Master's Programs FAQ

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How long does a Master's degree typically take?

Usually two years. It is possible in principle to complete a thesis Master's degree in one academic year plus one quarter (e.g., the following summer quarter), but this is rarely done. If you enter with transfer credits from another graduate program, you might be able to complete your degree in a shorter period of time.

I've done graduate work at another university. Can I get transfer credits?

If the Graduate Program Coordinator approves, you may petition the Graduate School for up to 6 transfer credits for courses that are equivalent to 500-level UW math courses applicable to a Master's degree. Transfer credits are not granted for 400-level courses or for the Ph.D. degree.
What's the difference between the thesis and a non-thesis Master's degrees?

Roughly speaking, for a thesis degree you will write a Master's thesis (and register for 9 credits of Math 700, Master's Thesis), while for a non-thesis degree the thesis is replaced by an extra three-quarter 500-level course sequence. Details are in Degree Requirements.

What's the difference between the MS and MA degrees?

The MS degrees are far more rigorous than the MA degree, and closely resemble the first two years of the Ph.D. program. Basically, if you obtain an MS degree, you will have completed a lot of the course work required for a Ph.D. degree, and you will be prepared to use specialized mathematics in industry, or to teach mathematics at the advanced secondary or community college level. The MA degree is primarily for students who want to enrich their general mathematics background or to teach at the K-12 level.

If I don't finish my Master's degree in two years, what options do I have, assuming I really want to get a degree?

If you are continuing to make reasonable progress toward completing your degree requirements, you are welcome to remain in the program as a self-supporting student until you complete your degree. But the Math Department virtually never provides financial support to Master's students beyond the second year.

What is a typical first-year Master's program?

Typically, first-year Master's students take two 400-level courses (including either 402/3/4 or 424/5/6, sometimes both) and one 500-level core course (usually 504/5/6 or 524/5/6).

May I take two or even three 500-level courses my first year?

You may take more than one 500-level course, if you really are prepared to do so, but this is rarely the case. Be sure to discuss this carefully with both your advisor and the instructors of the 500-level courses, however, to ensure that your undergraduate real analysis and algebra courses were sufficiently rigorous to prepare you for the 500-level courses you wish to take. Again, it is unusual for a first-year Master's student to be really well prepared for more than one 500-level course.

What if I'm not prepared to take any 500-level courses my first year?

With your advisor's approval, you may register for three 400-level courses during your first year. Be aware, however, that it will be nearly impossible to complete an MS degree in two years if you don't complete at least one 3-quarter 500-level sequence during your first year. Thus you may need to continue working on your degree without departmental support after the second year.

What is a typical second-year Master's program?

For an MS non-thesis degree, a typical second-year program would include two 500-level core courses plus one more advanced 500-level sequence. For an MS thesis degree, the advanced 500-level course would be replaced by a Master's thesis.
Am I allowed to take courses outside the Math Department?

Yes, provided you are otherwise meeting the Normal Progress and registration requirements, and your advisor approves. Otherwise you'll need the permission of the Graduate Program Coordinator.

What if I can't find a 3-quarter advanced sequence to take during my second year?

Because there may not always be an advanced 3-quarter sequence offered in your area of specialization, there is room for negotiation about what counts as fulfilling this requirement. For example, if the Graduate Program Coordinator agrees, you might substitute a 2-quarter sequence plus a related independent study course, or two separate 2-quarter sequences. Talk to the Graduate Program Coordinator as early as possible and, in any case, before the beginning of your second year if you feel that you will have a problem finding an appropriate 3-quarter sequence.

I plan to register for three courses that amount to only 9 credits. How can I meet the 10-credit requirement?

If you take three 3-credit courses, you will need to sign up for at least one extra credit to bring the total up to 10. For most Master's students, the most appropriate option would be one or more credits of Math 600B in conjunction with a three-credit course. (See What is Math 600B?)

What is Math 600B?

This course number is for Supplemental reading in connection with a math course. If you need additional credits to bring your total up to 10 credits, one easy way to get them is to sign up for two credits of 600B in conjunction with one of your 3-credit courses. You should reach an understanding with the instructor of that course at the beginning of the quarter about what work will be required for the extra credits. It could involve outside reading, doing extra problems, or regular discussions with the instructor, for example.

What do grades mean in graduate courses?

Passing grades for graduate students are in the range 2.7–4.0. Grades below 2.7 do not count for graduate credit in the Mathematics Department, and may not be used in fulfillment of any math graduate degree requirements. In 400-level and core graduate courses, a grade of 4.0 means you have attained a superior mastery of the material, while a grade of 3.0 means you are just barely performing at the level expected of a graduate student.

What's involved in writing a Master's thesis?

In general, Master's theses are expository, and typically do not involve original research on the part of the student. The thesis should usually be a synthesis of some relatively recent mathematics (say from the past 50 years) beyond what is typically covered in elementary and intermediate graduate courses and textbooks.

What should I do when I'm ready to get my Master's degree?
Before the end of the second week of the quarter in which you wish to complete your degree, you must file a Master's degree request.

May I change my advisor? How do I go about that?

Yes, you may change advisors at any time, provided all parties agree. Get an advisor change form from the Student Services Office (C-36), fill it out and, after it has been signed by yourself, your old advisor and your new advisor, put it in the Graduate Program Coordinator's mail box for approval. (Your new advisor must sign to agree to be your advisor. Your old advisor must sign to indicate notification of the change.)

How does the final Master's exam work?

Usually the final exam is an oral presentation of material you have learned in your area of specialization. (If you write a Master's thesis, it will be an oral presentation of your thesis--also known as the "thesis defense.") A typical Master's exam consists of a 50-minute presentation by the student, followed by an opportunity for anyone in the audience to ask questions. Then the general public is asked to leave, and the faculty members present are given an opportunity to ask questions in private. Finally, the committee meets to decide on the outcome of the exam. The student is notified of the outcome immediately.

I started in the Ph.D. program but now I want to finish with a Master's degree. What do I need to do?

If you have completed two full years in the Ph.D. program, you have probably already completed the course requirements for a Master's degree. See Master's Degree requirements for details. The only other things you need to do are file a Master's degree request during the first two weeks of your final quarter, and complete your final Master's exam. (See How does the final Master's exam work?)