

# How to write your Master Thesis

# Aim of the MA Thesis

The MA thesis should show the capability of the student to:

- work on a sociological research question
- that focuses on European societies
- and applies scientific methods
- under supervision but independently
- and to write up an appropriate documentation of the results.

Thus, the MA thesis serves as a proof of independent scientific research.

# Formal requirements

- Crucial information on thesis **registration and rules** can be found here:  
[http://www.polsoz.fu-berlin.de/en/studium/studiengaenge/ma\\_studiengaenge/ma\\_soziologie\\_europaeische\\_gesellschaften/index.html](http://www.polsoz.fu-berlin.de/en/studium/studiengaenge/ma_studiengaenge/ma_soziologie_europaeische_gesellschaften/index.html)
- **Submit 3 versions:** printed (single-sided), page-numbered and bound as well as a PDF
- **Volume:** roughly 80 pages/ 24.000 words (1.5 lines, Times New Roman, 12 pt, justified)
- **Title page:**
  - University, department, institute, research group
  - Title of the thesis
  - Author's name, matriculation number, email address, date of submission, names of advisors
- **Citations:**
  - Uniform, coherent and following Harvard Style: <http://libweb.anglia.ac.uk/referencing/harvard.htm>
  - **Plagiarism is sanctioned with 5.0 (=fail)!** Please refer to further information on plagiarism on the institute website.

# Thesis structure

- Title page
  - Table of Contents
1. Introduction (ca. 10 pages)
  2. Question and theoretical framework (ca. 20 pages)
  3. Research design and methods (ca. 10 pages)
  4. Empirical findings (ca. 30 pages)
  5. Conclusion, implications, avenues for further research (ca. 10 pages)
- List of references
  - Optional: Appendix (survey questionnaire, supplementary tables)
  - Optional: CD-ROM (e.g. qualitative studies: interview transcripts)
  - Affidavit (i.e. official declaration) that you are the sole author of this thesis

# Ad 1.) Introduction

## 1.1) Develop and formulate a research question

- Place it in current scholarly and public debate
- Highlight the relevance of this topic for sociology
- Identify a gap in the literature or a current problem
- Formulate the general aim and research question
- Optional: narrow down the topic and specify the research question (alternatively in 2.)
- Optional: current state of knowledge, and how your research contributes to it (alternatively in 2.)
- Optional: define and discuss main concepts

Hint: A common narrative in the introduction is as follows: Question X is highly relevant to sociology because of Y and Z, but we don't know enough about it empirically.

## 1.2) Outline of the thesis

- “The rest of this thesis is structured as follows. First.... because, next... because...”

Hint: Write a rough draft when starting to write, finalize it when the whole thesis is done.

# Ad 2.) Research question and theoretical framework

- Lay out the theoretical framework to specify and answer your research question
- **Typical content:**
  - Present and discuss the theories that the question relates to
  - Define and clarify key concepts
  - Present the state of the art (i.e. what we know so far), relate your contribution to it
  - Specify your research question within the theoretical context
  - Optional: develop hypotheses that guide your empirical analysis

## Ad 3.) Research design and methods

- **Case selection/ sample:** explain and justify your choices
  - Selection of respondents
  - Access to the field and prior experience
- **Data collection:** Discuss your questionnaire and main items
  - The operationalization of your research question and key concepts serves as a blueprint for your questionnaire
- **Method of analysis:** Discuss your method of analysis and explain why you chose this method

Hint: Reflect upon potential methodological shortcomings, problems and the limitations of your analyses either here or in the conclusion

## Ad 4.) Empirical results

- **Take up the question and present the results with respect to your question:**
  - Empirical evidence in qualitative studies: Interview excerpts and their interpretation
  - Empirical evidence in quantitative studies: Presentation and interpretation of statistical analyses
- **Presentation of results:**
  - Should be reader friendly (no SPSS output)
  - Select tables can be presented in the appendix
  - Discuss your results always with respect to your research question and theoretical framework
- **Common procedure in quantitative studies:**
  - Descriptive statistics: distribution of the dependent variable (e.g. across countries)
  - Bivariate relationship
  - Multivariate analysis, controlling for alternative explanations
  - Strongly depends on research question, to be adjusted to concrete research question



## Ad 5.) Conclusion

- **Answer to the research question:** shortly summarize your question, the core argument and main results, always with respect to your question
- **Contribution to current research:**
  - What are the theoretical and empirical implications of your results for current research?
  - What have we learnt?
- **Reflection:** Critically reflect upon your procedure
- **Future research:**
  - What could you not answer?
  - Suggestions for further research

# What matters most

- **The connection between the chapters:**
  - Chapters should build upon each other in a logical way
  - Pay attention to transitions between chapters: there should be a story line
- **In its core, the thesis consists of the following elements:**
  - General research question (Introduction)
  - Narrowing down of the research question, development of hypotheses, optionally with respective scope conditions (i.e. conditions under which the hypotheses hold) (Theoretical framework)
  - Operationalization of core concepts and development of questionnaire, explanation and justification of research methods (Methods section)
  - Interpretation of interview transcripts according to theoretical dimensions or statistical data analysis (Results)
- **Walk your reader through the thesis:** Explain what you are doing in each chapter and why

# Frequent problems

- **Research question:**
  - No concrete and explicit research question
  - Question remains vague
  - Question cannot be answered with the empirical data used
- **Coherence:**
  - No story line, no logical chain of reasoning
  - Too many deviations
- Failure to use correct and complete citation, no secondary citations

## Further reading

- Booth et al. (2008): *The Craft of Research*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press (especially on writing, structure and style).
- O’Leary, Z. (2005): *The Essential Guide to Doing Research*. London: Sage (more general).