



Universität Hamburg

DER FORSCHUNG | DER LEHRE | DER BILDUNG

Fakultät Wirtschafts- und  
Sozialwissenschaften



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## **Guidelines Master Theses**

### **Professorship for Sustainable Business**

Dear student,

we are delighted that you are interested in completing your master thesis at the Professorship of Sustainable Business! To make matters clearer, this guideline sums up some basic information on the process and regulations for a master thesis at our Professorship.

If any aspects remain unclear or if you would like to discuss further details, feel free to contact us.

We are looking forward to hearing from you!

Sincerely,

The Team of the Professorship for Sustainable Business

## **1. Before You Start**

### **1.1. Finding a Topic**

Generally, our Professorship will publish an updated list of topics that are currently available for master theses (see [our website](#) for information). These topics will typically relate to our on-going research projects. In some instances, they may tie in with data collections that are already planned or in progress, use empirical tools that we have access to, and/or extend on literature and theory that has already been reviewed at our Professorship. However, the exact topic and research question can often be shaped to suit your interests, and we are open for your ideas on the exact contents and design of your thesis.

Alternatively, you may propose a topic of your own, which must naturally relate to the field of sustainable business. Feel free to view our publication lists or other recent publications in sustainable business as a first idea of possible angles. Ideally, your ideas for a topic should carry some new notions or research questions and expand on existing literature. Once you have a sound idea, or list of ideas, feel free to discuss their feasibility and details with us. Please note that we may reject topics if we feel that they are not manageable as a master thesis, or do not tie in with our research at all.

Due to the nature of our own research, our Professorship generally leans toward empirical master theses; that is, theses that are based on real-life data. This will either be quantitative data, for example stemming from questionnaires, tests, economic indices, etc., or qualitative data, often stemming from interviews and/or archival data. Prior to selecting a topic, consider which type of data you feel competent generating and/ or working with. Also note that this may influence your time schedule.

Depending on your topic, you may be required to collect the necessary data yourself, use available secondary data, or use data that the Professorship has collected during ongoing research. One way to generate data of your own is to cooperate with one or several companies,

initiatives, NGOs, or other relevant practitioners. In some cases, the Professorship may already have cooperation projects with or connections to practitioners that you can make use of. Alternately, you may suggest a cooperation partner/project of your own (e.g., involving a company that you are working at, or have done an internship with). We are happy to discuss your suggestions to assess whether such a cooperation sufficiently ties in with our research, and whether it can provide a feasible basis for your thesis.

## **1.2. Prerequisites**

For formal requirements, please see your respective “Prüfungsordnung” and the [requirements](#) of the examination office.

As described above, there are two ways to determine a thesis topic: First, you can check the list of proposed topics on our website. Second, you can propose a topic of your own choice. Once you have identified a topic that you are interested in, we ask you to contact the person responsible for that topic (the prospective supervisor). This is necessary to ensure that the topic is currently still available and that your time planning fits with the availability of your prospective supervisor. The (prospective) supervisor will schedule an individual ‘kick off’ meeting with you, where you can discuss the topic in more detail and agree on a schedule. After having agreed on the topic and schedule, we ask you to write a short proposal (approx. 5 pages, font size 12, 1.5 margin, Times New Roman). In this proposal, you should answer the following questions:

- 1) Why is the topic of interest? (Here you can use current statistics or news reports)
- 2) What is the state of research in the academic field related to the topic? Which void in the literature do you intend to address? (You may use a table or a figure to illustrate the research gap)
- 3) What is your exact research question?

- 4) a) In case of **quantitative** research: What is your research hypothesis? Which rationale is this hypothesis based on? Which theories will you use to derive your hypothesis?  
b) In case of **qualitative** research: Which theories will be relevant in the context of your study? What phenomenon do you seek to investigate and explain, and how is that linked to the theories you intend to use?
- 5) Which methodological approach do you intend to use to empirically test your hypothesis (in the case of quantitative research) or to answer your research question(s) (in the case of qualitative research)?
- 6) Which contribution to the literature do you expect from the results of your thesis? In how far does your thesis add anything new to existent research? Why do you expect your results to be relevant for academia and for management?
- 7) What is your work schedule/ time plan for the thesis? (This can be added in the form of a table.)

### **1.3. Registering Your Thesis**

Please note and follow the [requirements of the examination office](#) (Studienbüro).

## **2. Writing, Citing, and Formatting**

### **2.1. Language**

You are welcome to write your thesis in either English or German. This is your choice.

### **2.2. Length**

Theses at our Professorship must adhere to paper-style (i.e., be written in a manner similar to papers that are published in academic journals). For the formal requirements regarding the length of your thesis, please refer to the [information](#) given by the academic office.

### **2.3. Structure**

Master theses at our Professorship generally follow the structure used in scientific papers and recommended by the American Psychological Association (APA). For your convenience, important aspects are summarized below. For more details, please also refer to the Publication Manual of the APA or to papers that have been published in scientific journals.

### ***2.3.1. Title page***

The first page of your thesis is a title page, including the title of your thesis, your name and matriculation number, your study program, your university e-mail address, the date of submission, and the Professorship and supervisors assigned to you. For your master thesis, there are no specific regulations on the formatting of the title page. We provide a sample title page on the Professorship's website which you can download and use.

### ***2.3.2. Table of contents***

Please always include a table of contents in your thesis. If you use abbreviations within your thesis, please explain them in the main text when you use them the first time and also include a table that lists and explains all abbreviations. In case you have any tables and/or illustrations, please also include two separate tables listing all of these.

### ***2.3.3. Abstract***

The abstract provides a short summary of your thesis. It gives the reader an idea of the problem you dealt with, the data and method you used, and the most important findings. Typically, it does not exceed 250 words.

### ***2.3.4. Introduction***

In the introduction, the reader gains an idea of what you are going to do in your thesis and why that is so. The introduction highlights the relevance of the problem and explains the research gap which is addressed in your thesis. Furthermore, you also present your research question(s),

a brief overview of your hypotheses (if applicable) and the conducted study, as well as a summary of your key findings and their contribution to theory and practice in your introduction.

### ***2.3.5. Literature Review***

Throughout the literature review section, you give an overview of the existing literature from your field of research and summarize previous work as well as relevant theory. If you work quantitatively, you also derive your hypotheses based on previous literature. You can either integrate the hypothesis development into your literature review or place it as a separate chapter right after the literature review. Instead of ‘just’ mentioning existing work by other researchers, you should make sure to *problematize* the literature. This means that you should point out the current state of research (‘what we know’) and what is currently missing from the ongoing academic discussion (‘what we don’t know’). Your thesis should intend to fill this gap.

### ***2.3.6. Methods***

The method section describes how you carried out your research in such a way that readers can assess whether the methods you used were appropriate, and that they could replicate your study if they wanted to.

For **quantitative** research, the method section of an empirical paper may include some or all of the following labeled subsections: participants, sampling, measures and covariates, research design, experimental manipulations/interventions.

For **qualitative** research, the method section may include some or all of the following labeled subsections: choice of case/research context (if applicable), data collection, data analysis.

### ***2.3.7. Results***

In case of **quantitative** research: The results section describes the data, the analyses you conducted, and all relevant results. Initially, provide some basic information regarding your

data. Depending on your data and analyses, this may include means, standard deviations, sample sizes, correlations etc. Often, a table of the intercorrelations of all variables is included.

For inferential tests (i.e., hypothesis-testing analyses), report all findings that are relevant, even when they are contrary to your hypotheses, or when effects are smaller than you expected. If relevant, include information on potential problems or biases (such as missing data) and your approach to handle them. Do not explain basic concepts or the mathematical background of common analysis techniques (e.g., regression analysis, correlations, ANOVAs), but do include information on your choice of analysis if the procedure is new, unusual, or may be contested.

Typically, reporting your results will include the test's respective value (e.g., a correlation coefficient, t, F, or  $\chi^2$  value), the degrees of freedom, and the probability value. Providing effect sizes, robustness checks or the results of manipulation checks may also be useful.

In case of **qualitative** research: The results section offers a clear, well-structured narrative that highlights the key insights from your data. We recommend that you organize the presentation of findings by major themes, categories, or patterns that emerged from your data. Make sure to use descriptive labels for the themes that you want to present to the reader and to provide a rich description of what each theme means, especially in the context of your research question(s). For qualitative studies, it is important that you provide evidence (such as quotes from the interviews) to support your claims. The last step is usually to contextualize/abstract from your data, for example by building and explaining a visual model that explains how different themes are connected.

### **2.3.8. Discussion**

The discussion offers the opportunity to evaluate and interpret your study. Typically, the discussion begins with a summary of results that clearly summarizes which hypotheses were supported, which were not supported, and whether alternative explanations exist (in the case of

quantitative research) or that clearly summarizes the main insights from your findings (in the case of qualitative research). In this section, you should provide an interpretation of your findings in the context of the overall research field. Make sure to point out what others can learn from your study. The discussion then also addresses limitations of your study by discussing aspects such as generalizability, validity, the appropriateness of your measures or interventions, characteristics of the sample, and so on (in the case of quantitative research) or generalizability, subjectivity and researcher bias, issues in the data collection process, and so on (in the case of qualitative research). Lastly, the discussion should turn to the relevance of the study by pointing out its contribution to theory and research, its implications for further studies and for practitioners.

#### ***2.3.9. Bibliography***

Your master thesis must contain a bibliography, in which every source that you referred to throughout the thesis must be listed. Please take care in creating your bibliography! For further information, see 2.4.

#### ***2.3.10. Appendices***

Material that may be helpful for the reader but that is too lengthy or distracting for inclusion in the main body may be included in an appendix. This may apply to lists of variables, stimulus materials, more detailed information on your sample or its subgroups, etc. If you use a questionnaire or interview guidelines, we also ask you to include this in your appendix. In case your appendix is very long (e.g., because you used a long questionnaire, need to use many illustrations, you have transcribed interviews for the purpose of data analysis, etc.), you are also permitted to hand in the appendix in a digital format only instead of including it in your printed version.

#### ***2.3.11. Declaration***



Your thesis must include a signed declaration assuring that the thesis is entirely your own work and does not contain plagiarism. You must submit the [German version](#) or the [English version](#) of the declaration of originality with your thesis; it contains the statutory declaration that is mandatory under your examination regulations. The declaration of originality, completed digitally, printed out and signed by hand, must be included in your thesis (1 PDF).

## **2.4. Using References and Citing**

In the process of arguing your standpoint and approach, you will depend on the ideas and knowledge of others. Whenever you use background information, definitions, arguments, data, or any other information created by others, you must then cite this source appropriately. By citing, you confirm that you have actually read the original source, and that you are repeating its contents to the best of your knowledge. This must be true whenever you include a reference!

For your master thesis, there is no minimum (or maximum) number of references to be included. There are also no rules regarding the type of reference that may be used. Typically (but not necessarily!), the most useful sources are meta-analyses, articles in highly ranked journals, and articles by authors who are experts in the respective field. Especially concerning dynamic areas, it is advisable to include the most recent research. Depending on the topic, useful sources may stem from areas other than business such as psychology, sociology, etc. Most scientific papers, and hence also paper-style theses, rely on journal articles (rather than, for example, books, media reports, dissertations etc.) as main sources. To identify highly recognized journals, you can view journal rankings such as [FT50](#), [UTD Top 100](#), or [VHB Jourqual](#).

All references must be made according to the guidelines of the APA. Also, please note that “recycling” written material that you yourself have created some time earlier (e.g., as a bachelor thesis) is also plagiarism unless you officially cite yourself. For details, see the Publication Manual of the APA. Please take care when using references and citing! Not giving credit to

sources is a serious mistake and may lead to suspicions of plagiarism, which the university does not tolerate.

In order to simplify citing, you have the option to use the software Citavi (licenses are provided for free by the university, see [here](#)) or any other reference management program. Most of these programs are capable of accurately and efficiently implementing APA reference style. However, it remains your responsibility to check the references' correctness.

## **2.5. Formatting**

Formatting must fulfill the requirements of the APA. For details, see the Publication Manual of the APA and/or the APA's extensive online documentation.

Important aspects include:

- 1.5-spaced manuscripts
- Time New Roman font, 12 pt.
- 1-inch margins
- Running head with short title and page number
- Use Arabic numerals throughout for text pages. Use Roman numerals for table of contents, list of abbreviations, list of tables, bibliography, and appendix.
- Use active tense whenever possible
- Flush left

## **3. Handing in your thesis**

Please note and follow the [requirements of the examination office](#) (Studienbüro) for handing in your thesis.