Thesis Guidelines

Professor Ala Alrababah

If you want me to supervise your thesis, it is absolutely essential that you read this memo thoroughly and follow the guidelines outlined here in detail. Every step of these guidelines has been carefully designed to ensure that you produce a high-quality thesis. Skimming or ignoring sections will not only hinder your progress but will also affect our ability to have productive meetings and receive useful feedback in a timely manner. These guidelines cover everything from the initial stages of research development to final thesis submission, along with important expectations for meetings, writing style, and timing. Note that these guidelines are written with a research thesis for MA students in mind but most of these guidelines (especially steps 1-2, the general outline under step 4, and the two appendices) would apply to analytical/descriptive MA theses as well as to the final papers for Bachelor students.

Your success in writing a strong thesis depends on understanding and adhering to these guidelines. Please make sure to review each section carefully and fully internalize the expectations I have laid out.

Please note the university guide to the thesis for MA students and the guide for the drafting and defense of the thesis. For Bachelor students, please consult the university guide to the final papers. You are responsible for following these guidelines.

In addition to this document, this resource by Macartan Humphreys is useful. It discusses specifics related to empirical study chapters, case study chapters, and useful notes on style as well as figures and tables.

Step 1: Initial Research Development

Before we first meet to discuss your thesis, please send me a memo (3-5 pages) with the following details. This ensures that our discussion is productive and focused.

1. Develop Three Specific Research Questions

- Develop three focused, specific research questions that your thesis will address.
- These should be directly related to your field of study and clearly defined.
- Ensure that the questions indicate the causal relationships or key phenomena you will explore. Be clear about the dependent variable and (potentially) independent variable(s) you will examine.

2. Outline Research Design for Each Question For each research question, outline your approach, including:

- **Theoretical Framework**: Identify the relevant theories or conceptual frameworks that guide your research. Explain how these frameworks support your investigation of the research questions.
- **Hypotheses (if applicable)**: Clearly state any initial hypotheses based on your research questions. Make sure your hypotheses are testable and grounded in existing literature.
- **Identification Strategy (for a research thesis)**: Provide a clear explanation of how you will be able to isolate the causal effect of your predictor on the outcome. Read recent paper that use the data sources/examine the topic you will study and see their ideas for potential inspiration of how you will examine this question. Also, look at your policy evaluation/causal inference class notes to get an overview of potential methods and how you can apply them.

3. Data Collection Strategy For each question, provide detailed information on the **existing data sources** you will use:

- **Data Source**: Identify the datasets, archival sources, or other pre-existing data that you will utilize in your research. Ensure that the data is relevant and reliable for addressing your research questions.
- For quantitative projects, here is a helpful repository with political datasets: https://github.com/erikgahner/PolData
- Additionally, research papers recently published in political science journals (at least in the last 10-15 years) usually link to their data and replication code (often on Harvard Dataverse). This publicly available data could be useful for your thesis.

4. Potential Data Analysis Techniques Explain how you plan to analyze your data:

- **Quantitative Analysis**: If applicable, describe the statistical methods you will use to conduct the analysis.
- **Qualitative Analysis**: If using qualitative methods, explain how you will systematically analyze the cases (e.g., content analysis, coding frameworks, case studies).

5. Prepare a Memo

- Once you have developed your research questions and outlined the design, data collection, and analysis for each question, write a memo summarizing these points in 3-5 pages. This can be in bullet points–it does not have to be fully written out.
- The memo should be clear, concise, and structured to facilitate easy discussion.

Next Step: Share the memo with me via email **at least two weeks before** scheduling a meeting. In the same email, make sure to tell me **when you are planning to graduate**. We will discuss your research questions, identification strategies, and narrow them down to one topic. Please note that if this memo does not meet my expectations, I may decide not to supervise your thesis.

Step 2: Conduct a Literature Review

After our initial meeting, you should conduct a detailed literature review on the agreed-upon topic. This step is essential for ensuring your research question hasn't already been thoroughly addressed, positioning your work within the academic field, and identifying key gaps that your thesis will aim to fill.

1. Review Literature on the Dependent Variable:

- Identify existing studies that focus on your outcome of interest (the dependent variable).
- Examine how scholars have defined, measured, and studied this variable in various contexts.

2. Review Literature on the Independent Variable(s):

- If your research explores the effect of a specific independent variable, review the literature on the independent variable as well. The focus should be to investigate how the independent variable has been conceptualized and operationalized.
- Pay attention to how the independent variable has been found to affect other outcomes, as this may inform your theoretical framework.

3. Review Data Sources:

- For any datasets or sources you plan to use, conduct a review of the literature that has also used these sources.
- Understand the strengths, weaknesses, and common analytical approaches related to these data.
- This will help you avoid common pitfalls and inform your measurement strategies.

4. Structure the Review:

- Organize your review by themes, variables, or methodological approaches.
- Identify gaps or areas where your research can make a unique contribution.

Step 3: Descriptive Statistics and Data Overview

Once you have gathered and analyzed your date your data, it's important to provide a clear and detailed overview of what you're working with. This includes key descriptive statistics, preliminary results, and explanations that will guide your analysis.

1. Measurement of the Outcome:

- If using existing surveys or datasets, describe how your dependent variable (outcome) is measured.
- Include survey questions or indicators, coding decisions, and any operational definitions.

2. Sample Sizes and Data Coverage:

- Provide an overview of your data sample. Include sample sizes for each year, geographic location, or relevant category.
- Specify the years/locations of data collection and any relevant interventions or events your data covers.

3. Descriptive Statistics:

- Present key descriptive statistics (including means, medians, standard deviations, and missing observations) for each variable to summarize your dataset.
- Highlight any patterns or important trends, including potential limitations or gaps in the data.

4. Preliminary results:

- Report the preliminary results that test your main hypotheses.
- Make note of any interesting or unexpected findings that emerge from your initial data exploration.

Step 4: Writing the Thesis

An MA thesis is roughly 18,000 words/50 pages long. Follow this detailed outline to structure your thesis. Each section here is one chapter. Use your best judgment if you want to deviate from this outline (for instance, combining the literature review and theoretical expectations, or combining the results and discussion, or whether to include a context chapter). However, I may ask you to go back to this outline.

1. Introduction:

- **Motivation**: Start with the motivation for your research.
- **Research Question**: Clearly state your research question(s).
- **Literature Connection**: Identify the gaps in existing literature that your thesis will address.
- **Theoretical Expectations**: Introduce any hypotheses or theoretical claims.
- **Main Findings**: Provide a preview of your findings.
- **Implications**: Briefly discuss the broader significance of your research for the academic literature and (possibly) the policy implications.
- **Road Map**: Provide an overview of the structure of the thesis.

2. Literature Review:

- **Overview of Existing Research:** Conduct a thorough review of relevant studies, focusing on your dependent variable. Structure the review around **key ideas** and **theoretical debates**, not individual papers. This helps build a cohesive narrative.
  - **Argument-Driven Review:** Rather than just summarizing studies, ensure your review **makes an argument**. Organize it logically, grouping ideas by themes or debates to guide the reader toward your research question.
- **Gaps in the Literature:** Identify where existing research falls short. Highlight the unanswered questions or limitations in prior work. Emphasize how your thesis will fill these gaps and make a distinct contribution to the field.

3. Theoretical Argument:

- **Presentation of Theory**: Clearly articulate your central theoretical argument or model potentially building on the literature review above.
- **Assumptions**: Identify any assumptions that underlie your theoretical framework.
- **Key Mechanisms**: Explain the causal mechanisms at play and how your independent variable affects the dependent variable.
- **Hypotheses**: If applicable, explicitly state the hypotheses you will test based on your theoretical argument.

4. Context (If needed):

- **Background Information**: Provide the necessary historical, social, or political context for your research topic.
- **Relevance to Your Study**: Explain how the context informs or influences your research question.
- **Case-Specific Information**: If focusing on a specific case or region, offer details on why this context is crucial for your analysis (e.g., local policies, societal factors, or regional conflicts).
- **Temporal Scope**: Define the time period your research covers and justify why this is relevant to your study.

5. Research Design:

- **Theoretical Framework**: Clearly explain the theoretical approach guiding your research.
- **Research Methods and Identification Strategy**: Specify the methodological approach. When using regression analysis, clearly state the regression equation and explain all the variables. Make sure to clarify your identification strategy, the assumptions it relies on, and how you will test the implications of these assumptions.
- **Variables and Measurement**: Define how you will operationalize and measure your variables.
- **Data**: Explain your data sources in detail.

6. Results:

- **Descriptive Statistics**: Present an overview of your dataset with relevant statistics.

- **Analysis**: Please note that <u>you are responsible for using the correct regression analysis methods, correct code, and reporting results.</u> If I notice mistakes, I will point them out but you are responsible, based on your previous training, of analyzing and reporting your results correctly. <u>I may also ask you to share your code at any point</u>. Please make sure that your code is always clean, organized, and well-commented.
- **Results**: Present your findings in relation to your research questions and hypotheses. For regression tables and figures, please look at published papers to understand how people report these tables/figures, <u>including the captions</u> that describe these figures. Always make sure to report the coefficient estimates, standard errors, and number of observations (in addition to anything else that will be necessary for regression tables).
- **Robustness Tests and Counterarguments:** Perform robustness checks to ensure the validity of your findings (some of those may go into an appendix but discuss them in the main text–either here or in the discussion section below). Additionally, address potential counterarguments or alternative explanations, explaining how your results hold up against them.
- **Visual Aids**: Use graphs, tables, or figures to enhance clarity.

7. Discussion:

- **Interpretation of Results**: Explain the significance of your findings and how they answer your research questions.
- **Theoretical Implications**: Discuss how your results support or challenge existing theories.
- **Limitations**: Address any limitations in your research design, data, or analysis.
- **Alternative Explanations**: Explore other potential explanations for your findings (and you may want to include a discussion of the robustness tests here).

8. Conclusion:

- **Summary of Findings**: Recap the key results of your study.
- **Implications**: Discuss the broader implications of your research for the field and practice.
- **Future Research**: Suggest areas for further study and potential research directions based on your findings.

Appendix I: Timing and Expectations

As your thesis supervisor, I want to ensure that our meetings are productive and that I have enough time to thoroughly review your work. To manage expectations and time effectively, please follow these guidelines:

- **Meeting Scheduling**: You should plan to request a meeting with me at least two weeks in advance. Depending on my travel schedule and availability, it may take longer, so always plan ahead.
- **Submitting Memos**: Please send your memos two weeks prior to our scheduled meeting. This gives me sufficient time to review your work carefully. Do not expect feedback within a few days of submission.
- **Proximity to Thesis Submission**: As the thesis submission deadline approaches, I will have more students requesting meetings and feedback. This means I will require more time to review your work. You are responsible for ensuring your thesis is submitted to Bocconi at least **five days before the official deadline** to give me enough time to approve it. If you cannot meet this timeline, you must check with me first to ensure I am available to review and approve it later.
- **Responsibility for Deadlines**: It is **your responsibility** to manage your progress and meet the submission deadlines. You must be proactive in reaching out to me about your progress and arranging meetings. I will not initiate follow-ups or check on your progress, so it's crucial that you take the lead.
- **Respect for Time**: Please be respectful of my time and the time of other students. Avoid last-minute requests and plan ahead to allow for meaningful feedback and revisions.

Appendix II: Writing Style Guidelines

1. Clarity

Your writing should be easy to understand, with no ambiguity.

- **Short Sentences**: Keep your sentences concise, focusing on one idea per sentence.
- **Clear paragraphs**: Each paragraph advances one claim only. The claim should be clear in the topic sentence.
- **Avoid Passive Voice**: Use active voice to make your writing more direct and clear.
- **Precise Word Choice**: Choose your words carefully. Avoid vague terms and unnecessary jargon. Explain specialized terminology when required, ensuring clarity for a broader audience.
- **Avoid ambiguous phrases starting with "This."** Instead of writing, "This implies" or "This leads to," specify exactly what you mean. For instance, write "This argument implies" or "This evidence leads to."
- **Use the Oxford comma** for clarity in lists. For example, think about the difference between the following two sentences:

- - ○ No Oxford comma (AVOID THIS): "I want to thank my parents, Beyoncé and God."
    - ○ Oxford comma (USE THIS): "I want to thank my parents, Beyoncé, and God."
  - Read your writing out loud. If a sentence feels awkward or unclear, rewrite it.

2. Organization

Your argument must be logical and easy to follow.

- **Topic Sentences**: Each paragraph should begin with a clear topic sentence that signals its main point.
- **Paragraph lengths:** Aim for paragraphs that are not longer than a page, and avoid overly brief paragraphs of only 1-2 sentences. Each paragraph should fully develop a single idea but remain concise.
- **Logical Flow**: Paragraphs should be logically connected, with each one building on the previous to create a cohesive argument.
- **Alternative explanations/threats to inference**: Explain and address threats to inference (e.g., through robustness tests). For undergraduate theses or analytical theses, these can be in the form of counterarguments which you should be able to acknowledge and/or refute.
- Ensure **smooth transitions** between paragraphs to maintain the flow of your argument.

3. Evidence

Support your thesis with strong evidence.

- **Substantiate Your Claims**: Every claim you make should be backed by evidence. Avoid making unsupported statements.
- **Explain Evidence**: Clearly explain how each piece of evidence supports your argument. Don't assume the reader will make the connection themselves.
- **Paraphrase More Than You Quote**: Demonstrate your understanding by paraphrasing rather than quoting. Only use direct quotes when the original wording is particularly powerful or necessary.

4. Scholarly Tone

Your writing should maintain a professional, academic tone.

- **Never use abbreviations** like "they're," "he's," or "it's" in formal academic writing. Always write out the full form ("they are," "he is," "it is") to maintain clarity and a professional tone.
- **Avoid Absolutist Language**: Refrain from using extreme words like "always" or "never." They can weaken your credibility.
- **Avoid Overblown Rhetoric**: Don't use exaggerated language or make unsupported claims. Keep your tone professional and grounded in evidence.
- **Avoid the royal "we"**: Unless you're a member of a royal family, avoid using "we." You are allowed to use "I" or "this paper" but do not overuse them. Let your argument and evidence speak for themselves.

● **Professional and Formal Tone**: Your writing should be formal but not overly complex. The goal is clarity, not impressing (read: confusing) with complicated language.

5. Edit and Revise

Expect to go through multiple drafts before your thesis is ready.

● **Revise for Clarity and Logic**: Your first draft should focus on your argument. Subsequent drafts can refine clarity, flow, and organization.
● **Proofread Carefully**: Check for spelling, grammar, and punctuation errors. Pay close attention to the placement of punctuation around quotations and citations.
● **Transitions**: Ensure smooth transitions between sections and paragraphs, keeping the logical flow intact.

6. Citations and Quotations

Ensure proper citation practices and avoid over-reliance on direct quotes. In political science, we often follow the **Chicago Manual of Style** for citations. Be consistent throughout your thesis. You can access the Chicago style guidelines here: https://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide.html. **Alternatively, you may use another citation style, provided you are consistent and use only one style throughout your thesis.**

7. Final Details

● **Consistent Formatting**: Ensure your formatting is consistent throughout (e.g., font, margins, citation style).
● **Proofread Extensively**: Proofread carefully for errors, including spelling, homonyms (e.g., "their" vs. "there"), and possessive/plural mistakes (e.g., "its" vs. "it's").