

Heinrich Heine University Düsseldorf

Department of Social Sciences

Master Programme European Studies



## Guideline for writing your Master thesis

### 1. Introduction

One of the requirements of the European Studies Master Programme at Heinrich Heine University (HHU) is that students should conduct research, and write research papers (the first to be submitted at the end of first semester/ March, and the MA Thesis as second one to be submitted at the end of second semester/ August). Other reasons for writing research papers besides being a must is that students will develop critical thinking ability and an in-depth knowledge of a particular area in the discipline. Each paper should present your original work, adding your personal insights, criticisms, findings, assessments etc. to the body of knowledge and emphasizing *concepts* and *arguments* related to European Studies. The purpose of this document is to provide you with guidelines for writing a research proposal and a research paper. Issues related to proposal writing, writing skills, literature review, methodology, documentation and bibliography information will be covered.

### 2. Formalities

Information about writing period, registration of your Master thesis and other formal requirements can be found [here](#).

### 3. Language and spelling

Use clear and correct language and spelling. Introduce terms and write out abbreviations in brackets (acronym, abbreviation or initial) when mentioned for the first time, then

abbreviate. Avoid speaking in first-term. For instance, do not use phrases such as “In this research I will deal with.../ In this part I will address the reasons related to ...” but “This research will deal with ... / This part will address the reasons related to...”.

The first chapter of the thesis and the introductory paragraphs of each chapter should be in present tense, since you inform the reader what you are going to do. Other information should be in past tense.

Most importantly, since your paper must be written in correct English; proofreading the paper for grammatical and spelling mistakes is urgently needed for all non-native English speakers. Pay attention to punctuation marks, too.

#### **4. Practical considerations for choosing a research topic**

The topic of your thesis should not be randomly picked, but must be chosen according to several practical considerations. Keep in mind that you will work on the topic for a relatively long time (months). Since every researcher will feel more comfortable with a topic of his/her own choice and interest, you need a good idea that hinges on asking yourself questions such as:

- Are you interested in the topic?
- Does the topic suite your career objectives?
- Do you have a background or experience in the topic (familiarity / What do you know about it)?
- Are you willing to commit yourself in the next coming months researching (reading, assessing and writing) the topic?
- Is the topic interesting for other scholars?
- Is the topic new and its findings will be beneficial to the body of knowledge or does it simply replicate other research?
- Are you able to do this topic in terms of data availability, limited time and effort needed?

Once you have a good topic, you can talk, ask questions and discuss with your supervisor(s) what is on your mind in order to develop a better understanding of what is needed to develop your research plan. Then, you may start drafting the proposal.

## 5. Writing a proposal

Proposal writing is important to explain and specify what you intend to do. You provide the reasons why it should be done, describe how you will do it, what you expect will result and how you will interpret the findings. A clear, well thought-out and prepared proposal forms the backbone of your thesis.

To start with writing your proposal you need a good idea which requires familiarity with a topic in your area of interest. This needs a preparatory period of intensive reading in order to develop a good understanding of the topic. Observe carefully what is important and figure out what is missing. Most importantly, discussions with professional scholars will help you figure out ideas you did not pay attention to, build up your proposal (most probably 3-4 pages long) and estimate the size of your thesis. After you have an agreed upon proposal, writing your thesis will look like " fill-in the blanks ".

In your proposal you should show what is known about the topic, how your work fits and what new contribution you intend to make. Introduce the question (and sub-questions) you will answer, specify what it means and establish its significance. Show the approach/ methodology you intend to use to answer your questions. A well-defined question will make it easier to plan the research, to argue and to finally answer it. Note that even literature reviews, involving the collection of information just from already published articles and books, aims to coming up with a new insight on the topic.

*The proposal should have:*

- An *introduction*, where you introduce and specify your research topic. Provide a problem statement and a puzzle, i.e. something which is not immediately clear or has not been answered so far. Then, define the research interest and significance on the study and provide research questions and, if possible, an expected answer (hypothesis).
- A *literature review*, in which you check what others already have published to answer your question or how others dealt with issues similar to yours.

- A *methodology part*, that describes the research plan you intend to follow. Here, means/ methods of the chosen analytical approach used to answer the research questions are introduced and written in the future tense (sources of information, course of analysis method such as comparative study, literature review, process tracing)
- *Expected results*, where you indicate what you expect to get out of the research. This should be related to theoretical concepts, questions raised and initial data provided. In addition, a preliminary outline and bibliography should be included.

## 6. Writing the thesis

Your thesis as well as other research papers you write in your Master programme usually do not include abstracts, prefaces, keywords, author information and similar parts which you might find in academic articles. Usually your thesis starts with a cover page, a table of contents page, and, if necessary, a list of abbreviations. Then you present the main text. It is highly recommended to number the chapters and sub-chapters. At the end you add the bibliography, perhaps an annex, and the declaration of authorship.

### 6.1 Introduction

#### Research topic

The introduction should be informative and identify your research. Follow with a strong problem statement, provide a brief and clear overview to inform the reader about what the research is about. At the proposal writing stage, you should be specific about what you will address in your research and provide clues; still, you will not tell the whole story. Later, when you write the research, you elaborate and provide more details.

### Research question

Once the research topic is established, you can get to the point and start. Here you state what you will do and specify the study sample, then present your thesis question. An assumption or a hypothesis may be stated, too. It is very important to keep the wording of the research question and sub-questions consistent throughout the research. Be aware of the fact that “what” and “how” question are usually better suited for a Master Thesis than (over)ambitious “why” questions.

### Significance of the study

Show why your topic is important and explain the importance of providing answers to the questions you asked. Here it is where you clarify the goal of the research paper. When you show the significance of the topic, make a link to how it relates to other studies and why it is important to the academic debate. Mention what added value/ contribution you will accomplish and establish why the reader should read the thesis.

At the end of the introduction; indicate the scope of the research, time frame, selection of case (if applicable) and describe the organization of the research (if possible provide chapter by chapter outline) so that the reader knows what will be addressed in the rest of the paper.

## **6.2 Literature review**

### State of our knowledge/ background

Literature review aims to show what is already known about a topic and what other researchers have done and discovered. It is important that you learn how to evaluate what you need in the literature review and interpret it. This comes as a result of experience, which enhances your reading and writing ability. The body of literature should be comprehensive, focused, organized clearly and relevant to the topic. Provide enough but not exhaustive details, since your reader is a professional and familiar with the topic. You need to show how your work relates to what has been done by other researchers. Still, in this part, the reader should see and feel confident that you are well oriented to the topic. The theoretical basis of the topic should also appear in the background and set the beginning for your work.

Keep in mind that your literature review is chronologically and thematically organized, as well as properly referenced. Your work should be well organized, easy to follow up and the statements provided should be supported by previous research and actual facts. Focus on related studies to the topic and avoid irrelevant data and vague sources.

In the literature review you should address the following:

- What has been previously done and what is the current status of the topic?
- Who studied the topic (well known scholars)?
- Findings and follow up recommendations of previous studies?
- What is the aim of your research? Do you intend to support, refute, clarify and add to the body of knowledge?
- Does the literature support your research?

### **6.3 Research question(s)**

As the background presents what has been addressed, it should also show that there is missing knowledge (gaps) or uninvestigated aspects not addressed in previous research. Tell what you have done to date and give a sense to the reader that you are in a position to investigate and add to the body of knowledge. By doing so, you ask the appropriate questions related to your topic, establish the questions' importance and significance to the discipline and situate your work. You should present a precise statement of the problem, ask the question and sub-questions you want to discuss and answer.

### **6.4 Methodology**

The methodology is an overview of your research approach. In this section you describe your work plan and make clear to your reader how you intend to address it (study case, procedures, theoretical framework, logic and time frame). Notice here that the research theoretical framework relates to what theory you intend to use as base for your discussion and analysis, such as using Civilian Power Europe or Normative Power Europe in your case study.

Specify details correctly; names, times, places. Be honest and fair and do not omit details, because by doing so analysis and credibility of the research and its results will be affected. Describe how you will collect your data or information and what sources will be used in the

study. Then explain how you will use the data after obtaining the information needed to answer the research questions in your analysis. In this section you should indicate any anticipated outcomes and show how they relate to your findings. Finally, pay attention to use the past tense in the finished thesis.

### **6.5 The (empirical) analysis part**

In this part of the study, you present the most important part of the research: your own findings and analysis. Describe your empirical findings in detail and link the analysis with the theory or more general arguments you provided earlier. After the analysis is done, you can provide answers for the questions asked in the introduction.

Use the past tense and use the exact wording of the research question(s) in this section.

### **6.6 Conclusion**

In this final chapter, summarize what you have done and what you have found, but also the limits of your research, what you could not do and what has to be left to future research. Here you can finally add your own personal comment in terms of (brief and modest) policy advice or normative evaluation.

### **6.7 Bibliography**

The bibliography lists all sources used in your work. Usually you list all academic literature and additional documents and materials in one bibliography. Carefully apply a standard bibliographical style in a precise and consistent way and respect the alphabetical order.

- ▶ Add *tables* and *annex* as needed.
  
- ▶ Do not forget to add the *Declaration of authorship*.

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