

Master's Thesis Manual

Department of Semiotics
Institute of Philosophy and Semiotics
University of Tartu
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A Master's thesis (30 ECTS) is a written result of a student's independent research, wherein the research object under examination is treated and presented in a scientific manner. The latter means that the object of study is treated and presented according to a standard of quality which adheres to that of peer-reviewed scholarly publications. This standard involves clear argumentation, systematic thought, the ability to contextualise the problem, etc. A Master's thesis may be empirical or theoretical in terms of its type of research. The thesis is based on, and develops upon, previous research. Regardless of the type, the author of the thesis must specify in precisely what way their contribution is original or novel.

The main body of the text of a Master's thesis — from the introduction until the section on references — is 40-80 standard pages (72 000-144 000 characters, with spaces) in length.

The Master's thesis is formally presented as a digital or bound manuscript, or as peer-reviewed article(s) either published or confirmed for publication that is presented in digital or bound form with both an introduction and conclusion added; it may also include other complementary material deemed necessary. A Master's thesis based on peer-reviewed paper(s) must conform in its scope to the requirements of a Master's thesis, outlined above.

The Master's thesis may have several authors, but in this case the scope of the work for each corresponding author is correspondingly greater. The permission for a collective thesis is provided by the decision of the head of the Institute of Philosophy and Semiotics.

The Master's thesis must be written in English, or in another language if agreed upon with the supervisor and program manager. The Master's thesis must be written according to the criteria found in the Department of Semiotics' *Guide for formatting written papers*.

The following timeline provides an overview of important milestones:

1st semester: Finding a topic for research

September: the instructors will introduce their own topics of research
Individual meetings with individual faculty members

2nd semester: Finding a supervisor

Finding a supervisor and agreements with them
Preparing research plans together with the supervisor
May: presentation of the research topic in the master's seminar

3rd semester: Preparations for the final thesis

November: Official confirmation of the topic and supervisor

3 days before the presentation – submitting the thesis plan

November: Presentation of the thesis plan

4th semester: Finishing the thesis

10 days before the pre-defence: presenting the thesis to the supervisor

7 days before the pre-defence: submitting the thesis

End of April: Pre-defence

10 days before the final defence: presenting the thesis to the supervisor

7 days before the final defence: submitting the thesis

1 working day before the final defence: the reviewer submits their review

End of May: Final defence

The grade will be announced within a working day after the final defence

1. The topic of the Thesis, and finding a supervisor

During the 2nd semester the student finds a responsible supervisor for their thesis from the Department of Semiotics, and if so agreed with the supervisor, also an additional supervisor, who can be a doctoral student or a person with relevant expertise from outside the university.

The topic of the master's thesis is decided upon by the student, in collaboration with the supervisor, based on their academic and/or professional interests and in correspondence with the competency of the supervisor.

Cooperation between the supervisor(s) and the student is based on the good practices of supervision of the Faculty of Arts and Humanities of the University of Tartu.

The supervisor(s) of the master's thesis are confirmed by the head of the Institute of Philosophy and Semiotics six months before the final defence, and the topic of the thesis is confirmed at the meeting of the council of the Institute of Philosophy and Semiotics.

2. The Structure and presentation of the Master's Thesis Plan

The plan of the Master's thesis (about five pages in length) is to be presented during the third semester and must include the following components:

- the title of the thesis
- the name of the supervisor
- an explanation and delimitation of the research topic
- the research objective, research questions, and expected results
- the materials and methodology
- an introduction to the structure of the thesis as well as explanation of it (choice of chapters or sections, the expected size of the work, etc.)
- a list of references or works cited

Before presenting the plan, it must be discussed with the supervisor.

The primary purpose of presenting the plan is to acquire feedback and suggestions for the future development of the thesis. As such, the plan may include questions and doubts.

The presentation of the plan lasts for 20 minutes (10 minutes for presentation, 10 minutes for discussion).

3. The Recommended Structure of the Master's Thesis

A Master's thesis consists of an introduction, descriptions of the research object and methodology, an analysis, results, a conclusion, a foreign-language summary, and a list of references (works cited). A Master's thesis based on an article should follow the proposed structure to the extent possible.

The **introduction** explains the choice of the research object, delimits it, gives an overview of relevant previous research, opens up the thesis's theoretical and methodological starting points, states the research objective and research questions, and introduces and justifies the structure of the thesis. The introduction contains historiography, or references to most of the important and relevant research done on the specific object of study, including in recent years and in Estonia as well elsewhere.

The section on **research object** and **methodology** describes the methodology of the thesis; the chosen research methods are explained and their purposes made clear. The object to be researched is described, as are the choice of materials, the data collected, and the methods of their subsequent treatment.

The section on the **analysis** and **results** presents an analysis of the material, as well as an interpretation of the analysis by the author. It also presents the results and solutions arrived at in the thesis. The results of the analysis must be connected to the proposed theoretical model and the proposed research questions of the thesis, and are to be debated in relation to the research objectives proposed at the beginning of the thesis. There should also be a discussion of what these results may offer in terms of future ideas that can be formulated on their basis, possibilities for future research, and the place of these results in a wider context.

Depending on the type of the thesis separate sections for materials and methodology need not be present, in which case the corresponding information must be clearly formulated in the introduction. Also, aspects of analysis and/or research may be presented in separate chapters. If a section explicitly devoted to results is lacking, the corresponding information must be clearly formulated in either the section(s) relating to analysis, or in the conclusion.

The **conclusion** gives a compact overview of the Master's thesis as a whole, mainly concentrating on its central or primary results. The relation between the results and the objectives posed at the beginning of the thesis are to be discussed, as well as the new perspectives these results may possibly allow for. The conclusion is meant to point out the new knowledge gained from the research.

References or **works cited** contain a list of bibliographic data of all the sources used in the Master's thesis. A coherent formatting must be used to compile this list (see the *Guide for formatting written papers*).

A Master's thesis may contain **appendices** (materials such as images, diagrams or schemes, interview transcriptions, etc.) which are not counted among the main body of the thesis.

In addition, the master's thesis presented for final defence must also include the following:

- **Title page** (see the *Guide for formatting written papers*, Appendix 1).
- **Annotation** (an abstract) in the same language as the thesis, with the length of up to 100 words and 3-5 keywords. This is to be placed after the title page.
- **Table of Contents**, placed after the annotation and before the introduction. The table of contents will present the chapters and subchapters, their numbers, full titles, and initial page numbers.
- The **summary** is a very brief overview (2000 characters with spaces) of the Master's thesis, written in a language other than that of the thesis (in case of a thesis in a language other than Estonian, the summary must be in Estonian). The summary is not a translation of the conclusion, but a coherent overview of the thesis's introduction, body, and conclusion. It includes an overview of the objectives, research problems, conclusions, results, etc., of the thesis. A translation of the title of the thesis must also be provided. The summary is placed after the list of references.
- A **signed license**, which gives consent on the part of the author to allow the University to reproduce the Master's thesis (the purpose being electronic preservation of the thesis as well as electronic publication of it through the University's web-based environments) is added as a separate document appearing at the end of the Master's thesis.

4. Master's Thesis Defence Procedure

4.1. The pre-defence of the thesis takes place one month before the final defence.

4.1.1. The thesis is accepted for pre-defence at the discretion of the supervisor. The student must submit the thesis to the supervisor(s) 10 days before the pre-defence at the latest, unless agreed otherwise with the supervisor(s).

4.1.2. The student must submit the thesis as a .docx file to the Moodle environment one week prior to the pre-defence at the latest.

4.1.3. For the pre-defence the body of the thesis must be complete, so that the opponent and the committee are able to gain an overview of the thesis on which to give constructive feedback. Minor parts of the thesis (such as the introduction, the conclusion or a subchapter) may remain in outline. The primary purpose of the pre-defence is to find areas that need changing.

4.1.4. The procedure at the pre-defence is similar to the actual defence; the author's overview of the thesis is brief (up to 5 minutes) and the reviewer provides suggestions for improvements also in a written form. No grade is assigned to the Master's thesis at the pre-defence, but it is determined whether the Master's thesis is allowed to the defence.

4.2. The precondition for being allowed to the thesis defence is successful completion of all other study subjects (courses), and passing the preliminary thesis defence. The Master's thesis is allowed to the thesis defence at the discretion of the supervisor, who must inform the academic affairs specialist that the thesis corresponds to all requirements.

4.2.1. The dates of the thesis defence and the membership of the board is confirmed by the head of the Institute of Philosophy and Semiotics at least two months prior to the actual defence.

4.2.2. The defence board is composed of at least three members. If the board includes the supervisor of a Master's thesis to be defended, the supervisor shall have the right to comment, but not to vote regarding the thesis in question.

4.2.3. The (primary) supervisor of the Master's thesis must be a member of the academic staff of the department, and must have a minimum of a Master's degree, and have competency on the chosen topic. The supervisor is chosen by the student; it is possible to have additional supervisors, who may also be doctoral students. The thesis topic and supervisors are approved by the council of the Institute of Philosophy and Semiotics 6 months prior to the defence of the Master's thesis.

4.2.4. The reviewer of a Master's thesis is appointed by the programme director. The reviewer must have at least a Master's degree and must be competent in the given field of research.

4.2.5. The student shall submit the Master's thesis — formatted according to the requirements — as a .pdf file through the online environment for theses submission, and as a hard copy (one hardbound copy) to the secretary of the Department 10 workdays before the date of the defence at the latest.

4.2.5.1. Following a successful defence, the bound copy of the Master's thesis will be preserved in the library of the Institute. The Master's thesis is published electronically on the web-based environments of the University of Tartu (exceptions for electronic publishing are regulated in the Study regulations of the University of Tartu).

4.2.6. Preferably three days prior to, and no later than one working day prior to the defence, the reviewer should submit a written review to both the board as well as the author of the thesis. The review must elucidate the strengths and weaknesses of the Master's thesis, characterises the thesis in terms of both form and content, and serve as the basis for a subsequent discussion with the thesis writer.

4.2.7. The thesis defence is public. In the interest of protecting personal data, state secrets or business secrets, technological secrets, etc., the Vice Dean may — after receiving an application offering valid justification on the part of the writer — declare the thesis defence a closed procedure. The head of the defence committee may, if presented with substantial reasons, allow the participation at the defence online, with a two-way connection which allows for both sound and image.

4.2.8. Both the supervisor as well as the reviewer take part in the defence, except in cases in which they are not able to participate due to compelling reasons. In the absence of the reviewer and/or the supervisor from the thesis defence, the chair of the committee is to read out their opinion(s).

4.2.9. The main stages of the thesis defence are:

1. a presentation on the part of the thesis author, briefly introducing the main positions of their Master's thesis (up to 15 minutes);
2. the reviewer's assessment of the thesis, highlighting its strengths and weaknesses;
3. the reviewer's questions to the author, followed by an academic debate between the author and the reviewer;
4. questions and comments on the part of the board members and other people present at the thesis defence;
5. the final statements of the author of the thesis.

The final defence will last for 40 minutes.

4.2.10. The final grade of the Master's thesis shall be decided upon the thesis defence board, who will take into account the assessment from the reviewer, the assessments of the board members, as well as the opinion of the supervisor. The defence board has the right to decide on a grade only if over half of the board members are present.

4.2.11. The result of the defence of the Master's thesis is made known after the finalisation of the official defence protocol, but no later than one workday after the actual thesis defence.

4.2.12. A second defence of the Master's thesis is possible only in the following semester at the earliest.