

Thesis manual for the Linguistics MA programme

Learning objectives of the thesis

Knowledge and understanding

The student is able to systematically and expediently collect and interpret information. He/she is able to read, understand and analyse academic and other complex texts. In this way, the student acquires demonstrable knowledge and understanding that go further and deeper than the level of the Bachelor's programme, demonstrating that the student is capable of making an original contribution to the development and/or application of ideas.

Applying knowledge and understanding

The student is able to apply knowledge, understanding and problem-solving skills in new or unfamiliar environments within a broader context that relates to his/her field of study. He/she is able to integrate knowledge and to deal with complex material.

Making judgements

The student is able to discern general themes and make connections which are meaningfully supported by a wide variety of primary and secondary literature and primary sources where relevant. He/she is able to independently, critically and honestly formulate and defend a position.

Communication

The student is able to present a complex problem clearly and concisely in written or spoken form to an audience of specialists and non-specialists.

Combination of the above

The student is able to write a scientific paper in clear, effective and academic language and to submit it within an agreed period.

Learning skills

The student possesses sufficient learning skills to tackle further studies that are largely self-directed or autonomous in nature.

Start of the thesis process

The thesis coordinator organizes a meeting in December in which the lecturers present the thesis themes for that year. The lecturers ensure that there is a wide choice and that the topics are spread evenly across the graduation specializations. The students state their first, second and third choices and the thesis coordinator then allocates thesis supervisors to students. Both individual and group processes can be started. The thesis is also written individually within group processes.

Every thesis is assessed by the supervisor and an independent second reader who has not been involved in the production of the thesis.

The entry requirements for the thesis can be found in the programme's Academic and Examination Regulations.

Thesis contract and thesis plan of work

Process

As soon as the topics have been assigned and the supervisors have been allocated to the students, the supervising staff member and student jointly draw up a thesis contract. The standard form can be found on VUnet. This is a written record of the agreements made.

The contract also states the name of the second reader; this person is never involved in the process of writing the thesis. The first supervisor is always affiliated with the Department of Language, Literature and Communication of the VU Faculty of Humanities. The second reader may be from outside the faculty. A second reader must always be affiliated with a university or college of higher education as an Assistant Professor and be approved by the Examination Board as an examiner. If desired, a programme may elect to appoint a second supervisor, for example from the field of professional practice, to provide substantive guidance. In that case too there must be an independent second reader (actually the third reader), who comes from the student's own faculty or who works as an Assistant Professor in another faculty and/or university or college of higher education.

In addition, the student submits a thesis plan of work to the supervisor, detailing the substantive content. The timeline for completion is part of the thesis plan of work. The standard form for a plan of work can also be found on VUnet.

After the thesis contract and the plan of work have been signed by the supervisor, the second reader and the student, these documents will be sent to the thesis coordinator of the programme. The student and the supervising staff member are responsible for the clear and correct interpretation of the thesis contract and the plan of work. The coordinator generally checks whether the thesis contract and plan of work are complete and checks the summary of the content. In practice this task will be divided among a number of fellow lecturers because otherwise thesis coordinators in large programmes would have a disproportionately high workload and thesis coordinators in small programmes would almost always be involved as a supervisor or second reader of a thesis. If the coordinator discovers any omissions or mistakes, he/she may ask the supervising staff member and the student to amend the thesis contract and/or the plan of work and sign it again. If the thesis coordinator finds that a supervising staff member uses the same second reader very frequently, he/she may ask that staff member to designate a different second reader. After any amendments have been made, the thesis contract and plan of work must again be submitted to the thesis coordinator for approval.

Content and purpose

The thesis contract provides the supervisor and the student with clarity about the nature of the supervision. Students know what is expected of them and what they can expect of the supervisor. The same applies to the supervisor. The purpose of the thesis contract is to prevent students from falling behind with their studies unnecessarily and to provide solutions in the event of ambiguities and/or problems.

The thesis contract includes the following elements:

- the start date and the planned end date. On the end date, the student is required to submit the final product. The end date may be changed if both parties consider this to be necessary.
- name of the supervisor(s);
- name of the second reader;
- the description of the topic;
- agreements on the frequency of supervision interviews;

- the deadline before which the supervisor and the second reader will assess the final product (in July and August lecturers are less available to mark work, unless agreed otherwise between the student, the supervisor(s) and the second reader);
- the number of credits available;
- the language in which the report should be written (theses for Master's programmes taught in English must of course be written in English);
- additional agreements, where relevant.
- for interdisciplinary theses, the division of responsibility between the first and second supervisors may be formalized in the thesis contract, where relevant.

The plan of work for the thesis structures the student's thoughts on the topic and his/her work and lists the activities for the thesis. The timeline for completion is part of the thesis plan of work. Both the supervisor and the student must adhere to this timeline and they share responsibility for monitoring the process.

Final assessment

The final assessment of the thesis will be communicated to the student by email, by telephone or at a meeting with the supervisor, in which the thesis will be discussed, including content, organizational aspects and supervision. If requested, the student may see the cover sheet and assessment forms.

Supervision and feedback

Form and frequency of supervision

Students are entitled to systematic supervision when working on the thesis. Supervision should in all cases include the following elements in different stages:

- advice on the choice of research topic and on setting an appropriate scope for their work;
- approval of the design;
- instructions regarding the rewriting of inadequate sections of the thesis.

The frequency of the feedback is also stated in the plan of work. The student makes agreements with the supervising staff member about the submission deadline for the various sections of the thesis in relation to the feedback sessions. As a guideline, the student is entitled to a maximum of eight feedback sessions. According to the standards for teaching load, a teaching staff member can spend a total of 30 hours on supervising a Master's thesis, including all marking.

The supervising staff member will provide written comments (in the margins or separately) on the work submitted. During supervision interviews, the supervisor explains the comments to the student and advises him/her on how to follow them through. On some occasions feedback will be given by email. The supervisor and the student enter into clear agreements on this.

The supervisor's feedback must be recognizable (otherwise no adjustment is possible), must provide pointers for a better approach in future and be provided in such a way that the student does not feel insecure due to the comments made by the supervising staff member.

The supervising staff member provides feedback at most twice on drafted parts of the thesis. If a draft is still unsatisfactory after feedback has been given twice, the supervisor will record this and it will form part of the final assessment.

The date on which the final version of the thesis is to be submitted to the supervisor(s) is stated in the thesis contract. The thesis contract also stipulates the amount of time that the supervisor(s) and second reader have to read the thesis.

The supervisor gives feedback only once on the first complete version. A complete version is a thesis in which all components of the thesis – such as the declaration of originality – are present. The version submitted subsequently (1 July) goes to the supervisor and the second reader. If the thesis still does not meet the required standards after this round of feedback, the student has an opportunity to further revise this version (between mid-July and mid-August). If that version still does not meet the required standards, the assessors may decide to fail the student for the thesis. In consultation with the student it is determined whether further work on the thesis would serve any purpose (after re-enrolment in a new academic year) or whether the student would be better advised to start a new thesis.

Presentations

Presentations on the theses are given in February and in May/June. In February, the research structure is presented to the students and lecturers of the programme. The structure can be further adjusted on the basis of the feedback received by students. In the second meeting the students present their results. Here, too, the intention is that any feedback can still lead to new analyses and revisions of the Results, Conclusion and Discussion chapters.

Delays

If material is submitted to the supervisor late or not at all, the supervision interview is cancelled. Supervision interviews may not be cancelled by the student or supervising staff member(s) less than two days in advance, other than in exceptional circumstances.

If a supervisor is unable to meet his/her obligations (due to long-term absence/illness etc.), the student is informed. The thesis coordinator arranges a replacement in consultation with the chair holder of the lecturer concerned. If the student is unable to meet his/her obligations (due to long-term absence/illness etc.), the supervisor is informed. In such cases, the plan of work and the thesis contract are revised.

If the student exceeds the agreed deadline for submitting the final version by *three months* without consultation, he/she may fail the thesis.

Form of the thesis

A thesis is written as a fully self-contained research report according to the standard scientific structure and must contain the following components:

- Introduction including problem definition/research question
- Theoretical framework
- Method/justification of the chosen procedure
- Results
- Conclusion/Answer to the research question
- Discussion
- Notes, bibliography, source references
- Illustrations, where relevant (including source references)
- Appendices, where relevant (including source references)