

For anyone considering certification as Fencing Master...

As a CAB Member and someone who has been on several thesis review boards during the last few years I thought it might be worthwhile for me to put down in writing some of my thoughts and expectations concerning the thesis process associated with certification as Fencing Master. Do remember that other reviewers may have different things that they look for and may be more or less demanding. That being said, reviewers tend to be very demanding and may themselves have advanced degrees and experience in writing or editing, so do expect a thorough review and criticism of the paper once it is submitted.

There are many resources available to help, including many books on how to write a thesis and Walter Green's excellent NTP module "The Masters Project and/of Thesis Manual For Candidates for Certification as Maitre d' Armes."

The first three things on the list deal with the quality of the paper as a written work. Anyone with a strong writing background should be able to help the candidate with these. It is not the job of the reviewers to teach candidates how to write or to read through every revision of the paper as it is being written. We expect to receive a finished paper to review. Ideally we read it the first time and all vote to pass it. That should be the goal for the candidate when submitting the thesis. It is not uncommon, however, for the reviewers to send back a list of requirements thus requiring a revision.

1) Is it written properly? For some people this is the easiest aspect of the thesis, and for others it seems to be the most difficult. I am not even discussing content here, but rather things like spelling, grammar, typos, and formatting. Does the paper look ready for publication? Do not rely on spell-check in your word processing program. (Have others proofread the paper before it is submitted.)

2) Does the format follow the guidelines for a thesis or research paper? Is there a table of contents? Does it have an introduction, body, conclusion, and works cited or referenced? Are illustrations properly used?

3) Is it well written? Does the content of the paper actually do what it is intended to do? Does the body reflect the thesis statement? Does the conclusion accurately summarize the paper? Are there parts of the paper that don't fit in? Does anything obvious seem to be missing? Are statements made that are not supported or proven in the paper? Does the paper have enough content to be a thorough discussion of the topic? Is it one solid paper that flows from section to section or does it seem like an incoherent combination of disparate arguments and opinions?

4) Are fencing terms and fencing language used properly? I do recognize that there are often several acceptable ways to describe fencing techniques and tactics, but any fencing language must be used clearly, properly, and consistently throughout the paper. Fencing Master Wang Yung also emphasizes that descriptions of fencing phrases need to be clearly described to eliminate any chance of misinterpretation.

5) Does the central argument make sense? I may not agree with the point being made, but it should at least make sense and be well supported. Generally this isn't much of an issue because the topic has to be approved ahead of time, so papers like "My Eight Year Old Daughter is the Greatest Fencer in the World" isn't something I'd have to deal with. Instead though, a paper might have a section that argues

that footwork in saber and epee have become more similar in the last decade. I would say to myself "Really? Have they? Ok, if you say so, but prove it to me."

6) Is the paper worth reading? How does the reader benefit from taking the time to read the thesis? Does the paper advance the knowledge of coaching? Is it an academic contribution to the sport? Can the reader take something from it and become a better coach, club owner, etc? Will the students of the reader be better fencers because of it?

7) Are opinions expressed in the paper that show some thought by the writer? Or is the paper just a bunch of quotes and data that could have been written by any non-fencer? I'd like to have a sense of how the candidate thinks. What sort of coach is he or she? Let me know that this paper was written by someone who understands and loves (some aspect of) fencing. Even a very dry paper on win/loss statistics should have a discussion and commentary that shows that the candidate really understands the sport.

8) Is the paper Master level? This last one can be a tough call depending on the topic, but basically I'd like to finish reading the paper having confidence in the candidate. I'd like to know that the candidate took the task of writing the thesis seriously and that effort was put into it that is on par with the effort necessary to pass the practical exam. Likewise, was the topic and study of the topic detailed, complex, and interesting enough to create a contribution to fencing that is beyond what you may find in a basic introductory text or random article on the internet.

-Paul Sise  
Fencing Master