

Thesis Regulations

Faculty of Theology

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0. Guide

This document explains the thesis regulations for the Bachelor's and Master's programmes in the Faculty of Theology at VU University Amsterdam, and for the faculty's joint Bachelor's programme with the Protestant Theological University. These regulations apply to the thesis component of all faculty programmes. Any differences between the Bachelor's, pre-Master's and Master's theses are specified; in all other cases, the thesis regulations outlined here apply to all of these programmes.

1. Preparations

1.1 What is a thesis?

A thesis is a written report on a research project that each student conducts largely independently, though with some guidance from a supervisor. The thesis serves as a final testament to the student's mastery of his/her subject. For that reason, it should not contain any past projects or previously published articles. Students must use standard methods in applying the knowledge, understanding and skills they have gained to their discussion of clearly formulated and well-defined research goals and research questions.

The differences between theses at the Bachelor's and Master's levels are outlined below.¹

a. *Scope.*²

- i. The Bachelor's thesis earns 12 EC (including the *Research Lab: Thesis Preparation* module) and generally contains between 7,000 and 10,000 words.
- ii. The pre-Master's thesis earns 12 EC (including the *Research Lab: Thesis Preparation* module) and generally contains between 7,000 and 10,000 words.³
- iii. The Master's thesis varies by programme:
 - i. The thesis for the one-year Master's programme earns 12 EC (excluding the *Research Skills* module) and generally contains between 15,000 and 20,000 words.
 - ii. The thesis for the Research Master's programme earns 30 EC (excluding the *Research Skills* module) and should contain no more than 50,000 words.
 - iii. The thesis for the three-year Master's programme earns 18 EC (excluding the *Research Skills* module) and should contain no more than 30,000 words.

b. *Complexity.* The Bachelor's thesis may apply knowledge in a singular context, and/or within one sub-discipline. Master's theses must span multiple contexts and specifically discuss interconnections with other sub-disciplines.

c. *Pre-formulated structure.* Bachelor's students may use structures, research questions and working methods that are pre-formulated primarily by their

¹ See also R. van der Rijst & R. Jacobi, *De verwevenheid van onderzoek en onderwijs in universitaire bacheloropleidingen* (English: The interconnection between research and education in university Bachelor's programmes); https://openaccess.leidenuniv.nl/bitstream/handle/1887/16257/VanderRijstJacobi2010_TvHO.pdf?sequence=2 (26 June 2014).

² Including footnotes. Excluding attachments, but the thesis must be intelligible without the attachments. These can only be used for "proof", e.g. lists of texts or persons; interview questions; etc.

³ In the rest of this document the pre-Master's thesis follows the rules of the Bachelor's thesis.

supervisors. For Master's theses, however, students must contribute these elements independently for the most part.

- d. *Use of sources.* For Bachelor's theses, students may use textbooks in addition to scientific and primary sources. Textbooks are not permitted as sources for Master's theses (unless the textbook is in use as a primary source).
- e. *Depth of discussion and conclusions.* Bachelor's theses offer information, ideas and solutions with their themes. In addition to these contents, Master's theses specify contrary considerations and the limitations of the solutions and themes they present.
- f. *Writing skills.* Both Bachelor's and Master's theses must contain correct spelling, while Master's theses must also use clear, precise language to prevent uncertainties in interpretation.
- g. *Independent work.* Bachelor's students work independently, but can still expect a fair amount of guidance from their supervisors. Master's students are expected to show independence in their work. Students at both levels will be responsible for the entire course of their thesis projects.
- h. *Originality.* Bachelor's theses present findings from literature and/or case studies in the light of an original perspective or new research question.⁴ Master's theses make an original contribution to the development and/or application of existing ideas in the literature and/or case studies.

1.2 Educational goals

In their theses, students must demonstrate, among other things, the following independent skills:

- a. the ability to present the knowledge and insight gained in a select field;
- b. the ability to formulate a research question and organize a thesis research project;
- c. the ability to gather, study and evaluate sources and/or data and/or academic literature;
- d. the ability to conduct research according to the standard method(s) used for the subject matter in question;
- e. the ability to complete an individual learning process by producing a correctly written research report that puts forth findings in a clear, methodologically sound, well-argued and documented manner;
- f. the ability to present critical and creative thinking.

The Dublin Descriptors have been incorporated as follows: knowledge and understanding (a), applying knowledge and understanding (b, c, d), making judgments (c, f), communication (e, f), learning skills (e, f).

⁴ See, for example, B. Greetham, *How to Write Your Undergraduate Dissertation* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2009).

1.3 Thesis admission requirements

Bachelor's programmes:

Barring exemptions granted by the Examination Board, students cannot enter the *Thesis Preparation* module, or start on the thesis itself, until they have completed all second-year courses. Students may only begin on the thesis once they have concluded the *Thesis Preparation* module.

Master's programmes:

Barring exemptions granted by the Examination Board, students cannot begin their thesis until they have completed the *Research Design* (Research Master), *Research Skills* (Divinity Master), or the first assignments of the *Thesis* course (Societal Master), i.e. until they have completed their research proposal and have received approval of the course coordinator and possible supervisor.

1.4 Exemptions

As laid down in Article 5 of the Academic and Examination Regulations (Dutch abbreviation OER) and faculty policy, no exemptions will be granted for the thesis.

1.5 Language

The thesis of the Research Master's students is written in English. The thesis of students in the one-year master and the international bachelor is written in English, except for the tracks that are classified as Dutch. The thesis of students in the Dutch Bachelor and the Divinity Master is written in Dutch.

1.6 Choice of topic

Thesis topics can be chosen in different ways:

- a. Each research group has a list of potential topics. These topics are ideally suited to the research interests of certain lecturers or faculty sections.
- b. Students may also choose their own topic. In that case, they may first consult the lecturer(s) for the *Bachelor's Thesis Preparation* or the *Research Skills / Design* modules, after which they should contact the lecturer whose field is relevant to their topic.

Should students encounter difficulties in finding a topic or a suitable supervisor, they should begin by contacting the lecturer for the modules listed above. If problems persist, students should contact the Examination Board for advice.

Because our faculty does not offer education in quantitative research, such as courses in Statistics, it is only possible to graduate on a quantitative research project, if the student can prove to have been schooled in quantitative research (elsewhere), such as courses from psychology or sociology, and if the first supervisor is likewise schooled in quantitative methods.

2. Overview of the thesis process and supervision

2.1 Overview of the thesis process

2.1.1 Bachelor's thesis

The thesis component begins in period 5 with the *Bachelor's Thesis Preparation* module. During this module, students draw up a thesis proposal, and start writing their thesis.

Students look for a lecturer to serve as their thesis supervisor, in period 3 and 4. To do this, they check the lists of thesis topics that various faculty sections make available, or they consult the lecturer for the *Thesis Preparation* module. A thesis supervisor should have sufficient affinity with the topic and academic research in that field. In exceptional cases, the Examination Board will grant requests for someone outside the faculty to be appointed as a thesis supervisor. The thesis supervisor is responsible to oversee the level of the thesis structure, the thesis itself and the process of supervision and guidance.

During the *Bachelor's Thesis Preparation* module, students write a thesis proposal of roughly 1,000 words. The proposal must, at the very least, contain all the components listed below:

- a. name, telephone number, e-mail address and student number;
- b. introduction: background and motivation;
- c. definition of focal problem and research question;
- d. structuring of the focal problem in a provisional theoretical framework (in the light of which theory will you examine your topic?) and development of provisional research questions (how do you plan to write about these?);
- e. research structure and method;
- f. time planning;
- g. preferred thesis supervisor and second assessor;
- h. list of sources and materials;
- i. if applicable, any unusual necessities for this research project in terms of aids, travel, or archive/library visits.

During the *Bachelor's Thesis Preparation* module, students should contact their preferred supervisors to make sure they are available and to consult them about their topic choice and thesis proposal. During this same module, students will also begin making other preparations for the thesis project itself. The study guide for the *Thesis Preparation* module explains how the work needs to be presented to complete this module successfully (draft version, literature report, etc.). Students will submit their thesis proposals and supplementary documents to the lecturer for the *Bachelor's Thesis Preparation* module. The lecturer will evaluate the students' thesis proposals based on the format (outlined above) to see if they meet the standard academic writing requirements (cf. academic skills).

If a thesis proposal is inadequate, the lecturer will notify the student as swiftly as possible of the areas requiring improvement. This will be done no later than ten working days after receipt. The student should use that feedback to submit an improved proposal.

Students will write their theses in period 6.

2.1.2 Master's thesis

The thesis process begins in period 3, and usually takes place in conjunction with the *Research Skills* module. Before this module (mid December) the student will make a very short research proposal.

During this module this proposal will be complemented and corrected in the tutorials until it has reached a final, well-founded and coherent form. Students who draft other proposals (e.g. for their Internship) during *Research Skills* will draw up their thesis proposal together with their supervisors when they start their thesis project.

Students will choose a lecturer to supervise their thesis, using the lists of thesis topics issued by different faculty sections. They may also do this in consultation with the director of their Master's programme. Thesis supervisors should have sufficient affinity with the topic and academic research in that field. In exceptional cases, the Examination Board will grant requests for someone outside the faculty to be appointed as a thesis supervisor. The thesis supervisor is responsible to ensure that the student completes the *Research Skills* module and to oversee the level of the thesis structure, the thesis itself and the process of supervision and guidance.

The proposal must be submitted well before the *Research Skills* module begins. It should contain, in the end, all the components listed below:

Research Proposal

A. Fact Sheet

- a. name, e-mail address and student number
- b. the specific Master's programme and track for which the thesis is being written
- c. research theme in one short phrase
- d. (prospective) research team and first supervisor

B. Background of Research and Researcher

- a. introduction to the topic (research problem)
- b. its relevance for society, science, (faith) communities, or individuals
- c. background/motivation for choosing the specific topic, including the questions whether you have a special wish for a certain outcome: how will you avoid being subjective? Or: how do you guarantee scrupulousness, reliability, impartiality and independence in this specific investigation?
- d. your own strong and weak points (see e.g. Kolb test) and their consequences for this investigation

C. Research Plan

- a. in case you wrote a paper or thesis on this topic before: state the research question of your undergraduate thesis and explain how your current thesis will deepen and/or broaden your undergraduate thesis
- b. survey of the literature or a provisional *status quaestionis*: who have published on this topic; what are the key problems/questions; what methods were used; what positions have already been worked out
- c. main research question in **one sentence, concluding in a question mark**, preferably in the ABC format, introduced in Research Skills
- d. determination of the kind of research question: descriptive, comparative, explanatory, evaluative, or prognostic
- e. delimitation: what is the scope of your research and how do you delimit it to a workable size
- f. subquestions, necessary in order to answer the main research question
- g. approach and/or method, including:
 - determination of the kind of research method: qualitative or quantitative
 - determination of the focus on textual, historical, systematical or empirical
 - any extraordinary requirements (travels, archives, library visits, etc.)
- h. data management plan;
 - how do you guarantee verifiability of your investigation = where do you store your original data?

- how do you keep your data safe: think about backups of digital files?
 - how do you keep your data private: think about digital protection. Think about European privacy rules
 - Do you need consent forms for interviews, surveys, focus groups or otherwise?
- i. planning
 - j. bibliography

D. Approval

- a. letter/e-mail of approval from your (prospective) supervisor or a lecturer, who is competent in the field of your topic

If a student's final thesis proposal is inadequate, the lecturer will inform the student as swiftly as possible of the areas requiring improvement. This will be done no later than ten working days following receipt of the proposal. The student should use that feedback to submit an improved proposal.

Once a thesis supervisor has fully approved the thesis structure, the student should consult him/her in selecting a second evaluator. The second evaluator will provide feedback on the thesis structure within ten working days. Students will incorporate the second evaluator's suggestions until the final version of their thesis structure is approved. To finalize approval, the thesis supervisor and second evaluator must agree on the thesis structure. Students may then begin writing their thesis.

2.2 Thesis supervision

Every Bachelor's and Master's thesis must be assessed by (1) the supervisor and (2) a second evaluator. Master supervisors and evaluators must have a doctorate. One of the two might come from another university/faculty.

Thesis supervisors for Bachelor's students are available for a total of five consultations of no more than one hour. Thesis supervisors for Master's students will provide a total of ten consultations spread throughout the supervisory period. These sessions will also be limited to a maximum duration of one hour.

Consultations between students and their thesis supervisors will focus on written submissions that are turned in a week in advance. Thesis supervisors will then provide verbal or written feedback on these submissions. See Appendix 1 for a plan of supervision. If a submission fails to meet the minimum formal requirements (correctness in spelling, quotations and footnote citations), the thesis supervisor may return it unread, with a request for the necessary improvements.

In July and, in the case of resits, August, students should take account of their thesis supervisors' holiday planning. During this period, thesis supervision will only be available on an individual appointment basis.

For Bachelor's students, the period of active thesis supervision lasts no longer than two months. For Master's students, that period has five-month duration. The supervisory period begins on the date the supervisor approves the thesis structure. Once a student has used the maximum number of supervision hours, the thesis supervisor is entitled to issue a final evaluation and withdraw as that student's supervisor.

If a Bachelor's thesis supervisor is not a native speaker of Dutch, the second evaluator must be one.

2.3 Form and contents

Every thesis should, at the very least, contain the following components:

- a. a research question;
- b. an explanation of the working method used;
- c. a critical discussion and evaluation of the literature and documentation relevant to the research question;
- d. an answer to the research question;
- e. well-founded conclusions regarding the research question;
- f. references and bibliographical information listed in keeping with the faculty's standard guidelines (see *Thesis Guide*).

In terms of structural contents, every thesis should include the following:

- a. *Title page*. In addition to the title, this page should list the name, student number, address and telephone number of the author(s). Other information to list here: the date of completion, the thesis supervisor's name and the degree programme for which the thesis was written.
- b. *Abstract*. A short summary should follow the title page to offer readers an immediate overview of the research question, working method and conclusions of the thesis.
- c. *Statements*. A page containing two statements should follow the abstract. (See Appendix 3: Statements.) The first statement concerns the originality of the work and the second concerns copyrights.
- d. *Table of contents*. This should list each section by page number.
- e. *List of abbreviations* for easy reference to frequent abbreviations in the thesis. Terms that occur only once in the thesis are best spelled out in full.
- f. *Introduction*. In every thesis, the table of contents should be followed by an introductory chapter. That chapter should present: (a) the focal problem or research question; (b) an account of the approach to the subject matter; and (c) a concise, but clear, overview of the contents.
- g. *Chapters and sections*. It is recommended to divide the different sub-topics of the thesis into individual headings that are typographically distinguishable from the rest of the text. Chapter titles should appear in upper case letters. Titles of smaller sections should appear in underlined or bold font. Chapters should be numbered as 1, 2, 3, etc., and sections as 1.1, 1.2, 1.3... 2.1, 2.2, etc. At least one blank line should be inserted between different sections of the thesis.
- h. *Paragraphs*. Avoid beginning every sentence on a new line. Instead, divide your text into paragraphs. There are two ways to separate paragraphs: with or without a blank line in between. If you do not use the blank line as a separator, use the tab key to indent the first line of each new paragraph.
- i. *Footnotes*. Commentary that is added in notes throughout the thesis must be listed in consecutively numbered footnotes. The sources used should be cited in this manner. Students are responsible for using the faculty's writing guidelines for theses to cite their sources whenever they draw on the texts or ideas of others (see *Thesis Guide*).
- j. *Conclusion*. The thesis closes with a conclusion chapter that follows the last chapter of the main body. The conclusion presents a brief summary of the contribution made by the thesis and answers each of the research questions addressed. This chapter may also make recommendations regarding future research.

- k. *Literature list*. Every thesis must include a list of the literature consulted. This list should appear on the page following the conclusion. These literature lists in theses specify all of the works mentioned, quoted, paraphrased and consulted in alphabetical order (based on the author's last name). The titles are listed according to standard guidelines (see *Thesis Guide*). Title description information should be taken over carefully from the source's title page (not from the dust jacket, since the latter differs at times).

The following elements may also be included in a thesis:

- a. *Illustrations*. Use photos and illustrations only as required by the text. Each illustration should be numbered, and appear with an explanatory caption and source reference.
- b. *Tables and graphs*. Tables and graphs will be incomplete unless they appear with:
(a) a number and title above the table or graph; (b) a legend of abbreviations; and (c) a caption underneath the table or graph serving as a source reference. If the information is entirely new and is being published for the first time, the source reference requirement does not apply.

2.4 Co-authoring

Students wishing to collaborate on a thesis project must apply in advance for permission from the Examination Board. Permission requests should include a joint thesis proposal by both students and a written letter of approval from their thesis supervisor.

Each student must make an independent, well-defined contribution to the thesis project's conceptual and theoretical component. The thesis itself should also specify each author's individual contribution to the entire thesis project. Both students will be personally responsible for making their individually assigned contributions and for ensuring overall cohesion in the project. Co-authored thesis projects are required to offer 50 to 100% more words than individually completed theses.

For co-authored theses at Bachelor's level, thesis supervisors are available for a total of five consultations of no more than two hours. At Master's level, the thesis supervisor will provide a maximum of fifteen one-hour consultations, held jointly with both students. Each student will receive their own, individual grade for the thesis.

2.5 Thesis consisting of an article plus explanation

Master students—especially those of the *Research Master*—may be helped in their career by making them acquainted with writing, editing and sending in an article. An academic article might therefore be delivered instead of a thesis. The student must hand in:

1. one article according to the norms of a chosen *scientific* journal, entirely as it would be submitted. The minimum number of words must surpass the 5000 words, unless this would be exceeding the norm of a very reputable journal. The article must be submitted to the journal editors, but acceptance is not relevant to the assessment of the thesis.
2. an account of the choices that are made in the article, because articles for journals must usually be shorter than a thesis and cannot contain all the necessary elements of a thesis. This account may include:
 - a. the *status quaestionis* of the research problem;
 - b. the explanation of methods and sources, if these could not be included in the article;

- c. the personal position of the student with regard to the topic of the article;
- d. an explanation to what extent the student did not consider counterarguments or dissenting opinions;
- e. other background information that would have been too extensive for an article.

Article and account together must not surpass the maximum number of words, as is indicated earlier in these regulations.

3. Final phase

3.1 Cheating

Every thesis contains a statement declaring that the student's thesis is his/her own work and that the thesis acknowledges anything drawn from other sources as the work of other authors (see Appendix 3: Statement 1). The student will upload the final version of the thesis in Canvas (via the appropriate course Thesis in Canvas) to check for plagiarism.

Submission of work for evaluation in a thesis project that uses – without the proper source citations - segments of literature, works by others, or segments of the student's own previous work will be considered cheating. Use of false data for thesis research purposes will also be considered cheating. Thesis supervisors will report all cheating to the Examination Board, who will determine sanctions on a case-by-case basis.

3.2 Grading and grading matrix

The following requirements are pre-set for the thesis, but do not count for assessment and the height of the grade:

1. Presence of a correct title page, including the data of student and thesis;
2. Presence of the statement of originality and that of approval;
3. Correct spelling and grammar;
4. Correct length (see 1.1);
5. Correct references to used literature;
6. Neat appearance and layout.

Grading will be determined based on the following criteria (see Appendix 2: Grading matrix):

1. Justification of the thesis' scientific and societal relevance and imbedding in the extant academic discussion;
2. Clear description of the problem, the research question and the sub-questions;
3. Clear description of the used terms, methods and theories;
4. Sufficient quality of the data and the literature consulted, as well as a reliable representation of results and literature;
5. Clear discussion, summaries and conclusions;
6. Scientifically correct lines of arguments;
7. Critical hermeneutics, with an eye for differences in interpretation and for historical and social backgrounds of the many facets of the research;
8. General writing quality, both scientific and smooth;
9. Degree of self-regulation and flexibility.

A thesis that is submitted on time will be read and evaluated within twenty working days. In exceptional circumstances, the thesis supervisor may petition the Examination Board for an extension of the allotted grading period. In that case, the student in question will receive a written notification explaining the reasons for the extension before the allotted period has passed.

Once the first supervisor has approved the thesis, it is submitted to the second evaluator. If the thesis also meets his/her approval (possibly after requiring some final revisions by the student), the supervisor and evaluator fill in the grading matrix. Working in consultation, they derive the average of their individual grades to determine the final grade. If the individual grades differ by more than 2 points even after consultation, the

first assessor asks the programme director for a third assessor to harmonize the two figures in a conversation with the two assessors. When for a thesis the final mark after completion will be 6.0 or 9.0 or higher (in practice, therefore, with an average mark of the two assessors of 6.0 to 6.2 or 8.8 or above, because the Education Desk will round marks to wholes and halves), the first assessor should ask for a third assessor to assess the correctness of the grade.

The first supervisor will send the final grade the average of the individual grades and all completed grading matrix forms to the Education Office. Whatever the procedure, the students must pass all the elements of the thesis matrix. Thesis supervisors will return the thesis (possibly with feedback) and each individually completed grading matrix form to the student.

3.3 Disputes

3.3.1 Dispute between student and supervisor

Whenever disputes arise between students and their thesis supervisors during thesis projects, the programme director will serve as a mediator. If necessary, the programme director can assign the student a different thesis supervisor.

When disputes stay unresolved even after the programme director's mediation, students may file a complaint with the Examination Board. If a student disagrees with the Board's decision, he/she can appeal the matter to the University Examination Appeals Board (Cobex).

When a student disagrees with an assessment or a grade, he/she can file a complaint with the University Examination Appeals Board (Cobex), which will request the Examination Board to investigate whether a amicable settlement can be reached. The procedure can be found on <https://www.vu.nl/nl/over-de-vu/contact-routebeschrijving/adressen-en-telefoonnummers/geschillenloket/bezwaar-en-beroep/index.aspx>

3.3.2 Dispute between supervisor and second evaluator

Outlined below are the procedures for disputes between the thesis supervisor and second evaluator regarding the approval of a thesis structure and/or a thesis itself.

- a. The thesis supervisor should report the matter to the programme director.
- b. The programme director will find an independent third assessor.
- c. If the third assessor's mediation does not resolve the dispute, the student may file a complaint with the Examination Board.
- d. If the student disagrees with the Examination Board's decision (see description under section c of 3.3.1 above), he/she may appeal the decision with the University Examination Appeals Board.

3.4 Final phase

Students must provide their supervisors with both a digital and hard copy version of their thesis. The thesis grade will be communicated to the student during a meeting on the basis of the grades and the feedback in the thesis matrix, during which the thesis contents and course of its development are evaluated. The exact trajectory is published in a protocol (Appendix 3).

All information concerning graduations are published on [VU.net](#).

3.5 Copyrights and public access

In principle, students own the copyrights to their thesis. If their thesis is ever published (including in part), students are expected to specify the course and Bachelor's or Master's programme within VU University Amsterdam for which they wrote their thesis.

Students are asked to upload a digital version of their final thesis via the web site of the UBvU, see www.ub.vu.nl > faciliteiten > scripties uploaden. Students may leave out the signed statements in order not to make their signature visible for every web site visitor. If students have founded objections against publishing their thesis in full on the UBvU site, they can hand in a comprehensive summary.

If a student conducts his/her thesis research in an organization, that organization *cannot* be given any assurances of confidentiality in the publication of the thesis. However, a confidentiality alternative that may be acceptable in publication is the use of pseudonyms and other means of guarding anonymity.

3.6 Final provisions

These regulations enter into effect on 1 September 2018. They will apply, wherever possible, to theses that were already started before that date. Decisions regarding situations not covered by the regulations outlined here will be made by the Faculty Board.

Appendix 1: Explanation of the Thesis Matrix

This is the explanation of the rubrics for assessing Bachelor's and Master's Theses. The rubrics themselves are composed in an Excel-file, in which thesis supervisors can fill in grades and comments and which will automatically calculate the definite grade.

The rubrics are not based on the five Dublin descriptors because of several reasons. Yet, these descriptors can be linked to the nine criteria of the rubrics. The table below shows how the descriptors are integrated in the criteria:

	1. up-to-date knowledge and understanding	2. applying knowledge and understanding, reasoning	3. analyzing, interpreting and making judgments	4. communi- cation with specialists and others	5. lifelong learning skills
A. Imbedding and importance	x	x			
B. Research question		x	x		x
C. Methods and sources	x	x			x
D. Results		x	x	x	
E. Discussion and conclusion	x		x	x	
F. Scientific reasoning		x	x	x	x
G. Critical hermeneutics		x	x		x
H. General writing quality		x		x	x
I. Self- management		x			x

1. Use of the rubrics

There are several ways to use the rubrics in the process of supervising and assessing theses, for example, instructive, formative and summative ways.

1.1 Instructive

Discuss in the first meeting with the student these rubrics. The student is then informed about the criteria of assessing. The student can also learn how the supervisor(s) interprets the nine criteria. The supervisor can mention the most important items and state when a criteria is met or not. To mention a few examples: extensive explanation of which methods are used and referring to methodological literature is very important for supervisors in the field of empirical research, while supervisors in a more philosophical or systematic field tend to stress the theological tradition and its literature.

1.2 Formative

Chapters or sections can be assessed by parts of these rubrics during the process of writing a thesis, for example use of sources, scientific reasoning or hermeneutics. These rubrics can be added to the remarks on the chapter, even if the rubrics are not filled in completely.

1.3 Summative

It is obligatory to use the rubrics in the final assessment. This must be done according to the protocol (see below). The supervisor must fill in the grades for the nine criteria. As important is it to fill in the boxes for remarks. Supervisors can describe their feedback in their own words, but remarks from the explanations below can also be used to reason why a certain grade is chosen.

1.4 Mind calibration

If the first supervisor and the second assessor did not cooperate before, it is useful to discuss the rubrics together before the thesis trajectory starts. It is important to know if both assessors use the same definitions and methods.

2. Requirements for Approval

Some items are not mentioned in the rubrics, because we presuppose that these items are correctly done or integrated in the thesis – especially after three years of study. The supervisor must, of course, check whether these requirements are met. If the thesis does not meet the following requirements, it has to be revised:

- The thesis starts with a correct title page, including the thesis' title and possible sub-title, the name of the student and his/her student number, the e-mail address, the date of conclusion, the supervisors and the educational programme in which this thesis is written.
- The thesis continues with signed statements of originality and of approval of it being used in the library.
- The thesis is free of plagiarism: the first supervisor checks the thesis after the student has uploaded it on the Blackboard site for theses.
- The thesis does not contain evident typos or grammatical errors.
- The layout of the thesis is neat and consistent.
- The thesis is not too long.
- References to literature are included and are presented through all the text, footnotes and bibliography in a correct and consistent way.

3. Grading by the Excel rubrics

There are nine criteria (see below) in the rubrics, which are all equally weighted. Every one of them must be met. The Excel rubrics provides its user with a grade, if all criteria are met. In other words, if there is one "insufficient" grade, the rubrics end in the conclusion "revise". That means that the thesis has to be revised on that specific item.

4. Criteria and norms

Find below the nine criteria including their norms, each on a new page. The left column always starts with "some of these are applicable". That means: the more items of that column are applicable, the higher the grade for this criterion. It is up to the supervisor to give the final judgment.

The criteria in orange more or less follow the order of the chapters of the thesis: from introduction to conclusion. The criteria in blue refer to other aspects of the thesis.

A. Relevance and Embedding

<p><i>Question:</i> Does the introduction make a comprehensive argument for the significance of the student's research within the context of the current academic literature?</p>					
<p><i>Characteristics:</i> The thesis</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • includes a adequate literature review that places the student's research within its appropriate scientific context. • describes what is known about the topic. • identifies the specific knowledge gaps that the student's project intends to address. • makes an argument for the broader significance of the student's research when addressing these gaps. 					
Excellent		Acceptable		Requires major revision	
<p><i>Some of these are applicable:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The introduction accurately reviews and summarizes relevant literature. • The introduction demonstrates how the student's research fills a gap. • The introduction presents a compelling argument for the broader significance, or scientific value of the student's research. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The introduction presents a literature review that sufficiently and (partly) effectively places the student's research within the context of current / past academic literature. • The introduction presents an argument for the broader significance and/or scientific value of the student's research. (However, this may be rather implicit.) 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The introduction does not present an adequate review of the literature. • The introduction does not make sufficient connections between the published literature and the student's own research. 	
10	9	8	7	6	≤5

B. Research Question:

<p><i>Question:</i> Does the introduction clearly articulate the student's research goals, the main research question and the sub-questions?</p>					
<p><i>Characteristics:</i> The thesis includes</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • a description of the research problem. • the research goal and the main research question. • a logical analysis of the main research question into sub-questions. • a conceptual framework in which key concepts are defined. 					
Excellent		Acceptable		Requires major revision	
<p><i>Some of these are applicable:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The student explicitly and precisely articulates the goal, main question and sub-questions of the project. • The research goal is demarcated and (somehow) ground-breaking. • Research goal, main question and sub-questions are logically and explicitly interrelated. • The central question and sub-questions reveal an innovative approach to the research goal. • Research goal, main question and sub-questions are placed within a clear and relevant conceptual framework. Key concepts are well chosen and well defined. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The student articulates the goal, the main question and the sub-questions of the project. • The research goal is sufficiently demarcated and relevant to the field. • Research goal, main question and sub-questions are interrelated, but some relations may be implicit and/or questionable. • The introduction includes a conceptual framework that is relevant and (sufficiently) clearly explained. Key terms are generally well defined. 		<p><i>Some of these are applicable:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The student does not explicitly articulate a goal, a main question or sub-questions. • The research goal and/or main question are insufficiently demarcated. • The research goal, the main question and/or the sub-questions do not match; answering the main question does not achieve the research goal or answering the sub-questions does not contribute to answering the main question. • The conceptual framework is not clear; key terms are either ill-defined or not defined at all. 	
10	9	8	7	6	≤5

C. Methods and Sources

Methods and sources form one criterion together. An empirical research will stress method, its description and its application. A formal research will underline the correct sources, their use and their interpretation. Or a formal research will ask the question in which research tradition the thesis is written. Sometimes, a research knows both empirical and formal aspects.

NOTE: This criterion is *not* about correct footnotes or a correct bibliography. Those are not part of the assessment, but are presupposed (see above, section 2). This criterion is about the logical coherence between research and methods or research and sources, and about the clear description of both.

<i>Question: Are the methods and sources adequately described and referenced?</i>					
<i>Characteristics: The thesis</i>					
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> provides sufficient information on methods and data, for example by referring to methodological literature. provides enough information to secure that the right methods and sources are used. would allow someone to repeat the student's research. 					
Excellent		Acceptable		Requires major revision	
<i>Some of these are applicable:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The methods used are embedded in methodological literature in an adequate and/or surprising manner OR the methods used are adequately and consistently applied. The methods used represent an adequate approach to the research goal. The student is precise in describing and referencing the methods and data/sources used in the thesis work. The thesis refers to primary religious sources in a way that the reader knows when arguments from within the religious tradition are used and when from outside. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The methods used are connected to current methodological literature; The methods and selection of sources are adequate given the research goal. The student describes the research methods and sources, but may not consistently achieve an appropriate level (too much or too little detail). Primary religious sources are used, but the shift from an internal to an external perspective is not indicated all the time. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Methods are not (adequately) connected to current methodological literature. The methods and/or the selection of data/sources are inadequate given the research goal. The student does not clearly describe his/her methods and/or data/sources, or does so incompletely, or superficially. Primary religious sources are used at random, as if every reader has the same presuppositions. 	
10	9	8	7	6	≤5

D. Results (verbal and visual)

The matrix makes a distinction between the actual results and the discussion and conclusions. This fits both empirical and formal research, but the supervisor must decide in each case how to make a proper distinction between results proper and their discussion.

Besides the results the matrix asks for visual elements: illustrations or tables. These belong in an empirical environment, rather than in a formal one. Yet, you must ask yourself whether certain elements of your thesis can be presented best by a table or an illustration, for example a geographical map instead of a description of several geographical places, a table of opinions or arguments, a list of dates with important events, etc. Sometimes it is just pleasant to be addressed visually instead of verbally.

<i>Question 1: Does the thesis provide a comprehensive, understandable and relevant description of the results (or lack of results)?</i>
<i>Characteristics of Results: The thesis</i>
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> describes the findings of one's research. analyses the sources and findings accurately.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> interprets the results within a specific scientific context as discussed in the Introduction, in relation to the research problem and research question. does not lack important elements from the field of research. 		
Excellent	Acceptable	Requires major revision
<p><i>Some of these are applicable:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Results (or the lack of results) are clearly and completely described. Data analysis is accurate; the process of data analysis is examined. Results are related to the research problem and research question: the research question is answered on the basis of the findings. The student provides an insightful interpretation of the results and relates these results to the theoretical debate(s) to which the student aims to contribute. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Results are included, but lack depth. While the student explains the way the data is analysed, there is no critical reflection on the way the results are generated/found. While the results are related to the research problem and research question, the thesis does not succeed in achieving a strong coherence between these elements. The thesis presents a reasonable description and interpretation of the results, but may not (convincingly) explain the potential theoretical implications. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The thesis lacks clear results, or results are only minimally (incompletely) described, or described inappropriately. The process of data analysis is not examined. No connection is made between the results, research problem and research question. No interpretation is included of the results.
<p><i>Question 2: If visualizations are included, are they clear, effective and informative?</i></p> <p><i>Characteristics of visualizations</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Appropriate choices should be made regarding how to display data (when to use a figure, what kind of figure to use and how to organize evidence within the figure or table). The visual elements of all tables and figures should be clear and easy to read or interpret. Figures and tables should include numbering and appropriate, descriptive titles; The legends should provide a clear description of each table or figure and not duplicate information that is in the materials and methods; Written results should explicitly refer to each table and figure. 		
Excellent	Acceptable	Requires major revision
<p><i>Some of these are applicable:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The student provides the most appropriate way to present his/her data: tables, graphs, photographs, figures and/or text. The visualizations are well constructed, correct and unambiguous. The visualizations have a number, a title, and 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The data presented is clear and correct, but one or two visualizations are superfluous; or, one or two visualizations may have helped to clarify a paragraph. The visualizations are well-constructed, generally correct and almost unambiguous. The visualizations have a full legend where needed, but one or two numbers or titles are absent. The visualizations presented are clear, but one or two of 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Visualizations are superfluous or required visualizations are absent. Some visualizations are misleading, incorrect or unclear. Visualizations lack numbers, titles and legends. The majority of the visualizations are not referred to in the main text.

where needed, a full legend. • Every visualization is referred to in the main text.			they are not referred to in the main text.		
10	9	8	7	6	≤5

E. Conclusions and discussion:

Empirical research usually separates the results from the discussion of the results. Formal research has difficulty to do so in separate chapters. It is up to the supervisors to indicate which parts of the thesis is 'results' and which part 'discussion'. In both cases, the conclusions belong to this criterion.

<i>Question:</i> Do the conclusions and discussion present logical argumentation regarding the implications of findings and possible future directions?					
<i>Characteristics:</i> The conclusion					
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • briefly highlights major findings, acknowledging complexities of the data, as well as inconsistencies, limitations and alternative explanations. • explicitly relates the implications of the research findings (results) within the academic context constructed in the Introduction. The narrative should draw connections between the student's research findings and other published work. • the implications of negative results should be discussed. • highlights how the project could lead to future research within the field and/or suggests additional research or alternative approaches. Theses with largely inconclusive or incomplete results should focus on the latter. • if a student has inconclusive or incomplete results, the conclusion and discussion should focus on the limitations of the results and possible explanations. 					
Excellent		Acceptable		Requires major revision	
<i>Some of these are applicable:</i>					
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The thesis provides a compelling discussion of the implications of the findings (positive and negative), placing their importance within the context of current knowledge. • When appropriate, the thesis recognizes the potential for multiple interpretations of the data. • The thesis includes a thorough consideration of possible future studies. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The thesis makes some attempts to discuss the implications of the findings, but may not explain their significance. • The thesis may mention possible future studies without explaining how they could contribute significant new knowledge to the field. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The thesis reiterates the findings from the results, but makes little or no attempt to discuss the implications of the findings. • The thesis does not describe future directions for the project. 	
10	9	8	7	6	≤5

F. Academic reasoning

<p><i>Question: Are the discussions and conclusions justified and at an academic level?</i></p> <p><i>Characteristics of academic reasoning:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The student provides arguments and counter-arguments in the most unbiased manner possible. • The student provides arguments and counterarguments that relate to the views put forth. • The presentation and discussion in the thesis must take place by means of an appropriate and correctly applied argumentation scheme. Argumentation schemes are presented to the students in the module of Research Skills through the books of Frans van Eemeren. • Arguments and counterarguments are weighed, not counted. 					
Excellent		Acceptable		Requires major revision	
<p><i>Some of these are applicable:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The thesis provides arguments in a logical order. • The student provides unbiased and appropriate arguments and counter-arguments. • The student uses a correct argumentation scheme. • The student weighs arguments and counter-arguments within his/her personal proposition. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The thesis provides arguments in a rather logical order. • The student provides unbiased and appropriate arguments and counter-arguments, but not always the most appropriate. • The student uses a correct argumentation scheme, except for one or two cases of minor argumentation fallacies. • The student weighs arguments, but it is not always clear how his/her weighing is connected to his/her personal proposition. • Some parts of the thesis may still be associative, rather than argumentative. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The student provides his/her arguments in a chaotic manner. • The student ignores counter-arguments or provides them in a biased manner. • The student uses several argumentation fallacies. • The student gives arguments and/or counter-arguments, but hardly weighs them. 	
10	9	8	7	6	≤5

G. Critical Hermeneutics

Subjectivity and normativity cannot be absent in the theological or religious field. You must, however, show that the research is conducted in such a way that the personal opinions, interpretation, wishes and norms have not been leading. Every research project must include some checks and balances to reach a certain objectivity.

<p><i>Question:</i> Do the contents (as applicable: introduction, contents, methods and/or discussion) demonstrate critical hermeneutics towards one's own understanding as well as the academic discourse?</p>					
<p><i>Characteristics of contents as applicable to thesis topic:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The text provides sufficient details so that readers can judge the role of subjectivity in the thesis • The text shows the student's capability of critical reflection on the diversity of voices within the power-laden world of religious perspectives. • The student shows insights in historical and social backgrounds of the many aspects of his field of research. 					
Excellent		Acceptable		Requires major revision	
<p><i>Some of these are applicable:</i></p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The student addresses both mainstream and more marginal voices in the academic discourse on the chosen topic, deepening the critical potential of the research. • The student shows awareness of historical backgrounds of texts, authors, subject matters, methods, etc. • The student critically reflects on personal interests in the subject matter, in whatever way faith-based, and clarifies how that will be and has been of influence to the research. • The student makes reflection on his/her personal stance an integral part of his/her thesis and uses his/her personal interests in the subject matter to deepen, not to narrow, the research. • The student indicates how his/her research contributed to his/her own normative stands. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The student mentions his/her personal relation to the subject matter, in whatever way faith-based, but does not clarify how that will be and has been significant to the research. • The student separately mentions his/her personal stance to the subject matter, but does not state how his/her personal interests have affect the research. • The student focuses primarily either on mainstream or more marginal voices in the academic discourse on the chosen topic, creating a somewhat one-sided perspective. • The student shows some awareness of historical backgrounds, but not consistently. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The student neglects his/her personal relation to the subject matter, and does not clarify how that will be and has been significant to the research. • The student does not indicate how his/her personal interests have deepened, or otherwise affected the research. • The student only addresses one mainstream or one marginal voice in the academic discourse on the chosen topic, creating a one-sided perspective that lacks the hermeneutics of suspicion. • The student fails to show historical awareness, or cannot link historical backgrounds to the subject matter at hand. 	
10	9	8	7	6	<5

H. Overall writing quality

This criterion is *not* about spelling or grammar. These are supposed to be correct. This criterion is about the quality of your writing (precise, unambiguous, correct terminology), its quantity (not too wordy, not too compact) and its fluency (varied sentence structure, good examples, clear overviews).

<i>Question:</i> Is the writing at an appropriate level for the target audience of upper division undergraduates and faculty in the general field of theology and religious studies?					
<i>Characteristics of writing quality:</i>					
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The wording is clear and unambiguous. • The author is not too wordy nor too compact. • The style is smooth and enjoyable to read. 					
Excellent		Acceptable		Requires major revision	
<i>Some of these are applicable:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Arguments or descriptions are direct and to the point, employing no unnecessary words. • Wording is unambiguous; academic terminology is used appropriately, with specific terms defined if needed. • The author does not assume the reader will have an expert level of knowledge. • The style is smooth, clearly showing transitions in argumentation, and is enjoyable to read. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Arguments or descriptions are usually direct, precise and concise, but some areas may need improvement. • Occasionally, terminology is not (well) defined or used appropriately. • Occasionally the thesis assumes too much or too little knowledge on the part of the reader. • The style is generally smooth, but certain passages need to be re-read in order to be fully understood. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A significant amount of the terminology in the thesis is either used inappropriately or is inappropriate for the target readers. • A significant portion of the prose is too concise, too wordy and/or ambiguous. • The expected level of knowledge is too high, too low, or constantly changing. • The thesis's style is rigid, not fluent and/or contains stylistic errors. Transitions in contents and/or argumentation are not indicated. 	
10	9	8	7	6	≤5

I. Self-regulation

Self-regulation of students is also assessed and graded. This part of the evaluation is a process evaluation, rather than a product evaluation as in the other eight criteria. This criterion belongs to the fifth Dublin descriptor, namely learning skills. It does not refer to the character of the student (although that will be present on the background), but to skills that are useful to develop oneself in a next academic programme or in practice, yet in an academic way.

The degree of self-regulation in a Bachelor's thesis project is, of course, less than in a Master's thesis project. Therefore, the supervisor must choose the left column earlier in a Bachelor's thesis project than in a Master's thesis project.

<i>Question:</i> Does the student take responsibility for the project?
<i>Characteristics of self-regulation:</i> the student
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • shows curiosity and eagerness to learn.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • is eager for new ideas, situations and academic tasks. • looks around him/her and can make new connections. • recognizes the need for assistance or feedback and actively asks for it. • takes feedback seriously and processes it appropriately. • shows flexibility and perseverance. 					
Excellent		Acceptable		Not acceptable	
<i>Some of these are applicable:</i> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Demonstrates the capacity for innovation and a willingness to take risks. Is eager for new ideas, situations and academic tasks. • Recognizes the need for assistance or feedback and actively asks for it. • Takes feedback seriously and processes it appropriately. • Shows flexibility and perseverance; makes an effort when responding to obstacles and challenges. • Demonstrates a sense of full responsibility for the project; manages his/her own activities and adheres to agreements. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Shows curiosity and interest in learning. • Approaches new ideas, situations and academic tasks with a positive attitude. • Takes feedback seriously and processes it appropriately or at least on a sentence or word-level. • Is (sometimes) stubborn about accepting feedback or is (sometimes too) dependent on feedback. • Is able to persevere and (with some encouragement) to keep up efforts when confronted with obstacles and challenges. • Demonstrates responsibility for the project; is usually able to manage his/her own activities and to adhere to agreements. 		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Does not demonstrate interest in learning; is reluctant to take on new ideas, situations and academic tasks. • Ignores feedback. • Shows a passive and/or helpless attitude when confronted with obstacles or challenges. • Does not take responsibility for the project; attributes problems to external factors; does not adhere to agreements. 	
10	9	8	7	6	≤5

5 Grade

There are seven requirements (see 1) and nine criteria (see 2).

- Theses will only be graded if the seven requirements are fulfilled.
- Theses will only be graded if the nine criteria are met. In other words, if a thesis 'requires major revision' or is 'not acceptable' on one or more points, the thesis must be revised on each of the points flagged for revision.
- Since all criteria are equally important, the grade will be the mean of the nine scores.

Appendix 2: Statements

STATEMENT 1

I hereby declare that this thesis is an original work. It is the result of my own research, and was written entirely by me, except where otherwise stated. Any information and ideas from other sources are explicitly and fully acknowledged in the text or the notes. A bibliography is appended.

(place and date)

(signature)

STATEMENT 2

I hereby give consent for my thesis, if acceptable, to be made publicly available by the University Library of Vrije Universiteit Amsterdam for photocopying and for (inter-library) loans.

(place and date)

(signature)

Appendix 3: Protocol

Coordinator Theses:

1. The Coordinator of Theses coordinates the Canvas thesis sites:
 - She takes care of the necessary documents (thesis regulations; thesis guidelines, thesis matrix, etc.) on these sites.
 - She provides these instructions on these sites.
 - She makes an uploading point for the final thesis.
 - She takes care of adding the supervisors as “instructors” on the appropriate site.

Student:

2. The student hands in all his preliminary chapters to his/her supervisor, apart from the Canvas sites.
3. The student hands in the almost definite version to the second assessor.
4. The student hands in the definite version, including the two declarations (see Appendix 4 of the Thesis regulations) here.
5. The student mails to e.van.stalduine-sulman@vu.nl and cc's the supervisor and the second assessor (both with their VU or PThU e-mail address) that (s)he has uploaded the thesis in which master. The thesis coordinator adds the supervisor and the second assessor in this Canvas site.

Supervisor and second assessor:

6. The supervisor checks the thesis for plagiarism by using the report of Urkund.
7. The supervisor checks that the thesis starts with the two declarations of originality and permission for usage.
8. The supervisor and second reader fill in—**separately**—the thesis matrix and decide what grade is appropriate.
9. The supervisor and second reader discuss their results and calculate the **average** of the two grades.
10. If the grades they arrive at individually differ more than 2 points, even after consultation, the supervisor will ask the programme director to call in a third assessor. In this case, the average of the three grades will be taken as the final grade.
11. The supervisor will also ask the programme director for a third evaluator if the final grade for a thesis is 6.0, or 9.0 or higher (i.e., every grade between 6.0 and 6.2 or 8.8 and higher), in order to assess the mark.
12. The supervisor mails (a) the final digital version of the thesis; (b) the two thesis matrixes and (c) the form “voorblad” with the final grade to the “onderwijsbureau”, including the student in cc.

Student:

13. The student only then uploads the thesis to the University Library, see <https://ub.vu.nl/en/education-research/upload-publications/upload-your-thesis/index.aspx>. This may be done without the two declarations.

“Onderwijsbureau”:

14. “Onderwijsbureau” administrates the grade and the thesis.
15. “Onderwijsbureau” sends a curriculum evaluation to the student.