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Guidelines for Masters / Magister / MA Theses

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Language of the Guidelines

These guidelines are for students who want to write their Masters / Magister / MA thesis with me. These guidelines are in English because my expectations grow out of the Anglo-American scholarly publishing tradition and because some of the concepts that I use in these guidelines do not have exact German analogs. By writing in English I hope to avoid any misunderstanding.

Wenn Sie Englisch nicht gut lesen können, schlage ich vor, dass Sie einen anderen Gutachter aussuchen.

Digital Copy

I will only read a digital copy of your thesis. *If you want me to read and grade your work, I must receive it in digital form as specified below.*

According to university regulations, you must also provide paper copies of your thesis.

Process

I will accept only a limited number of theses to read and am instituting an application process. In order to apply to have me as your first or second reader (Gutachter):

Step 1
Send an email with the following format: 1) a one paragraph description of your preliminary research question, 2) a one paragraph description of your research methodology and the methods you plan to use (see below for an explanation), 3) a one paragraph description of the

data sources you plan to use, and 4) three to five articles from peer-reviewed journals that are relevant to the research. Please also list your proposed other reader.

Step 2
I will review the abstracts on the last Friday of September, November, February, April, June and let you know which I will accept.

Step 3
Those accepted will be *required* to attend the Research Colloquium, if they are not Fernstudium Students. Fernstudium students who live in Berlin are strongly encouraged to attend as well.

Basics
I care less about the topic than the research methodology and the methods that you plan to use. A thesis for me should follow the standard principles of social science or computer science research. These include:

Research question
The research question is essential and should be stated explicitly in the thesis, preferably near the beginning. The question itself need not be unique, but either new data (new information) should be used to answer it or a research method should be used that has not been applied to the question before. The research question should ideally grow out of the scholarly context (ie out of the library and information science literature), rather than merely be something that seems interesting to the author.

Example: what is the relationship between X and Y under circumstance Z? X might be a library, Y might be users, and Z might be a new digital service. Or X might be a type of content, Y might be a metadata format, and Z might be users seeking particular information.

(WARNING: authors who provide no explicit research question risk having their grade lowered by one full point.)

Research methodology (Social Science)
The research methodology is also essential and requires explicit explanation. The words methodology and method can be confusing because of ambiguities in their meanings in everday usage. In these guidelines I will use "methodology" to refer to the ways that a particular discipline looks at how to solve research problems (its research philosophy), and I will use "method" to refer to a particular way of solving a research question within that broader context.

Ideally authors will apply a methodology from an established social science discipline such as anthropology, economics, sociology, or psychology. Methodologies from social linguistics and the more empirical forms of history may also be acceptable. Authors who lack sufficient social science background may simply describe how they plan to collect and analyze data. These plans should be checked with me first to avoid unhappy surprises.

(WARNING: authors who provide no explicit description of how they are conducting their research and why they have chosen these methods risk having their grade lowered by one full point.)

Note that a questionnaire is not a methodology but a method -- a single mechanism for data gathering, not a systematic approach to problem solving. A questionnaire can be a valuable part of an anthropological or sociological methodology. Anyone planing to use a questionnaire should have or should plan to acquire a basic understanding of statistics. At a minimum students using questionnaires need to know how to judge how far a sample is representative. Students may also need to understand some basic principles about how to recognize an outlier. An interview is also not a method but a tool.

Students who want to see examples about how to use methods such as observation, interviews, or experimentation within the context of cultural anthropology as a methodology, should read:

> Foster, N.F. & Gibbons, S. eds. (2007) Studying Students: The Undergraduate Research Project at the University of Rochester. Chicago, IL., American Library Association. Available from: <ACRL>.

Research methodology (Computer Science)
Computer science has wide range of methodological approaches, depending on the branch. For students in library and information science who want to use a method from computer science, I suggest a tool-oriented build-and-test approach in which the author explains why a tool needs to be built, why a particular algorithm makes sense, then builds the tool, tests it using live data and analyzes the effectiveness (validity) of the results.

(WARNING: authors who provide no explicit description of how they are conducting their research and why they have chosen these methods risk having their grade lowered by one full point.)

Scholarly context
The scholarly context is sometimes called the literature review. Students sometimes add this as an afterthought and merely do a database search to gather references. The scholarly context should in fact be the first step in preparing a thesis, because it is primarily out of a knowledge of the subject literature that a good research question should emerge. The discussion of the scholarly context traditionally takes place in a separate section, but that need not be the case. It can, for example, very reasonably be integrated into the discussion of why a particular research question makes sense.

(WARNING: authors who provide no explicit discussion of the scholarly context risk having their grade lowered by one full point.)

Data gathering
The data gathering lies at the heart of a scholarly work in the social sciences. A thesis that assembles new, interesting, valuable data is likely to be regarded positively. The data need not

be new of course. An existing data set may be reexamined with different methods or tools or may be mined for different kinds of results. Authors should explicitly discuss their sources of data and comment on its qualities, which might include accuracy, representativeness, or uniqueness. Test data for a computer science approach should be discussed in the same way.

What is data? Some authors think that data must be numeric or highly structured. This is not true. An unstructured interview can provide valuable data. So can text as long as it is not merely quoted, but is used in some way that transforms it so that the result is not merely a repetition of a prior author's opinions.

Data Analysis

Data analysis is the process of drawing conclusions on the basis of the data in a thesis. It can be done with statistical tools and approaches if the data is quantitative. It can also be done by structuring and interpreting qualitative data. The effectiveness and credibility of the analysis may determine whether a thesis makes any contribution to knowledge or not.

Outline

The internal structure of a thesis should reflect standard social science practice. In general this means an outline that has roughly the following structure:

- research question
- research method
- scholarly context
- data gathering
- data analysis
- conclusions

Variation in the order is certainly possible, but having these sections and labeling them as such aids the reader in understanding how the research was done.

Details

References

Your references should be in Harvard format following the Emerald Guidelines (see: http://info.emeraldinsight.com/authors/guides/harvard.htm) or in University of Chicago (Turabian) style. Citavi will do Turabian, Zotero, Refworks and other citation management systems are able to do either Harvard or Chicago (Turabian) references automatically.

Footnotes

I prefer endnotes to footnotes. If you feel strongly about using footnotes, then they should only be used for URLs. Footnotes in modern research works should never be used for text. If the comment is important, then include it in the body of the text. If it is not important enough for the body of the text, then leave it out.

Format

You may deliver your digital text to me in the following formats:

Rich Text Format (RTF) for the body of the text with image-based elements in JPG (RTF handles images badly). The advantage of RTF is that I can read it easily on the Sony ebook reader.

PDF with a minimum 12 point font, which is also readable on the Sony.

Style

A thesis ought to have clear simple prose that relies on nouns and verbs to make its points, rather than adjectives and adverbs. A thesis is not a work of literature, but a scholarly argument.

Language

I am willing to read a thesis in either German or English and in some cases might agree to reading one in French (ask first, please). If you want to write in English and it is not your native language, I will be quite flexible about minor grammar, syntax, or word-choice errors – probably more so than most German teachers. For those who are ambitious and hope for future publication to a larger audience, writing in English offers advantages.

Quotations in the body of the text that are in these languages need not be translated for me. Short Dutch, Swedish, Danish, Norwegian, Spanish and Italian quotations may also be left in the original as long as the context is clear.

Background Reading

Authors of a masters thesis are writing in some sense for a very narrow audience: two readers (Gutachter) who will give the work a grade. Under these circumstances authors should take the trouble to read what these people have written on their subject and to be prepared with cogent arguments if they disagree. I have no problem with intelligent disagreement, but blythly repeating opinions that I patently reject will not improve the grade.