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# How Do I Successfully Write a Masters Thesis?

A practical guide for peace- and conflict-researchers and other social scientists

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**For Consultation** (also Workshops):

**ACADEMIC COACHING**
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**Recommended Literature** (including stages of the writing process and crisis management):

Stock, Steffen; Schneider, Patricia; Peper, Elisabeth; Molitor, Eva (Hrsg.):
**Erfolg bei Studienarbeiten, Referaten und Prüfungen. Alles was Studierende wissen sollten.**
Springer-Verlag, Berlin, Heidelberg 2009 – *www.studierendenratgeber.de*

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## I. It's *Your* Thesis – An Introduction

"Writing can bring even the best author to her knees" a colleague said to me, chuckling, as I morosely told him about my work on a long, scholarly writing project. His words did make me feel briefly better, but this really ordeal should not happen to me – someone who advises other social scientists! Another phrase from another colleague was, in connection with such academic writing, rather better for bolstering courage: "Practically all students make the same mistake, of beginning their own writing too late. They lose themselves in the flood of literature." Courage, it is true, can be a good companion on the journey to one's own scholarly manuscript. But in the course of our experiences with our own texts, we have discovered three additional, much better escorts: commitment, motivation, and support from colleagues. Whenever we had a personal commitment to the topic we were writing about, we began writing earlier in the morning, worked with more dedication, and sat longer at our desks in the evening. And when, in the process of writing, a good idea suddenly hit us (which they often only do while we are actually writing), the letters practically flew onto the paper. Finally, we have realized just how beneficial conversations or teamwork with colleagues can be, especially in scholarly work – and, luckily, academia regards cooperation quite highly!

Commitment, motivation, and support from colleagues are hence the things we would like you to take to heart regarding your academic writing. To the degree that these factors work together, writing a scholarly work can sometimes even be fun! In counselling sessions with students planning their theses it struck us that, unfortunately, these qualities were often missing.

*Commitment* is the easiest to achieve. When you have a choice about the topic or central question of your work, ask yourself which topic, which question *really* interests you – what gets *you* excited.

*Motivation* is more difficult to inspire. It has much to do with self-determination, with knowing and understanding your own character and work habits. It is most important that in every phase of text preparation you consistently dare to trust yourself, for example beginning by simply writing "straight out" without consulting ten books first. You might be amazed by your own level of knowledge, and besides, secondary literature is not an end in itself. Motivation can also be nurtured if, for any pages *you* write, you give yourself a reward and them a place of honor on your desk. Furthermore, you are (of course) also responsible for structuring your work day such that something of your own can come out of it and the hours spent at your desk do not become torture. Plan work time and free time, as well as specific highlights that you can look forward to.

*Support from Colleagues* should not be left to chance, but organised. Which colleagues might be happy to make themselves available for discussions on methodological framework, and which willing to read through your text? Who can you call when you need to let off some steam?

This guide is deliberately kept short and simple. On the title page we have provided a note on the possibilities for further consultation (and workshops) as well as literature recommendations.

# II. Work Stages

## 1. Thinking Academically

Academic reasoning aims for an objectifiable connection with reality (that is, a connection that outsiders can identify and understand). It features planned procedures, distinctive thinking strategies and a specific language style.

Academic information and findings are systematically obtained and developed. New insights are balanced against established facts.

Example:

> When you analyse the causes of inter-ethnic conflict, you will have to consider an array of economic, political, historical, etc., criteria. If you come to the conclusion that transnational actors played a key role in your case study, you must check your findings against the available literature before you make general statements and apply for the Nobel Peace Prize.

Academic reasoning differentiates between *author-oriented approaches,* in which one's own ideas stand in the foreground and the literature is used for support, and *literature-oriented approaches*, in which the available scholarly literature takes a primary role and the author remains in the background. You can work deductively using either approach. In other words, you can derive your findings from the (fundamental) theories developed by others or you can conduct research empirically, on the basis of facts you have compiled yourself.

Example:

> If you hold the view that transnational actors play a key role in inter-ethnic conflict, you could use an author-oriented approach to develop your own theory, supporting your ideas through a case study. You might support your hypothesis with a "Theory on the Significance of Transnational Relations in the Age of Globalisation", deductively following the prescriptions of this theory. In comparison, if you have arrived at your hypothesis as a result of your recent research trip to Polynesia then you would want to work inductively on the basis of your empirically-obtained data. However, you can also choose a literature-oriented approach and analytically review all the available works dealing with your thesis.

Political science writing has a number of characteristics in common with that of the other social sciences, namely that every work should:

- Define central, and especially new, concepts
- Systematically, precisely and logically justify assertions
- Support assertions with appropriately cited quotations and data (i.e., cited according to official guidelines)
- Clearly make connections between different assertions
- Eliminate inconsistencies, and
- Separate personal analysis from factual statements

### ☐ Check

- ✓ Look over a scholarly article written by your professor to get an idea of his/her approaches, strategies and language.

## 2. Finding a Topic

Less and less often are today's students given a concrete question as a thesis topic. Instead, students may now choose their own questions—something much more easily said than done. Choosing your own topic and question is roughly comparable to being sent to the market to do the shopping for a multiple-course meal, without a pre-determined menu. What in the world should you consider while shopping, so that you are not at a total loss that night in front of the stove? When choosing your topic, consider the following steps:

1. What *really* interests you? What do you want to learn? Do not underestimate this question, because it is *you* who will have to sit for weeks at your computer, struggling to create something unique.

   Example:

   One of your acquaintances, whom you regard highly, belongs to the Chechnyan diaspora. He has already told you a little about his home. This has awoken your interest in finding out why this conflict is so difficult to solve and why your acquaintance cannot live safely in his homeland.

2. What is your object of investigation: an object, a theory, a text or a problem? And closely related: On which period of time will you base your work?

   In terms of the above example, a possible subject of investigation would be the conflict between the pro-secession Autonomous Republic of Chechnya and the Russian Federation. You could thus use the period from 1991, when the first Chechen War broke out, until the year 2005 as your time frame for investigation.

3. Is there any empirical material on which you can base your planned analysis? If not, is there at least enough literature for you to draw on? How wide is the range of available material? Does it suffice as an empirical basis from which you can draw generaliseable conclusions? Is it anywhere near the right size for you to work with in the time given?

   In the case of the conflict between the pro-secession Autonomous Republic of Chechnya and the Russian Federation, it will be difficult if not impossible to work with empirical data, as many sources are inaccessible. Nevertheless much has already been written about this conflict, even if one party to the conflict has written far more than the other.

4. Are there already research findings on your topic? Are there any general theories that try to answer the questions relating to your theme?

   Political science research on the conflict between the Autonomous Republic of Chechnya and the Russian Federation is still limited. In the theoretical realm, you can draw on not only theories of minority conflict but also more general theories from conflict research, such as those regarding war economies.

5. What would be an appropriate question?

   "What factors contribute to a perpetuation of conflict?" Or "How do various sources of conflict combine to perpetuate a conflict?"

6. In terms of methodology, will you move forward by means of a selected (existing) theory, or do you have to devise a methodological approach yourself?

   The theory on the development of war economies says, for example, that many actors involved in a conflict have developed an economic interest in the continuation of the conflict. If you elect to use this theory, it would be important to verify and substantiate these interests in the conflict.

### ☐ Check

- ✓ Work through points 1-6 for your chosen topic.

## 3. Finding an Advisor

If you are free to choose your own advisor, you should make your choice responsibly, knowing clearly what your expectations are. When you do have the opportunity to choose, the following checklist may be useful in your preliminary talks with possible advisors. Even if you are assigned to a specific advisor, this list may help you address critical issues in preparation for your first meeting.

### ☐ Check

- ✓ Is your advisor competent in your topic field?
- ✓ What expectations does he/she, and what expectations do you, have regarding meetings and contact during your work?
- ✓ Will he/she take enough time to talk to you?
- ✓ Will he/she take an interest in advising you, or does he/she seem overworked?
- ✓ Will he/she generally be available (upon appointment) to talk with you?
- ✓ Will he/she help you obtain information (materials, theories) and develop your methods?
- ✓ Is he/she willing to look over a preliminary draft?
- ✓ What does he/she look for when evaluating a thesis?

## 4. Organising Support

Writing a masters thesis implies, as a rule, a time frame of three to six months or longer. In this time, it will be necessary for you to independently and targetedly concentrate on one concrete topic (the "read-think-write" game). There will also be little respite from your work. Being alone can sometimes be beneficial, but scholarly work in particular gives rise to the danger of becoming lonely – that is, of feeling empty and cut off from the world. To prevent this situation, you should organise specific contact and support, preferably from classmates working on similar tasks. Small work groups can also be helpful in staving off loneliness.

### ☐ Check

- ✓ Do you have someone with whom you can discuss your topic, question and approach?
- ✓ Do you have someone who will read through and comment on your manuscript (or parts thereof)?
- ✓ Do you have someone to talk to when you are frustrated?

## 5. Time Management – Structuring Your Work Time

Slight pressure can be helpful in tackling your work, but a serious time crunch can be destructive. The following checklist may help you keep deadline problems from emerging.

### ☐ Check

- ✓ Plan your work steps from the due date backwards.
- ✓ Plan realistic work hours that you can stick to! Also schedule free days for recovery.
- ✓ Start writing parts of your text as early as possible.
- ✓ Try to stick to your schedule.

- ✓ Arrange to have a partner who will nicely but firmly remind you of your time schedule.

## 6. Obtaining Information

The "Google Era" has greatly altered methods of obtaining information. On one hand, certain tasks have become quite easy – for example, gaining access to documents. On the other, there is an ever-increasing risk of losing sight of one's own priorities in the jungle of abundant information. Finally, "copy and paste" has not done a bit of good for the originality of scholarly analysis. You are responsible for determining the quantity and quality of the information you collect.

### ☐ Check

- ✓ You yourself already know quite a lot. Make sure you have a clear idea of your own knowledge pool before you dive into the information jungle. Organise it by posing questions to yourself (What do I want? How do I want to proceed? What do I already know? What assets do I already have? How much do I want to know? etc.). Construct your own Info-Map (for example with the Mind Mapping technique) on a blank sheet of paper. Next, write out as much as possible without using literature: central questions, outline, theses, etc.

*Next comes a **Rough Information Phase**:*

- ✓ Analyse your topic options according to information fields.
- ✓ Consult articles from the specialist literature which broadly relate to your central ideas, and compare their views with the steps you have made thus far. Which aspects do you want to/ can you use, and which not?
- ✓ Does this information change your heretofore chosen approach?
- ✓ Start compiling a bibliography from the outset (source and literature databanks).
- ✓ Write out as much as possible during this rough stage.

*A **Specific Information Phase** follows:*

- ✓ Now more exactly define what information you will need for your specific keywords, range of topics, and central questions.
- ✓ Compile a bibliography (from *Google*, databanks, keyword catalogues, specialised journals, topical books, etc.).
- ✓ Construct a "to-do" list of sources to look through. Also set limits on the extent of your analysis.
- ✓ Assess the information based on your defined needs.
- ✓ Make sure that your planned approach can be adhered to.

*Finally you reach the **Detailed Information Phase**:*

- ✓ Specifically define your needs for detailed information (empirical data, documents, interviews, etc.).
- ✓ Locate missing details and integrate them into the texts you already have.

## 7. Structuring Your Material

Now it is time to work with the texts you have gathered. This work primarily includes reducing, summarising and choosing. Therefore it can be helpful to excerpt important texts and make excerpt-like notes of less important ones. A good excerpt should:

### ☐ Check

- ✓ Have a maximum length of 10% of the whole text
- ✓ Summarize the fundamentals of the text, in your own words and in terms of your own central research questions;
- ✓ Concisely explain the key message of the text;
- ✓ Clarify the central concepts of the text;
- ✓ Quote or paraphrase important passages;
- ✓ Categorise the text into the relevant field of knowledge;

- ✓ Characterise the text's style;
- ✓ Examine your own topic focus in relation to the text;
- ✓ Clearly point out the text's limitations.

*In preparation for writing your thesis, it can also be helpful to schematically note the references and connections between various texts.*

## 8. Constructing a Framework

After completing the above preparatory steps it will be time to, metaphorically speaking, build the scaffolding for your paper. The central components of your scaffolding should include your research interests, questions (including general guiding questions, if existent), goals, research progress, methods, hypotheses, empirical material/case studies, conclusions, and recommendations for policies/actions (if existent). In order to construct a stable scaffolding, you will need to consider the following questions.

### ☐ Check

**Research Interests:** What about this topic motivates *you personally?*

Here we choose as an example the OSCE's democratisation policy in Central Asia: Showing that democracy is the best form of governance, etc.

**Central Questions/ Research Focus:** Questions to ask (tip: the 5 W's: Who? What? When? Where? Why? (and How?))

- ✓ What central academic question does your work hope to answer (What)? OR
- ✓ How does your work contribute to answering a specific problem – a problem closely tied to your research focus, of course (How)? OR
- ✓ What is necessary to solve practical problems, take decisions, or make improvements (What)? OR
- ✓ What in your research field is unclear, problematic, incomprehensible or confusing (Why)? OR
- ✓ Which time period will you study (When)?

Example

What possibilities exist for the OSCE's democratisation policies in countries without democratic traditions?

**Guiding Questions**
You can break down your central question into a number of smaller inquiries that answer specific parts of the main question.

Example

How are democratisation concepts being developed?
What tools are being employed?
Who takes decisions about democratisation policy? Etc.

**Goals**
What scholarly (theoretical, empirical), material, and/or political goals does your work aim for?

Example

Using examples, the work should depict democratisation policy.
The work should, on the theoretical level, make a contribution to research on the value of both universalist and particularist concepts.
The work should, on the empirical level, study the implementation of selected OSCE projects.
The work should, on the political level, contribute to the discussion of the OSCE's democratisation

policy.

**Research Progress**

At this point, it is necessary to see:

What has already been written on your topic, and in which research disciplines/areas?
What is the current state of research?
Which (if any) theories can contribute something to your analysis?
And finally, where does a demand for research exist?

Example

On the topic of OSCE democratisation policy in countries without democratic traditions, you can (in accordance with the focus of your central questions) bring in existing studies on the democratisation policies of external actors, check transformation theories for their explanatory value, or incorporate theories and studies about political change in non-democratic political systems.

**Method**

Your method is the academic foundation of your analysis. The following factors play a role:

- ✓ On what *level* does your research begin? What is its scope/*reach*?
- ✓ What makes up your *research material*? (Books, magazines, essays, interviews, journal articles, politicians' statements, documents/special archives, political cartoons, audio/video documents, your own observations, your own or others' surveys, statistics, etc.). Do you have sufficient access to literature and sources? Can these sources satisfactorily answer your research questions, or do you need to further specify your topic?
- ✓ According to what *criteria* will you conduct your study of the material/case studies? Your criteria should be based on the current state of research in your field.
- ✓ Will you verify *hypotheses* (postulated connections between criteria)?
- ✓ Practically speaking, how will your research proceed *(approach)*? In general, most methods in political science have either empirical-analytical or theoretical approaches (or a combination of the two).

Example

The method could, for example, consist of describing the development of concrete democratisation projects (Material: surveys of participants) in selected countries (case studies), from the project conceptualisation (external political level) to the project implementation (domestic political level). Thus you could verify a hypothesis that postulates a connection between the participation of local actors in the conceptualisation of programmes and these programmes' acceptance within the local community (e.g., The…the…). See below.

Even if you invest a significant amount of time and energy in such a masters thesis, it is possible that the case studies will be extremely limited and fragmented. If so, your ability to make well-supported conclusions will also be constricted. One possible solution is to comparatively analyse a few different case studies. If you choose this option make sure that the cases, while conforming to your chosen research criterion, are as different as possible. This approach will make it possible for you to determine whether your criterion is central to your question or can be disregarded.

**Hypotheses**

First, formulate the assumptions/hypotheses you will analyse in the course of your work. The hypotheses should be well grounded in the current knowledge-base surrounding your topic, not created out of thin air. You may also derive them from existing theories. Do not compose your hypotheses at the end of your work! Such a strategy is boring and unscientific. You will see a much stronger advance in your knowledge if you start with hypotheses that turn out to be incorrect, and are forced to abandon them and build new theories based on your own analysis. Furthermore, construct hypotheses that are as concrete as possible, not general statements. Finally, near the end of your work you will have to reflect on what impacts your findings have had on your original assumptions.

Example:

The more 'civilised' a state (rule of law, democracy), the more prepared it is to comply with international legal regimes.

Justification: It is predicted that democratic states are more compliant than non-democratic ones. This phenomenon is attributable to (Democratic) Liberalism, which explicitly focuses on inner-societal variables and their international implications.
Later finding: …On this empirical basis one could reasonably judge that the part of (Democratic) Liberal Theory which says that democracies act differently from non-democracies cannot be upheld in the context of international jurisdiction, because national differences in political system do not appear in this area of the international system.

**Final Conclusions and Recommendations (if existent)**
Final conclusions should bring together all of your findings (e.g., to what extent your hypotheses had to be abandoned or revised). They should also address your general problem and – as much as possible – try to answer your central question. Furthermore, if one of your goals is to make policy or action recommendations to political actors, you should do so here. Finally, you should also highlight the possibilities for further research based on your findings.

## 9. Outlining Preliminary Considerations/Drafting a Synopsis

Some advisors require an outline of preliminary ideas for a masters thesis. An outline can also be quite helpful in clarifying your own intentions. A much more comprehensive and detailed synopsis, meanwhile, is generally required for scholarship applications. A synopsis helps you present your ideas, update your project outline through systematic preliminary studies, and solidify your knowledge of the relevant literature and sources

**Outline of Preliminary Considerations** *(Length ca. 1-5 pages)*
- Thesis title (main and secondary titles)
- Problem/Research interests
- Question(s)
- Theory base
- Method
- Material
- Preliminary work progress
- Special problems (if you have special problems, explain them in detail)
- Time schedule (plan from the due date backwards)

**Synopsis** *(Length 10-20 pages)*
- Short description of the planned work (*abstract*, max. 1 page)
- Introductory outline of the problem
- Research focus
- Problem/research interests
- Question(s)
- Goals
- (Academic) relevance
- Current state of research
- Theoretical underpinnings
- Theoretical framework
- Methodological approach
- Central concepts, materials, variables, hypotheses, case studies
- Outline of your framework
- Organisation of your work, including time schedule, required funds (if existent, e.g. for travel, literature, technical equipment), cooperation partners
- Bibliography

- Attachments (if existent) such as your own academic CV with contact details (1 page)

## 10. Tackling Formal Requirements

In terms of formal requirements, there are always a variety of possibilities. One ground rule: Be consistent, be concise, be systematic! You may want to take a look at how your advisor publishes his/her own works, or ask directly about his/her requirements and preferences.

Requirements for consistent formatting, for example in a thesis, enable (among other things) evaluators to see if the author has adhered to the length limits. These requirements must be strictly observed. You certainly do not want the grader to be displeased from the moment he/she begins to read! In addition, the formatting could be checked by the registrar's office/program's director or a similar overseeing body, in which case it would behove you to have obeyed the requirements. Furthermore, adherence to the required formatting (including citation and bibliography format, etc.) demonstrates you have mastered the basic scholarly methods – an absolute precondition for a postgraduate academic degree. You will find samples of the following format in the appendix. These samples should help you get oriented.

**Cover Page**

**Table of Contents**

**Citation method**

Direct/indirect citation
Abbreviations
Footnote system
Ellipses
Grammatical Adjustments
Handling foreign-language texts
Handling confidential information

**Source and Literature Indices/ Bibliography**

**Personal Statement**

## 11. *... last but not least*

Allow yourself enough time to rework your text if necessary. Editing is more than just "reading it through again." There are two central steps involved here:

**Self-Editing**

Make sure your threads of thought are visible, your argument logically consistent, and your writing style in accordance with scholarly aims. Eliminate redundancy.

**Final Correction with Outside Help**

Find a competent acquaintance/classmate/friend who will take the time to read through your text and discuss his/her findings. Make sure to allow enough time for the reader to examine your paper carefully and thoroughly. (By 'outside help' we do NOT mean ghost-writing!) Plan enough time to incorporate the recommended changes. We also suggest that you ask someone unfamiliar with your field of research to read your paper for comprehensibility, and someone good at writing to edit the language (a native speaker who is a good editor of spelling and grammar). Ideally, at least 2-3 people should read your paper in its entirety before you turn it in.

## III. Further Literature


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*Kalina, Ondřej/Köppl, Stefan/Kranenpohl, Uwe/Lang, Rüdiger/Stern, Jürgen/Straßner, Alexander*: Grundkurs Politikwissenschaft. Einführung ins wissenschaftliche Arbeiten. Wiesbaden: Westdeutscher Verlag, 2003.

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