

GUIDELINES FOR MASTER DISSERTATIONS

These are general guidelines for MA dissertations. Please refer to specific guidelines of your study programme and discuss with your supervisor to adapt sections 2 and 4 of these guidelines below, as deemed appropriate.

A master dissertation (or MA thesis) is a piece of independent and original research carried out by MA students under faculty supervision. It addresses a (set of) research question(s). Students are expected to demonstrate their command of the relevant literature, as well as of the relevant concepts and methods to address the research question(s). The dissertation is the culmination of your two-year MA programme. It can further be of direct use in your forthcoming academic or professional activities.

The MA dissertation is worth 30 ECTS (1/4 of a Master study programme). There is no oral defence.

1) Supervision – Finding a supervisor & 2nd reader

- Students are free to choose their thesis supervisor among the faculty of their department or interdisciplinary programme, no later than the end of the second semester. Faculty members are free to accept or decline the supervision request. Heads of department and programme will however see to it that all MA students eventually find an appropriate supervisor.
- Students then agree with their supervisor on the topic of their dissertation. They must register the tentative title and the name of the supervisor in the Institute's intranet no later than the end of the second semester, as per the deadline set each year by the Director of studies.
- The supervisor chooses the second reader of the dissertation from the same department (for disciplinary MA) or from another department (for MINT)¹. In some cases, a co-supervision involving two faculty members from different departments can be envisaged, or a second reader from another academic institution can be appointed (both instances require prior agreement from the Director of studies).
- A visiting professor/lecturer may be entitled to supervise a dissertation if he/she teaches more than one semester at the Institute. However, the Director of Studies could make an exception and accept a supervision by a visiting professor/lecturer who only teaches at the Spring semester.

¹ Students should look at the specific department/programme guidelines for dissertation. MINT dissertation should demonstrate that student possess sufficiently advanced knowledge of an important topic including literature drawn from more than one discipline. Even if MINT dissertation may likely be more directly related to real world issues than disciplinary MA dissertation, it is not meant to be a policy or consultancy report.

2) Content and structure

The requirements may vary from one department to another as well as between disciplinary and interdisciplinary programmes. Again, please refer to your study programme's guidelines and discuss with your supervisor. MA dissertation typically comprise the following:

1. **Introduction:** summarize the context and issues at stake. Spell out the research question(s): what is the phenomenon of interest and what is its significance? What precisely is the question that you wish examine regarding this phenomenon? Briefly present the overall structure of your MA dissertation.
2. **Literature review:** How previous work has addressed similar question(s)? What does the existing scholarly literature say about the research topic and in what ways? Does it fall short of satisfactorily addressing your research question, and how?
3. **Conceptual/theoretical framework:** expanding on point 2 (literature review), what are the core concepts, theories and/or models, hypotheses or claims that you use (or posit, make, refer to) to address your research question(s)?
4. **Research design and data/information:** describe your methodological approach (e.g. inferential scheme) and discuss the potential strengths and limitations. Present and discuss your 'data': e.g. spatial, social, economic, institutional, political, historical elements that you consider; sources; indicators; unit of analysis; sampling, etc. If relevant, present and discuss the data that you have generated through interviews, questionnaires, field research, etc.
5. **Analysis:** present and analyse your findings. What does the evidence suggest with regard to your hypotheses (if applicable)? How does it relate to the existing literature and on-going scholarly and/or policy debates?
6. **Conclusion** and wider policy and/or research implications.
7. **Bibliography**

3) Format and quotation style²

- Unless otherwise stipulated in specific guidelines of your study programme, Master dissertations comprise a minimum of 15,000 words and a maximum of 25,000 words excluding footnotes, bibliography, iconography and appendices.
- It must include a 150-word abstract.
- Students can choose the reference style (amongst those commonly used) as long as they apply it consistently throughout the manuscript.
- Please take note of the Institute's recommendations on citations and references as well as guidelines on plagiarism
Guidelines: [here](#).

You can also refer to the online repository to consult dissertations submitted in previous years (<http://repository.graduateinstitute.ch>)

4) Sources, research ethics

- You may use a range of sources: primary/secondary, quantitative/qualitative data, written/oral/audio-visual, etc.
- The use of primary sources or original data generated from own field research is not compulsory.
- As for secondary sources, students are expected to conduct extensive research and thorough readings.
- Students are encouraged to use documents written in various languages.

²Suggested reading: Cochrane John, [Writing Tips for PhD Students](#)

- Strong research ethics is required. Ethical issues such as preserving the anonymity of interviewees, or using dubious sources should be discussed with your supervisor.

5) Evaluation criteria

The evaluation criteria include:

- Originality, clarity and strengths of your research design; clarity in framing the issues, clarity of argumentation.
- Command of the relevant literature and relevance of the context analysis.
- Command and use of appropriate methodology, concepts and theories.
- Analytical skills, critical and nuanced thinking.
- Writing skills, capacity to synthesize complex issues, structure and format of the text.
- Ability to integrate the comments of your supervisor(s) and to revise the manuscript accordingly.
- Autonomy and initiative.

6) Supervisor's involvement and calendar

- Students must upload an electronic copy of their detailed *dissertation plan* on the Institute's intranet before the end of the third semester (no later than the deadline set up each year by the Director of studies). The supervisor is expected to give a feedback on the *detailed dissertation plan* in a reasonable delay.
- Students must upload the *final version of their dissertation* on the Institute's intranet during the fourth semester (no later than the deadline set each year by the Director of studies).
- Supervisors agree with students on a calendar regarding exchanges on work progress and draft(s).
- Students should let enough time between submitting a final draft, getting supervisor feedbacks and revising the manuscript accordingly before uploading the final version. The timing should be agreed with the supervisor.

Failure to hold deadlines can be disqualifying. Please refer to the Graduate Institute's Academic Regulations & Implementation Guidelines for the specific rules and regulations applying to MA dissertations.

More information and resources regarding Academic Writing can be found [here](#).

Approved by the Academic Committee on 14 April 2015