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Guidelines for the preparation of a Master's Thesis proposal

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1 Preface

The following document serves as guidance to prepare a thesis proposal, whereas the supervisors will communicate individual requirements if applicable. Before the proposal formulation, thorough research on the thesis topic is expected, which can take some time and should be discussed with the supervisors. For this matter, please arrange a meeting or visit your supervisor's consultation hours.

2 Objective

The proposal of a scientific paper serves to outline the essential content before the actual writing of the paper; in particular, to clarify the relevance of the topic, formulate a problem, and establish a methodological approach for answering the resulting research questions and outline hypotheses. The proposal *does not* have to anticipate the findings of your final thesis – these will become clear while you are writing the paper.

A well-formulated proposal guides you through the Bachelor's/Master's thesis. It contains all elements of the introduction and can often be used as a draft for the first chapter of your thesis and part of the literature section. This underlines that you are not writing the proposal "for nothing".

Always keep the goal of your final thesis in mind: Your task will be to apply a theoretical and/or empirical method (you typically learned during your study program) to a concrete research problem and to show how trained you are working with a scientific toolbox.

It follows that a thesis that does not have a sound theoretical and/or empirical foundation does not meet the requirements for a thesis and will be graded poorly according to this.

Put the other way round: A good thesis is characterized by an exciting question answered with a suitable theoretical and/or empirical method. This includes that the relationship between the research question and the method should become as clear as possible (for example, through cross-references between the chapters of the paper or frequent references to the methodological framework).

However, do not overestimate the demands placed on a thesis: Good Master's theses contains an important portion of already known considerations, which are arranged in a new way to produce new insights. This is a challenge for itself – you cannot and should not reinvent the world completely!

3 Time exposure, scope and style

The thesis proposal is the screenplay for your final thesis. Make sure to assign sufficient time – the effort involved can usually be measured in weeks rather than days. A hastily and casually written exposé will not help you. The proposal will also be commented on by your fellow students and the supervisors in the thesis seminar and must be comprehensible to them.
As a rule, your written proposal should not be much longer than three pages. Additionally, the proposal should include the planned outline of the thesis, schedule and bibliography (see below: 4.5 to 4.7).
Master's theses are scientific papers! Spelling and formatting should be appropriately clean, formulations neutral and objective, citations and the structure should be well thought through and appropriate. The more you consider these aspects when writing your proposal, the better.

4 Key contents of the proposal

4.1 Motivation, relevance and context

Explain how the topic of the thesis is relevant. For example, is there a current political or historical motivation? Perhaps your topic has not been researched profoundly in the past, or is your goal, for example, to gain a different perspective by applying a new method to a known issue?

4.2 Current state of research

Show how the topic has been analyzed in the scientific literature until today and elaborate lines of argumentation and contradictions in the literature. Which authors argue in which direction, which aspects are already well covered in the literature, where can you find gaps?
Our research wiki provides tips on research and essential sources: https://wiki.htw-berlin.de/confluence/display/htwwssschrbn/Research+resources+for+students+of+economics which you should definitely (!) take a look at.
When presenting the state of research, work in the same way as you should in your thesis: In particular, practice proper citation (short citation in the text, sources in the bibliography) and link individual literature citations by establishing references between the cited works.

4.3 Research questions

Based on your considerations of relevance and the state of research, formulate research questions as concrete as possible; it should become evident which aspects of the topic deserve special analysis. Avoid questions that are too open-ended, instead formulate so-called W-questions (in particular: What?, How? Which?, Why?, What for?, possibly also When?, Who?, Where?), because these direct you to a more precise problem setting. You may already be able to formulate initial hypotheses about the answers to the questions, i.e. you can already formulate initial assumptions about the results of your final work.

When formulating research questions, make sure that they are related to the given or envisaged topic of the thesis (which, of course, can still be changed in consultation with your supervisor until the official thesis registration). It is often helpful to take the topic of the thesis as a starting point and break it down into a number of smaller research questions, which then provide a more tangible structure for working on the topic and make the necessary stages of answering the main research question recognizable.

4.4 Method

Present the method (≠ methodology[1]) with which you would like to explore your topic. Outline theoretical and/or empirical models and approaches (Data comparison? Country comparison? Media analysis? …) suitable for answering the formulated research questions. If necessary, also cite relevant literature (again: short citation in the text, sources in the bibliography) and explain why the preferred methods can be used in a meaningful way from your point of view. Moreover, try to point out the limitations of the methods used.

4.5 Structure

Create a preliminary outline of your final thesis. Generally, this outline does not have to include more than two outline levels. If applicable, name the main themes of each section in bullet point form below the headlines.

In your preparation phase and during the writing process, your structure can be subject to change and adjustment to newly considered aspects. Potentially, some individual sections might become obsolete, or it will be meaningful to arrange sections differently.

4.6 Schedule

Establish a reasonable timetable for the preparation of your final thesis. Break down your work into individual processes and the time needed for each; preferably in tabular form. Include proofreading and another time buffer of at least ten days into your timetable.

4.7 Bibliography

The reference list includes all cited sources that are part of your proposal and should provide an overview of the current research state, in content and method-based manner, according to your topic. As a general rule, five to ten scientific sources should be sufficient. For the proposal and your thesis, appropriate citations according to scientific standards have to be applied, whereas citations should be complete, systematic, and coherent.

[1] " *Methodology* can properly refer to the theoretical analysis of the methods appropriate to a field of study or to the body of methods and principles particular to a branch of knowledge. […] In recent years, however, *methodology* has been increasingly used as a pretentious substitute for *method* in scientific and technical contexts […] But the misuse of methodology obscures an important conceptual distinction between the tools of scientific investigation (properly methods) and the principles that determine how such tools are deployed and interpreted— a distinction that the scientific and scholarly communities, if not the wider public, should be expected to maintain." (Frankfurter 2002 citing his MICROSOFT Bookshelf dictionary, p.2)

Generally, the proposal's bibliography should only include sources, which are cited in-text in the proposal. For the final thesis, this is obligatory: the bibliography will only (!) contain citations that are mentioned in your text. If you consider a source vital to be included in the bibliography, make sure to cite that source in the text; otherwise, your paper might not be complete.

Reference list:

Frankfurter, George M. (2002). *Method and Methodology*. Homo Oeconomicus at Institute of SocioEconomics (University of Hamburg), 18(2002), 465-491.