

Thesis Manual BA/MA Philosophy

This course manual describes what is expected of theses in the Philosophy programmes at Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam.

The course manual is consistent with the Thesis Regulations Bachelor and the Thesis Regulations Master of the School of Humanities (SGW). These, as well as the Assessment Forms, can be accessed online: <https://vu.nl/en/student/graduation-and-diploma/thesis-information-school-of-humanities>

The Bachelor's and Master's thesis regulations contain a number of important regulations which, among other things, provide a general description of the level of an undergraduate and graduate thesis respectively, define the roles of the supervisor and the second assessor, contain instructions on how to act in the event of resits and a difference in assessment, and deal with fraud, disputes and the graduation procedures.

The course manual was adopted by the Programme Director of the Philosophy Department on July 17, 2025.

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1. Introduction

Students complete the Philosophy Bachelor's and Master's by writing a thesis.

In the thesis the student demonstrates that he/she is able to:

- plan and conduct philosophical research
- with a reasonable degree of independence
- addressing an interesting issue
- and providing a clear written account of the findings

The credits are as follows:

- BA: 12 EC
- MA: 18 EC

The word count for the Bachelor's thesis is: **8,000-12,000**, including notes, bibliography and illustrations, but excluding appendices (no further margin).

The word count for the Master's thesis is: **15,000-25,000**, including notes, bibliography and illustrations, but excluding appendices (no further margin).

2. Requirements for access to thesis process

The requirements for access to the thesis process (from the Academic and Examination Regulations):

BA

As a minimum a student must have completed all subjects from the first year and 48 EC of the second year. Students for whom Philosophy is the second study programme must have completed a minimum of 78 EC in courses before the bachelor's thesis can be started.

MA

A student must have obtained at least 60 EC (this includes credits from the master programme in your discipline).

3. Process

The thesis process for Bachelor's students starts no later than period 5 of year 3 (and should preferably be aligned with the chosen optional courses).

The thesis process for Master's students starts no later than period 5 of year 2.

It is highly advisable to start earlier with:

- the formulation of a research question
- the development of a thesis plan of work
- consulting a potential supervisor
- reading the literature

The thesis coordinator (bachelor's) or the program coordinator (master's) will provide assistance in finding the appropriate supervisor. An appointment with the supervisor must be made by the student. Together with the supervisor, the second assessor is chosen and approached.

Good research questions are not excessively ambitious ("is there such a thing as free will?"), nor too limited ("is there such a thing as free will, as understood according to a specific definition X, according to the specific author Y?"). More information on suitable research questions can be found in appendix C.

After the research question has been determined, the student draws up a thesis plan of work and presents it to the thesis supervisor.

The plan of work must include the following components:

- timetable for completion
- the reading list
- schedule of meetings with the supervisor
- provisional organization of chapters
- definition of audience (specialist, or broad academic)

Along with the work plan, student and supervisor complete the thesis contract. This is signed by the supervisor, the student, and the second assessor at the beginning of the thesis process. The second assessor is shown the work plan, and then is not involved in the supervision.

Generative AI may be used to improve the spelling and grammar of the thesis, but not in the writing of the thesis. Students must declare in their thesis how they used generative AI in the creation of the thesis.

4. Supervisor

At the start of the Bachelor Seminar (third year) in February, each student will be assigned to a tutorial group led by one of the lecturers who are available for thesis supervision. Each of them will supervise the students in their group. The enrollment in a specific group is, among others, dependent on the subject of the thesis and the field of expertise of the supervisor (cf. appendix B). In a previous meeting of the Bachelor Seminar in November, you will get information about the process.

Master's students request a supervisor on their own, and provide the name of their supervisor and research question to the coordinator of the Master's program in the case of M FCB or the coordinator of the Master's track in the case of M Philosophy (by email).

Every student is entitled to 3-5 supervision meetings for the Bachelor's thesis (including the meetings of the tutorial group) and 5-8 for the Master's. In order to have an overview of the thesis creation process, a minimum of 3 (bachelor's) or 5 (master's) supervision meetings will be conducted. The student may also be asked to keep a logbook in which the student describes the steps taken. In case of suspected fraud, the supervisor informs the examination board (see the Thesis Regulations).

The lecturers have a range of expertise, as set out in appendix B. Students approach a prospective supervisor themselves, asking whether they can write their thesis on one of the specified themes. Whether supervisors are available depends on e.g. their teaching time.

If a student wishes to deviate from the specified themes, that is possible. In that case the student must draw up a proposal and submit it to the desired supervisor, who will determine whether it is suitable for a thesis.

If students experience problems in selecting a supervisor or if conflicts arise between a student and a supervisor, the coordinator of the programme or the Program Director will mediate between them. If they fail to find a solution, the matter will be referred to the Examination Board. The Examination Board will designate a new supervisor within 10 working days.

If needed or desired, a second supervisor may be required (see the Thesis Regulations).

5. Assessment

Once the student has completed the thesis, the supervisor assesses the overall thesis. The assessment takes place on the basis of the assessment form with the associated rubric: (<https://vu.nl/en/student/graduation-and-diploma/thesis-information-school-of-humanities>). The student goes through the form at the beginning of the thesis process (and directs any questions to the supervisor), so that the expectations are clear.

Second assessor

In addition to the supervisor, the final assessment requires a second assessor who plays a part in determining the grade. The second assessor is selected in consultation with the student and then invited by the supervisor. The second assessor is not involved in the process of writing the thesis in any way. The second assessor guarantees an independent substantive check of the thesis. As a rule, the second assessor has a different specialization than the supervisor.

In the interdisciplinary Master's tracks the assessors usually come from different disciplines (one from the Philosophy department and one from the second Master's).

When the supervisor receives the final version of the thesis (via email; hard copy is optional), he/she forwards it to the second assessor (and if applicable the second supervisor).

Final assessment

The supervisor takes care that the final assessment of the thesis is communicated to the student by e-mail, telephone or face to face. If an interview takes place, then it is in principle a public event.

Conclusion

After the final assessment (and sometimes the interview), the supervisor follows the steps as described in the last paragraph of the relevant Thesis Regulations (Ba or Ma).

Finally, the Examination Board invites the student to attend the graduation ceremony (the Bachelor's graduation ceremony of the Department of Philosophy, or the annual Graduation Day of the School of Humanities for graduating Master's students).

The "Assessment Form" (under "Thesis Manual for the Department of Philosophy") and the "Thesis Assessment Cover Sheet" (under "Thesis Regulations") to be completed by the supervisor can be accessed online: <https://vu.nl/en/student/graduation-and-diploma/thesis-information-school-of-humanities>

Appendix A: Source reference

There are various systems for referring to sources (such as the note-quotation system and the author-year system). It is important that one of these systems is used consistently in your thesis.

Reference

If you wish to refer to a source using the author-year system, place the author's surname and the year of publication in brackets in the text, with page numbers (if relevant).

Example:

Consequentialism falls prey to various problems, including the problem of collective action (see Kagan 2011).

You then provide the full details of the source at the end of your text in the bibliography (instructions below).

Quotation

If you wish to use full sentences from a source, you can quote by placing the sentences in quotation marks and closing with a reference.

Example:

Kagan refers to the problem of collective action as follows: "consequentialism condemns my act only when my act makes a difference. But in the kind of cases we are imagining, my act makes no difference, and so cannot be condemned by consequentialism." (2011: 108)

If you omit the quotation marks, you give the impression that this is your own reasoning and you commit plagiarism.

Paraphrasing

When you paraphrase you rewrite someone else's reasoning in your own words. You do not have to use any quotation marks for this, but you must provide a reference.

Example:

Consequentialism holds that an action is morally wrong only if there was an alternative with a better outcome. When buying chicken there is no alternative with a better outcome, since an individual boycott is usually fruitless. Thus the purchase would be permissible according to consequentialism. Intuitively, however, such a purchase is not permissible and this yields a problem for consequentialism (see Kagan 2011: 108).

As a rule, paraphrasing is better than quoting. Formulations can almost always be improved, and the improvements can be made in your paraphrase. In some cases you can omit or summarize less relevant information, while in others you must add relevant information.

In such a paraphrase you can also present the argument in separate steps:

Example:

According to Kagan (2011: 108), consequentialism faces the following problem:

- (1) Consequentialism condemns my act only if my act makes a difference.

- (2) My act makes no difference.
- (3) Hence, consequentialism does not condemn my act.

Instructions bibliography:

Article

Kagan, S. 2011. Do I Make a Difference? *Philosophy & Public Affairs* 39: 105-41.
 [surname], [initials] [year of publication]. [article title]. [journal] [volume number]: [page numbers].

Book

Parfit, D. 1984. *Reasons and Persons*. Oxford University Press.
 [surname], [initials] [year of publication]. [book title]. [publisher].

Translated work

Kant, I. 1785. *Groundwork of the Metaphysics of Morals*. Transl. M. Gregor & J. Timmermann 1998. Cambridge University Press.
 [surname], [initials] [year of original publication]. [*translated title*]. Transl. [translators] [year of translation]. [publisher].

Chapter

Parfit, D. 1984. Five Mistakes in Moral Mathematics. In *Reasons and Persons*, pp. 76-86. Oxford University Press.
 [surname], [initials] [year of publication]. [chapter title]. In [editor, if any], [book title], [page numbers]. [publisher].

Online encyclopaedia

Rickless, S. 2015. Plato's *Parmenides*. In *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/plato-parmenides/>
 [surname], [initials] [year of publication]. [title]. In [encyclopedia], [url]

Appendix B: Supervisors

Lisa Bastian (l.bastian@vu.nl):

- Metaethics (rationality and normativity, and metaethics more generally)
- Philosophy & economics
- Epistemology

Justin Bernstein (j.s.bernstein@vu.nl):

- Bioethics (especially public health ethics)
- Political philosophy
- Contemporary moral philosophy

Jelle de Boer (j.s.de.boer@vu.nl):

- General philosophy of science
- Philosophy of social science & philosophy of biology
- Decision theory & game theory

Leon de Bruin (l.c.de.bruin@vu.nl):

- Philosophy of mind
- Philosophy of cognitive science
- Philosophy of psychology, psychiatry, and neuroscience

Govert Buijs (g.j.buijs@vu.nl):

- Political and social philosophy (general)
- Philosophy of management and organization/ethics and economy
- Philosophy of life and public domain

Sabrina Coninx (s.coninx@vu.nl):

- Philosophy of mind
- Philosophy of psychology, psychiatry, medicine, and healthcare
- Philosophy of situated cognition and phenomenology

Lieven Decock (l.b.decock@vu.nl):

- Philosophical themes in the disciplines (particularly the cognitive sciences, other scientific fields by arrangement)
- History of analytical philosophy (from Frege to the present day)
- Metaphysics

Catarina Dutilh Novaes (c.dutilhnovaes@vu.nl):

- Philosophy of logic and mathematics
- Issues pertaining to social categories, in particular gender and race
- Human cognition; philosophy of cognitive science

Annemie Halsema (j.m.halsema@vu.nl):

- 20th century continental philosophy, particularly phenomenology and hermeneutics
- Philosophy of the body
- Feminist philosophy

Carlo Ierna (c.ierna@vu.nl):

- History of philosophy, cognition, and computation
- School of Brentano (Brentano, Stumpf, Meinong, Ehrenfels, Husserl)
- Early phenomenology

Monika Kirloskar (m.a.kirloskar@vu.nl):

- World philosophies (methodologies, conceptual decolonization, epistemic injustice)
- Social philosophy (critical social epistemology, pluralistic societies, ethics of immigration, Frankfurter Schule)
- Political philosophy (critical theory, nationalism, cosmopolitanism, political philosophy of the Indian state)

Edwin Koster (e.koster@vu.nl):

- Philosophy & education
- Philosophy & narratology and film
- Philosophy of the humanities

Christian Krijnen (c.h.krijnen@vu.nl):

- Modern and contemporary philosophy
- Epistemology, metaphysics, philosophy of science
- Moral and legal philosophy, economic philosophy, philosophy of management & organization

Krishma Labib (k.labib@vu.nl):

- Bioethics, especially virtue ethics and dialogical approaches to moral reflection
- Research ethics, integrity and open science
- Questions related to fairness and justice in research

Lilith Lee (l.w.lee@vu.nl):

- Early Chinese (Warring States) philosophy
- Analytic social philosophy (theory of ideology, false consciousness, epistemic injustice)
- Comparative philosophy (comparative methodology)

Guido Löhr (g.lohr@vu.nl):

- Philosophy of Mind and Language/Cognitive Science
- Philosophy of AI
- Social Ontology

Marije Martijn (m.martijn@vu.nl):

- Ancient philosophy
- Patristic philosophy
- Reception among later thinkers

Gerben Meynen (g.meynen@vu.nl):

- Neuroethics
- Medical ethics
- Philosophy of medicine

Chris Ranalli (c.b.ranalliz@vu.nl):

- Epistemology (including ethics of belief; and intellectual virtue)
- Philosophy of Mind & Perception
- Metaphysics

Jeroen de Ridder (g.j.de.ridder@vu.nl):

- Social epistemology
- Philosophy of science (general)
- Philosophy of religion

Philip Robichaud (p.robichaud@vu.nl):

- Ethics
- Free will and moral responsibility
- Applied ethics

Angela Roothaan (a.c.m.roothaan@vu.nl):

- African/intercultural philosophy
- Spirituality/religion (based on practical philosophy)
- Critical theory/deconstruction/hermeneutics

Emanuel Rutten (g.j.e.rutten@vu.nl):

- Philosophy of religion
- Metaphysics
- Logic, theory of knowledge and rhetoric

Haroon Sheikh (h.sheikh@vu.nl):

- Continental philosophy (Nietzsche, Heidegger, Foucault, Sloterdijk, Han)
- Philosophy of technology (AI, digitization, etc.)
- Philosophy East-West (Said, Hui, Chakrabarty)

Ad Verbrugge (a.m.verbrugge@vu.nl):

- Continental philosophy (e.g. Kant, Hegel, Kierkegaard, Heidegger, Spengler, Latour)
- Aristotle and contemporary virtue ethics
- Philosophy of culture (e.g. Frankfurter Schule, Spengler, McLuhan, Bratton)

Jan Willem Wieland (j.j.w.wieland@vu.nl):

- Moral responsibility: individual, collective, inter/intrapersonal dilemmas
- Applied ethics: business, environmental, health (e.g. corporate responsibility)
- Normative ethics: Kant, Parfit, Korsgaard, Gauthier, Scanlon, etc.

Appendix C: Research questions

Type of questions (part 1):

- conceptual
- normative
- empirical

Example of topic:

Michelle Moody-Adams' claim that slavery was due to affected ignorance.

Conceptual question:

What exactly is affected ignorance?

Normative question:

Why is slavery morally wrong?

Empirical question:

Why do people want to stay ignorant, what are their motives?

Philosophers generally focus on conceptual and normative questions, where results of empirical research can support the formulation of the question or answer. Conceptual and normative questions asked from a philosophical perspective usually address the role of (hidden) presuppositions.

Type of questions (part 2):

- systematic
- historical
- applied

Example of topic:

Immanuel Kant's Formula of Universal Law.

Systematic question:

Is there a good solution for the counterexamples to Kant's Formula of Universal Law?

Historical question:

What precisely was Hegel's objection to Kant's Formula of Universal Law?

Applied question:

Should slavery be condemned on the basis of Kant's Formula of Universal Law?

Philosophers focus on conceptual and normative dimensions when answering such questions. Thus, answering the historical question regarding Hegel's objection goes beyond an inventory of Hegel's views regarding Kant's formula of the universal law.

Demarcation

Such questions are generally too large for a thesis, and you must demarcate your question by focusing on specific authors.

Example:

What is the solution of authors X and Y for the counterexamples to Kant's Formula of Universal Law, and are these good solutions?