WRITING THE MASTER'S THESIS:

know and respect the rules of the game

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Introduction

This document[1] is intended for students who are about to prepare their master "s thesis in business economics subjects. Its main objective is to provide some guidelines to be followed during the whole process of thesis preparation.

Contrary to what often happens abroad, it is not yet established practice in Italy to explicitly provide a written document with guidelines for the formulation of the thesis. However, there are rules pertaining in general to the modalities of research and in particular to the individual disciplinary areas that we believe it is useful to make explicit, while being aware that they are "filtered" by personal experience acquired over time and therefore marked by an obvious subjective component.

The goals of a dissertation are many: to close
- one's course of study;
- grapple for the first time with a research project and an independent written paper, albeit guided by a lecturer;
- build a "product" that should be one "s calling card entering the labor market.

The work of writing a thesis can present several difficulties, related to organization, writing, and adherence to formal elements.

1. The : preliminary defining aspects

A dissertation consists of arguing, precisely, a thesis, that is, arguing all the way from a set of starting ideas/hypotheses to a set finishing statements/conclusions. The thesis must be carried out under the direction of a thesis supervisor. All faculty members of the School of Economics may be thesis advisors. If a lecturer from another Faculty of the University of Trieste is chosen, it is necessary to have taken at least one examination with that lecturer in a subject related to the thesis work.

First of all, it is necessary to define the type of work one wishes to undertake, the motivations for studying a given topic within a given discipline. An important aspect, in this sense, is the order in which to choose topic and teacher. Indeed, it is not always easy to reconcile the interest in the topic and the quality of the personal relationship established with your relato re. The weight to be assigned to these two components is entirely subjective.

Two types of theses are provided: compilative and research.

In the case of the compilative thesis, the candidate must , analyze and interpret scientific contributions pertaining to a topic in its various aspects and points of view. It starts with a basic bibliography on the specific topic under discussion, which is enriched with an independent literature search. Literature analysis is undertaken with the aim of leading to original and unpublished cognitive or interpretive results.

In the case of the research thesis, the candidate may propose to develop exploratory, descriptive or interpretative work on the phenomenon under investigation, formulating hypotheses and subjecting them to scrutiny according to the canons of scientific inquiry.
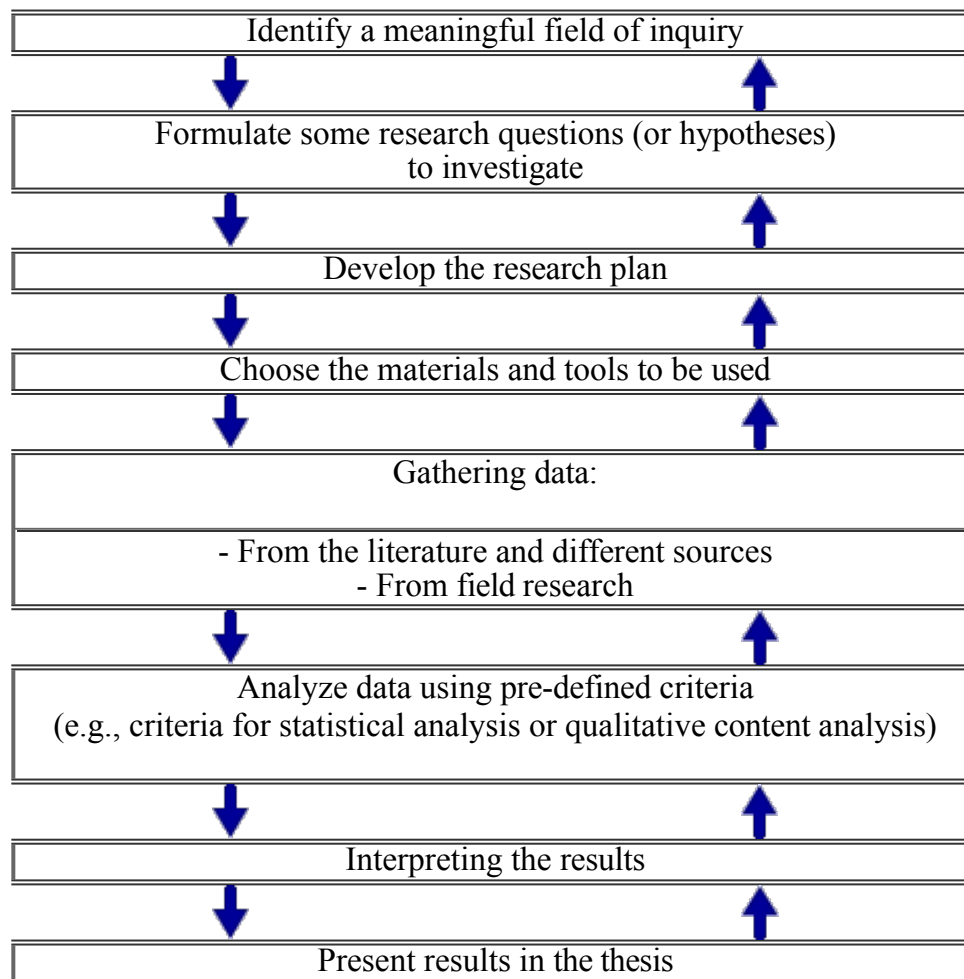
Depending on the type of thesis the student will be tackling, the paper will have its own peculiarities; however, it is possible to provide some cross-cutting indications regarding the structure and formal aspects to be followed.

2. The thesis project

The term "research "is usually applied to any form of systematic and organized investigation for the purpose of verifying facts or gathering information, usually related to a problem to be solved.

The research path basically consists of a "cycle," with a series of interrelated steps (Figure 1). Each step leads to the next, but at any time it is possible to return to the previous steps in order to appropriately revise one's ideas, resetting the project as necessary.

Figure 1 - Summary outline of the thesis project

| Identify a meaningful field of inquiry |
| Formulate some research questions (or hypotheses) to investigate |
| Develop the research plan |
| Choose the materials and tools to be used |
| Gathering data:
 - From the literature and different sources
 - From field research |
| Analyze data using pre-defined criteria
 (e.g., criteria for statistical analysis or qualitative content analysis) |
| Interpreting the results |
| Present results in the thesis |

Source: translation and adaptation from http://www.dissertationsuccess.com/resquest/index.htm (cons. 08/02/2010)

The first step is to identify a good field and objective of inquiry, from which more specific research questions and related hypotheses can be derived.

Next, one can begin to define the research plan. At this stage, starting with the research questions, the various methodological aspects need to be established: the bibliographic material (literature of

reference, institutional data, etc.), the type of research (qualitative and/or quantitative research, with exploratory, descriptive and/or causal purposes), the sample (probabilistic, non-probabilistic), data collection (in-depth, individual or group interviews, questionnaire, collection techniques, etc.).

The collected data are then analyzed using pre-defined criteria (e.g., using certain statistical tools)[2].

At the end of the data analysis and interpretation, we finally come to the stage of presenting the results. This concluding step is certainly no less important than the previous ones: in fact, good work presented poorly runs the risk of not being perceived and evaluated properly.

3. The structure of the thesis

The thesis is organized into chapters, paragraphs and sub-paragraphs exactly like a textbook. Typically, a thesis has the following structure:
- Introduction (summary of the project described)
- chapters devoted to the general formulation of the problem to be addressed (context, background data, theories, problem description, application interests, scientific basis and state of the art, critical literature review);
- chapters devoted to personal work (objectives, working hypothesis, description of the project by stages, characters of innovativeness, work content, data processing, results);
- conclusions (from ideas/hypotheses to statements/conclusions, future developments);
- bibliography;
- Any appendices (interviews, tables, reference materials).
The central chapters and appendices vary greatly from case to case, so they will not be covered here. Instead, it is important focus on the introduction and conclusion.

3.1. The introduction
The introduction should present the work clearly and succinctly, justifying its existence and immediately stating the chosen methods of analysis. In some cases, it may also be helpful to explain the division into parts (in the first chapter we talk about...).

According to many, the introduction is written at the end of the paper and, indeed, it is true that only at the end can the graduate student-researcher have an overall view of his or her journey and can tell it lucidly. However, it might be nontrivial to write a first version right away in the form of a draft and update it *ongoing*.

The first draft should contain, at least in broad strokes, a brief description of the context, reasons the work undertaken, expectations, data, source research, hypothesized path, etc.

At the same time as writing this first introduction, it is advisable to also draft a preliminary table of contents for the thesis. As a result, in the course of the work, the introduction and index will be rewritten several times, but it is important to begin by having an outline and a work program to proceed in order.

3.2. The conclusions
In many ways, the conclusions may seem to duplicate the introduction because they again summarize the work done. In reality they have a different function: the conclusion "s role is to "draw the sums" of the research, making clear what was attempted to demonstrate and in what terms the operation was successful.

The conclusions move from the introduction: taking up the discussion of what were the goals and expectations at the beginning of the research, a review of what has been done and how

much is proposed,

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[2] For a clear and useful discussion of methodological issues, see Corbetta (2003).

however, remains to be done. Conclusions should therefore highlight expectations met and unmet, goals achieved and not achieved, etc., highlighting the most interesting data, leaving open the possibility of further research and giving indications for potential future developments.

4. Some caveats regarding content

In principle, it is good to remember that the thesis must then be discussed in front of a committee. In English this is referred to as thesis *defense*. It follows that what is written in the thesis should be "defensible": everything that is useful to support the thesis, should fall into one of the following categories:

1) theories etc. taken from the literature (the source must always be cited and the source must be in the bibliography);

2) data, information (the source should always be cited, always specifying whether the data presented are the result of information processing or data from other sources;

3) personal opinions (argued in light of reflections that move from theory or elaboration from data obtained from empirical research).

In the theoretical part of the thesis, i.e., the part devoted to the review of the bibliography, it is important to "connect" the various ideas expressed by each source in a logical way so as to increase the overall comprehensibility of the topic, trying to maintain a good capacity for synthesis and adding, if useful for understanding, personal comments as well.

4.1. The malpractice of "copy-paste"

The use of copy-paste of excerpts from literature IS FORBIDDEN : this is an offense of plagiarism, by the way not difficult to detect, since usually:

- writing style is blatantly different from that used in previous periods;
- the "pasted" passage is not logically related what is written before and what is written after;
- within the pasted passage one does not have to edit references (footnotes, citations, etc.) that are no longer valid in the thesis text.

However, copying whole passages from other sources is certainly helpful *in the process of literature reconnaissance*:

- makes it possible to avoid forgetting important information: it is good practice, however, to clearly highlight the copied passage and note the references related to the source, so that the bibliography can be compiled correctly;
- allows the student to overcome "blank page panic."

It follows that the use of copy-paste can be considered "legitimate" only at a preliminary stage. After putting the materials in order, in fact, it is necessary to commit oneself to rewriting the text, taking advantage, on the one hand, of the information that the sources allow one to learn and trying, on the other hand, to maintain one "s own writing style.

4.2. The style of writing

One of the most challenging aspects is being able to adapt to the "style," language, and technical vocabulary of the discipline referred to in the thesis. The only help on this front may come from a careful analysis of the bibliography, from which to extract both indications of content and indications in terms of the language of the scientific community of reference.

In methodology, for example, simple sentences are preferred. Consequently, it is best to avoid periods containing too many subordinates. In addition, links between consecutive statements should be

as clear and explicit as possible. Throughout the discussion, special attention must be paid to the methods adopted because it is the method that shapes and supports the path of analysis.

5. Some formal aspects

5.1. Layout

Fonts: classic fonts (Times New Roman, Verdana or Arial) are preferred, and less readable fonts are to be avoided. The body of the text can be 12 or 13 point.
The *font* chosen should "normal" (round, not italic, not bold, etc.) and remain the same throughout the work; it is appropriate to enlarge the font in titles (e.g. 14 or 16 points, possibly using bold as well) and decrease it (usually to 10 points) in notes and quotations.
It is preferable not to go overboard in trying to highlight different parts of the text with the use of italics, bold, underlining, etc.: highlighting too much will have the same effect as not highlighting anything and will only create a great deal of confusion that disrupts reading.

Margins: should be appropriate for the type of printing. In the case of the thesis, a margin of about 3 cm can be expected above, below, left and right, and it is advisable to increase the inner margin to account for the space needed for binding (0.5 cm)[3].

Line spacing: can be appropriately set to 1.5 lines.

Number of pages: in specific terms, it is difficult to give guidance: however, it is important to remember that a good level of synthesis is always appreciable and that it is useless to try to "impress" one's supervisor by presenting a voluminous thesis; what is evaluated is its content, not the number of pages.

5.2. Writing rules
Since we cannot be exhaustive on the vast topic of writing rules, only a few aspects considered relevant to the thesis will be focused on here.
In Italian punctuation is generally followed (never preceded) by a space: so after a period, a semicolon, a comma, the colon, etc., a space is placed. Parentheses and quotation marks do not require internal spaces.
In Italian there are accented vowels (àèéìòù). With the exception of "e," all other accented vowels are written with grave accent (systematic, so, more), "è" (with grave accent) is used for the third person of the verb to be and for many words such as "cioè," "caffè," "ahimè," etc., while "é" (with acute accent) is used for "perché," "affinché," "né"₌ etc.
In a dissertation it often happens that foreign words must be used; these should be written in *italics* to make it explicit to the reader that they are borrowed from another language and do not meet the phonetic rules of the Italian language. If the foreign word has become commonly used or has already been assimilated into the technical lexicon of the discipline, the term can be written in the same font as the body of the text (e.g., web, business, stage).
It is preferable never to decline foreign words (e.g., do not use the plural form either by applying the rules of the foreign language or those of the Italian language), although continuous violations of this general rule are observed in the literature.
It is also preferable to use the third person in the presentation of the text.

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[3] In the case where the thesis is written on the two sides of each sheet, in order to reason in terms inner/outer

margin and/or to be able to number odd pages on the right and even pages on the left, the "side-by-side pages" option must be set (found in the page setup menu).

5.3. Quotes

When citing documents found in the bibliography it is usual to quote, in parentheses, the author and year of the text from which these passages are taken: (Author, year). When, on the other hand, reviewing existing literature, one can cite the author "s name in the text and insert only the year of publication in parentheses.

EXAMPLE: "an explanation from an economic perspective can, however, be found in a seminal contribution by Stiglitz (2002).

If, on the other hand, excerpts are quoted verbatim, it is necessary to enclose the portion of text in quotation marks ("" or "") and then insert, in parentheses, the year and page number. It is emphasized that, in these cases, it is essential to quote faithfully.

EXAMPLE: In this sense, description "[...] is the first step and/or goal of any field of intellectual curiosity" (Bernardi, 2005, p.18).

In some cases, when, for example, the reported text is quite long (more than two-three lines), it is useful to separate it from the text with a blank line, use a smaller font (10 points) and increase the left margin.

EXAMPLE: In relation to the use of the survey as a tool for market analysis, Bernardi notes that:
"The opportunities for administering questionnaires and interviews to the population are, unfortunately, multiplying: not only professional researchers, but also market research agencies, "barefoot" researchers, casual onlookers promote with ephemeral and, more often than not, inadequate approaches, means, methodological facilities "survey" initiatives that, in the long run, are severely affecting the willingness of the population to participate in the various, improvised surveys, sometimes not fully justified in their eyes. It is no accident that the expression 'statistical harassment' has been coined" (Bernardi, 2005, p. 89).

Finally, if changes are made to a source, it is necessary to make explicit that at that precise point the text has been changed. If text is added to increase, for example, the comprehensibility of the quoted passage, then the added words should be placed in square brackets. When, on the other hand, it is necessary to point out to the reader that the quoted passage is incomplete (it was decided to omit parts at the beginning, at the end, or within it for the sake of synthesis), then square brackets and ellipses should be used, as in the following example:

"The [interview] structure consists of a social situation in which one person (the interviewer) has the task of asking the questions and the other person (the respondent) has the task of answering the questions, with the tasks defined by another person (the researcher) [...]" (Bradburn, 1992, p.315).

A standardized system has not yet been established for citing materials found on websites, so always write the source in full, citing web address, author and year. "It is also appropriate to add the date the site was accessed, given quickly web pages can change.

5.4. The notes

Footnotes should be inserted in the footer and are written using a smaller body (10 point) and the same font as the text. Footnotes are used for different purposes, including:
- Specify or add bibliographic references for reference and further study;
- enrich the discussion with additional information that may be left out on a first reading and become useful only to those who wish to delve deeper into the subject matter.

It should be pointed out that excessive use of footnotes can be counterproductive as it leads to too frequent interruptions in reading, to the detriment of the

linearity of the treatment. Therefore, it is recommended to use this tool only when it is not possible to include additional information in the text.

5.5. Graphs and tables
Graphs and tables should be inserted into the text and numbered with the chapter number followed by the sequential number. Within the graphs and tables, especially if it increases readability and/or improves layout, a different and/or smaller body may be used.
Graphs and tables should always have a title (placed immediately before) and indication of the source (below). If they are original elaborations you can put the words "elaboration on data" followed by the source.
Graphs and tables are called up in the text by quoting the number.

EXAMPLE: As can be seen in Table 2.1, the company "s turnover over the past three years has growing at increasing rates.

<div align="center">or</div>

EXAMPLE: The company "s turnover over the past three years has been growing at constant rates (Table 2.1).

In the case of graphs and drawings, it is important to remember that the thesis is to be printed; therefore, it is important to choose effects (colors, textures, etc.) based on print rendering, not video rendering.

5.6. Bibliography
The bibliography should be inserted at the end of the thesis and should contain in alphabetical order all "specialized" texts that directly relate the thesis topic and all "classic" texts (manuals) that have been referred to. The bibliography can be written using single spacing and an indent for the text wrap.
First of all, it should be kept in mind that the bibliography of the dissertation should list all works that have been cited in the text (with author "s name and year of publication).
There are several settings in the presentation of the bibliography. One once chosen a setting, it is important to maintain it and not continually change its form[4].
Bibliographic references should be presented differently for different types of publications:
- books
- book chapters
- articles
- websites

Here we suggest one among several possible approaches frequently adopted in different fields of economic and social sciences.

In the case of books, begin by citing the **author**'s last name and then the first initial of the first name, separated by a comma (if there are more than one author, all the last names will be written in the order they appear in the text); next, the **title of the book**, in italics**, the publishing house, the place of publication** and the **year of publication.** Each field should be separated by a comma.

EXAMPLE: Author, *Work title*, Publisher, Place of publication, Year of publication

(Eco U., *Come si fa una tesi di laurea,* Bompiani, Milan, 2001).

In cases where **chapters of books** collecting content from various authors are to be cited, the author of the chapter and the title of the chapter itself should be put in front; the latter should be written in quotation marks, while italics will be reserved for the title of the book. Finally, the pages that contain the chapter of interest should be cited.

EXAMPLE: Author Chapter, "Chapter Title," in Author Book, *Book Title*, Publisher, Place of Publication, Year of Publication, pp.

(Sabbatini P., "Regulation and Competition in the Insurance Industry," in Varaldo R. and Turchetti G., *Evolutionary Profiles of Insurance Marketing and Distribution*, Franco Angeli, Milan, 2000,
pp. 576-590).

When an article from a **journal** is to be listed in the bibliography, the title of the article should be written in quotation marks and the title of the journal in italics. In addition, the number of the journal consulted, year of reference and the pages in which the article is contained should be specified.

EXAMPLE: Author, "Article Title," *Journal Title*, Number, Year, Pages containing the article.

(Orth U.R., Arnold R.C.G., "Understanding wine consumer behavior: Recent insights and open issues," *Markets and Competitiveness*, 4, 2009, pp. 71-94).

The list should be in **alphabetical order**, according to the author "s last name; if there are several books by the same author, they should be ordered starting with the most recent.

Finally, a separate list should be included for any articles found on **Internet sites**.
Documents consulted via the Internet present some special problems for citation: in fact, they often lack the author and/or the date of writing and/or the date of publication on the web. It becomes, therefore, very important to specify the date of last consultation. The recommended citation is as follows:

AUTHOR or EDITOR, year. *Title* [online]. Place of publication: publisher. Available at
<URL> [date accessed].

Sample citation of Internet publication:
LIBRARY & INFORMATION SERVICES, 1998. *Electronic library resources: a subject guide to selected resources on the Internet* [online]. Nottingham: The Nottingham Trent University.
Available at:< http://www.ntu.ac.uk/lis/elr.htm> [Access date: 07/16/2004].

In relation to documents on the Internet, "publisher" means the organization that hosts the author "s work on its pages. The entries "publisher" and "place of publication" are however (only in this case) optional. By indicating the URL the source is in fact uniquely identifiable. "Access date" means the date on which the site was visited. It is important to indicate this since the
content of pages on the Internet changes with high frequency, and so it is useful to inform
the reader that a particular piece of information was accurate at a given date (even though it
may no longer be present at a later date).

If it does not show the author of the page, it can be cited by indicating its title.

Conclusions

The spirit this note is to enable our undergraduates to reflect, before they set out to tackle such a demanding job as writing their dissertation, on what they *really* expect and what is *really* expected of them.

A nontrivial goal is to make explicit what most common sometimes abuses-are.

The exposition is deliberately simple in form and restrained in size, as such it can be criticized and improved. Any advice in this direction is most welcome.

Bibliographical references

Bernardi L., *Pathways of social research*, Carocci, Rome, 2005

Corbetta P*., Social research. Methodology and techniques* (4 volumes), Il Mulino, Bologna, 2003. Eco U., *Come si fa una tesi di laurea*, Bompiani, Milan, 2001

http://www.aib.it/aib/contr/gnoli2.htm (cons. 07/02/2010)

http://www.apastyle.org (cons. 07/02/2010)

http://www.dissertationsuccess.com/resquest/index.htm (cons. 08/02/2010)