

Thesis Manual BA/MA Philosophy

This course manual describes what is expected of theses in the Philosophy programmes at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam.

The course manual is consistent with the Bachelor's and Master's thesis regulations of the Faculty of Humanities: <https://vu.nl/en/student/graduation-and-diploma/thesis-information-faculty-of-humanities-hum> (login required).

The Bachelor's and Master's thesis regulations contain a number of important regulations which, among other things, provide a general description of the level of an undergraduate and graduate thesis respectively, define the roles of the first supervisor and the second reader, contain instructions on how to act in the event of resits and a difference in assessment, and deal with fraud, disputes and the graduation procedures.

The course manual was adopted by the Programme Director of the Philosophy Department on February 13, 2025.

Contents:

1. Introduction
2. Access requirements
3. Process
4. Supervisor
5. Assessment

Appendices:

- A. Assessment form
- B. Rubric
- C. Assessment cover sheet
- D. Source reference
- E. Supervisors
- F. Research questions

1. Introduction

Students complete the Philosophy Bachelor's and Master's by writing a thesis.

In the thesis the student demonstrates that he/she is able to:

- plan and conduct philosophical research
- with a reasonable degree of independence
- addressing an interesting issue
- and providing a clear written account of the findings

The credits are as follows:

- BA: 12 EC
- MA: 18 EC

The word count for the Bachelor's thesis is: **8,000-12,000**, including notes, bibliography and illustrations, but excluding appendices (no further margin).

The word count for the Master's thesis is: **15,000-25,000**, including notes, bibliography and illustrations, but excluding appendices (no further margin).

2. Requirements for access to thesis process

The requirements for access to the thesis process (from the Academic and Examination Regulations):

BA

As a minimum a student must have completed all subjects from the first year and 48 EC of the second year. Students for whom Philosophy is the second study programme must have completed a minimum of 78 EC in courses before the bachelor's thesis can be started.

MA

A student must have obtained at least 60 EC (this includes credits from the master programme in your discipline).

3. Process

The thesis process for Bachelor's students starts no later than period 5 of year 3 (and should preferably be aligned with the chosen optional courses).

The thesis process for Master's students starts no later than period 5 of year 2.

It is highly advisable to start earlier with:

- the formulation of a research question
- the development of a thesis plan of work
- consulting a potential supervisor
- reading the literature

The thesis coordinator (bachelor's) or the program coordinator (master's) will provide assistance in finding the appropriate supervisor. An appointment with the supervisor must be made by the student. Together with the supervisor, the second reader is chosen and approached.

Good research questions are not excessively ambitious (“is there such a thing as free will?”), nor too limited (“is there such a thing as free will, as understood according to a specific definition X, according to the specific author Y?”). More information on suitable research questions can be found in appendix F.

After the research question has been determined, the student draws up a thesis plan of work and presents it to the thesis supervisor.

The plan of work must include the following components:

- timetable for completion
- the reading list
- schedule of meetings with the supervisor
- provisional organization of chapters
- definition of audience (specialist, or broad academic)

Along with the work plan, student and supervisor complete the thesis contract. This is signed by the supervisor, the student, and the second reader at the beginning of the thesis process. The second reader is shown the work plan, and then is not involved in the supervision.

4. Supervisor

At the start of the Bachelor Seminar (third year) in February, each student will be assigned to a tutorial group led by one of the lecturers who are available for thesis supervision. Each of them will supervise the students in their group. The enrollment in a specific group is, among others, dependent on the subject of the thesis and the field of expertise of the supervisor (e.g. theoretical philosophy, history of modern philosophy, etc.). In a previous meeting of the Bachelor Seminar in November, you will get information about the process.

Master's students request a supervisor on their own, and provide the name of their supervisor and research question to the coordinator of the Master's program in the case of M FCB or the coordinator of the Master's track in the case of M Philosophy (by email).

Every student is entitled to 3-5 supervision meetings for the Bachelor's thesis (including the meetings of the tutorial group) and 5-8 for the Master's.

The lecturers have a range of expertise, as set out in appendix E. Students approach a prospective supervisor themselves, asking whether they can write their thesis on one of the specified themes. Whether supervisors are available depends on e.g. their teaching time.

If a student wishes to deviate from the specified themes, that is possible. In that case the student must draw up a proposal and submit it to the desired supervisor, who will determine whether it is suitable for a thesis.

If students experience problems in selecting a supervisor or if conflicts arise between a student and a supervisor, the coordinator of the programme or the Program Director will mediate between them. If they fail to find a solution, the matter will be referred to the Examination Board. The Examination Board will designate a new supervisor within 10 working days.

5. Assessment

Once the student has completed the thesis, the supervisor assesses the overall thesis. The assessment takes place on the basis of the assessment form with the associated rubric: appendices A and B. The student goes through the form at the beginning of the thesis process (and directs any questions to the supervisor), so that the expectations are clear.

Second reader

In addition to the supervisor, the final assessment requires a second reader who plays a part in determining the grade. The second reader is selected in consultation with the student and then invited by the supervisor. The second reader is not involved in the process of writing the thesis in any way. The second reader guarantees an independent substantive check of the thesis. As a rule, the second reader has a different specialization than the supervisor.

In the interdisciplinary Master's tracks the assessors usually come from different disciplines (one from the Philosophy department and one from the second Master's).

If the second reader also provides feedback on the thesis, which the student takes into account in order to achieve a higher grade, a third assessor must be designated to guarantee the independence of the assessment (see Thesis regulations).

When the supervisor receives the final version of the thesis (via email; hard copy is optional), he/she forwards it to the second (and if applicable third) reader.

Final assessment

The supervisor takes care that the final assessment of the thesis is communicated to the student by e-mail, telephone or face to face. If an interview takes place, then it is in principle public.

Conclusion

After the final assessment (and sometimes the interview), the supervisor follows the steps as described in the last paragraph of the relevant thesis regulations (Ba or Ma).

Finally, the Examination Board invites the student to attend the graduation ceremony (the Bachelor's graduation ceremony of the Department of Philosophy, or the annual Graduation Day of the Faculty of Humanities for graduating Master's students).

Appendix A: Assessment form

Add cover page assessment thesis (<https://vu.nl/en/student/final-paper-and-thesis/thesis-information-from-fgw>).

Thesis title:

Date:

Name of Student:

Student number:

Supervisor:

Second reader:

<i>Assessment criteria</i>	<i>BA</i>	<i>MA</i>	<i>Grade (or o/v/g = fail/pass/good)</i>	<i>Comments</i>
1. Research question and structure	15%	10%		
2. Literature	30%	30%		
3. Argumentation	30%	30%		
4. Language use and style	10%	10%		
5. Process	5%	5%		
6. Originality	10%	15%		
Final grade (1-10)				

Theses are assessed on all these criteria, and the student will only pass the thesis if he/she scores a pass mark for all criteria. The weights of the criteria are a guideline. A more detailed explanation of each criterion can be found in the rubric in appendix B. It is recommended that reference be made to the rubric so that it is clear how the grade was arrived at.

Difference between BA and MA:

- Word count: 8-12k (BA), 15-25k (MA)
- Level of difficulty and quantity of sources
- Originality is a weightier criterion in MA

Minimum requirements (to obtain a grade):

- Within the word count
- Submitted before the agreed deadline
- Correct spelling and grammar
- Appropriate and consistent font and layout
- Correct source reference and no plagiarism
- Title page with all data (title of thesis, name student, email, student number, name supervisor(s), date, programme, word count)

When the completed thesis has been submitted, the supervisor performs a plagiarism check.

Appendix B: Rubric

Three categories:

- unsatisfactory (fail) / below 5.5
- satisfactory (pass) / 5.5 to 8
- good / 8 or over

1. Research question and structure

<i>Good</i>	<i>Satisfactory (pass)</i>	<i>Unsatisfactory (fail)</i>
The research question is clearly stated (together with any sub-questions) and any ambiguities have been clarified.	The research question is clearly stated.	The research question is absent, unclear or ambiguous.
The research question is well demarcated, and the limitations of the project (and any follow-up questions) are explicitly stated.	The research question is demarcated.	The research question is too ambitious and therefore cannot be answered in a thesis.
The research question is interesting and philosophical, i.e. it falls within the scope of the discipline (see appendix F).	The research question is philosophical.	The research question is not interesting or not philosophical.
The thesis is well structured, and the chapter structure shows clearly how the research question is answered.	The thesis is structured.	The thesis is not well structured.
The main question and any sub-questions have been answered fully in the conclusion.	The research question is answered in the conclusion.	The conclusion does not sufficiently answer the research question.

2. Literature

The argumentation is thoroughly embedded in relevant and current debates (such as influential books or publications in journals).	The argumentation is embedded in existing debates.	The argumentation is insufficiently embedded in existing debates.
The literature considered is of a high level (degree of difficulty).	The sources are of average level.	The sources are of insufficient level.
The literature is conveyed correctly, in the student's own words, and in an original or attractive way.	The literature is conveyed correctly.	The literature is conveyed carelessly or incorrectly, or in a way that is too close to the original source.
It is always clear who is speaking and from which source ideas have been drawn.	It is generally clear who is speaking and from which source ideas have been drawn.	It is unclear when the student is conveying his/her own ideas and those of others.
The source references are complete, consistent and based on a single system (see e.g. appendix D).		The source references are incomplete or incoherent.

3. Argumentation

The argumentation is well thought out (and always has a valid form: modus ponens, dilemma, reductio ad absurdum, etc.).	The argumentation is fairly well thought out.	The argumentation is lacking or invalid.
The argumentation is fully developed; the student sets out all stages of the reasoning and guides the reader through them.	The argumentation is fairly well developed.	The argumentation is incomplete; the reader has to complete the reasoning himself, so it remains superficial.
The argumentation is well explained using examples (chosen or devised by the student), the relevance of which is always clear.	The argumentation is explained on the basis of (existing or own) examples.	No examples are given, so the argumentation remains abstract.
The argumentation is relevant in the light of the research question and balanced (e.g. no unnecessary repetitions or digressions and most attention is focused on the main arguments).	The argumentation is relevant in the light of the research question.	The arguments are less relevant to the research question, or unbalanced.
The discourse is convincing.	The discourse is convincing to some extent.	The discourse is unconvincing.

4. Language use and style

The style is academic, and yet lively and appealing.	The style is academic.	The style is inappropriate for an academic paper (e.g. too populist).
The formulations are accurate, clear, consistent.	The formulations are fairly accurate, clear and consistent.	The formulations are careless, ambiguous or inconsistent.
The text is easy for your intended audience to follow (specialist or broadly academic).	The text is sufficiently easy to follow.	The text is impossible to follow.
All relevant philosophical terms are defined (and the main terms at the beginning of the thesis).	Most philosophical terms are defined.	Many philosophical terms are not defined.
The structure of the text is always clear (partly as a result of including a summary, contents, titles, paragraph breakdown, empty lines, key words).	The structure of the text is sufficiently clear.	The text structure is unclear, illogical or not consistently maintained.
The text is supported by illustrations, helpful diagrams, tables and argumentation reconstructions (if applicable).		

5. Process

The student demonstrated a lot of independence in formulating the research question, finding and studying sources and drawing up the argumentation.	The student was able to continue working independently on the basis of instructions.	The student had to be continuously supervised during the process.
The student works to an agreed schedule and meets his/her own deadlines.	The student meets the deadlines set for him/her.	The student exceeds deadlines.
The student has an open attitude, is able to incorporate feedback (including deleting, supplementing or restructuring text).	The student tries to incorporate feedback.	The student finds it difficult to deal with feedback.

6. Originality

The thesis shows an independent line of reasoning, adds to the literature and stimulates thought (and may even contain material for a publication).	The thesis shows an independent line of reasoning but is otherwise unremarkable.	The thesis reproduces the studied sources passively, without critical reflection or addition.
---	--	---

Appendix C: Assessment cover sheet

Go to <https://vu.nl/en/student/final-paper-and-thesis/thesis-information-from-fgw>

Click on 'Thesis Regulations' and under 'General' download the 'Cover page assessment theses'. Follow the instructions.

On the next page you find the cover sheet as it was on the site as of June 16, 2022 (with the addition that the administration can only process forms that are completely filled out).

Cover page for thesis assessment

The joint assessment must be sent with the assessment forms of 1st and 2nd assessors to onderwijsbureau.fgw@vu.nl.

Cover page for thesis assessment (bachelor and master)	
Student name	
Student number	
University, Faculty, Program	
Thesis title	
Name of 1st assessor (supervisor)	
Grade of 1st assessor (supervisor)	
Name of 2nd assessor	
Grade of 2nd assessor	
Course name	
Course code	
Number of EC's	
Final grade	
Plagiarism check performed?	
Date of assessment	
Append the following documents	
() Supervisor's assessment	
() 2nd assessors assessment	
() Thesis contract	
() Thesis in PDF	
Summary of assessment (only necessary if grades awarded by supervisor and second assessor differ by one point or more)	

Appendix D: Source reference

There are various systems for referring to sources (such as the note-quotation system and the author-year system). It is important that one of these systems is used consistently in your thesis.

Reference

If you wish to refer to a source using the author-year system, place the author's surname and the year of publication in brackets in the text, with page numbers (if relevant).

Example:

Consequentialism falls prey to various problems, including the problem of collective action (see Kagan 2011).

You then provide the full details of the source at the end of your text in the bibliography (instructions below).

Quotation

If you wish to use full sentences from a source, you can quote by placing the sentences in quotation marks and closing with a reference.

Example:

Kagan refers to the problem of collective action as follows: "consequentialism condemns my act only when my act makes a difference. But in the kind of cases we are imagining, my act makes no difference, and so cannot be condemned by consequentialism." (2011: 108)

If you omit the quotation marks, you give the impression that this is your own reasoning and you commit plagiarism.

Paraphrasing

When you paraphrase you rewrite someone else's reasoning in your own words. You do not have to use any quotation marks for this, but you must provide a reference.

Example:

Consequentialism holds that an action is morally wrong only if there was an alternative with a better outcome. When buying chicken there is no alternative with a better outcome, since an individual boycott is usually fruitless. Thus the purchase would be permissible according to consequentialism. Intuitively, however, such a purchase is not permissible and this yields a problem for consequentialism (see Kagan 2011: 108).

As a rule, paraphrasing is better than quoting. Formulations can almost always be improved, and the improvements can be made in your paraphrase. In some cases you can omit or summarize less relevant information, while in others you must add relevant information.

In such a paraphrase you can also present the argument in separate steps:

Example:

According to Kagan (2011: 108), consequentialism faces the following problem:

- (1) Consequentialism condemns my act only if my act makes a difference.

- (2) My act makes no difference.
- (3) Hence, consequentialism does not condemn my act.

Instructions bibliography:

Article

Kagan, S. 2011. Do I Make a Difference? *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 39: 105-41.
[surname], [initials] [year of publication]. [article title]. [journal] [volume number]: [page numbers].

Book

Parfit, D. 1984. *Reasons and Persons*. Oxford University Press.
[surname], [initials] [year of publication]. [book title]. [publisher].

Translated work

Kant, I. 1785. *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. Transl. M. Gregor & J. Timmermann 1998. Cambridge University Press.
[surname], [initials] [year of original publication]. [*translated title*]. Transl. [translators] [year of translation]. [publisher].

Chapter

Parfit, D. 1984. Five Mistakes in Moral Mathematics. In *Reasons and Persons*, pp. 76-86. Oxford University Press.
[surname], [initials] [year of publication]. [chapter title]. In [editor, if any], [book title], [page numbers]. [publisher].

Online encyclopaedia

Rickless, S. 2015. Plato's *Parmenides*. In *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/plato-parmenides/>
[surname], [initials] [year of publication]. [title]. In [encyclopedia], [url]

Appendix E: Supervisors

Lisa Bastian (l.bastian@vu.nl):

- Metaethics (rationality and normativity, and metaethics more generally)
- Philosophy & economics
- Epistemology

Justin Bernstein (j.s.bernstein@vu.nl):

- Bioethics (especially public health ethics)
- Political philosophy
- Contemporary moral philosophy

Jelle de Boer (j.s.de.boer@vu.nl):

- General philosophy of science
- Philosophy of social science & philosophy of biology
- Decision theory & game theory

Leon de Bruin (l.c.de.bruin@vu.nl):

- Philosophy of mind
- Philosophy of cognitive science
- Philosophy of psychology, psychiatry, and neuroscience

Govert Buijs (g.j.buijs@vu.nl):

- Political and social philosophy (general)
- Philosophy of management and organization/ethics and economy
- Philosophy of life and public domain

Sabrina Coninx (s.coninx@vu.nl):

- Philosophy of mind
- Philosophy of psychology, psychiatry, medicine, and healthcare
- Philosophy of situated cognition and phenomenology

Lieven Decock (l.b.decock@vu.nl):

- Philosophical themes in the disciplines (particularly the cognitive sciences, other scientific fields by arrangement)
- History of analytical philosophy (from Frege to the present day)
- Metaphysics

Catarina Dutilh Novaes (c.dutilhnovaes@vu.nl):

- Philosophy of logic and mathematics
- Issues pertaining to social categories, in particular gender and race
- Human cognition; philosophy of cognitive science

Annemie Halsema (j.m.halsema@vu.nl):

- 20th century continental philosophy, particularly phenomenology and hermeneutics
- Philosophy of the body
- Feminist philosophy

Carlo Ierna (c.ierna@vu.nl):

- History of philosophy, cognition, and computation
- School of Brentano (Brentano, Stumpf, Meinong, Ehrenfels, Husserl)
- Early phenomenology

Monika Kirloskar (m.a.kirloskar@vu.nl):

- World philosophies (methodologies, conceptual decolonization, epistemic injustice)
- Social philosophy (critical social epistemology, pluralistic societies, ethics of immigration, Frankfurter Schule)
- Political philosophy (critical theory, nationalism, cosmopolitanism, political philosophy of the Indian state)

Edwin Koster (e.koster@vu.nl):

- Philosophy & education
- Philosophy & narratology and film
- Philosophy of the humanities

Christian Krijnen (c.h.krijnen@vu.nl):

- Modern and contemporary philosophy
- Epistemology, metaphysics, philosophy of science
- Moral and legal philosophy, economic philosophy, philosophy of management & organization

Krishma Labib (k.labib@vu.nl):

- Bioethics, especially virtue ethics and dialogical approaches to moral reflection
- Research ethics, integrity and open science
- Questions related to fairness and justice in research

Lilith Lee (l.w.lee@vu.nl):

- Early Chinese (Warring States) philosophy
- Analytic social philosophy (theory of ideology, false consciousness, epistemic injustice)
- Comparative philosophy (comparative methodology)

Guido Löhr (g.lohr@vu.nl):

- Philosophy of Mind and Language/Cognitive Science
- Philosophy of AI
- Social Ontology

Marije Martijn (m.martijn@vu.nl):

- Ancient philosophy
- Patristic philosophy
- Reception among later thinkers

Gerben Meynen (g.meynen@vu.nl):

- Neuroethics
- Medical ethics
- Philosophy of medicine

Chris Ranalli (c.b.ranalliz@vu.nl):

- Epistemology (including ethics of belief; and intellectual virtue)
- Philosophy of Mind & Perception
- Metaphysics

Jeroen de Ridder (g.j.de.ridder@vu.nl):

- Social epistemology
- Philosophy of science (general)
- Philosophy of religion

Philip Robichaud (p.robichaud@vu.nl):

- Ethics
- Free will and moral responsibility
- Applied ethics

Angela Roothaan (a.c.m.roothaan@vu.nl):

- African/intercultural philosophy
- Spirituality/religion (based on practical philosophy)
- Critical theory/deconstruction/hermeneutics

Emanuel Rutten (g.j.e.rutten@vu.nl):

- Philosophy of religion
- Metaphysics
- Logic, theory of knowledge and rhetoric

Haroon Sheikh (h.sheikh@vu.nl):

- Continental philosophy (Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, Sloterdijk, Han)
- Philosophy of technology (AI, digitization, etc.)
- Philosophy East-West (Said, Hui, Chakrabarty)

Ad Verbrugge (a.m.verbrugge@vu.nl):

- Continental philosophy (e.g. Kant, Hegel, Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Spengler, Latour)
- Aristotle and contemporary virtue ethics
- Philosophy of culture (e.g. Frankfurter Schule, Spengler, McLuhan, Bratton)

Jan Willem Wieland (j.j.w.wieland@vu.nl):

- Moral responsibility: individual, collective, inter/intrapersonal dilemmas
- Applied ethics: business, environmental, health (e.g. corporate responsibility)
- Normative ethics: Kant, Parfit, Korsgaard, Gauthier, Scanlon, etc.

Appendix F: Research questions

Type of questions (part 1):

- conceptual
- normative
- empirical

Example of topic:

Michelle Moody-Adams' claim that slavery was due to affected ignorance.

Conceptual question:

What exactly is affected ignorance?

Normative question:

Why is slavery morally wrong?

Empirical question:

Why do people want to stay ignorant, what are their motives?

Philosophers generally focus on conceptual and normative questions, where results of empirical research can support the formulation of the question or answer. Conceptual and normative questions asked from a philosophical perspective usually address the role of (hidden) presuppositions.

Type of questions (part 2):

- systematic
- historical
- applied

Example of topic:

Immanuel Kant's Formula of Universal Law.

Systematic question:

Is there a good solution for the counterexamples to Kant's Formula of Universal Law?

Historical question:

What precisely was Hegel's objection to Kant's Formula of Universal Law?

Applied question:

Should slavery be condemned on the basis of Kant's Formula of Universal Law?

Philosophers focus on conceptual and normative dimensions when answering such questions. Thus, answering the historical question regarding Hegel's objection goes beyond an inventory of Hegel's views regarding Kant's formula of the universal law.

Demarcation

Such questions are generally too large for a thesis, and you must demarcate your question by focusing on specific authors.

Example:

What is the solution of authors X and Y for the counterexamples to Kant's Formula of Universal Law, and are these good solutions?