

Institute of Sociology
Master of Arts "Sociology – European Societies"

Master's Thesis Guidelines

The MA thesis should deal with a topic that is sociologically relevant. In the thesis, you should demonstrate the study's relevance, by making use of self-researched social science literature and empirical data sources. These guidelines are aimed at assisting you in writing a MA thesis that meets the scientific quality requirements of our master program.

1. Goals of the thesis

The thesis marks the end of your studies in the respective discipline and should serve as a proof of independent scientific research. Along a specific research question your study should show that you are able to master scientific work. A central component of scientific work is the structured development of a logical scientific argumentation. This argumentation (both theoretical and empirical) can be developed by making use of primary texts, secondary data analyses and sometimes own data generated for the purpose of the study. The aim is to address a precise research question, which you seek to answer throughout your thesis, and to substantiate your thesis through reference to related debates in the sociological literature.

The thesis is about:

- Developing your own research question and research hypotheses derived from it
- Providing an explanatory context – theoretically and/or empirically
- Taking scientific positions as pertaining to the state of research
- Being able to contextualize your findings within that state of research
- Developing your own position
- Embedding that position in a larger context

Describing all research steps in a transparent and comprehensible manner, especially when it comes to collecting and analyzing research data.

2. Requirements and registration

The research-oriented Master's program in Sociology – European Societies leads to an additional professional qualification that enables students to carry out independent social science research and teaching and to critically evaluate and apply research that has been carried out.

Students must have **completed 60 ECTS** to be admitted for thesis registration.

The registration for the master thesis is made exclusively via e-mail to PB-MA-SOZIOLOGIE@polsoz.fu-berlin.de.

Each semester we offer two dates for master thesis registration. Usually, the first date is at the beginning of the semester (in November or April) and the second date towards the end of the semester (in February or September). Students can decide which date suits them best. The most current registration date is always updated at the [program's website](#). You may start to work on your thesis even prior to registration. After the formal registration, you have five months (22 weeks) to submit the finalized thesis. If a student has been prevented from working on his or her thesis due to an acute temporary illness, the Examination Board may, upon request, extend the write-up period by the period of the proven inability to take part in the examination. The reason for the inability to take the examination must be reported in writing to the examination board immediately and must be supported by a medical certificate. A medical certificate is a certificate stating why the student is unable to study or take part in an examination. For more information, please see: [Extension of MA-Thesis](#).

Finding a supervisor – You need two supervisors of your thesis. As a rule, the first supervisor is the main reference person throughout the development of your thesis. The selection of supervisors should be based on your topic and the planned methodological and theoretical approach to your work. This should ideally correspond to the research focus of the intended supervisor(s). A cross-institute, cross-faculty or cross-discipline appraisal can also be considered when making the selection. Supervisors will agree to work with you on the thesis based on preliminary discussions and a meaningful exposé/research proposal, highlighting your research question, its relevance as well as first ideas about your theoretical framework and methodology. The topic of your thesis and your primary supervisor need to be set when you register and you must meet the requirements of 60 ECTS credits that you should have already earned prior to registration. As long as 60 ECTS are completed at the moment of thesis registration, students are allowed to complete the remaining modules during and even after writing their thesis, if necessary. However, the official completion of studies can only be requested after completion of all modules.

You will have to find a first supervisor for your master thesis yourself. Normally, you ask one of the lecturers on [the list of official supervisors at the Institute](#). Under special circumstances,

you can also ask an external supervisor. Note that external supervisors must hold a PhD and have to be approved by the Examination Board. A second supervisor is usually appointed by the Examination Board. You can, however, suggest a second supervisor (with a short e-mail confirmation of the person requested; same for the external supervisor). Lecturers have limited capacities therefore you are strongly advised to approach potential supervisors as early as possible, at least 6 weeks before the official registration date.

When to attend the MA colloquium? – MA colloquia are offered during summer and winter terms. Ideally, you take a colloquium parallel to writing your thesis to benefit most from it, as it involves you presenting and discussing your schedule and the preliminary findings of your thesis with the lecturer as well as fellow students in the colloquium. However, you can also first attend the colloquium and write your thesis in the following semester (the supervisor is only needed in the moment of registering your thesis, not necessarily for attending the colloquium).

Is it required to be enrolled for writing the Master's thesis? – No, you don't have to be enrolled for registering, writing and submitting your Master's thesis. You only need your last proof of enrollment for registering your thesis. You only have to be enrolled if you have course work left to complete. However, after exmatriculation, you will lose access to Campus Management and all other FU services (such as library or specific software programs), so you are advised to obtain your documentation from Campus Management (Transcripts, certificate of enrollment) before exmatriculation.

What do I need for the registration – You need to send the following forms to the email address provided above:

- Form "Thesis Registration" completely filled out.
- Proof of last enrolment in the Master's program in Sociology.
- Proof of Achievements: Grades and credit points overview from Campus Management or recognition certificates, module certificates (if applicable).
- Form "Thesis Topic", completed with signature of the supervisor(s).
- Declaration in Lieu of Oath: When submitting your thesis, you will have to declare that you have independently composed/authored it yourself, using the referred sources and support only.

All forms are available on the website of the Examination Office under the heading ["Master's thesis registration"](#).

Volume – roughly 80 pages/ 24.000 words, excluding bibliography and/or endnotes (1.5 lines, Times New Roman, 12 pt, justified).

Title page must include:

- University, department, institute, research group
- Title of the thesis
- Author's name, matriculation number, email address, date of submission, names of supervisor

Assessment – Your thesis supervisor and second assessor will provide independent assessment for your thesis. Should the grades differ, the arithmetical mean of both grades will be the grade for your master thesis. You will be informed of your grade by email as soon as both assessments have been submitted. You may get your assessors' feedback during office hours. A thesis that has not been graded with at least 'sufficient' may be repeated once only.

Completion of Studies – The course examination regulations require you to apply for the completion of your studies. Submitting this application is a prerequisite for the issuing of your degree certificates. Further information and the relevant forms are available on the website of the Examination Office under the heading ["Completion of Studies"](#).

3. How to develop a research question?

Narrowing a topic – You may not know right away what your research question is. Gather information on the broader topic to explore new possibilities and to help narrow your topic.

Choose an interesting topic – If you're interested in your topic, chances are that others will be, too. Plus, researching will be a lot more fun! Make also sure that at least one lecturer at the Institute of Sociology has some expertise in your topic to be able to supervise your work.

Reference sources such as literature review articles (see for instance Annual Review of Sociology) are a great place to begin your research. They provide:

- a way to identify potential research topics.
- a starting point to gather information on your topic.
- an introduction to major works and key issues related to your topic.
- key authors in your area of research.

General Reference Sources – Dictionaries and encyclopedias provide general information about a variety of subjects. They also include definitions that may help you break down and better understand your topic.

Ask yourself: What subtopics relate to the broader topic? What questions do these sources raise? What do you find interesting about the topic?

From Topic to Research Question – After choosing a topic and gathering background information, you should develop a specific research question. When developing your research question, take also into account the availability of data/feasibility of the data collection and analysis necessary to answer your research question: is it possible to provide a sound answer to your research question with the data you want to analyse? Do not forget the time frame of your master thesis: is it feasible to provide a sound answer to your research question within 5 months of research?

Explore questions:

- Ask open-ended “how” and “why” questions about your general topic.
- Consider the “so what” of your topic. Why does this topic matter to you? Why should it matter to others?
- Reflect on the questions you have considered. Identify one or two questions you find engaging and which could be explored further through research.

Determine and evaluate your research question:

- What aspect of the more general topic you will explore?
- Is your research question clear?
- Is your research question focused? (Research questions must be specific enough to be well covered in the space and time available.)
- Is your research question complex? (Questions shouldn’t have a simple yes/no answer and should require research and analysis.)

Hypothesize – After you’ve come up with a question, consider the path your answer might take.

- If you are making an argument, what will you say?
- Why does your argument matter?
- How might others challenge your argument?
- What kind of sources will you need to support your argument?

Clarity	Sample Research Questions Focused	Simple vs. Complex
Unclear: Why are social networking sites harmful?	Unfocused: What is the effect on the environment from global warming?	Too simple: How are doctors addressing diabetes in the U.S.?
Clear: How are online users experiencing or addressing privacy issues on social networking sites like MySpace and Facebook?	Focused: How is glacial melting affecting penguins in Antarctica?	Appropriately complex: What are common traits of those suffering from diabetes in America, and how can these commonalities be used to aid the medical community in prevention of the disease?

Adapted from: George Mason University Writing Center. (2008). How to write a research question. Retrieved from <http://writingcenter.gmu.edu/?p=307>

4. Data Analysis

It is highly advised that you discuss the intended data analysis process initially with your thesis supervisor. Be aware of the type of thesis you want to write and the kind of empirical data you want to make use of. In this regard, there are three main types of thesis:

Based on empirical analysis of secondary data – Such data is freely available for reuse and is scientifically recognised: e.g. OECD, EUROSTAT, UN statistics etc.

The list below is intended to assist you in finding appropriate data for your thesis project. It compiles a set of publicly available a) data repositories where you can search for specific data; b) population survey datasets which contain national or cross-national survey; c) other non-population survey datasets widely used in social sciences; d) scientifically recognized websites providing macro statistical indicators at the national or regional level.

Data repositories:

- Research Data Centers of the German Data Forum:
<https://www.konsortswd.de/en/datacentres/data-search-at-the-rdcs/>
- [GESIS portal](#) (quantitative data repository in Germany)
- <https://ukdataservice.ac.uk/> (UK data repository for social sciences, including quantitative and qualitative data)
- <https://data.qdr.syr.edu/> (qualitative data repository at Syracuse University)
- <https://timescapes-archive.leeds.ac.uk/> (qualitative longitudinal research data)
- [Qualiservice](#) (qualitative data repository in Germany)
- [Harvard Dataverse](#)
- [Visual History Archive](#) of Freie Universität Berlin (in German)

Population Surveys:

- [Socio-Economic Panel \(SOEP\)](#)
- [German Family Demography Panel Study \(FreDA\) \(https://www.freda-panel.de\)](#)
- [Survey of Health, Ageing and Retirement \(SHARE\) \(https://share-eric.eu/\)](#)
- [German General Social Survey \(ALLBUS\)](#)
- [Afrobarometer](#)
- [Eurobarometer](#)
- [European Social Survey](#)
- [European Value Survey](#)
- [International Social Survey Programme](#)
- [World Value Survey](#)

Other non-survey datasets

- [Varieties of Democracy \(V-Dem\)](#)
- [Political Party's Electoral Manifestos](#)
- [Political Party's Organization](#)
- [Observatory for Political Conflict and Democracy \(PoIDem\)](#)

Websites with macro indicators

- [UN data](#)
- [Eurostat](#)
- [OECD](#)

Based on empirical analysis of independently generated data. If no suitable secondary data exist for your research question (which must be explicitly demonstrated), you can plan your own data collection. In this case, you need to be aware of time management, as data collection and analysis can take significant time. Whether you plan on conducting interviews, working with focus groups, or doing experiments, make sure to have a specific time-plan for each step of the data gathering procedure.

When constructing an own questionnaire, use existing and adequately tested measurement instruments whenever possible. For this, consult existing Repositories for Measurement Instruments (e.g. <https://zis.gesis.org/en>).

Before planning your own data collection, familiarize yourself with the quality requirements and data protection regulations as set out in the Guidelines on the Provision and Handling of Research Data in Sociology provided by the Academy of Sociology (<https://osf.io/preprints/socarxiv/xbr4v/>)

Literature review – A literature review must address a specific question and not be a mere descriptive account of other sources. To see examples of good literature reviews, you can consult publications from the [Annual Reviews of Sociology](#).

5. Choice of literature and scientific reading

There are basically two types of sources: 1) those sources that you quoted directly and indirectly because you adopt their statements (social science literature) and 2) those sources that you use as material that you further interpret in order to support your theses within the framework of an analysis. Sources that you can use as material for analysis may also include media reports. However, you need to interpret and contextualize these non-scientific sources because, unlike social science literature, they are not subject to quality control and peer

review, are not always edited and more strongly reflect the opinion of journalists. You can for instance cite media reports in the introduction or conclusion of your thesis in order to shed light on the political relevance of a topic. You have however to avoid developing a scientific argumentation based on such non-scientific sources. The exception to this rule is when you use media reports as primary data source that you analyze in the empirical part of your thesis, such as when conducting a discourse analysis or media content analysis.

Therefore, always use social science literature from specialist journals, anthologies and monographs as well as data from scientifically recognized databases to substantiate statements in your text. On the one hand, the literature review of your thesis needs to encompass the state of the art literature, on the other hand you should also review central original texts, which are always to be quoted in original. Social science literature can be researched using appropriate databases (SUB, JSTOR, etc.).

Particular caution is required with freely accessible texts and Internet sources. You have to assess the extent to which the sources can be quoted. Books and articles in anthologies that have been published by well-known scientific publishers, are subjected by the editors and reviewers to a quality assurance process. This does not apply to pdf documents of any kind that you can find on the Internet. Contributions from foundations and other interest groups should be treated with particular caution, as they represent often political interest groups. If you are asked to donate on the homepage, this is a clear signal that this organization is not independent.

A variety of reading techniques can help you greatly in researching which scientific texts are relevant to your thesis. In the context of a literature review and with the purpose of going more in-depth into selected literature, you can make use of:

- **Skim Reading** – The reading goal is to overview the literature on a topic and useful as a first approach to the body of texts. Read only a selection of text elements, such as: Author, year of publication, Title, Table of contents, Abstract, Introduction, Conclusion, Bibliography etc.
- **Scan** – The reading goal is to check if the text is useful for a topic. Define your topic in keywords and then scan the text for these keywords.
- **Thorough Reading** – The goal is to understand the text or excerpts in detail (including structure and argumentation) and to arrive at a critical assessment of the content. This is the most intensive and slowest form of reading. The purpose is to read the text in its entirety and make sure that you understand it completely. This is particularly important if you are engaging with the work of an author(s) or a specific theory in more detail.

- **Selective Reading** – The goal is to read only the passages of a text that are relevant to the topic. You have to know exactly what you are looking for in the text. First scan/skim and mark relevant passages. Then read relevant passages thoroughly.
- **Analytical Reading** – The goal is to examine text under certain aspects (e.g. method of analysis, concepts applied, structure of argumentation). Select a pair of aspects and then read the text under these aspects.

6. Citing correctly

Although you should make use of a recognized style of citation (e.g. MLA, APA, etc.), the specific choice of style is not as important as is the accurate and consistent citing according to the selected style. Therefore, always make sure to use only one style of citation in the same study and provide all information as according to selected style criteria. You can make use of [Citation-Management Software](#). However, they are susceptible to error if the entries are not made correctly. Therefore, you should always manually cross-check citations made using such software.

All scientific work (essays, term papers, theses) are written according to the rules of scientific work:

- They are free of spelling and grammatical errors.
- Use a scientific (not journalistic and/or normative) argumentation style.
- Are logically and clearly structured.
- Direct and indirect quotations are identified as such and references are correctly indicated.
- Use several scientific sources (monographs, book chapters in edited volumes and articles in specialist journals).
- Follow the formal requirements (citation style, formatting, etc.).

When citing and referencing correctly, you have to distinguish between different types of citations such as paraphrasing or direct quotation; select and use a formal style; format the in-text citations, format the reference list. If you are not familiar with any of these styles, then it is highly advisable to [read a full guide](#) on the major styles, such as APA and Harvard. A very useful style for the purpose of writing a sociological thesis is the [American Sociological Association \(ASA\) guide](#). Of course, citation applies also to statistic and other data sources, as well as to media reports and other non-scientific literature used as material in the thesis.

7. Plagiarism

Plagiarism represents a serious violation of property rights and the rules of good scientific practice. Plagiarism is presenting words and thoughts as your own which have actually been created by somebody else. These words and thoughts are the original author's property and using them for one's own purpose without acknowledging the source is punishable. If an MA thesis is found to contain plagiarism, it is automatically sanctioned with a 5.0 (fail). To understand more about plagiarism, please read [the paper on plagiarism written specifically](#) for students of the Sociology – European Societies program.

8. Exposé

An exposé is a shorter thesis outline that you submit to your potential supervisor when asking him/her to supervise your thesis. Your exposé must essentially answer two questions: a) What exactly is your research question and b) how will you proceed to answer your question, i.e. what should explain your finding (theory) and which method do you want to use to prove this on the basis of which material?

In general, it is beneficial to develop a research question that starts with "why" (analytical question) and avoid "how" research questions that are more descriptive. A "why" question is aimed at a cause-and-effect relationship. Thus, you need to specify in your proposal the explanatory context of your research question: what do I expect, what do I find out and why is that the case?

First, you should be able to explain your question using a sociological theory. If you, for instance, assume a social change, what would this be driven by? Therefore, you should examine the literature that revolves around different explanations for your topic. The second task concerns your research design: How do you proceed methodically based on which material (literature review, discourse analysis, meta-analysis, qualitative and/or quantitative data analysis)? What sources do you want to base your analysis on? Why is that?

9. Structure and content of thesis¹

There should be a necessary 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. Walk your reader through the thesis: Explain what you are doing in each chapter and why. In essence, the thesis should consist of the following elements:

- a) General research question (Introduction).

¹ See also the checklist for quantitative social science articles provided by the Academy of Sociology (<https://osf.io/mw59u/n>)

- b) Narrowing down of the research question, development of hypotheses, optionally with respective scope conditions (i.e. conditions under which the hypotheses hold) (Theoretical framework).
- c) Operationalization of core concepts and development of questionnaire, interview guideline etc; explanation and justification of research methods (Methods section). Make sure to be transparent and justify and explain each step of your decision process regarding the empirical design of your study.
- d) Interpretation of interview transcripts according to theoretical dimensions or statistical data analysis (Results)

In what follows, we will address a tentative structure of the thesis. While the suggestions here are not strict requirements and subject to change based on the nature of the thesis at hand, it is clear that a good thesis must be characterized by a coherent and logical structure. A thesis usually consists of the following parts (some are optional, it depends on the specific work):

- Title page
 - Table of Contents
 - List of abbreviations
 - List of tables and figures
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)
 6. List of references (does not count for total number of words)
 7. Appendix (program codes of all data analyses, survey questionnaire, supplementary tables)
 8. Optional: CD-ROM (e.g. qualitative studies: interview transcripts)
 9. Affidavit (i.e. official declaration) that you are the sole author of this thesis

1. Introduction – The purpose of the introduction is:

- To develop and formulate a research question.
- To define and discuss main concepts.
- To place it in a current scholarly and public debate.
- To highlight the relevance of this topic for sociology.
- To identify a gap in the literature or a current problem.
- To formulate the general aim and research question.
- To narrow down the topic and specify the research question.
- To lay out the current state of knowledge, and explain how your research contributes to it.

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 – You may want to summarize shortly the individual chapters 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.

2. Research question and theoretical framework – Lay out the theoretical framework to specify and answer your research question. The purpose of this section is:

- To present and discuss the theories that the question relates to.
- To define and clarify key concepts.
- To present the state of the art (i.e. what we know so far), relate your contribution to it.
- To specify your research question within the theoretical context.
- To develop possible hypotheses that guide your empirical analysis.

3. Research design and methods – In this section you explain the method you have used and explain why these methods make sense in the context of the study. Based on the methods you chose, some of the following aspects may apply:

- Explain and justify your choice of the dataset, case selection/sample
- 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.
- Own data collection: selection of respondents, access to the field and prior experience
- Discuss questionnaire and main items.

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

4. Empirical results – Take up the question and present the results with respect to your question(s):

- 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).
- More central findings are presented in the text. Other select tables can also be presented in the appendix.
- Discuss your results always with respect to your research question and theoretical framework that you have proposed earlier in the thesis.

Common procedure in quantitative studies:

- Descriptive statistics: distribution of the dependent variable (e.g. across countries)
- Bivariate relationships.
- Multivariate analysis, controlling for alternative explanations.

The presentation of empirical results strongly depends on research question, and the findings need to be to be discussed as relate to a concrete research question.

Document all the single steps of your data analyses and provide the complete program codes (e.g. do-files in Stata) in the Appendix.

5. Conclusion – Answer to the research question: shortly summarize your question, the core arguments and main results, always with respect to your research question. Address the contribution to current research: what are the theoretical and empirical implications of your results for current research and what have we learnt? Critically reflect upon your theoretical and methodological procedure and its possible shortcomings and limitations. Lay out questions for future research: What could you not answer?

Frequent problems that may occur and that you should try to avoid before embarking in the thesis project is not having a concrete and explicit research question, the question remaining vague or posing a question that cannot be answered with the empirical data used. Another problem is if your thesis lacks in coherence between the sections. This occurs when you have no story line, no logical chain of reasoning, too many deviations that are not necessary. A failure to use correct and complete citation, represents another major problem.

10. Format of thesis

Font: use one of the standard fonds, e.g. Arial, Times New Roman, Cambria, Calibri.

Font size: 11-12

Spacing: 1.5-2 lines

Left and right margins 2 to 2.5 cm