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# Guidelines to author a thesis

## 1. Introduction

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*This document outlines the most important processes and formalities for writing a paper or thesis at our institute (e.g., you need to exactly follow to the APA reference style, see details below). Read it very carefully before contacting us!*

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It is in your own interest to adhere to these guidelines as this will affect the evaluation of your work! These guidelines do not claim to be complete.

Before registering for a thesis, you should have sufficient knowledge about applying research methods as well as structuring and writing a scientific paper. Familiarize yourself early with the respective procedures, rules, and quality criteria. There is an extensive literature on these aspects in the library and we highlight some recommendations at the end of this document. Study these recommendations before starting with your thesis!

We expect you to be familiar with academic search strategies (especially for journal articles) in scientific literature databases (e.g., Web of Science, Scopus, EBSCO; see here: <https://www.ulb.hhu.de/services/researchieren/dbis>). Most of them can be accessed via the University network or the VPN client (see here: <https://www.zim.hhu.de/servicekatalog/netze/vpn>). You can access many papers through the databases (if it is a full text database) or most often also directly from journal homepages (this website provides an overview: <https://www.ulb.hhu.de/services/researchieren/e-journals>).

We strongly recommend writing your thesis in English because a crucial part of any academic paper is to review the latest international (i.e., English) scientific literature. Thus, although it might initially not seem so, it is in the end usually easier to write your thesis in English. If absolutely necessary, your paper or thesis can also be written in German.

## 2. General procedure

The procedure before writing a thesis at our institute is as follows:

- a. We collect applications for writing a thesis with us twice a year. The respective deadlines are Feb. 15 and Aug. 15. For further information (and a link to the application form) see: <https://www.sustainability.hhu.de/lehre/projekt-und-abschlussarbeiten>
- b. You will receive an email with further information approximately three weeks after the respective deadline.
- c. Together with your supervisor you can then set your individual timeline for finalizing your topic, writing an exposé (see below), and, subsequently, your thesis. The thesis has to be registered with the examination office (Prüfungsamt) between April 1 and September 30 (for the application deadline of Feb. 15) or between October 1 and March 31 (for the application deadline of Aug. 15). Make sure that you allow enough time for the writing of an exposé before registering your thesis!

## 3. Finding a topic and writing the exposé

*Note for topics to be written in collaboration with company partners: Writing your paper in collaboration with a company is only possible if the thesis deals with a scientifically(!) relevant topic in our field that usually needs to be investigated with an empirical research method. Based on experience, most of the “practical topics” do not comply with our requirements. Before approaching us, ask yourself critically: What is the scientific research question I want to answer with my thesis and what method can I use to answer the question?*

Before registering your thesis (but after applying for a spot, see above), you draft an exposé to be discussed with the supervisor (i.e., your contact person at the institute, who will be announced with our information following your application) and, subsequently, with Prof. Hahn. This exposé will not be included in the evaluation and grading of your work, but it will help you to find, define, and completely grasp a suitable topic for your thesis.

### 3.1. General hints and requirements

The actual content part of the exposé (which does not need any headlines etc.!) should not exceed two pages for a Bachelor thesis and three pages for a Master thesis. It should be written according to scientific standards and follow these guidelines (especially regarding style and wording). Consult the relevant literature before writing your exposé (see recommendations at the end of this document)!

Additionally, include one cover page and a draft overview of your planned outline of the paper (with a rough estimate of word count per chapter). Furthermore, add a final page to the exposé (after the reference list) on which you confirm the following:

- “I confirm that I previously worked with scientific literature databases (e.g. Web of Science, Scopus, or EBSCO Business Source Premier) or that I took a course on scientific literature research at the university library.”
- “I confirm that I have solid knowledge on how to author a scientific piece of work (for example, by studying some of the recommended readings).”
- “I confirm that this exposé includes all necessary elements and adheres to the requirements as outlined in the ‘Guidelines to author a scientific work’ as published by the institute.”
- “I confirm that all references in the text and the reference list exactly follow the guidelines of the publication manual of the American Psychological Association (APA) in its seventh edition.”

Please note, however, that this confirmation only applies to the Exposé and not your final thesis. For your final thesis, you need to add a declaration on scientific integrity following the guidelines provided by your examination office (Prüfungsamt).

Send your exposé (Word-file, not PDF, to allow for easier annotations etc.!) to your supervisor at least two working days before your next meeting. Always send a clean version without any resolved comments (i.e., delete resolved comments!) or tracked changes.

The main text of your exposé should comply with the requirements outlined below. Keep in mind to provide a compelling line of arguments between every aspect you discuss not only in the exposé but also in the thesis or paper itself (hint: Always reflect on why an aspect is relevant and how that aspect connects logically to the preceding and next aspect). In the text, a

paragraph usually includes several sentences on an overarching thought. If a paragraph exceeds more than half a page, it usually covers more than one overarching thought and should thus be separated (but logically connected to the preceding and following paragraph).

### 3.2. Proposed title

A title usually has the form of a half-sentence. If necessary, the title can be dyadic, separated by a dash or a colon. The title should give a clear idea of your topic. You may also want to express a theoretical perspective or an empirical focus in your title (e.g., “– a systematic literature review”, “– a qualitative-empirical inquiry”, “– implications from signaling theory” ...).

### 3.3. Introducing the initial situation and problem statement

The first one or two paragraphs of an exposé should arouse general interest in the topic. Thus, you have to clarify the starting point of your planned thesis as well as the thematic context. Always refer to the specific topic of the thesis and lead shortly and concisely (usually two to three sentences are enough) to the presentation of the problem statement. Do not start with too general thoughts or sentences, which only loosely relate to the topic (e.g., if you write about sustainability reporting then indeed start with sustainability reporting and not, for example, with sustainability or sustainability management in general). After introducing the general topic, identify a scientific (!) problem related to your topic. Here, you might want to state the relevance of your research (ask yourself why your research is necessary and how it contributes to solving the problem). You need to cite relevant and recent literature sources to show that you have read the international literature (especially scientific articles) and that you have incorporated existing ideas and results published in the field of interest.

As a test, you could ask yourself the following questions to check whether you have a suitable problem statement:

- Would a reasonably informed person understand what my thesis is about?
- Would a reasonable informed person understand why my thesis is relevant (maybe from a practical but more importantly from an academic perspective)?

### 3.4. Research aim, research question and method

You should formulate specifically what you want to accomplish or study (i.e., what is your research aim?). Typically, a paper/thesis aims at discovering, explaining, or assessing a relevant issue, which can be investigated theoretically, conceptually and/or empirically. The research aim is important because the final evaluation and grading will assess whether the thesis achieved its specified goal. The aim is usually formulated in one sentence or – even better – a question that should be answered in the thesis. The aim should be clearly linked to the problem statement and the overall topic of the thesis as introduced before (think about a clear line of argumentation). The title of the thesis should also reflect the aim of the thesis. Furthermore, you should briefly elaborate your research method to show how you want to reach the goal and answer the research question.

As a test, you could ask yourself the following questions to check whether you have a suitable section on research aim and method:

- Would a reasonably informed person understand what I want to achieve with my thesis?
- Would a reasonably informed person understand how I want to achieve my goal?

Later (i.e., when writing and eventually handing in your actual thesis, not the exposé), you can add a short paragraph to the introduction, which explains your main findings.

### 3.5. Structure (optional!)

The exposé can end with a few remarks outlining the structure of the planned thesis to show the reader how you want to proceed. A short paragraph is usually sufficient and it should not be too generic (i.e., do not simply write something like: “The thesis will begin with an introduction followed by the conceptual background, the method section, the results, a discussion and a conclusion.”).

### 3.6. After completion (submission rules)

Bachelor and Master theses need to conform to the respective examination regulations (Prüfungsordnung). A complete version of the thesis has to be submitted as a PDF-file (via the “Studierendenportal”).

For seminar papers, please see the regulations of the respective course or module.

## 4. Writing the thesis

### 4.1. Content and length

A thesis contains (in the following order): Cover Page, Table of Contents, List of Figures, Tables and Abbreviations, other indexes, Main Text, References, Appendix as well as a Statutory Declaration. The main text (i.e., everything from “Introduction” to “Conclusion” but excluding references etc.) should usually not exceed 7.000 words for a Bachelor thesis and 9.000 words for a Master thesis. Table of content, list of references, appendices etc. count extra. For seminar papers, the scope is announced separately. Note that there is no minimum word count! However, no relevant content should be missing in your thesis.

### 4.2. Structure of the thesis

#### 4.2.1. Cover page

The cover page contains:

- Title of the thesis.
- First and last name, student matriculation number, and submission date.
- The passage: “Bachelor/Master thesis, submitted to Prof. Dr. Rüdiger Hahn, Chair of Sustainability Management, Heinrich Heine University Düsseldorf” (Note: Please clearly indicate already with your exposé whether you are writing a Bachelor or Master thesis!)
- A word count (i.e., mention how many words your document has in the main text – see above)

#### 4.2.2. Table of contents, chapters, and headlines

The text part and all following pages are numbered with Arabic page numbers. The cover page does not have a page number. All pages before the text part are numbered with Roman page numbers.

Use 1., 1.1., 1.1.1. and so forth to number the (sub-)chapters of your work. Indicate on which page each (sub-)chapter starts. Each hierarchical level of sections and subsections needs to include at least two parts (i.e., if there is a section 1.1., there needs to be a section 1.2.). Do not divide the thesis into too many (or too few) sections. As a rule of thumb: A (sub-)chapter usually should not be longer than five to ten pages (depending on context) but it should usually also not be less than one page. Do not introduce any sub headlines in the text which are not included in the table of contents.

#### 4.2.3. *List of figures*

Every figure has to be stated with the ongoing number, title, and the corresponding page. The figures themselves have to be numbered subsequently (“Fig. 1”, “Fig. 2”) and given a distinctive name (e.g. “Fig. 1: Levels of the entrepreneurial sustainability management”). All figures need to have a reference to the running text (Fig. + ongoing number).

#### 4.2.4. *List of tables*

Same rules as in the list of figures.

#### 4.2.5. *List of abbreviations*

Factually correct and non-formal abbreviations, like the name of organizations (EPA, UNEP), have to be quoted in alphabetical order and explained with the complete name. For commonly used abbreviations (“e.g.”, “esp.”, “etc.”, “i.e.”), no separate statement in the list of abbreviations is needed (Reference: Merriam Webster).

Do not to use too many abbreviations. If a term is used only a few times in the manuscript, it is usually better to spell it out instead of introducing an abbreviation to improve readability.

#### 4.2.6. *References*

The latest edition of the APA publication manual, see below, gives detailed rules and many examples of how to present references for many different types of sources (see <https://apastyle.apa.org/style-grammar-guidelines/references/examples>). You need to exactly follow these rules and examples.

#### 4.2.7. *Appendix*

This section contains material that is not mandatory for the understanding of the text (e.g., large figures, underlying questionnaires, calculations, interview data etc.) and would disturb its clarity.

#### 4.2.8. *Declaration on scientific integrity*

Follow the guidelines provided by your examination office (Prüfungsamt).

### 4.3. **Formatting**

#### 4.3.1. *Edge distance*

Upper and lower margin: 2.5 cm, left and right margin: 2 cm.

#### 4.3.2. *Main Part, references etc.*

Times New Roman, 12pt, line distance: 2 (double spaced). Write non-stop left-aligned (also in footnotes and references) and use automatic hyphenation.

#### 4.3.3. *Footnotes*

Same typeface, but 10pt, line distance: 1 (single spaced). Footnotes start with capital letters and end with a period.

#### 4.3.4. *Highlighting in the text*

Should be marked in italics and used very sparsely. Quotation marks and apostrophes are for quotes only.

#### 4.3.5. Paragraph distance and headings

Paragraph distances should be between 6 and 8pt. For headings, use a common distance regulation (for a neat picture of the thesis). Text headings, also on the first level, should be distinct from the text, but also visually connected to the text on a page.

#### 4.3.6. Orthography and formulation

Follow the rules the Merriam-Webster Dictionary or the Duden (depending on the language of your thesis). Technical terminology and relatively unknown terms should only be used in cases where necessary, but need to be explained then. Avoid unnecessarily complicated or (very) long sentences (use a simple and short sentence structure and avoid passive formulations). A lot of leaps in sentences or paragraphs can lead to statements that are imprecise or difficult to comprehend. Too many or too few headings and paragraphs impede readability.

The APA style offers extensive guidance for a bias-free language (including gender issues). Please familiarize yourself with these guidelines and apply them in your writing:

- <https://apastyle.apa.org/style-grammar-guidelines/bias-free-language>
- <https://apastyle.apa.org/style-grammar-guidelines/bias-free-language/gender>
- [for recommendations in German see: <https://www.hhu.de/die-hhu/organisation-und-gremien/selbstverwaltung-und-interessensvertretungen/beauftragte-und-koordinierungsstellen/zentrale-gleichstellungsbeauftragte-1/geschlechtergerechte-sprache>]

### 4.4. Citation method

#### 4.4.1. When do you have to cite?

Every idea, figure, table and all other things you take from somewhere else has to be cited. If a cited thought covers more than a few sentences, this fact has to be indicated. All figures and tables from external sources have to be marked with the corresponding reference source (e.g., by the statement “Extracted from ...” or “Adapted from ...”). Self-made figures or tables have to be marked with “Own Figure”. As a rule of thumb, it is better to cite more than less!

#### 4.4.2. What is to be cited?

All sources that were used have to be cited. This also applies for offprints, unpublished papers, or other writings. However, there are a number of works that cannot be used as a basis of a scientific work and, therefore, should not be used as references. Such non-quotable writings include review books, scripts, lectures, lecture notes, as well as Bachelor or Master theses, questionable internet sources etc. Please consult the accompanying literature when writing your thesis to find hints on what can and should be cited (see recommendations below).

#### 4.4.3. How is to be cited?

For citations refer to the “**Publication manual of the American Psychological Association (APA) in its seventh edition**”. This handbook is available at the ULB – go get it now if you do not have it, yet! Citations and references strictly have to conform to the APA-guidelines. For the structure and the outer formalities, please conform to the guidelines given above (and **not** to the APA guidelines for formatting). Consider that in the APA-Style, page references are only needed for direct citations. This means that you need to be **exceptionally diligent when using sources**. Especially in case of an indirect citation, you should cite sources for their core statements, essential results, and contents; not (!) for single marginal statements that are not a core aspect of the respective source. In addition to the book-style APA manual (7. Ed.), the APA offers several online tutorials as online examples for referencing etc. (<https://apastyle.apa.org/>), which illustrate the basics of the citation method.

Tip 1: “Internet sources” are those sources that can be found exclusively on the Internet and cannot be assigned to another document type. Scientific articles, books etc. that are offered for download on the Internet are no Internet sources and are not quoted as such.

Tip 2: Use a citation software such as Citavi or EndNote. Some of these programs are available for free for students via the ZIM. These programs are often helpful to avoid unnecessary mistakes when crafting the references. However, you need to be able to use the software correctly (the ULB offer seminars and material) and you need to be very careful and diligent when importing data into the software. Otherwise, you will have a “garbage-in-garbage-out”-problem.

## 5. Literature recommendations to author a scientific work (examples)

### 5.1. Recommendations for bachelor level

The following literature is not updated regularly. More recent editions might be available.

<b>Helpful sources esp. for first time authors (e.g., Bachelor level)</b>
Bänsch, A. & Alewell, D. (2020). <i>Wissenschaftliches Arbeiten</i> (12. Aufl.). De Gruyter.
Kollmann, T., Kuckertz, A., & Stöckmann, C. (2016). <i>Das 1 x 1 des Wissenschaftlichen Arbeitens</i> (2. Ed.). SpringerGabler.
Müller-Seitz, G., & Braun, T. (2013). <i>Erfolgreich Abschlussarbeiten verfassen: Im Studium der BWL und VWL</i> . Pearson Studium.
Oehrich, M. (2022). <i>Wissenschaftliches Arbeiten und Schreiben</i> (3. Aufl.). SpringerGabler.

### 5.2. Recommendations for advanced bachelor level and master level

The following recommendations are not exhaustive. The nevertheless provide a broad initial overview of many aspects of scientific work. We highly recommend that you consult this literature prior to writing your thesis!

<b>Helpful sources esp. for advanced authors (e.g., Master level)</b>	<b>Esp. helpful for the issues</b>
Alvesson, M., & Sandberg, J. (2023). The Art of Phenomena Construction: A Framework for Coming Up with Research Phenomena beyond ‘the Usual Suspects’. <i>Journal of Management Studies</i> . Advanced Online Publication. <a href="https://doi.org/10.1111/joms.12969">https://doi.org/10.1111/joms.12969</a>	How to identify interesting research phenomena
Brown, J.R., & Dant, R.P. (2008): On what makes a significant contribution to the retailing literature, <i>Journal of Retailing</i> , 84(2), 131–135.	How to make a scientific contribution and explain it in your exposé
Reuber, A. R., & Sharma, P. (2013). The Anatomy of a Paper. <i>Family Business Review</i> , 26(2), 113-120.	How to structure a typical (empirical) scholarly article
Cuschieri, S., Grech, V., & Savona-Ventura, C. (2019). WASP (Write a Scientific Paper): Structuring a scientific paper. <i>Early Human Development</i> , 128, 114-117	How to structure a typical (empirical) scholarly article
Sheperd, D.A., & Wiklund, J. (2019). Simple Rules, Templates, and Heuristics! An Attempt to Deconstruct the Craft of Writing an Entrepreneurship Paper. <i>Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice, Online First</i> . doi: 10.1177/1042258719845888	General thoughts about the constitutes of a good scientific manuscript
Lee, N., & Greenley, G. (2009). What makes a good article? Generating an insightful manuscript. <i>European Journal of Marketing</i> , 43(5/6), 577–582.	General thoughts about the constitutes of a good scientific manuscript
Grant, A. M., & Pollock, T. G. (2011). Publishing in AMJ--Part 3: Setting the Hook. <i>Academy of Management Journal</i> , 54(5), 873–879.	“Interesting” writing
Ragins, B.R. (2012). Editor’s Comments: Reflections on the Craft of Clear Writing. <i>Academy of Management Review</i> , 37(4), 493-501	Hands-on tips for good a writing style

Connelly, B. L., Ketchen, D. J., & Zhou, Y. S. (2023). The Pre-senter's Paradox: More Is Not Always Better. <i>Journal of Management</i> , 49(7), 2208–2217.	“Lean” writing: Why more is not always better
Reinartz, W. J. (2016). Crafting a JMR Manuscript. <i>Journal of Marketing Research</i> , 53(1), 139–141.	How to meet high quality standards in writing
Palmatier, R. W. (2016). Improving publishing success at JAMS. Contribution and positioning. <i>Journal of the Academy of Marketing Science</i> , 44(6), 655–659.	How to meet high quality standards in writing
Sparrowe, R.T., & Mayer, K.J. (2011). Publishing in AMJ--Part 4: Grounding Hypotheses. <i>Academy of Management Journal</i> , 54(5), 1098–1102.	Presenting and explaining the theoretical foundation of hypotheses
Zhang, Y., & Shaw, J.D. (2012). Publishing in AMJ--Part 5: Crafting the Methods and Results. <i>Academy of Management Journal</i> , 55(1), 8–12.	How to write methods and results
Geletkanycz, M., & Tepper, B.J. (2012). Publishing in AMJ--Part 6: Discussing the Implications. <i>Academy of Management Journal</i> , 55(2), 256–260.	How to reflect on your findings in your discussion section
Colquitt, J.A. (2013). Crafting References in AMJ Submissions. <i>Academy of Management Journal</i> , 56(5), 1221–1224.	How to cite properly and accurately
Maula, M., & Stam, W. (2020). Enhancing Rigor in Quantitative Entrepreneurship Research. <i>Entrepreneurship Theory and Practice</i> , 44(6), 1059-1090.	How to enhance rigor in quantitative research