Guidelines for Writing a Master Thesis Exposé

An exposé for a master thesis should **comprise between 10-12 pages plus a cover page and abstract.** The main text should be structured as described below.

Please use a common typeface like Arial (sans serif) or Times New Roman (serif). The font size is 11 pt, the line spacing is 1½. Please pay attention to insert subheadings in order to guide the reader through the text. Each page of the main text has to have the student's name and the page number in the header.

The exposé should show that you ...
- ... have a clear research question
- ... can argue its relevance
- ... know the academic / scientific debates your work is related to/embedded in
- ... address the research question in a sound theoretical and methodological way
- ... are realistic about the time you need to do your research and write your thesis
- ... have a clear idea what you expect from this piece of academic work.

Cover page should include
- Tentative title and subtitle of your thesis
- Full Name, Student identification number
- Name of the Supervisor
- Date

Abstract of your thesis (10-15 lines)
The abstract should be a very short version of the exposé's main argument and include the context your work addresses and how your work relates to it, your research question and arguments what your work contributes to the existing state of the art, further, what methods you use and why, and possibly conclude how your results might enhance the understanding of the debates sketched in the intro sentences.

Structure of the main text of the exposé

1. Introduction (1 page)

An introduction is both there to give the reader a first good impression of your approach, as well as of how your work relates to broader societal and academic discussions, problems or concerns. So, best start by identifying: *what makes your work interesting? How does it tie into current debates, be they academic, political, or societal?* Then go on to describe why particularly your work will make a valuable contribution to these issues, and briefly sketch how it will do so.

More than any other part of an exposé or a grant application, the introduction is a rhetorical exercise. In very little space, you need to stage a problem, catch the reader's interest in it, and then prepare the ground so that precisely your approach can be presented as offering valuable knowledge to address this. Also, you need to give a comprehensive idea of the most cru-

cial aspects of your work – so what you do, roughly how, and why it is innovative. In short, you precisely need to know what is important to your approach. *To write a good intro, you basically need to very well understand the overall argument you make in your exposé*. That is why good introductions can only be finalised at the end.

To stage a problem and to **catch readers' interest**, a good way is to include a **hook at the beginning of the introduction**. This is a statement of something sufficiently interesting to motivate your reader to engage with your proposal; it should make the reader intuitively grasp – even if he/she is not specialised in this field – that your thesis' analysis will contribute to an important/interesting scientific/social problem. To introduce this, you may use quotes, examples, concrete events ... whatever is helpful to state your case briefly and convincingly. You should draw the reader in and make him/her want to read the rest of the exposé. *What is (1) the relevance of your work and (2) the larger social context of it?*
Try to stage the hook in such a way that it makes the reader feel that your approach and research question is the 'right one' in this context. That means that you need to rhetorically augment aspects of a problem which are of relevance to your work, and stress the importance of questions your approach relates to.
In the framework of a master thesis exposé, you should also include why you personally are interested in this issue. What is your connection to it? This is done elsewhere in a grant application (in the section on the research team).

As a next step, give a very condensed version (a more extended version will come in the state-of-the-art section) of your work's relation to the state of the art. Start by sketching briefly how this problem/issue has been dealt with so far, and by whom in terms of disciplines, theories, ... (not necessarily down to the level of single authors here!). Identify a lacuna or gap your work speaks to (so, basically all the "staging" arguments made before also apply here).
Then, give a miniature version of your approach. As said above, you only need to give an idea of the most crucial aspects of your basic approach here. This means that you should mention only the aspects which are absolutely necessary for the reader to understand why your research is a perfect fit to the issues and questions you have outlined before. At best however, you will give the reader **a brief and clear idea of your research question, field, and methods** (about 4-5 lines maximum!).

The **argumentative line** would thus be: **entry point (hook) → opening the field where the problem is situated → sketching how it was dealt with so far → identifying the lacuna/gap → positioning your research (incl. maybe your personal relation to/interest in this topic)**

2. State of the Art (2-3 pages)

The next pages should do an effort to position your question in relation to existing research in this area. This of course presupposes that you have done a **thorough literature review** and that you are able to **"map" the different lines of existing work** relevant to your question. The theoretical pieces may but need not be the ones you will yourself use to frame the question. There is room in 4.1 to explain your theoretical framing.

Particularly for a grant application, this part is also strategic writing. For hardly any topic, there is a "state of the art" in the sense of a coherent body of literature dealing with a topic. More often, the state of the art comprises different traditions of addressing the issue, which might be unrelated (then it's your work and merit to bring them together), as well as introduce contexts which are of relevance but in which nothing on this specific topic has been

written so far. E.g. you might criticise that a specific body of work has treated the issue rather on an empirical case study basis so far, without relating it to more general theories on the relation of science and society. For making this kind of argument, however, you need to introduce a short paragraph on relevant theories such as, for example 'co-evolution' or 'co-production'.

Every single part of the state of the art should give the reader a **clear idea of your perception of the respective debate, and it should already hint at how your work relates to it** (so, why is it important to you but also what do you criticise and intend to do differently?). You cannot pack everything into this part, but it should show an excellent command of the key literature. This part should cite those who had the idea or ideas first, and should also cite those who have done the most recent and relevant work. It should also focus on those parts of the literature which seem most relevant to the goal of **your** research.
Proper acknowledgement of the previous work on which you are building is a key issue. Include sufficient references, so that a reader could, by going to the library, achieve a sophisticated first understanding of the context and significance of the question.

In a nutshell, **this part** should do **three things: a) show your knowledge of the main debates relevant to your question, b) beyond mere knowledge, show that you are able to develop a position to these debates and c) that you can develop this position to lead the reader to what you are going to do in your thesis or grant application.**

3. Concrete research question (< 1 page)

This part is meant to elaborate the research question you developed in the introduction in a more structured and elaborated way. It is meant to be very concrete. At best, this part is structured as a **main question** which then is broken down into **sub-questions**. For each question, particularly for each sub-question, explain why it is relevant to ask precisely this question in this form. Sketch how the answers to this sub-question contribute to answering your overall question.
Also, pay close **attention to the notions you use in your questions**, in particular those which denote what you are going to analyse. If central notions aren't very clearly and precisely defined in existing literature (they hardly ever are), it might be worth to give short definitions of your understanding of central concepts used in your research questions. If you need more space to explain really crucial concepts, you can do that in 4.1.

4. How to do your research (~5 pages)

To put it bluntly, at this point the reader should be basically convinced that your work addresses an interesting question both scientifically and societally. The following subchapters are there to **convince** him/her **that you are able to provide relevant answers** to these questions, and that the **way** how you are going to do so **is well thought about**.

4.1. Theory/ies & sensitizing concepts (1-2 pages)

At this point in the structure, you should explain which theories and concepts you will use to frame your work. If these were already mentioned in the state of the art, you can "zoom in" here and explain how precisely they will be useful and which concepts will be of specific relevance. If you introduce new theories (e.g. you are using ANT which hasn't been applied to the field you are studying so far), you will need to introduce them more properly.

The theoretical framework connects your work and thinking to existing knowledge. It structures your approach to your interest and question. Different theories may allow you to explain some issues better, while they are less "sensitive" to others. Theoretical frames are the basis for formulating hypotheses but also guide you in choosing the research methods. Articulating your theoretical assumptions forces you to **think through the whys and hows of your research work**. Having clear theoretical frames allows you to go beyond description of phenomena and helps you to identify what statements you could make beyond your concrete study.

The theoretical framing should be selected to best explain the relationships among the different variables you identify in your problem. Be aware of the essential connection between your theoretical frame, the concepts you might use and the way you operationalise your question. While you do not need to stick to one pre-identified "theory" (such as ANT), give a clear explanation of why you need certain approaches and concepts, what they contribute to understand your research questions, and also in how far they are compatible with other theoretical approaches you use.
Note: The theories you use do not "follow" from the state of the art you identified, but together with your question should be clearly related to that state of the art – so, ***how does your theoretical framework help you to see and understand things which are relevant and innovative***?

4.2 Research field, data and methods of data collection (1- 2 pages)

This part is about your research field and how you are going to access it. You should describe which data you are going to use, and why particularly these data are well suited to answer your research questions. If applicable, you should **describe your case or research field** here, and argue why this case allows to address the issues you are interested in particularly well. Depending on field and case, also **address potential difficulties** in field access and any issues of **research ethics** which may arise (e.g. when working in the medical field), and how you are going to deal with them. So, what are the people/objects you have chosen as your unit of analysis? Has this "population" already been approached in other studies or has it been neglected? How will you get access to the people/objects?

Then, describe the methods you will use to collect/produce/access your data in detail. How can your research question be best answered by observing, surveying, interviewing, ... ?
Reflect the possibilities/limits certain methods bring with them. In writing the methods section, the key issue is not to just "cite" particular methods of data collection and analysis, but to write something substantial about **how they allow you to access certain dimensions of key concepts/issues of your research interest**. This implies to also think about the analytic and pragmatic limitations each method imposes. Try to go in detail about what you would like to do and why – so e.g. don't just write "using focus groups", but specify why focus groups and not interviews are the better way of addressing your question, how many groups, with whom, what topics they should cover, and most of all what you intend to learn by doing it that way and not in any other. Connect to the literature and the debates there and/or to other studies using similar/different approaches.
If you collect/produce different groups of materials, then sometimes a table is a good way to present them in summary. Such a table should contain the kind of data (the amount, e.g. number of interviews) as well as the role they will play in your analysis. This is a good point to think about the time you have planned to use for producing this empirical material and be realistic about your estimations.

4.3. Methods used in data analysis (< 1 page)

This part is on the methods you will use to analyse your data, whether you will use different methods for different sources, and if so, how you will combine them. To write something which makes sense here beyond saying "I'll do grounded theory", you will need to think about **what you will need to "dig out" of the material to answer your research questions, and then ask which method best helps you in doing that**.

4.4. Timeline (< 1 page)

Give a detailed, ***at best graphical, time plan*** from now to the completion of your thesis.
Be realistic and build check-points into your time line in rather short time distances in order to see your progress. Being realistic implies really going into the details here. Don't pick headlines such as "literature review", or worse "empirical phase", and assign them a number of months which seems attractive on first sight. Sit down and think about what you will do in that phase, and how long it will really take. Possibly consult someone more experienced in this and the methods you intend to use. Also, consider how much time you have per week/month for your thesis, and plan for sickness, vacations, and the "unexpected" ... which can always be expected to arrive ☺.

5. Bibliography (< 1 page)

Mention only the key literature and not everything you have looked at or read. This is also an exercise of choice. Show that you recognise the central pieces of literature and that you can distinguish them from less central ones. This needs to strongly correspond to your "map" of the state of the art, of course!
Be careful about presenting the bibliography in a consistent way. Choose one style!

Some more practical remarks on such writing processes:
Commitment, motivation and support are three ingredients which make any writing exercise more pleasant and generally lead to a better outcome.
Commitment: ask yourself if the topic and the concrete question really interests you, gets you excited.
Motivation: try to understand and realistically estimate your own character and work habits; motivation needs nurturing: set yourself small goals and enjoy once you have reached them; trust your intuition and sometimes do some writing without necessarily too much reading before it;
Support: use your colleagues as rich resources and be a resource for them;