case and match the Title Page.
- □ Leave at least one blank line between the student's name and the abstract text.
- □ Keywords are optional. If included, begin with ‘Keywords:’ followed by a comma-separated list of keywords. Capitalize proper nouns, acronyms, and established names where appropriate.

Acknowledgements (optional)

If included, the Acknowledgments page should follow the Thesis Template.

Table of Contents

Match the Thesis Template and pay particular attention to the following:

- □ Only the following preliminary pages should appear in the Table of Contents (if included): List of Tables, List of Figures, List of Symbols, List of Abbreviations, List of Acronyms, and List of Nomenclature.
- □ Include the word CHAPTER above the Chapter 1 listing. Subsequent chapters must be listed by chapter number only (e.g., 2. METHODS, not Chapter 2. METHODS).
- □ Include the word Page above the page number column. All entries must use leader dots connecting the entry to the page number. Text must not extend into the page number column.
- □ Chapter and section numbering must follow a consistent hierarchy throughout the Table of Contents (e.g., 2, 2.1, 2.1.1). Text must not extend into the chapter numbering column.
- □ Chapter and first-level section headings (e.g., 2, 2.1) must be included in the Table of Contents. Lower-level headings (e.g., 2.1.1 and beyond) may be omitted, provided the chosen level of detail is applied consistently.
- □ Chapter entries must be CAPITALIZED. Subchapter entries must use either Title Case or Sentence case consistently.
- □ Verify that all page numbers match the corresponding pages in the thesis.
- □ Format appendix entries in the Table of Contents according to the Appendices section of these guidelines.

List of Tables (if applicable)

Match the Thesis Template and pay particular attention to the following:

- □ Include the word Table above the first entry. Subsequent entries must be listed by table number only (e.g., 1. Sample Data, not Table 1. Sample Data).
- □ Include the word Page above the page number column. Text must not extend into the page number column or table numbering column.
- □ All entries must use leader dots connecting the table title to the page number.
- □ If you choose to single-space each table title, use double spacing between entries.
- □ Table titles must match the corresponding table titles exactly as they appear in the thesis.

List of Figures (if applicable)

- □ Match the Thesis Template and follow the same formatting requirements as the List of Tables, substituting Figure for Table where applicable.

Lists of Symbols, Abbreviations, Acronyms, and Nomenclature (if applicable)

- □ If included, these lists are typically placed in the preliminary pages following the List of Figures. They may instead be included as an appendix, particularly when the list is extensive.
- □ Entries must be formatted consistently, with uniform alignment and spacing throughout the list.

Main Text

Chapter, section, and subsection headings may follow the student's preferred formatting and capitalization style, provided they are applied consistently and comply with these guidelines.

Tables and Figures

- □ Tables and figures must follow a consistent numbering system throughout the thesis and appear as close as possible to their first discussion in the text.
- □ Tables must include a table number and title above the table. Figures must include a figure number and caption below the figure. Titles and captions must appear on the same page as the corresponding table or figure.
- □ Tables and figures must remain within the required margins. When necessary for readability, large tables or figures (including their titles or captions) may either:
  - Be rotated to landscape orientation on a portrait-oriented page, or
  - Be presented on a landscape-oriented page.

  Page numbers must remain in a consistent position throughout the document.
- □ Tables and figures must be placed on their own lines, with surrounding text appearing above and below rather than wrapping around them.
- □ When possible, tables and figures should be positioned so they do not interrupt a sentence or divide a word. Exceptions are acceptable when alternative placement would compromise the overall page layout.
- □ Leave at least one blank line between a table or figure (including its title or caption) and the surrounding text to clearly distinguish it from the main text.
- □ Formatting choices, such as (partial) bolding of table titles or figure captions, must be applied consistently throughout the document.
- □ Long table titles or figure captions may be shortened in the List of Tables or List of Figures to the initial concise title or first descriptive sentence. The wording used must match the corresponding title or caption exactly.

Multi-part Figures

- □ Multi-part figures may contain multiple related images, graphs, or diagrams within a single figure. Individual panels must be clearly labeled (e.g., (a), (b), (c)). The overall figure caption must describe the figure as a whole and include descriptions of each individual panel.

Equations

If equation numbering is used, it must be applied consistently throughout the thesis.

References (Bibliography)

- □ All sources cited within the thesis must be included in the References section.
- □ Students should work with their faculty advisor to determine the appropriate citation style for their discipline.
- □ If references are not numbered, they must be listed in alphabetical order.
- □ Individual reference entries may be single-spaced, provided double spacing is maintained between entries.
- □ URLs may remain clickable but must not appear in blue font.
- □ Reference entries must not be broken apart on two different pages.

Appendices

Appendices contain supplementary material that supports, but is not essential to, the Main Text of the thesis.

- Each appendix must begin on a new page and include a title.
- Appendices must be listed in the Table of Contents. Lower-level appendix headings (e.g., A.1, A.2) may be used within the appendices but do **not** need to be included in the Table of Contents.
- Tables and figures appearing in the appendices must also be included in the List of Tables and List of Figures, if applicable.
- All appendix content must remain within the required margins.

One Appendix

If the thesis contains one appendix:

- In the thesis: Identify the appendix and include a descriptive title beneath the heading. The appendix heading and title must follow the same formatting and capitalization style as the chapter headings and titles used throughout the thesis. For example, if chapter headings and titles are formatted as:

Chapter 1
Survey Instrument

format the appendix in the same manner:

Appendix
Survey Instrument

- In the Table of Contents: List APPENDIX as the entry. The title does not need to appear in the Table of Contents. Use leader dots to connect the entry to the page number.

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Multiple Appendices

If the thesis contains multiple appendices:

- In the thesis: Label each appendix alphabetically (e.g., Appendix A, Appendix B) and include a descriptive title beneath the heading. The appendix heading and title must follow the same formatting and capitalization style used for chapter headings and titles throughout the thesis. For example, if chapter headings and titles are formatted as:

Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

format the appendix in the same manner:

Appendix A

SURVEY INSTRUMENT

- In the Table of Contents: Include the heading APPENDICES, which serves as a section heading and must not include leader dots or a page number. Beneath it, list each appendix alphabetically with its title, using leader dots to connect each entry to its page number.

APPENDICES
A. Survey Instrument 95
B. Additional Experimental Results 101

- Large codebases, software packages, or similar technical materials may be referenced through a stable repository or documentation link rather than included in full as an appendix.
- If an AI Tool Usage Disclosure is included in the thesis, we recommend placing it in an appendix and formatting it according to the appendix guidelines.