



## **Manual for Master's thesis in Law**

For students  
Version September  
2023

# Contents

1. Introduction.....	3
2. Learning objectives.....	3
3. Preconditions and possible exemptions .....	3
4. Period for writing a thesis.....	3
5. The first steps: the theme of the thesis.....	4
6. Thesis design .....	4
7. Thesis agreements .....	4
8. Thesis plan .....	5
9. Length and layout .....	6
10. Assessment of the thesis .....	6
11. Plagiarism.....	7
12. (Digital) submission of thesis .....	7
13. Thesis evaluation .....	8
Appendix 1 Thesis-writing tips .....	
Appendix 2 Assessment of the Master's thesis .....	
Appendix 3 Nominal thesis procedure.....	

## **1. Introduction**

The Master's thesis is the final stage of the Master's programme. It is an independent work of research conducted by you, the student, as an integrated part of your programme. Many students consider writing the thesis to be the most interesting part of the programme, but also challenging. The information in this document is intended to assist you in the process of writing and to clarify the conditions that you will be expected to meet and what you can expect from your thesis supervisor.

Excellent writing skills are essential for any lawyer. Ultimately, written language will be your working tool. Future employers sometimes wish to consult an applicant's thesis in order to gain an impression of his or her writing skills. The thesis presents you with an opportunity to showcase yourself. Therefore, make sure to take the writing of your thesis very seriously.

This manual applies for both full-time and part-time students.

Contact details of the thesis supervisors can be found on [vu.nl](http://vu.nl)

## **2. Learning objectives**

The thesis can be completed with a pass if you have demonstrated to be able to apply the knowledge, understanding and skills acquired in the study programme in an independent manner, as described in the Teaching and Examination Regulations, article 9.4 Exit qualifications (See: [studiegids.vu.nl](http://studiegids.vu.nl), Master Law).

This means that you are capable of independently formulating a research question, identifying relevant source materials and/or data, critically analyzing and interpreting them, drawing conclusions, evaluating and, where applicable, making recommendations and suggestions for further research. In addition you acquire in-depth and specialist knowledge and understanding of, and insight in a subsidiary area within law.

## **3. Preconditions and possible exemptions**

In order to write a thesis, you must first register for the course 'Master's thesis in Law'. Further information can be found on Canvas.

In principle, it is not possible to obtain an exemption from the Master's thesis, or any part of it, in case you have already written a thesis as part of another programme. Neither will an (publishable) article result in exemption from writing the thesis. If you wish, you may consult your thesis supervisor or thesis coordinator on this issue.

If you wish to write a thesis together with another student, this is possible only if your individual contributions to it are clearly distinguishable. Each individual contribution must meet the requirements for a Master's thesis. For this, you must also first consult the thesis coordinator of your specialization.

## **4. Period for writing a thesis**

You have a maximum of ten months to write your thesis. Starting point is when your thesis design has been approved by the thesis coordinator and/or your thesis supervisor. An assessment will take place after max. ten months based on your final thesis version.

If you wish you can follow the nominal thesis procedure. You complete the thesis in accordance to predetermined deadlines within a year of the start of the Master's programme. See Appendix 3 for more information.

## **5. The first steps: the theme of the thesis**

It is never too early to start thinking about potential thesis subjects. Perhaps certain subjects were covered during your programme that you found particularly interesting. These subjects present a good point of departure for identifying an interesting theme. Above all, you should choose a subject that you personally find interesting and start identifying relevant sources to familiarize yourself with the subject. Your subject of choice must fit within the programme in general and within your chosen specialization in particular.

On Canvas you will find, where applicable for the specialization, a list of thesis themes or subjects.

## **6. Thesis design**

As soon as you want to start working on your thesis, you contact the thesis coordinator of your specialization.

The design contains 1-2 A4 where you describe:

- what made you choose this subject
- what research question you have in mind
- which research method you want to apply and
- an initial list of literature consulted or, if applicable, jurisdiction.

You first need to submit your design to the thesis coordinator. In writing or in a conversation it can be assessed whether the research question formulated is academic in nature and feasible and whether it is of sufficient relevance. The thesis coordinator will allocate a thesis supervisor. In principle, this will be based on the design submitted and on availability of supervisors.

Note: It varies per specialization whether the thesis coordinator or the thesis supervisor approves of the thesis design. The ten-month period starts as soon as the thesis design has been approved.

You may prefer an external supervisor who is not affiliated with the VU Faculty of Law. The Examination Board must give permission for this. In principle, permission is granted when this external supervisor is affiliated with a sister faculty. The external supervisor can only act under the responsibility of a faculty supervisor. You can discuss this with the thesis coordinator.

## **7. Thesis agreements**

Before embarking on the process of writing, you will make a series of agreements with the thesis supervisor to clarify what is expected of both parties, i.e. student and supervisor, such as:

- the number of supervision meetings you can expect
- how you will receive feedback (written or in a conversation) and
- how often you may submit a draft for assessment

It is particularly important to agree on a number of deadlines, such as:

- the expected completion date for the concept and the final version of your thesis and
- especially if they are expected to fall in the summer period (end of period 6 and beginning of period 1), given the availability of guidance and feedback by the thesis supervisor and assessment by the thesis supervisor and second assessor.

Your thesis should be written in English. You are only permitted to write your thesis in another modern language after consulting your supervisor.

The work that you submit for feedback must be carefully compiled in English and include a proper annotation system. If this is not the case, the thesis supervisor may withhold feedback until the work meet these conditions.

### **If the thesis supervisor defaults**

The thesis supervisor provides substantive feedback within 10 working days after the agreed submission date. Exceptions are possible in special circumstances. If the supervisor is (partly) not available during the thesis period, he or she will give you timely notice of this and suggest an alternative solution.

If you encounter problems with the thesis supervisor, you will first try to find a solution together. If this does not work, you contact the thesis coordinator. If, in your opinion, no reasonable solution is offered, you can turn to (the official secretary of) the Examination Board.

### **If you yourself default**

If you do not submit work (even after a reminder) contrary to the agreements made, the supervisor can inform you that the supervision will not be continued. In that case, you write a final version without further supervision, which will then be assessed (provided that it is submitted within ten months).

## **8. Thesis plan**

The next step is to compile a thesis plan. The thesis plan forms the basis for the introduction to the thesis. The thesis plan includes:

1. Introduction of the subject, resulting in;
2. The research question;
3. Subsidiary questions;
4. The approach for data collection or research method;
5. A provisional chapter structure;
6. A provisional bibliography;
7. A schedule and timeline of activities
8. The working title of the thesis

### **Re 1**

Describe in 600-800 words the theme to which the research question relates, provide details of the assumption or theory that you will take as your basis and why you have chosen this. The objective indicates the *relevance* of the subject: in other words, what we will gain from an answer to the research question.

### **Re 2-3**

In your research question, you will summarize what you intend to research. The aim of a research question is to define the parameters of the area you wish to research. The research question must be clearly formulated and, preferably, consist of a single sentence.

### **Re 4**

Here, you describe which approach or method you use to conduct your research and why this is appropriate for your research question.

You also make explicit how sources will be selected for the research. For example, jurisdiction research is necessary for some research questions. In that case, the choice of jurisdiction being used must be justified by the researcher. Will all published jurisdiction on a specific theme be examined? Are demarcations in time used and, if so, which ones and why? Is a demarcation used of only certain judicial bodies (for example only HR or courts of law)? Or, for example, given the problem definition, is only sought and referred to jurisdiction that confirms or rejects a certain approach in the doctrine? Many variants and choices are possible. What matters is that you make a responsible choice so that the research produces results that are reliable, complete or representative.

Re 5-7 Based on the sections described above, you draw up a provisional chapter structure, a list of possible literature and a timeline for the activities planned. Describe which activities are planned to do (preparation, data collection, reporting) and when. Indicate how much time each activity takes, and make a schedule in terms of both time (net) and lead time (gross).

## 9. Length and layout

As a rule, the following applies:

### *Law and Notarial Law*

A thesis on a specialization 12 ECTS

A thesis worth 12 ECTS contains between 12,000 and 20,000 words (excluding appendices). It is possible to deviate from this guideline if the nature of the thesis permits this. You should always discuss this with your supervisor. In addition you should use a standard font and a line spacing of 1.15.

## 10. Assessment of the thesis

Assessment takes place ten months after the theme has been submitted to the thesis coordinator, based on the current version at that time. This deadline does not affect the hardship clause in Article 6.1 of the Teaching and Examination Regulations for the Master's programme in Law.

If the end of the ten months takes place during the summer holiday, between the end of period 6 and the start of period 1, a final version submitted during the summer holiday will be deemed to have been submitted on time.

If you are unable to incorporate the feedback on the draft version before the end of period 6, the supervisor can grant an extension for the submission of the final version. No supervision will be provided in the interim.

Your thesis will be assessed based on the criteria as described in appendix 2.

The thesis supervisor and second assessor will jointly assess the thesis. The final result of the thesis will be announced within 20 working days after the official submission date of the thesis.

The assessment will be recorded, even if it is a fail.

A thesis that has been awarded a pass mark cannot be reworked.

The thesis supervisor will tell you your final mark and provide an explanation based on the set criteria and the assessment form and how he/she and the second assessor reached the final mark. You can request an interview if you wish. The assessment form will be included in your student file and the supervisor will issue you with a copy.

If the thesis is not awarded a pass mark, you can write a new thesis. It must have a different research question and be supervised by a different supervisor from the one who supervised the thesis that was awarded a fail mark.

When you have obtained all ECTS within the curriculum, you graduate automatically.

In case of a difference of opinion between the two assessors, the Examination Board will have the final decision. The Examination Board may allocate a third assessor for this purpose.

## 11. Plagiarism

It is not permitted to use passages from other people's work or paraphrase them without full and correct source references. If you fail to reference a source and make it appear as if the work is your own, this is plagiarism. In that case, your thesis supervisor can decide to put the matter to the Examination Board, which may impose a sanction on you. It is therefore advisable to always exercise caution in dealing with other people's work when writing your thesis. For a full description of what is understood by academic misconduct and plagiarism, as well as the procedure that applies in the case of infringements, please consult the Examination Regulations.

### Plagiarism check

Your final thesis will be checked for plagiarism using a Module on Canvas. On Canvas you will find the Master's thesis module for each specialization. You can upload the final version of your thesis there. Please note: you can only upload your thesis once and should therefore make sure you use the right version.

### Generative AI

The use of generative AI, such as ChatGPT, is permitted to a certain extent in the thesis. It may be used as a 'language assistant' for improvement of your writing, similar to how 'normal' spelling and grammar tools work. It can also be used to look up information, similar to how you would search for information with Google, for example. Please note that after searching for the information, you still assess the value of the information yourself (the information generated is not always correct!). You must also process the generated information yourself and search for additional scientific sources. You can also get inspiration for writing a piece of text with ChatGPT. It can generate ideas for the structure of a text.

**Fraud and plagiarism are not permitted.** The aim of the Master's programme and the thesis is that you learn to acquire and process knowledge and to report it properly. The supervisor and assessors must be able to make a correct assessment of your knowledge and skills. This means that you write the thesis yourself. Any form of literal copying and copying without full source acknowledgment (quoting, referencing) of non-native material, including those generated by generative AI, is fraudulent in that sense. Academic work requires original sources to be used and processed by oneself. If your supervisor has doubts about whether you have used ChatGPT within the correct framework, the supervisor can discuss this with you and, if still in doubt, contact the Examination Board.

For more and latest information about generative AI in education:

[Generative AI and ChatGPT - Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam \(vu.nl\)](#)

## 12. (Digital) submission of thesis

When the thesis has been completed with a pass, you must submit your thesis digitally to the VU thesis archive.

Go to: [Uploading your thesis - More about - Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam \(vu.nl\)](#)

After being uploaded, your thesis will not be publicly available. It will be checked by the education office to ensure that all details have been completed in full, after which it will be saved in the VU thesis archive.

Uploading after submission is important: this prevents delays in the degree certificate request.

If you have written a thesis that contains confidential information: your thesis will not be published. However, you must still upload your thesis in the VU thesis archive. On the assessment form, the supervisor will indicate that it is a confidential thesis. Make sure you thoroughly discuss this with your supervisor in order to prevent any misunderstandings.

### **13. Thesis evaluation**

You will receive a digital request to complete an evaluation form in which you can describe your experience of writing the Master's thesis and your supervision. The results of the evaluation will be used to make further improvements to everything associated with thesis writing and assessment.



## **Appendix 1 Thesis-writing tips**

This document contains a series of tips, examples and ideas that you may find useful while writing your thesis.

### **The subject**

Consult the University Library or examine general legal journals. You can also talk to a lecturer to discuss and develop your ideas.

A common mistake in thesis writing is attempting to cover too wide a subject. Make sure you define clear parameters for the subject. A subject such as “witnesses for the prosecution” is too wide. A better example would be “Guarantees in Dutch criminal proceedings with regard to the reliability and use of witnesses for the prosecution”.

### **The research question**

The research question takes the form of a question and is the theme that connects all parts of the thesis. The conclusion of the thesis provides a response to this question. A good research question should:

- have well-defined parameters
- be clear
- be academically relevant
- be researchable

Formulating a research question is not easy. Hardly anyone is capable of formulating a good research question the first time round. This is not necessarily a bad thing, since your knowledge will increase during the process of thesis-writing. This may call for adjustments or enhancements to the research question.

### **Literature survey**

In addition to searching, conducting a literature survey primarily involves selecting. The criterion for selection involves asking the question: does this book or article contribute to answering the research question? Many students make the mistake of delaying writing until they have found and read all relevant literature. Instead, write down any ideas you have while reading. As the thesis progresses, the amount of time spent on writing will gradually increase.

For each chapter, draw up:

- a list of the questions that will be answered
- a summary of the argumentation you will present
- a list of the themes that will be handled.

Compile a document which contains author information, title, year, publisher details, page number(s), if applicable, and possibly a brief summary of the relevant sections.

### **Writing**

Writing is about more than producing words: it also involves thinking. Many students find it difficult to put down their ideas on paper in a clear and structured manner. Therefore, do not postpone writing until the last minute.

Many students also find it difficult to write a first sentence. Initially, try writing freely. Just write everything down. You can improve the style and layout later.

Many students assume that their first version will be the same as the final version, small amendments aside. That is hardly ever the case. Look critically at your own work and ask others to read the thesis (even students of other subjects). Have the courage to discard things. Remove any redundant passages.

It goes without saying that the thesis must be written in grammatically correct language. A good thesis is easy to read and clearly argued. You can make the thesis more readable by recapping things the reader already knows and pointing forward to things that will come later in the thesis. It is advisable to write as succinctly as possible. Avoid long digressions, summaries or long sentences and make sure everything is concise and to-the-point. Avoid unnecessarily pompous, woolly or complex use of language. Whenever you introduce specialist terms, define them. Good theses are rarely very long.

A support in the writing process is the Schrijfhelp.

Academic English writing: go to <https://awa.schrijfhelp.be/>, login: vu, password: awa\_kbv32

The application works on the recent versions of all current browsers. The application is less suitable for tablets and not at all for smartphones.

### **Sources**

Every thesis must be complete with a bibliography and set of notes. Notes are used for references to any literature you have consulted (see above) and for comments that may be of interest but do not belong in the main body of the text. It is advisable to keep the latter category of notes to an absolute minimum.

### **Help**

Do not put off difficult questions. Do not hesitate to consult the supervisor. Notify the supervisor of any important changes. Prepare properly for meetings with the supervisor.

## Appendix 2 Assessment of the Master's thesis

A Master's thesis is assessed on the basis of seven criteria by both the thesis supervisor and the second assessor. The use of language and layout of the thesis must be worthy of a pass for the thesis to be assessed. The terms use of language and layout are explained in greater detail below. This is then followed by an explanation of the assessment criteria.

### *Use of language*

The target readership of the thesis is an interested university-educated audience with a legal background. The thesis must be written in language that is grammatically correct and free of spelling errors.

A good thesis is clear and does not contain unnecessary digressions. The argumentation and use of language must be appropriate.

### *Layout*

In addition to the introduction, the main body of the text and the conclusion, the thesis consists of a title page, a table of contents, and (at the very end) a bibliography.

In addition to the title details, the *title page* includes the author's name, student number, the date, faculty, specialization and the name(s) of the thesis supervisor(s). A good title is usually brief and to the point. Anyone must be able to grasp from the title and/or subtitle what the thesis is about.

The thesis must be clearly and consistently structured. Headings must be clear. The table of contents, page numbering and footnote numbering must be accurate.

The text is formatted in a common font and a line spacing of 1.15.

## Assessment criteria

### 1. Research question [indication weight 20%]

- Is the research question clearly explained (in sub-questions)?
- Is the research question clear and correctly defined?
- Has the research question been clearly introduced and has the research been placed in an appropriate practical and/or scientific context?
- Degree to which the research question is innovative?
- Degree to which the student has had help in formulating a relevant and clear research question?
- Does the research question match what has been researched?
- Does the conclusion contain a clear answer to the research question?

### 2. Accountability method [indication weight 10%]

- Is the research methodology made explicit?
- Is the research method suitable for answering the research question?
- Is the research method described sufficiently clearly (clarity/precision/demarcation)?
- Possibly: is the research method innovative (e.g. innovative methodology, new data, multidisciplinary)?

### 3. Structure and writing skills [indication weight 20%]

- Is the thesis logically structured and coherent [does the thesis lead to a well-founded conclusion via logical and imitable intermediate steps]?
- Is the thesis easy to read?

The main text of the thesis consists of three parts: the introduction, the main body of the text (subdivided into chapters) and the conclusion.

The *introduction* presents the subject and formulates the research question. The author also provides a justification of the methods applied and a summary of what will be covered in the rest of the text.

The *main body of the text* provides an analysis of the research question presented in the introduction. It must be subdivided logically into chapters.

The *conclusion* brings everything together and formulates a response to the research question. The conclusion summarizes the argumentation in the main body text and does not introduce new information.

#### **4. Academic level [indication weight 30%]**

- Is the (legal) information correct and is the information relevant to the argument?
- Are all relevant facets of a subject sufficiently highlighted for the problem statement, or is relevant information missing?
- Are main and secondary issues sufficiently distinguished?
- Is the argumentation in the thesis clear and convincing or are there missing arguments?
- Does the content of the thesis show the ability to (critically) analyze/evaluate or create?
- To what extent does the thesis have added value for scientific discourse?

The academic level is evident from, among other things, the thoroughness of the processing of legal sources, the level of reflection and the extent to which the research is in line with (current) legal academic discussions. In addition, the student has a recognizable personal contribution. This can be expressed in one's own point of view, but also in the choice of literature or jurisdiction, or in the (re)organization thereof. A personal contribution can also be expressed in a critical review of literature and jurisdiction, an independent position, making connections or pointing out contradictions.

#### **5. Source use [indication weight 10%]**

- Is the content of the thesis scientifically substantiated by the use of authoritative (primary) sources?
- Is the source use complete or missing relevant sources?
- Have the sources been adequately processed [is the information displayed and used correctly by the student]?
- Have the sources been critically processed [has the source been tested for correctness, verifiability, accuracy, topicality]?

#### **6. Independence [indication weight 10%]**

- Did the thesis develop from an 'independent learning process'?

### **Appendix 3 Nominal thesis procedure**

If you wish you can follow the nominal thesis procedure. You complete the thesis in accordance to predetermined deadlines within a year of the start of the Master's programme

#### *Start master 1 September:*

1. The student submits the thesis design to the thesis coordinator of the specialization or programme concerned in period 1. On the Canvassite for the specialization or programme, there is a list of themes for thesis subjects.
2. The student submits a research question and a thesis plan to the supervisor by 9 am on Monday of the second week of period 4 at the latest.
3. A draft final version must be submitted by 10 am on Monday of the first week of period 6.
4. The final version must be submitted by 10 am on Monday of the fourth week of period 6.

#### *Start master 1 February:*

1. The student submits the thesis design to the thesis coordinator of the specialization or programme concerned in period 4. On the Canvassite for the specialization or programme, there is a list of themes for thesis subjects.
  2. The student submits a research question and a thesis plan to the supervisor by 9 am on Monday of the second week of period 1 at the latest.
  3. A draft final version must be submitted by 10 am on Monday of the fifth week of period 2.
  4. The final version must be submitted by 10 am on Monday of the second week of period 3.
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