

Guidelines for Bachelor's/ Master's theses at the Chair of Public Finance

- Goals of the thesis: summarize the state of the literature, identify a new research question, make an attempt at answering the question
 - Use at most two thirds of your time and space for the literature review in a Bachelor's thesis, and at most one third in a Master's thesis
- Language of the thesis:
 - Bachelor: German or English
 - Master: English
- Compulsory meetings:
 - Bachelor
 - initial meeting to discuss thesis topic
 - after 2 weeks, please submit a preliminary list of references and a 1-page outline by email
 - second meeting after 4 weeks; literature review should be completed and preliminary research question should be identified; question will be fine-tuned during the meeting
 - Master
 - initial meeting to discuss thesis topic
 - after 2-4 weeks, please submit a preliminary list of references and a 1-page outline by email
 - second meeting after 4-6 weeks to fine-tune research question
 - further meetings upon request
- First main task: comprehensive review and discussion of the relevant scientific literature
 - Some papers suggested by the supervisor
 - Search the literature for related papers following the thesis guidelines of the Institute of Economics.
 - Describe the relevant literature in your own words. Do not simply repeat what the research papers claim to be doing but explain them in an independent and intuitive way.
 - Do not summarize each paper in isolation. Make sure to point out differences/similarities between the papers.
 - Typically, you will have 3-5 closely related references and 10-20 additional references.
 - The more closely related a paper is to your research question, the more detailed should be your summary.
 - For closely related papers, address all of the following points:
 - What is the research question? If the paper does not explicitly mention a research question, identify it yourself.
 - Which methods are used to tackle the question?
 - What are the main steps?
 - What is the answer to the research question?
 - How does the paper relate to your own research question and research design?
 - Your summary should focus on the **methods** and **main steps**. Describe the results only very briefly.
 - For empirical papers: at the very least explain the data set, the regression equation(s) and identification assumption (if applicable)

- For experimental papers: at the very least explain the experimental design (including the subject pool and the monetary incentives)
 - For theoretical papers: at the very least explain the main optimization problem, the corresponding first-order conditions (if applicable) and the main propositions
- Second main task: identify a new research question within your assigned topic and demonstrate the relevance of your question. Here are some possible questions to think about:
 - Which general questions remain open in the scientific literature related to your topic?
 - Questions focusing on a specific recent paper:
 - What are the main limitations of the paper? How can these be addressed?
 - Are there alternative approaches (empirical, experimental, theoretical) to the research question?
 - Are the assumptions of the model convincing? How can the model be extended?
 - For empirical papers: How can the empirical strategy be improved? Which theory could explain the results?
 - For experimental papers: Are the findings generalizable or unique to the experimental setting? How can the experiment be extended?
 - For theoretical papers: How will the results change if a critical assumption is relaxed? What kind of data would be needed to test the theory?
 - Et cetera
 - A good research question is **precise, well motivated and answerable**
- Third main task: make an attempt at answering the research question
 - Develop a research design: theoretical model or empirical/experimental strategy and suitable data sources
 - Typically, the research design will build on a closely related paper and extend its theoretical/empirical model in order to cover some additional aspects
 - Present the results of your research design (compulsory for Master's theses)
 - For Bachelor's theses, results will improve the value of the thesis but are not required (and will often not be part of the thesis).
 - Try to get as far as possible. Don't despair if you don't reach a complete answer.
- Structure of the main text
 - 1. Introduction (2-4 pages):
 - The introduction should be the last section that you write.
 - An impatient reader should be able to understand and evaluate the central findings of your thesis based exclusively on the information in the introduction.
 - Answer all of the following questions:
 - What is the research question asked in your thesis?
 - Why is this question interesting/relevant?
 - What is your research design?
 - What is the answer given to the research question? (if applicable)
 - How does your thesis extend the existing literature?
 - 2. Background information (optional)

- You may use this section to explain a specific institutional setting (e.g., a specific policy used in your study, etc.)
 - Non-academic references may be used in this section
 - 3. Literature review
 - 4. Research question
 - Development and discussion of your own research question
 - 5. Research design
 - 6. Results (compulsory for Master's thesis, optional otherwise)
 - 7. Concluding remarks (1-3 pages)
 - Do not repeat the information from the introduction.
 - This section can be used to discuss limitations of your model, speculate about further results, outline additional questions for future research, etc.
- Layout and length: follow the "Guidelines for Writing a Thesis or Seminar Paper" of the Department of Economics
- Audience of the thesis:
 - Your fellow students and the supervisor
 - Take knowledge from economics courses at Bachelor/Master level as given. Explain everything that goes beyond that knowledge. (In particular, you should not follow the highly condensed writing style of articles published in academic journals.)
 - Your exposition should be self-contained, i.e., the audience should be able to understand your arguments without relying on additional sources.
- General writing rules:
 - Keep it short.
 - Keep it simple.
 - Write only what you understand yourself.
 - Use your own words.
 - Cite your sources correctly.
 - Write in present tense.
 - Distance your own view from that of other authors. For example, include terms such as "in my view" or "according to the authors" if it does not become sufficiently clear otherwise.
- Preventing plagiarism
 - Zero tolerance for (intended or unintended) plagiarism
 - Any parts of your text (of more than two words) or ideas or data that are not strictly your own have to be marked. The same applies for translations.
 - The text has to be written in a way that makes unambiguously clear which parts are your own thoughts and which parts repeat ideas from other persons. Only general knowledge, commonly accepted facts or economic 'general knowledge' is exempted from this requirement.
 - Your thesis will be checked with plagiarism testing software.
 - Plagiarism will result in the rejection of your paper and possible further disciplinary measures by the university.