

# Guidelines for Philosophy M.A. Thesis

**Department of Philosophy, Institute of Philosophy and Semiotics,  
University of Tartu**

## **The role of the M.A. thesis in the M.A. degree**

In the fourth (i.e. final) semester of their degree, M.A. students will be afforded the opportunity, and expected, to focus on the writing and eventual defense of their M.A. theses. In the present document students and their supervisors will find guidelines, requirements and deadlines for the writing and defense of the M.A. thesis. Students should become familiar with the contents of this document in the first semester of their M.A. degree.

The writing and defense of an M.A. thesis constitutes a sizeable chunk of M.A. studies in Tartu (30 out of the total 120 credit points from the M.A. degree are earned by writing the thesis). Although the writing of the thesis is done, predominantly, in the fourth semester, this does not mean that students should ignore it up until that point. On the contrary, preparations for the writing of the thesis begin at the very start of a student's studies. At the beginning of each semester, students draw up a semester study plan with their supervisors. The study plan describe the courses the student will take during that semester. It is when drawing up the study plan for the first semester that students must first consider the M.A. thesis. Why? Because, although it's not the only relevant factor (e.g. if a student wants to apply for PhD positions then they should design their M.A. to help them meet the admission requirements of the PhD programmes of interest), students should design their degree so that it prepares them to write a good M.A. thesis. For example, students should identify what knowledge and skills they need for their preferred M.A. thesis topic but still lack. And if a student is unsure what they would like to write their thesis about, then they should design their degree so that they can make an informed decision in good time. So the study plan for even the first semester should be informed, to some degree, by the need to prepare the student to write a good M.A. thesis.

Aside from the general need for a student to exercise foresight in the design of their M.A. degree, there are seven official deadlines which pertain to the M.A. thesis. These are as follows:

31 October *, 3 <sup>rd</sup> semester	Registration of supervision and preliminary thesis title
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1 December, 3 <sup>rd</sup> semester	Submission of M.A. prospectus to supervisor
15 April, 4 <sup>th</sup> semester	Submission of draft of M.A. thesis to supervisor
April, 4 <sup>th</sup> semester	Pre-defense
15 May, 4 <sup>th</sup> semester	Submission of M.A. thesis to the <a href="#">institute coordinator</a> **
End of May, beginning of June	Thesis defense

\* If any of the deadlines fall on a holiday or weekend then they shift to the next working day.

\*\* Under exceptional circumstances, it is possible to apply for an extension of the thesis submission deadline.

This work schedule for the M.A. thesis is designed to enable students to produce a text that is more substantial with respect to content, more incisive in argument, and more polished in style and structure than the usual end-of-semester or class paper. The schedule enables this in two ways. Firstly, an M.A. student will be allowed and expected to write the thesis over a more extended period than for the usual end-of-semester or class paper. This will allow the student to engage in research to a greater depth and breadth than would otherwise be possible. Secondly, the thesis will undergo several rounds of substantial revision in response to input from a range of philosophical viewpoints. The series of thesis writing deadlines described above is designed to facilitate this input and to give the student time to integrate this input into their writing.

## What do we expect from an M.A. Thesis?

**A Clear Thesis Statement:** First off, your thesis should, as they say, have a thesis: i.e. a clear statement of the conclusion that the thesis is an attempt to defend. The thesis should locate this conclusion in the relevant literature. The rest of the text should be organized in support of the conclusion. This will include the sympathetic consideration and anticipation of counter-arguments and objections. The thesis will not be an undivided, single block of text. It will be divided into subsections. Each subsection will carry out a clearly indicated, and clearly discernible, function that contributes toward the overall goal of defending the intended conclusion. Explanations of what the student is doing in each section and paragraph (AKA “sign-posts”), and reminders of why they do this, will be expected throughout.

**Philosophical Skill:** A successful thesis will demonstrate that its author is capable of laying out a series of clear and cogent arguments for their conclusion, and of anticipating and rebutting objections. A successful thesis will show that the author has avoided equivocations, fallacious inferences and inaccurate or unfair interpretations of texts and arguments. Where the interpretation of historical texts is central to the chosen topic, a successful thesis will demonstrate that the author has competently interpreted the texts in the light of their historical context.

**Mastery of Content:** A successful thesis will show that the student “know their stuff.” It will show that they can explain clearly the relevant distinctions, arguments and positions on the topic of the thesis in a way which leaves no doubt that the student understands them. It will show that they know how to apply the relevant scholarly literature to their conclusion and their defense of that conclusion. Where the interpretation of historical texts is central to the chosen topic, a successful thesis will show that the student is aware of, and understands, the relevant historical context of those texts.

**Not a Survey:** Although the thesis has to contextualize the intended conclusion within the relevant literature, the thesis should not be a mere summary of what different thinkers have said on a given topic: a mere review or survey of philosophical positions and claims. Instead the thesis will be a sustained attempt to persuade the reader that the intended conclusion is true. This will require the student to exercise their argumentative and interpretative skills in tackling the difficulties posed for the truth of their conclusion by the relevant literature. In doing this, they will *display* their awareness of that literature, and their philosophical competence, without reducing their thesis to a mere review or survey of philosophical positions and claims.

**Not Just “Rudderless Reflections” on a Philosopher or Philosophical Thesis:** Similarly, the thesis should not be a collection of disconnected remarks on a philosophical thesis or philosopher. As with any kind of text that is designed to fulfil a specific function, an M.A. thesis has to be structured and designed so that it fulfils its function. You don't write a good movie review by throwing all that you can remember about the movie onto the page. Likewise, you don't write a good M.A. thesis by throwing everything you can remember about a given philosopher or philosophical thesis onto the page. The M.A. thesis *does* something specific: it presents a convincing case for the intended conclusion. Anything which doesn't contribute toward this, should not be included. Everything which is included should clearly constitute a step toward achieving the overall task of the thesis.

**Appropriate Scope and Ambition:** There is no need to revolutionize the philosophical world with your M.A. thesis. The intended conclusion of the thesis should be something that can be well-defended within a work of the length of the thesis (for the length, see below). Students should aim to show that those who may disagree with them will find it difficult to show that they're wrong. This is a very hard thing to do. If you're criticizing someone, and you don't fairly represent their position, then they will dismiss your argument as irrelevant to what they say. If you are vague in the way you formulate your conclusion then no one will be able to tell exactly what you're trying to show. If you are vague in your defense of your conclusion, no one will be sure that you really have established what you claim to establish. If you are ignorant of relevant literature then you leave open the possibility that something you missed undermines the cogency of your reasoning. If you are ignorant of relevant historical context, then you risk misinterpreting

the historical texts you rely on. Getting all this right is hard. For this reason, an M.A. thesis is much more likely to be successful if it has a modest goal which it demonstrably achieves.

**No Sloppiness:** An M.A. thesis is a professional piece of academic work. Spelling mistakes, grammatical mistakes, typographic errors and inaccurate references have no place here. Choose one convention (British or American) and use it consistently throughout the work. It is not the supervisor's responsibility to correct these but it is their duty to direct the students' attention to problems of this kind, if and when they arise.

**Appropriate References:** The reference systems in Philosophy vary depending upon the sub-field. The student needs to adhere to the system that is appropriate to the relevant field of specialization in Philosophy (for example, there are particular reference traditions in History of Philosophy). Regardless of which system they use, the student must use the same system consistently throughout their M.A. thesis. For your convenience and for general orientation, we provide an example of a reference system below in the Appendix—this follows the guidelines for the journal *Studia Philosophica Estonica*.

## Format

An M.A. thesis must conform to the following template:

- Title page (including name of the university, institute and department, author, title of the thesis, supervisor, number of characters in the main body of text, date and time – e.g. Tartu 2015)
- Table of Contents
- Main text
- List of references
- Summary/abstract (maximum 200 words)
- Annotation (for archival purposes) of up to 100 words (in the same language as the thesis): essentially a very brief summary
- 3-5 keywords (in the same language as the thesis) on the same page as the annotation
- In addition, the thesis may also include appendices and summaries in other languages. If the thesis has a summary in Estonian, then the summary will begin with the full thesis title in Estonian

**Language:** As a rule, an M.A. thesis is written in the official language of the curriculum. This means that if the language of the M.A. curriculum is English then the M.A. thesis should also be written in English. However, in well-founded cases, it is also possible to write an M.A. thesis in some other language that is comprehensible to the supervisor, the reviewer and the defense committee (e.g., Estonian or Russian).

**Font:** The thesis should be written in either Times New Roman, Arial, Georgia or Garamond, with font size 12pt and with 1.5 line spacing. Size 14 is used for main headings and 13 for sub-headings. Do not employ flashy styles. Never mix fonts. **Bold** can be used for headings, sub-headings and for special emphasis. Italics can be used for special emphasis but should definitely be employed for book, journal, newspaper and film titles (note that titles of articles are not italicised!). Italics are also used to offset foreign words used in an English sentence (e.g., the sentence contained a double entendre) as well as for words, letters and numbers mentioned as themselves (e.g., a large 3 was painted on the door). The latter can also be put in single quotation marks (e.g., the Estonian for 'cat' is 'kass').

**Indentation:** All paragraphs are indented. Do not use block style. Do not leave an empty line between paragraphs.

**Margins:** The left-hand margin should be 3 cm and the right-hand margin 2,5 cm. All text should be fully justified.

**Quotations:** Quoting means reporting someone else's words verbatim. If you have to add something, put it in [square brackets]. You should remember, however, that quotations are used sparingly. In general, paraphrase or summary is preferred. In both cases you use your own words to convey the information/ideas presented by another writer. Double quotation marks are used for short quotations. Longer quotations (over 40 words) are written as block quotations without quotation marks, require a smaller font (point size 10) and must be indented and single spaced. Example:

Then without doubt I exist also if he deceives me, and let him deceive me as much as he will, he can never cause me to be nothing so long as I think that I am something. So that after having reflected well and carefully examined all things, we must come to the definite conclusion that this proposition: I am, I exist, is necessarily true each time that I pronounce it, or that I mentally conceive it. (Descartes 2008, 15)

**Length:** Generally, M.A. theses should be between 40 and 60 standard A4 pages in length. A standard A4 page corresponds to 1800 characters of text (including spaces); so the length translates into 72 000–108 000 characters (including spaces) or about 12 000–18 000 words. *This accounts for the main body of the thesis, including footnotes. It does not cover the bibliography and appendices.* We encourage precision, clarity and relevance in philosophical writing and so for this reason shorter, well edited theses are preferred. However, those working on especially historical topics, and hence those who may need to reproduce large chunks of textual evidence in their theses, may feel it necessary to write a longer thesis. If a student is writing on such a topic, their supervisor may grant them an extension on their word limit. The maximum length, for such students, is 80 standard A4 pages (i.e. 144 000 characters, including spaces or about 24 000 words). The title page must state the number of characters (including spaces) of the main body of the thesis. If a thesis does not conform to these rules concerning length it will

impact the grade in a negative way.

**Submission:** The M.A. thesis will be submitted as **two** bounded non-digital copies as well as in the form of a pdf file. The pdf file needs to be sent to the coordinator of the Institute of Philosophy and Semiotics ([ruth.jurjo@ut.ee](mailto:ruth.jurjo@ut.ee)). If the thesis has no summary in Estonian, then the thesis title in Estonian needs to be provided and sent to the coordinator as well. Out of the non-digital copies, one copy must be hard bound, the other can have a soft cover. Well in advance of the submission deadline, students should ensure that they know where they can get their theses bound and how long binding will take so that they do not risk missing the submission deadline.

**Electronic Publishing:** The pdf file will also be sent to the University of Tartu Library and, for that purpose, [the contract for electronic publishing](#) needs to be signed. The signed contract will be included to the file of the thesis, but it is not part of the main body of the thesis. It needs to be placed at the very end of the file, it is not mentioned in the list of contents and has no page number. A signed version of the contract needs to be included to the hard bound copy of the thesis.

### **Master's thesis as a published article**

As per the Requirements for Graduation Theses adopted by the Council of the Faculty of Arts and Humanities on 11.09.2024, it is possible for a Master's thesis to consist partly in an article, as follows and in any case as deemed appropriate by the Program Director:

An article-based master's thesis consists of a peer-reviewed research paper written and accepted for publication during the studies and an accompanying text describing and analysing the research process. The scope of the research must correspond to the volume of the master's thesis.

Please note the following requirements for the Philosophy Master's program:

1. All of the above requirements regarding what we expect from a Master's thesis in philosophy apply equally to the article-based thesis.
2. Co-authored articles do not qualify.
3. Appropriate proof must be provided, at the latest by the pre-defense submission date (April 15th), about the full acceptance for publication by the journal. Conditional acceptance or revise-and-resubmit verdicts do not qualify.
4. The journal where the article has been accepted for publication must have peer-review procedures and be classifiable as a scientific journal. Any doubt on this will be solved jointly by the student's supervisor and the Program Director.

5. The total length of an article-based thesis (including the accompanying text and the article) must comply with the length specifications indicated above. An article which is longer than the specifications, or too long to leave sufficient room for the accompanying text, will not qualify. The article, however, must be of a sufficient length to constitute a significant research paper. Any doubt on this will be solved well before the April 15th deadline jointly by the student's supervisor and the Program Director.
6. An article-based thesis will be reviewed by members of the department as any other thesis and the grading will be based on the philosophy MA thesis grading criteria.
7. Plans to submit an article-based thesis must be communicated at the Prospectus stage, i.e. during the third semester. The Prospectus must be submitted as in the case of any other thesis.
8. The main body of the thesis' text will consist of two parts: Part 1, which includes the accompanying text, and Part 2, which reproduces the version of the article accepted for publication. The student can choose whether to provide two separate bibliographies for the two parts, or a single one at the end of the text.
9. Please keep in mind that the requirements regarding what we expect from a Master's thesis are compatible with submitting a regular, non-article-based, MA thesis, whose main content and style may resemble that of a journal article, and which may, after defense, be reworked as an article to be submitted to a scientific journal. In fact, presenting this material for one's MA thesis can be a good opportunity to receive precious feedback prior to a journal submission.

## Thesis Prospectus

As you have noticed, students must hand in a thesis prospectus to their supervisors in the third semester of their degree. A thesis prospectus is a preliminary plan of the M.A. thesis. Students are expected to do preliminary research for the prospectus which is worth 10 ECTS during their third semester. These 10 ECTS are taken from the 30 ECTS awarded for the M.A. thesis—so 10 ECTS will be awarded for work on the thesis in the third semester and 20 ECTS will be awarded for work on the thesis in the fourth semester. The aim of the research done in the third semester is for students to position themselves so that they can “hit the ground running” when they begin writing their theses proper, in earnest, in the fourth semester. When students hand in their thesis prospectuses, the department will double check to ensure that each student's thesis topic is viable within the time available and of appropriate scope for an M.A. thesis. The department will provide feedback on how the proposed project could be improved. The thesis prospectus has a fixed format, which is as follows:

1. A thesis title.
2. A succinct statement of the conclusion that the thesis will argue for, or, at this early stage, at least the question that the thesis will answer. This conclusion or question should be briefly contextualized within the relevant debate or literature to which the thesis is a contribution.
3. A chapter-by-chapter outline of the thesis. This should include brief descriptions of the contents of each chapter. It should be made clear what role each chapter will play in fulfilling the over-arching goal of the thesis: defending the conclusion of the thesis, or at least, answering the question that the thesis will answer.
4. A bibliography of (a) works that the student has consulted already in writing the prospectus and (b) works that the student plans on consulting during the student's future research for the thesis.

Although the research that goes into the prospectus will be 10 ECTS, the prospectus itself should be focused and brief; we suggest no more than 10 standard A4 pages 1.5-spaced (excluding the bibliography). The thesis prospectus is due at the *beginning* of December and not the Christmas break.



## Thesis Defense and Pre-defense

Students should be aware that as well as writing an M.A. thesis, they will also be required to defend the thesis in an oral exam at the end of May or the beginning of June in the fourth semester of their M.A. degree. This defense requires additional preparation. In the exam, the student will present the core of their work. There will be two reviewers who will raise questions and probe the arguments and claims of the thesis. (The reviewers provide a review report **at least 3 days before the defense**.) The floor will then be open to members of the audience (NB: these exams are public). The examination committee will then convene to reach a decision on the thesis: whether it passes or fails and if it passes, what grade it should receive. Because students will not have time to present their entire thesis in all its detail, they must identify the core argument or arguments of the thesis, and prepare a presentation that makes these accessible to their examiners. They must also be capable of providing considered answers to questions about their thesis from their reviewers, their examination committee, and to a lesser extent from other members of the audience.

To provide students with an opportunity to get collegial feedback to an early version of the thesis and to offer them an opportunity to rehearse for the thesis defense, pre-defenses will take place in April. A pre-defense follows the structure of the real defense where M.A. students play the role of reviewers.

## Appendix: Reference System (Example)

The bibliography must contain all and only the references which have been cited in the main text of the thesis. In the text, a reference identified by means of an author's name should be followed by the date of the reference in parentheses and page number(s) where appropriate. The relevant information about the work cited is given in brackets incorporated into the text, not in footnotes or endnotes. (Footnotes or endnotes are used to give additional information which is not indispensable for understanding the text.) When there are more than two authors, only the first author's name should be mentioned, followed by 'et al.'. If numbered references are concerned, the reference number should be enclosed within square brackets. In the event that an author cited has had two or more works published during the same year, the reference, both in the text and in the reference list, should be identified by a lower case letter like 'a' and 'b' after the date to distinguish the works.

**Examples:** Winograd (1986, 204) (Winograd, 1986a, 1986b) (Flores et al., 1988; Winograd, 1986) (Bullen and Bennett, 1990).

If you format the bibliography yourself, please use the following standard:

1. Journal article:

Barlow, D. H. and Lehman, C. L. (1996). Advances in the psychosocial treatment of anxiety disorders, *Archives of General Psychiatry*, **53**(8): 727-735.

2. Book chapter:

Cutrona, C. E. and Russell, D. (1990). Type of social support and specific stress: Towards a theory of optimum matching, in I.G. Sarason, B. R. Sarason, and G. Pierce (eds), *Social Support: An Interactional View*, Wiley, New York, pp. 341-366.

3. Book, authored:

Capland, G. (1964). *Principles of Preventive Psychiatry*, Basic Books, New York.

4. Book, edited:

Felner, R. D., Jason, L. A., Moritsugu, J. N. and Farber, S. S. (Eds.) (1983). *Preventive Psychology: Theory, Research and Practice*, Pergamon Press, New York.

5. Paper presented at a conference:

Phelan, J. C., Link, B. G., Stueve, A. and Pescosolido, B. A. (1996, November). Have public conceptions of mental health changed in the past half century? Does it matter? (Paper presented at the 124th Annual Meeting of the American Public Health Association, New York)

6. Patent:

Name and date of patent are optional Norman, L. O. (1998) Lightning rods. US Patent 4,379,752, 9 Sept 1998

7. Dissertation:

Trent, J.W. (1975) *Experimental Acute Renal Failure*. Dissertation, University of California

8. Published and In press articles with or without DOI:

8.1 In press

Wilson, M., et al. (2006). References. In: Wilson, Mm (ed) Style manual. Springer. (Berlin Heidelberg New York: Springer) (in press)

8.2. Article by DOI (with page numbers)

Slifka, M. K.& Whitton, J. L. (2000). Clinical implications of dysregulated cytokine production, *Journal of Molecular Medicine*, **78**: 74–80. DOI 10.1007/s001090000086

8.3. Article by DOI (before issue publication with page numbers)

Slifka, M. K. & Whitton, J. L. (2000), Clinical implications of dysregulated cytokine production, *Journal of Molecular Medicine* (in press). DOI 10.1007/s001090000086

8.4. Article in electronic journal by DOI (no paginated version)

Slifka, M. K. & Whitton, J. L. (2000). Clinical implications of dysregulated cytokine production, *Journal of Molecular Medicine*. DOI 10.1007/s801090000086

9. Internet publication/Online document

9.1. Internet articles based on a print source

VandenBos, G., Knapp, S., & Doe, J. (2001). Role of reference elements in the selection of resources by psychology undergraduates [Electronic version]. *Journal of Bibliographic Research*, **5**: 117-123.

VandenBos, G., Knapp, S., & Doe, J. (2001). Role of reference elements in the selection of resources by psychology undergraduates. *Journal of Bibliographic Research*, **5**: 117-123. Retrieved October 13, 2001, from <http://jbr.org/articles.html>

9.2. Article in an Internet-only journal

Fredrickson, B. L. (2000, March 7). Cultivating positive emotions to optimize health and well-being. *Prevention & Treatment*, **3**, Article 0001a. Retrieved November 20, 2000, from <http://journals.apa.org/prevention/volume3/pre0030001a.html>

**List of references:** Sources in the list of references are not numbered. All entries are listed in the ascending alphabetical order by the surname of the author. Editors are treated as authors. The earliest works are listed first.

University of Tartu  
Institute of Philosophy and Semiotics

TITLE OF THE M.A. THESIS

Master's Thesis in Philosophy

Author's name

Supervisor:

Number of characters:

Year

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