

Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam

*Thesis manual*

**BA Communication and Information Studies**

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Version: 2022-2023

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## 1 Thesis overview

The thesis is the conclusion of the BA programme. This manual is intended to let you make a well-informed and properly planned start with your thesis, in order to maximize the likelihood of success. You are responsible for knowing the information in this manual, and you will likely need to consult it regularly over the course of your thesis trajectory.

Your thesis is likely the first major research project of your own. The research and writing that you will engage in as part of it provide an opportunity to apply and develop the expertise you have acquired during your studies. Successful completion of your thesis will help you develop your skills and knowledge of scientific theories and methods, critical and analytical thinking, academic writing, finding and compiling relevant information, and understanding and evaluating scientific work. During this process, you will likely be surprised by things you already know, things that are more complicated than you thought, and things you never even thought about.

If this seems daunting at first, you will not have to do all of this on your own. For one, you will be writing your thesis in working groups with your peers. Together, you will proceed through the necessary steps to succeed in your writing. And of course, you will also have an experienced supervisor helping you with questions and problems you may encounter.

### 1.1 The thesis trajectory

The main features of the thesis trajectory in this programme are as follows:

- The trajectory consists of two components: the thesis (9 EC, 252 hours) and thesis colloquium (3 EC, 84 hours). This 12 EC load shows that a considerable effort on the part of the student is expected.
- In the typical case, the thesis trajectory takes place in the second semester (Periods 4-6). In the event of postponement or failure, a small number of students conduct their thesis work in the first semester (Periods 1-3).

Period 4 Feb-Mar	Period 5 Apr-May	Period 6 Jun	Period 1 Sep-Oct	Period 2 Nov-Dec	Period 3 Jan
Stage 1	Stage 2		Stage 1	Stage 2	

Regular deadlines	
<b>Enrollment</b>	Generally at least two weeks before Stage 1. See <a href="https://vu.nl/en/student/courses/registration-deregistration-deadlines">https://vu.nl/en/student/courses/registration-deregistration-deadlines</a> for precise dates
<b>Workplan submission</b>	First Monday following Stage 1 (i.e., first Monday of Period 5)

- After an information session at the start of the thesis trajectory, you are placed in a thesis group based on your track within CIS. This group is led by a thesis supervisor, who provides the group with a common topic, reading list, data set, and/or methodology.
- The thesis process consists of two stages:
  - Stage 1: Each group has a number of mandatory sessions with their thesis supervisor to work out the thesis proposals (workplans) of each student in the group. Stage 1 ends with the submission of a written workplan. On the basis of the workplan, the supervisor and the second reader make a go/no go decision (see section 4.3). If a 'no go' decision is reached, the student does not proceed to Stage 2.
  - Stage 2: Students complete their thesis on the basis of the approved workplan and submit it by the given deadline.
- The grade for your thesis is determined by the supervisor and a second reader. A resit option is possible if the final thesis is insufficient.
- Standards of academic integrity (see section 7) apply throughout the process.
- In addition to thesis research and writing, over the course of the trajectory you will participate in the thesis colloquium. The main aim of the colloquium is to organize an event in June (the Thesis Symposium) where you present your thesis research to invited friends and family as a celebration of your accomplishments.

## 1.2 Learning objectives

The overall goal of the thesis is the development of research skills and the ability to analyse and present research results in a systematic and clear way. The thesis shows that you can design and conduct academic research and that you can theoretically reflect on a particular field of research relevant to the programme. In line with its overall goals and objective, the thesis demonstrates that you possess and can apply the following general academic and social skills:

<i>Knowledge and understanding</i>	The student is able to apply previously acquired attitude, knowledge, skills and insights in an academically responsible way.
<i>Applying knowledge and understanding</i>	The student is able to analyse and develop a problem definition.
<i>Making judgements</i>	The student is able to develop clear argumentation that is meaningfully supported by a wide variety of primary and secondary literature and primary sources where relevant.
<i>Communication</i>	The student is able to convey information, ideas and solutions to an audience consisting of specialists and non-specialists by means of oral and written presentations.
<i>Combination of the above</i>	The student is able to write a scientific paper in clear, effective and academic language and to submit it within an agreed period.

### 1.3 BA thesis colloquium

In addition to the thesis itself, you must participate in the BA thesis colloquium (3 EC; 84hr) in order to fulfill all requirements for the CIS BA. The colloquium is a separate course (see: [Bachelor Thesis Colloquium Communication and Information Sciences](#)) and is led by the thesis coordinator.

Pre-master students are not required to participate in the colloquium.

The major part of the colloquium is an event—The **Thesis Symposium**—that is organized by BA thesis students to present their thesis research for friends, family, and VU staff. The Thesis Symposium is the culmination of your CIS programme and is meant to be a celebration of your accomplishments as you show the products of your hard work.

There will be a kick-off meeting early in Period 4, in which the symposium is described and you will be divided into groups with different organizational tasks to prepare for the Thesis Symposium. There are many such organizational tasks, such as setting a date, renting rooms, publicizing the event, setting up a website, and so forth. In addition, the humanities department typically reserves a small budget for the symposium, and so you have the opportunity to be creative in what you'd like to include.

As part of the colloquium, there may also be occasional lectures and discussions to do with general features of thesis research and writing (e.g., what is 'theory' and how to connect it to your thesis research). These will be arranged on your roster and/or announced on the Canvas page for the course.

In the event that you conduct your thesis work in the first semester rather than in the second semester, the thesis coordinator will provide an alternative assignment for you. That is, there is no symposium for students who begin their thesis trajectory in September.

In the event that i) you have completed the thesis colloquium component, ii) failed the thesis component, and iii) restarted in the next thesis trajectory, then you are not required to participate in the colloquium again. You may still present your thesis research at the Thesis Symposium, but you do not need to help organize that event.

## 2 Thesis coordinator, thesis supervisors, second readers

### 2.1 Thesis coordinator

The thesis coordinator is in charge of organizing the thesis process: enrollment, allocation of students to groups/supervisors, the thesis colloquium, and the like. During the thesis trajectory, the thesis coordinator is your point of contact for all procedural issues. Issues that are related to thesis research, writing, and feedback are not for the coordinator, but for the thesis *supervisor*.

The current thesis coordinator is dr. Elliott M. Hoey ([e.m.hoey@vu.nl](mailto:e.m.hoey@vu.nl)).

## **2.2 Supervisors**

In the BA programme in CIS the supervisor is usually from the Language, Literature & Communication Department. Occasionally, a supervisor is sought in another department at the VU. Each supervisor is expected to perform their task in line with this manual.

All supervisors are assigned by the thesis coordinator. It is not possible to approach staff directly and ask to be included in their supervision group. You keep the same supervisor through Stages 1 and 2. In case of illness or other prolonged absence of the supervisor, the thesis coordinator will assign a new one.

A key point about the supervisor is that they are not responsible for developing your workplan or writing your thesis. That is your work. It is your responsibility to deliver a good workplan and a sufficient thesis at the stated deadlines and in accordance with standards of academic integrity.

The supervisor is not expected to simply tell you what to do for your research. They will provide a topic, reading list, data set, and/or methods as a way to restrict the shape that your thesis may take. They are there to help develop possible research questions by giving feedback and suggestions.

The supervisor will contribute to the substance of the thesis by alerting you to possible improvements to the thesis: “Why don’t you read this article?”, “This could also be an interesting question”, “There is a more suitable test you can use”, “That’s something you can find in that database”. It is the responsibility of the supervisor to weigh these contributions when assessing the final paper, and to avoid giving disproportionately more assistance to one student than to another.

The thesis remains the intellectual property of the student, despite any contributions made by the supervisor. The supervisor may not use the thesis or materials from the thesis in their own publications without explicit permission by the student.

## **2.3 Second readers**

The second reader independently evaluates the final thesis and determines the final grade together with the supervisor. This ensures a degree of objectivity and consistency in grading. To prevent surprises at the end, the second reader also approves the workplan, jointly with the supervisor.

Second readers are mainly drawn from the pool of supervisors and so one staff member typically acts as supervisor of some theses and second reader of others. Students do not need to find a second reader for their thesis. The thesis supervisor, and in some cases the thesis coordinator, locates a suitable second reader.

As a student you normally don’t have direct contact with the second reader. It may happen that a supervisor brings you in contact with the second reader to discuss a specific point on which the second reader has specific expertise. But you should not seek input from the second reader or send drafts to

them without the permission of your supervisor. The second reader is supposed to remain uninvolved during the research/writing process, so as to serve as an independent, objective assessor at the end.

### 3 When and how to start

#### 3.1 Steps to start

1. In January, make sure that you've passed all your first and second year courses. This is required to start the thesis trajectory. If there is any doubt, contact your study advisor.
2. Sign up for Bachelor Thesis Colloquium Communication and Information Sciences (English: L\_AABACISCOL, Dutch: L\_AABACIWCOL) **and** Bachelor Thesis Communication and Information Sciences (English: L\_AABACISSCR, Dutch: L\_AABACIWSCR). Given that you are reading this manual, you have probably already done this or you may have seen an announcement on the Canvas page "CIW Informatiesite". Signing up for these courses gives you access to information, but it does not yet commit you to the thesis trajectory.
3. In late January, there is a mandatory information session where you will learn about the thesis trajectory, thesis topics, and supervisors. You will be assigned to a thesis group based on your track in CIS. Your thesis group shares the same supervisor(s) and thematic focus. In the event that you are dissatisfied with your group, you have the choice between accepting the topic or re-enrolling at the next round.

#### 3.2 Can I write a thesis on a topic of my own choice?

No, as a rule you can't. This is not because we don't like creativity, but because in our experience the topics that students come up with fall into one of two categories: (a) an interesting but vague idea, which requires a lot of time and effort on the part of both the student and the supervisor to shape it into a researchable question, or (b) a topic that has already been researched in many student theses. We have chosen the procedure described in this manual to help students to locate an appropriately-sized researchable topic and enable supervisors to assist students in the most efficient manner.

An exception: highly motivated and capable students may write their thesis on a topic of their own choice. To do this, you must contact the thesis coordinator at least three weeks before the start of Stage 1. In your message, you must: i) formally request to write your thesis on your own topic, ii) provide evidence that you have achieved a grade of 7.0 or higher for all BA courses you have completed, and iii) briefly outline the topic you have in mind.

There is no guarantee that your request will be approved. If the thesis coordinator deems that your proposal has insufficient promise, you can still enroll for the regular procedure. If the thesis coordinator allows you to proceed, you must submit a complete and high-quality workplan on the same deadline as the other students. A supervisor will help you develop this, but the proposal must be evidently original, in terms of the research question, research approach, and/or data sources used.

If your workplan is approved without reservations by an expert staff member and a second reader, you will be allowed to write the thesis, based on the workplan, under normal Stage 2 rules. There is no such thing as a 'Go with critical comments' in this case (see section 4.3). No staff will be made available to improve an insufficient plan to a good plan. Anything short of an unreserved 'Go' means a 'No go'. If you receive anything but an unreserved 'Go', then you will have to wait until the next thesis round.

## 4 Stage 1: Developing your research question and preparing the workplan

During this stage, which lasts for one teaching period including the exam weeks (i.e., eight weeks), you will develop your individual 'take' on your group topic by defining your individual research question. You will write a workplan outlining how you intend to conduct research that addresses your question. The workplan is assessed by the supervisor and the second reader, resulting in a Go/No go decision.

The key point is that you must *actively* use these eight weeks to build a foundation for your thesis, to get the input you need from your supervisor and fellow students in your group, and to arrive at an appropriate research question. By the end of Stage 1, you must be ready to complete the thesis with limited help from your supervisor. It would be a mistake to wait passively until your supervisor tells you to do something! As mentioned before, the thesis is and remains your responsibility.

### 4.1 The main steps

At the start of Stage 1, the supervisor makes available materials for the group. This is usually a list of required readings (i.e., academic papers) related to the topic of your group, but may also include a data set or analytic tools. The reading list is meant to provide a *starting place* for relevant literature, but it is not all the literature you will need. As you develop your workplan, you will actively need to search for additional literature in support of your 'take' on the overall topic.

During Stage 1, there will be regular meetings organized by the thesis supervisor. These meetings may include discussion of required readings, student presentations, and collective data sessions. The supervisor will naturally provide further information about your topic, but they are not expected to give a series of complete lectures. It is your responsibility to finish/understand the required readings, come with questions for your supervisor and groupmates, and assist fellow students in developing their research ideas. By the second meeting, you should already have some possible research questions for your thesis. The role of the supervisor is to lead the discussion based on what you come up with to ensure that all students end up writing sufficiently different theses.

Attendance at these meetings is mandatory. Unavoidable absences must be reported in advance to the supervisor. Failure to do so or absence without justifiable reasons may lead to cessation of supervision and removal from the thesis trajectory. This means that, if you wish to continue, then you must restart at a later semester.



The meetings are your main chance to interact with your thesis supervisor. In Stage 1, outside of class sessions, you can ask simple questions by email. You may also submit one draft of your workplan for comments, at least two weeks before the workplan deadline.

Stage 1 concludes with the submission on Canvas of a thesis contract and workplan (see Appendix 2). The deadline is the first Monday after Stage 1 (i.e., the first Monday of Period 5). The workplan is then assessed by the supervisor and the second reader resulting in a Go/No go decision.

*Hardship contingency:* Contact your supervisor and the thesis coordinator if there are major, unpredictable, and uncontrollable events that prevent you from working on your thesis. Such disruptions, in general, affect your ability to work for weeks rather than days.

## 4.2 Workplan contents

The workplan shows that you have thought of an adequately succinct research question and a coherent and feasible plan to address that question. You show this by completing the Workplan Preparation Form (see Appendix 1). This document will help you explain the key elements of your proposed thesis research. These **key elements** are described below:

**Problem definition:** Several sentences, including some key references, that define the basic shape of your problem. A problem is some issue that needs more research attention due to some gap, ambiguity, contradiction, etc. in our understanding of that issue. The problem definition provides the *context* in which it is relevant to consider your topic. It usually starts in a generic manner with things that any educated person would know about. Then, it proceeds to give more details such that a more tractable problem comes into view – the problem that you wish to address in your research. The problem definition ends with a research question, which is typically formulated as a single sentence ending with a question mark that describes as precisely as possible what we will learn from your research. This may be broken down into subquestions if you think that may help clarify things. The Workplan Preparation Form (Appendix 1) will already require you to think through the steps of answering this question.

**Type of research:** A brief, general characterization of your research, which typically mentions the general topic, data, and approach/methodology. Some examples:

- “An empirical discourse analytic study of opening statements in transcripts of Dutch press conferences about coronavirus”
- “A comparative content analysis of newspaper headlines about missing White women versus missing Black women in the United States”
- “An interview-based investigation of how young professionals in the finance sector adapted their communication when moving to work-from-home”
- “An conversation analytic examination of participants’ orientations to the act of recording within police bodycam footage”
- “A mixed-methods study (metaphor analysis + survey) of online reviews of romance novels”

- “A netnographic exploration of exercise routines among recent immigrants to Europe”
- “An experimental study of verbal aspect in written invitations for vaccinations in the Netherlands”

**Contribution:** What will we be able to say after your research that we couldn’t say before? The contribution often arises from your problem definition. How might your research improve upon, correct, complicate, or enrich our academic knowledge and understanding of a topic? And how might your research contribute to more applied, practical, and societally-oriented issues?

**Data:** In your description of the data you will use, indicate how large the data set will be (**volume**). How you do this will obviously depend on what data you talk about. Make clear that the data will indeed be available by indicating the **source**. Sometimes this is obvious (‘publicly available YouTube videos’), sometimes you need to explain in more detail that, for instance, you have agreed with a company that you can do interviews or a survey.

**Method:** What are the systematic steps that you will take to go from your data to an answer to your research question? And why is this method or approach the most appropriate for your data and research question? You will likely be using specific **analytical tools and techniques** (conversation analysis, linear regression, content analysis, thematic analysis, etc.). This will, of course, be very different from thesis to thesis.

**Design choices:** How will you measure a variable? Which medium of communication will you cover? How many people will you interview? How will you select your interviewees? How will you decide what cases to exclude? Most of these choices will be made by balancing the ideal against the practical. Explain how you made the most important choices to get the best possible answer to your research questions in the context of reasonable constraints such as data availability and available time for your thesis.

**Limitations:** Your design choices entail limitations—you can’t look at everything from every perspective. That is not a problem, but you should make clear in this section of the workplan that you understand how your study is restricted to a subset of the total of human communication.

In Stage 2, you will work more independently, with fewer meetings with the supervisor (see section 5.1). It is therefore in your own interest that you write a workplan that really is a serious basis for completing the thesis.

### 4.3 Workplan approval

As a rule, your workplan will be assessed within one week after submission. The outcome of the assessment can be one of three things: Go, Go with critical comments, or No go.

**Go** – You may continue to Stage 2 to complete your thesis on the basis of your workplan. This means that the workplan offers a reasonable prospect of a sufficient thesis. It is not a guarantee that you will pass. You still have to do the work to deliver the actual thesis.

**Go with critical comments** – You can continue to Stage 2, but the supervisor/second reader indicate one or more issues in the workplan that must be addressed if the thesis is to be considered sufficient.

Sometimes a ‘Go with critical comments’ results in a substantial change in the student’s research/writing during Stage 2 (such as in the precise research question, data, or analytic approach). If this happens, the thesis supervisor is advised to inform the second reader about this change so that they may properly evaluate the thesis when it is submitted.

**No go** – You cannot continue to Stage 2. A ‘No go’ can be given for non-compliance with formal Stage 1 requirements, such as late/non-submission or unexcused absences from meetings; if the workplan shows evident lack of effort and no/limited active participation in meetings; or if the workplan, despite evidence of effort, shows multiple, major issues in coherence, feasibility or writing skills.

If you receive a ‘No go’ you cannot continue and will have to re-enroll for another thesis round. There is no option for a resit of your workplan. Be aware that you will not automatically be re-enrolled for the next year.

## 5 Stage 2: Writing the thesis

### 5.1 Completing and submitting the thesis

Stage 2 lasts eight weeks and is for writing your thesis on the basis of the approved workplan. This is mostly done independently. During this stage, you can email your supervisor with simple questions. For discussion of more complex issues, you are also entitled to one consultation. Supervisors may of course schedule additional group sessions and individual consultations, but they are not obligated to do so.

Students are entitled to feedback on draft versions of the thesis. In general, there are two feedback moments: once on (components of) the pre-draft version and once on the complete draft version. During this stage, the supervisor is not obliged to give feedback on the same thesis text more than twice, though of course they may choose to do so. Supervisors’ feedback is expected to be comprehensible, actionable, and timely, such that students understand the feedback and how to go about addressing those comments within the time constraints of the thesis trajectory deadlines.

Stage 2 concludes with the submission of the thesis on Canvas. It should be in a finalized form – with the analysis completed and written up, all text checked for typos and usage errors, references and in-text citations formatted correctly, etc. If a timely submission is substantially incomplete (missing sections, unfinished analysis, unformatted references, etc.), it will not be accepted, it will not be sent to the second reader, and it will not be eligible for a resit. It will be registered as a ‘fail’.

The deadline is the first Monday after Stage 2 (i.e., the first Monday of Period 6). This is a strict deadline, but hardship rules, as in the case of the workplan, apply. If the thesis is not submitted on time, it will be registered as a ‘No show’ and no feedback will be given. The student may then submit it ten working days after the initial deadline.

## 5.2 Assessment procedure

The supervisor and second reader independently assess the thesis using the form in Appendix 3, taking into account the workplan and any comments made there (e.g., 'Go with critical comments'). Submitted theses are ordinarily reviewed within ten working days, allowing for circumstances beyond staff's control. Supervisors will notify the students if it will take longer.

### Initial assessment

If the difference between the two grades is less than 1.0—whether passing or failing—then the supervisor notifies the student and assembles all necessary thesis documentation to send to the Humanities Education Office (*FGW Onderwijsbureau*) for archiving.

If both grades are passing and they differ by 1.0-1.9 points, then the assessors determine a grade jointly and give their reasoning for the final assessment in the documentation sent to the Education Office.

If the assessors cannot reach agreement about a final grade, if they cannot reach agreement on whether the thesis passes, or if their assessments differ by 2.0 or more points, then a third reader will assess the thesis. The final grade will be the average of the three assessments (NB: If 2/3 of the assessments are 'fail', then the thesis cannot receive a passing grade).

### Resit opportunity

If a completed thesis was assessed as insufficient, the student will be notified and will receive feedback explaining why. The student may then submit a revised version within ten days of receiving the notification and feedback. A resit is not possible if the thesis was initially assessed as passing.

The resit opportunity is possible for an insufficient thesis if the initial submission was a complete thesis on the basis of the workplan, and if it is possible to specify what needs to be done for a passing grade. A resit opportunity is not available for students who submitted an incomplete thesis, due to the fact that it is not possible to give actionable feedback on such a thesis.

The resit opportunity is also possible if the student submitted nothing at the first deadline. In this case, they receive no feedback and must submit their thesis ten working days after the initial deadline. This resit is their final opportunity for assessment; no actionable feedback will be given because no further resit is possible.

If the resit version is sufficient, the grade will be capped at 6.0, unless there are compelling reasons to award it a higher grade. If the resit version is insufficient, the student may reenroll at the next thesis trajectory, with a new thesis research topic.

### Appeal

If you wish to appeal the assessment of your thesis, you must first discuss your objections with your supervisor and/or second reader. If no resolution is reached, you may approach the Exam Committee. If still no resolution is reached, you may go to the Examination Appeals Board (*College van Beroep voor de*

*Examens*). These steps should be taken within a stated time from the decision on the grade (usually within six weeks from the decision, see <https://vu.nl/en/about-vu/more-about/disputes-procedure>)

## 6 Formal requirements

This section should be read in conjunction with the Thesis assessment form (Appendix 3). Much of what is written here can be taken as guidelines to how your thesis will be assessed in the end.

### 6.1 Formatting

- The BA thesis is in English or, for certain CIS tracks, in Dutch. It is expected to be formal and academic in tone with few to no mistakes in spelling, grammar, or usage.
- The thesis ordinarily runs 8000–10000 words in length. Any deviations from this must be justified in consultation with the thesis supervisor, who is advised to inform the second reader of this deviation.
- The text should appear in a standard professional typeface, such as Times New Roman, and set with 1.0–2.0 line spacing. The layout should be A4 with standard margin sizes.
- The standard ordering of the thesis components is as follows:
  - Title page
  - Abstract
  - Declaration of originality
  - Table of contents
  - Introduction
  - Theoretical framework
  - Methods
  - Results
  - Discussion and conclusion (possible separated)
  - Bibliography
  - Appendices (if relevant)
- Paragraphs should be used to structure sections and to let the reader follow the development of your ideas and your argument. This means using indentations. In other words, you should avoid a ‘wall of text’ because that makes it harder for the reader to understand what you are trying to say.

### 6.2 Title page

The title page should contain the following information:

- Title of thesis
- Name of university, faculty, and degree programme
- Student’s name
- Student number
- Supervisor’s name

- Second reader's name
- Date and year of completion
- Word count

### 6.3 Abstract

With an abstract, the reader should be able to answer: What did you do? Why did you do it? What question were you trying to answer? How did you do it (methods)? What did you learn (major results)? Why does it matter (major implications)?

The abstract is usually 200-400 words and generally no citations appear.

### 6.4 Declaration of originality

The following statement must be included after the title page and before the table of contents and must be signed. Dutch and English versions appear below.

*Ik verklaar hierbij dat deze scriptie een oorspronkelijk werkstuk is, dat uitsluitend door mij vervaardigd is. Als ik informatie en ideeën aan andere bronnen heb ontleend, heb ik hiervan expliciet melding gemaakt in de tekst en de noten.*

*(plaats, datum)*

*(handtekening)*

*I hereby declare that this thesis is an original piece of work, written by myself alone. Any information and ideas from other sources are acknowledged fully in the text and notes.*

*(place, date)*

*(signature)*

### 6.5 Introduction

You want to show the reader how interesting your thesis topic is. It is almost always a good idea to include a catchy example of the phenomenon under study. After this, your introduction has three main goals.

1. To concisely describe the basic outline of your problem—the **problem definition**—so that the reader knows what the main issues are and how your research fits into it. As part of this, you articulate precisely what you want to find out with your **research question**.
2. To show that your research fits into a **broader context**, specifically with reference to findings and insights from the academic literature.
3. Your reader needs to know why you are studying this topic. Your reasons for doing this work are your **research goals**. These impart **relevance** to your thesis. In practice, you do this by stating what your research can provide in both a theoretical/academic and practical sense.

In the final paragraph of your introduction, you give a brief overview of the content and structure of the remainder of your thesis.

## 6.6 Theoretical framework

Your theoretical framework must clarify all the **concepts** that appear in your research question (and sub-questions) such that any reasonably intelligent reader could understand your research. Concretely, this means laying out your main **theoretical assumptions**, defining your concepts, and explaining how these concepts are related. In the process of doing so, you will also describe **scientific frameworks and empirical findings** related to your topic.

Your exposition of the research literature serves to justify your choice of **research approach** answering the problem. This means that you provide sound **reasoning** for selecting a thesis that evaluates or tests a hypothesis, that explores a certain topic, or provides a review of the literature.

### 6.6.1 Types of research

Your choice of how to approach the problem definition influences your theoretical framework, which can be one of several types:

#### *Hypothesis testing*

If you test one or more hypotheses in your thesis, your theoretical framework must argue for the **plausibility of each hypothesis**. It helps if you consider each of your substantive hypotheses as a potential explanation for an observed phenomenon. Usually there are several explanations for a phenomenon, so it is your task to convince your reader that your explanation is the most reasonable one. You do that by showing that it is consistent with leading theories, preferably by showing that your hypothesis can be deduced from the theory, and that your hypothesis is more compatible with empirical data than any of the viable alternatives.

Remember that your reader needs to know the full story, so you should not ignore incompatible results, lest you be accused of cherry picking. Of course, if you cannot rule out reasonable alternatives, you might want to devise a study that collects observations that can be used to evaluate the reasonableness of the competing hypotheses, by focusing on testable implications of each of the hypotheses.

Note that there is an important conceptual difference between substantive hypothesis (a potential explanation), research hypothesis or testable hypothesis (a prediction about the actual outcome of your study) and statistical hypothesis (an assumption about a probability distribution of potential observations). Keeping the distinction clear prevents drawing incorrect conclusions with respect to your substantive hypothesis. Make sure that you and your supervisor are clear about what you mean with the term “hypothesis”. Statistical hypotheses, such as the null-hypothesis of a significance test, do not appear in your theoretical framework. Your framework contains reasons and arguments supporting substantive hypotheses.

### *Exploratory research*

For exploratory research, there is little or no theory or empirical results that allow for the derivation of hypotheses and so hypothesis-testing is not possible. If your goal is exploration, then, the focus of your theoretical framework is to argue that the concepts you use to explore the phenomenon (so-called “**sensitizing concepts**”) are appropriate. Usually, you will illustrate the usefulness of these concepts by giving a preliminary description of the concepts and showing how they can be used in describing, organizing, and annotating the phenomenon under study.

For qualitative research of this sort (discourse analysis, ethnography, conversation analysis, etc.) we recommend following Silverman’s *Doing Qualitative Research* as a guide: <https://uk-sagepub-com.vu-nl.idm.oclc.org/en-gb/eur/doing-qualitative-research/book251108>

### *Literature review or meta-analysis*

It is of course possible to systematically analyse the research literature in order to describe the state of the art regarding a certain phenomenon. This can be done via (narrative) literature review or meta-analysis (qualitative or quantitative). In all cases the theoretical framework of your thesis must provide a clear description of the hypotheses for which you would like to evaluate the extent to which they are supported in the literature. Again, all concepts in these hypotheses must be clearly defined and accompanied by a preliminary description.

## **6.6.2 Using literature**

In constructing the argumentation in your theoretical framework, you will have to describe insights, theories, and empirical results regarding your topic. Remember that you are presenting your interpretation of the literature. This means that you should make minimal use of the words of others. So, refrain from overuse of phrases such as: “Johnson (2020) says that: ...” or “Petersen (2020) has stated that [...]”. Instead, if you wish to use someone else’s ideas or results, it is enough to paraphrase those ideas/results and include a reference to your source with an in-text citation and a reference in the bibliography at the end. Make sure that these conform to the latest APA-conventions (see: <https://apastyle.apa.org/>).

It is your responsibility to consult the *primary* literature. If and only if it is impossible to get access to the primary literature is it okay to refer to it using a secondary source. Thus, if you read in Johnson (2010) that Petersen (2002) has claimed something, you need to go to Petersen (2002) to make verify what Johnson (2010) has said. See: <https://apastyle.apa.org/style-grammar-guidelines/citations/secondary-sources>.



## 6.7 Methods

Your Methods chapter describes (in past tense!) all the activities involved in gathering data and performing your analysis. Most of it will be devoted naming your **research approach/strategy** (survey, experiment, case study, etc.) and describing the various facets associated with it (number of participants, data source and volume, statistical tests, consent forms, etc.). Strive for a level of detail that would allow a reasonably competent person to reproduce your study.

The reader needs to understand not only what you have done, but why you have done it in that way. That is to say, your research **design choices** need to be motivated. For instance, if you have chosen to send a survey to 100 people, why 100 and not 101? Your methods section should justify all major decisions such as this.

Relatedly, your methods section must address the aspects of your study that influence the **reliability** of your observations and/or the **validity** of your conclusions. This means devoting a few sentences to as sampling, experimental design, generalizability, etc.

## 6.8 Results

Here you provide a **systematic and readable description** of your analysis of the research materials. How this appears will depend on the research tradition and method of analysis. For general (journal) guidelines from the APA on reporting your results:

- For the reporting of qualitative studies: <https://apastyle.apa.org/jars/qualitative>
- For quantitative studies: <https://apastyle.apa.org/jars/quantitative>
- For mixed methods studies: <https://apastyle.apa.org/jars/mixed-methods>

If you have used a quantitative research strategy (e.g., survey, experiment, or meta-analysis), you will likely use both descriptive and inferential statistics. It is almost always a good idea to use tables and figures to support or underline the substantive conclusions that you draw on the basis of your statistical analyses. As with references, your tables and figures need to be consistent with the guidelines of the APA publication manual. See the site: <https://apastyle.apa.org/style-grammar-guidelines/tables-figures/>.

## 6.9 Discussion and conclusion

The final chapter in your thesis presents your conclusions and a discussion of your conclusions in the context of the literature you reviewed in your theoretical framework. These may appear as separate chapters for conclusions and discussion.

The first task of this section is to explicitly **answer your research question** (and sub-questions) based on what was reported in the Results section. That is, you interpret your results in light of your problem definition and provide a conclusion about what those results say.

The second task of this section is to indicate what your research contributes to the literature you reviewed in the theoretical framework. Ask yourself, “What do I know now as compared to what I knew before I did the study?” This is one way of showing the relevance of your research.

A third task is to take your conclusions in a broader direction. This means drawing out some **implications** from your conclusions. Ask yourself what your findings imply for the theoretical framework you used and ask what your study implies for a next study. It also means elaborating on the potential practical, societal implications of your work.

Finally, this is the section where you entertain alternative explanations. A single study seldomly settles a theoretical issue, not even a minor one. So, spend some words on a critical evaluation of your research method, but without being overly critical of it. Describe a few reasonable alternative explanations for your result that have to do with the specific way your research was done. Reasonable means that you have good arguments why a methodological choice may have brought out the results in a biased way. It is not enough, for example, to say something like ‘with other participants the results may have been different’.

A last caution: Students love to talk about the limitations of their study because it is easy and it seems like something you are supposed to do here. However, most limitations that students think of have already been addressed in the workplan and probably appear in your methods section. If your limitation is something you built into the design of your study, then it probably does not need to be repeated in the discussion section.

## 6.10 References

Your reference list contains all of the sources you consulted in writing your thesis. It should be formatted according to the most recent APA publication manual. See: <https://apastyle.apa.org/style-grammar-guidelines/references>

## 7 Academic integrity

Integrity is vital to the academic community and is threatened by fraud and plagiarism. Fraud means that we cannot trust reported research findings, for instance due to the manipulation or fabrication of data. Plagiarism means that we cannot judge the contribution of a piece of research because the extent of its reliance on previous work is not transparent. Unfortunately, fraud and plagiarism happen from time to time in theses. That is bad in all disciplines, but it is very sad in the case of students at the VU. Please consider what sort of a professional you want to be, and why anybody should trust you in the future if you cannot be trusted with a thesis. If you think that ignoring rules is okay as long as you are not caught, you fail the basic standards of any reputable professional body.

We assume that you are of good will and want to know the rules so that you can stay clear of them by a safe margin. VU Amsterdam subscribes to the main Dutch and European Codes of Conduct (<https://www.vu.nl/en/about-vu-amsterdam/academic-integrity/index.aspx>). We also ask you to

confirm that you will comply with these standards when applying for your thesis. Consult your supervisor when in doubt.

If the supervisor suspects academic misconduct in the thesis, they arrange a meeting with the student and offer them a chance to explain. If the suspicion is confirmed, or if there is still doubt regarding the circumstances after the meeting, the supervisor notifies the Examination Board. In either case, the Examination Board takes over the procedure at this point. The board will question both the student and the supervisor regarding the circumstances of the case. If academic misconduct is proven, penalties may also be imposed.

## 7.1 Plagiarism

Upon submission of the final thesis manuscript, the supervisor performs a plagiarism check via Canvas. This is a component of your thesis assessment form as well (“A clear distinction is made between the writer’s own observations and opinions, and the observations, assumptions and visions of others, and there is nothing that even hints of plagiarism or academic misconduct.”).

Plagiarism is more than just simple copy-paste. It includes any kind of reliance on other people’s work that is not disclosed. So you should:

- Use quotation marks to show where text has been cited literally and give a clear reference (including page numbers) to the source. Just changing a few words doesn’t mean you don’t have to show it as a quotation. In fact, using text from others with just a few words changed but no quotation marks is a very bad thing to do because it suggests you’re trying to conceal your act.
- Clearly indicate (‘according to X ...’, ‘X’s main point is that ...’, etc.) which parts of your text summarize others’ text, or where you put it in your own words, where you give a translation, or where you have used a source in another way than citing it literally. Cite the sources and position the citation close to what it refers to. For instance, don’t just add ‘(Jones, 2017)’ at the end of a paragraph without making clear by choice of words whether all or just part of the paragraph comes from Jones (2017).
- Clearly indicate where you use others’ work or ideas even if you do not cite or summarize their texts. This includes things like how you operationalized a concept. It also includes ‘indirect citations’ where you cite text from A, giving a reference to A, as if you had read A yourself, but where you simply copied the quotation and the reference from B.
- Apply the above to *all* sources: academic papers, other students’ theses, materials from company websites, regulatory texts, whatever.
- Apply the above to *all* texts you hand in: they do not just apply to the final thesis, but also to the workplan and any draft that you submit.

All of this is your responsibility. “I didn’t know this” or “my supervisor never said anything about these issues in my drafts” are not valid excuses.

## Appendix 1. Workplan Preparation Form

See above for explanation of **key terms**.

State the **problem definition** of your thesis, referring to key literature, in 300-500 words:

State what **type of research** you will use to answer this question:

Explain in about 100 words the **contribution** of your thesis (what will we learn compared to earlier research). Refer to key literature.

Describe the nature of the **data** that you will need for your research. For each main type of data, indicate the **sources** (where/how you will get it). State a concrete expectation of the **volume** of your dataset (depending on the situation in terms of sample size, number of interviews, number of survey respondents, number of documents to read, period covered, etc.).

Explain in about 400 words your **method**. These are the steps you will take to move from having the data to answering your research question. If this involves specific **analytical tools or techniques**, cite earlier research that you will use as example. If your research is quantitative in nature, write out the key (regression) model(s) that you will use

Discuss in about 300 words the main **design choices** you made in setting up the research as described above. Identify the main **limitations** that result from these choices and explain why you think it is right to accept them.

--

Any **other comments** you want to make to pitch your work plan:

--

## Appendix 2. Thesis contract and workplan

### BA Thesis Contract and Workplan for CIS

<b>Student information</b>	
Student name	
Student number	
Student address	
Student telephone	
Degree programme	
Number of credits	9 EC
<b>Supervision</b>	
Supervisor name	
Supervisor chair	
Supervisor contribution	Guidance, reading drafts, feedback, and evaluation as described in the BA CIS Thesis Manual
Supervisor teaching load	15 hours
Minimum and maximum supervision meetings	4-8
Supervision frequency	Once every two weeks or as agreed upon
Second reader name	
Second reader chair	
Assessment timescale for supervisor and second reader	10 working days
<b>Thesis information</b>	
Brief description of topic	
Language of final version	
Starting date	
Workplan deadline	
Deadline for final thesis	
Additional agreements	

Signed for agreement

\_\_\_\_\_  
Student signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Supervisor signature

\_\_\_\_\_  
Second reader signature

Place and date:

## Workplan

Workplan	
Working title	
Problem definition	
Type of research	
Contribution	
Data	
Method	
Design choices and limitations	
Provisional chapter organization	
Provisional reading list	
Timetable	
Start date	
Submission of contract and workplan	
Submission of draft version	
Submission of final manuscript	
Thesis symposium date	
Graduation date	
Evaluation	
Supervisor evaluation	GO / GO WITH CRITICAL COMMENTS / NO GO
Supervisor remarks	
Second reader evaluation	GO / GO WITH CRITICAL COMMENTS / NO GO
Second reader remarks	

## Appendix 3. Thesis assessment form

1. Introduction and theory				
Problem definition and relevance	fail	pass	good	explanatory notes (where necessary)
The thesis is embedded in a broader context. The writer describes how the thesis is intended to supplement insights from the academic literature.				
The theoretical and practical relevance of the thesis is clearly stated.				
The problem definition is clearly and concisely formulated as a question without a trivial answer, and which can be answered on the basis of several months of research. The problem definition is (usually) broken down into sub-questions which are reflected in the chapter structure.				
Treatment of academic literature	fail	pass	good	explanatory notes (where necessary)

Scientific theories and research findings about the thesis topic are stated fully, accurately and comprehensibly				
The discussion of the literature leads to the student's choice of a research approach / research model / hypotheses in order to answer the problem definition.				
Key concepts are operationalized as thoroughly as possible through definitions which are consistently maintained.				
<b>Gearing approach to selected topic</b>	fail	pass	good	explanatory notes (where necessary)
For a thesis that tests a hypothesis: the hypotheses follow from the literature discussed and are precisely formulated. Together they provide a possible answer to the problem definition.				
For an exploratory thesis: the "sensitizing concepts" that form the basis for exploring the topic follow from the literature discussed. They are accompanied by a preliminary description, demonstrating how phenomena in the research field may be identified, organized or annotated.				
For a literature survey or meta-analysis: the hypotheses to be confirmed or rejected in the various studies are formulated precisely. The concepts contained therein are accompanied by a preliminary description.				
There is sound reasoning for selecting a thesis that tests a hypothesis, an exploratory thesis or a literature survey.				
<b>2. Method</b>	fail	pass	good	explanatory notes (where necessary)
The various aspects of the <u>research design</u> (survey, content analysis, case studies, experiment, etc.) are identified. The choice of study / <u>data</u> collection / research materials is consistent with the problem definition.				
The <u>operationalization</u> / detailed description of the theoretical concepts is sufficient to make the connection with the research material.				
<u>Aspects relating to research</u> (reliability, validity, sampling, non-response, choosing multivariate analysis, generalizability, type of triangulation, etc.) receive the necessary attention				
<b>3. Results</b>	fail	pass	good	explanatory notes (where necessary)
A readable description of the research material based on the defined / operationalized concepts is provided.				
The research method used to address the problem definition is applied adequately from a research viewpoint				

The results are described systematically, where possible in explanations accompanying tables and figures presenting the results. In a thesis that tests a hypothesis, it should become clear whether the hypothesis can be accepted. In an exploratory thesis, it should become clear how provisional ideas (sensitizing concepts) are defined more clearly. In a literature survey, it should become clear what the final verdict is on the central hypotheses stated in the studies examined.				
<b>4. Discussion and conclusion</b>	fail	pass	good	explanatory notes (where necessary)
The problem definition is answered explicitly; conclusions are drawn on the basis of the results and they expand on the academic literature already available.				
Critical reflection takes place on the research methods used and the shortcomings of the study; possible avenues of further research are indicated.				
The significance of the research is placed in a broader context; where possible applications are touched on or recommendations given.				
<b>5. Other aspects</b>	fail	pass	good	explanatory notes (where necessary)
A clear distinction is made between the writer's own observations and opinions, and the observations, assumptions and visions of others, and there is nothing that even hints of plagiarism or academic misconduct.				
The use of language is impeccable (spelling, grammar). The writing style is clear (objectifying and systematic yet comprehensible and vivid).				
The structure of the thesis is clear, the problem definition and sub-questions serve a structural purpose for the argument. The thesis is of an appropriate length; any deviation from the guideline (between 8,000 and 10,000 words) must be justified.				
The literature references, tables, figures and chapter structure are in compliance with a standard format (usually APA, but in some cases a different format may be adopted).				
Originality				
Quality of the argumentation				
The thesis was written with a high degree of academic self-motivation within the specified time; the comments of the supervisor have been promptly and properly incorporated.				