

Guidelines for Preparing a Thesis

*Chair of Behavioral Economics
University of Zurich*

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The purpose of this document is to provide students interested in writing a thesis at the Chair of Behavioral Economics with clear guidelines regarding the process and expectations for successfully completing the work. All students are expected to follow these guidelines.

How to Apply

Submitting a thoughtful and well-prepared application is your responsibility. Failing to do so will lead to your application being rejected. An application that is missing any of the required components will not be considered.

In your application, you need to convincingly argue that you are motivated and qualified to write a thesis in the area of behavioral economics at our chair, and that you have put some thought into a topic. You should, therefore, indicate how your coursework and experience prepare you for this endeavor. You should also propose a broad topic. Sometimes, the final thesis topic will be distinct from your proposal; however, the proposal will allow us to learn about your interests and abilities, and we will do our best to find topics that interest you.

Application requirements:

1. A recent copy of your curriculum vitae.
2. A current copy of your academic record.
3. Desired start and end dates.
4. A short statement (maximum 150 words) stating why you are qualified and motivated to write a thesis in behavioral economics.
5. Brief proposal of a thesis topic (maximum 500 words, excluding references). This proposal should identify the broad topic that you would like to pursue for your thesis and why you believe this topic is important and interesting. You are free to propose any topic within the field of behavioral economics, but you should be able to demonstrate that it is an area that you have thought about. The proposal should include between 1 and 5 references.

Applications are generally accepted and considered at two yearly deadlines: **August 20** and **January 20**. Following submission of your thesis application, we will notify you two weeks after these deadlines whether your application has been accepted. If it is impossible for you to apply at one of these deadlines, you may submit an application at another point during the semester. However, in this case, your application must include a clear explanation for why it is essential that you submit then rather than at the next application deadline.

Evaluation criteria include whether your application is complete and thoughtful, you appear qualified to pursue a thesis in this area, and we have the capacity and ability to supervise a topic in this area. If your application is unsuccessful, we will keep it on file. If, during the following term, a project arises that would be suitable for you to work on as part of your thesis, we may contact you to see if you are still interested in writing a thesis at our chair.

Timeline for Completing a Thesis

If your application is accepted, you will be assigned to work under the supervision of a member of the Chair of Behavioral Economics. This will be your primary contact person during the thesis work, but you will be expected to work mostly independently. Prof. Weber will determine the final grade for your thesis, though he will consult with the person directly supervising the work.

The following stages are critical for the development of your thesis:

1. Initial meeting: As soon as is convenient for you and the person supervising the thesis, you should schedule a meeting. This meeting will identify the precise work to be completed as part of the thesis, the expectations for the preliminary feedback state, and the sources for the content (literature, experiment, data to be analyzed, etc.). Following this meeting, a letter with the precise topic will be sent by us to the Dean's office, where you must collect it.

At the conclusion of this meeting, you should clearly understand the nature of the project on which you will be working, the general characteristics of the final thesis document, and the precise expectations for the preliminary feedback stage.

2. Preliminary feedback: After 25% of the working time, you should schedule a preliminary feedback meeting with your supervisor. Prior to this meeting, you should send the material that was agreed upon at the initial meeting. For example, for most Bachelor's theses, this will include: (i) a one-paragraph abstract of the planned thesis, including the main objective and scope of the material it will cover, (ii) an extended table of contents that contains a detailed outline of the planned thesis, including what content you plan to include in each section, including most of the specific references, and (iii) a bibliography that includes most of the references you intend to use in the thesis. At the preliminary feedback meeting the supervisor will provide feedback on the document you submitted prior to this meeting.

At the conclusion of this meeting, you should have a clear idea of the precise work that remains for completing the thesis, and what the final document will look like. If your supervisor feels that progress to this point has been unsatisfactory, he or she will provide you with the opportunity to revise the material and have a second preliminary feedback meeting before 50% of the working time has elapsed. If, at that point, your supervisor believes that insufficient progress is being made, you should both have a meeting with Prof. Weber.

3. Initial draft: After 75% of the working time, you should schedule a meeting with your supervisor in order to discuss your initial draft. Prior to this meeting, you should send a complete initial draft of the thesis. This can have a few parts where there remains work to be done, but you should highlight these sections

and indicate what precise work you intend to do. The rest of the thesis should be largely complete.

At the conclusion of this meeting, you should have a set of concrete requirements from your supervisor for completing the thesis. If your supervisor does not believe that you are on a suitable trajectory for completing the thesis at this stage, an additional meeting with Prof. Weber should be scheduled.

4. Submission: At 100% of the working time (4 months for a Bachelor's thesis and 6 months for a Master's thesis, or as indicated by the official guidelines: http://www.oec.uzh.ch/studies/general/theses/oec_en.html) you should submit the final draft of your thesis. You should submit both the necessary paper copies to the Dean's office and an electronic copy sent directly to both your direct supervisor and Professor Weber.

Keeping up with this schedule is your responsibility. At every stage, you should contact your supervisor to ensure the fulfillment of the necessary meetings and feedback. If, at any point in this process, you believe you are receiving inadequate supervision, you should contact Prof. Weber. However, you should first try to resolve any issues directly with the person who is supervising you.

Requirements for a Completed Thesis

All completed theses should contain the following elements:

1. Title page
2. Abstract (a description of 200 words or less that clearly explains the contribution of your thesis)
3. Table of Contents
 - a. List of sections comprising main body
 - b. List of figures and tables
 - c. Description of any additional material (e.g. appendices, data)
4. Main body
 - a. Introduction and Motivation
 - b. Substantive Section 1
 - c. Substantive Section 2
 - d. ...
 - e. Discussion of Contribution
 - f. Conclusion
5. References
6. Figures and tables (if not included in main body)
7. Additional material (where necessary)

The principal part of the thesis is the main body, which will provide most of the detail on the work you conducted. This will be the critical section for evaluating your grade

(see below). The exact expectations regarding what goes into the main body will vary depending on your project and should be broadly defined at the initial meeting and precisely identified at the initial feedback stage. There are at least two possible “templates” for what a main body section might look like, depending on the type of thesis:

- *Literature Synthesis* (e.g., for Bachelor’s theses): This type of thesis involves a thorough review of a broad area of scholarship, with a synthesis at the end that provides your own novel perspective. The main body of this thesis will begin by defining the scope of the review, identifying why the scholarship in this area is important, and providing an overview of the remainder of the thesis (Introduction and Motivation). The next few sections (Substantive Sections) will review the relevant literature. For these sections, it is important that you organize the literature that you find into coherent and separate units, so that each section is unified by a coherent theme, perspective or method, and is distinct from the other sections. The typical Literature Synthesis will include 2-4 Substantive Sections.

The next section (Discussion of Contribution) should be where you attempt to produce a novel insight regarding the scholarship in the area you have reviewed. That is, you should think of a new way of interpreting the evidence you have reviewed. For example, you might argue that there is an important gap in the literature or might argue that the literature favors one interpretation over another. Or, you might propose an extension of the existing research and defend why it would be valuable. The point is to show that you can think creatively about the literature you have reviewed and provide a well-informed and defensible novel idea. This section is where the major part of the “Creativity and Contribution” portion of your grade (see below) will be determined. If you are unsure of what to do in this section, this is a good topic to bring up with your supervisor at the preliminary feedback stage. Finally, the Conclusion should provide a very brief overview of the results and a statement regarding the broad significance of the findings and ideas in the thesis.

- *Research Report* (e.g., for Master’s theses): This type of thesis presents the results of a research project, along with your interpretation of the significance of the results. The main body of the thesis will begin by motivating the need for new research in this area—including why the research area is important and why the particular question in this study is important (Introduction and Motivation). The relevant existing literature could either be briefly reviewed in this section or, if necessary, as an independent Literature Review comprising the first Substantive Section. The subsequent Substantive Sections will then present the design of the research study and methods employed, as well as the results and analysis.

The Discussion of Contribution will summarize the findings and argue, broadly, what can be learned from this research project and why it informs the important motivating questions in the Introduction and Motivation. This section should answer the questions, “What have you done?” and “Why is it important?” in some detail. Finally, the Conclusion will briefly provide a broad overview of what was learned.

Length: The ability to communicate concisely and to make points clearly without using a lot of space is an element of good writing. Therefore, the main body of the thesis should be no longer than 20 pages (1.5 line spacing, 12pt font, 2.5 cm margins on all sides; excluding material not in the main body, such as the abstract, table of contents and references). This means that you will have to work very hard to convey a lot of information within the required page limit. In some rare cases, where you and your supervisor agree that it is impossible to convey all of the necessary information within this space requirement, your supervisor can make an exception to these space restrictions. However, in this case you should obtain an e-mail explicitly informing you that it is acceptable to exceed the page limit prior to submitting your thesis.

Formatting of the thesis should be consistent throughout and the presentation should demonstrate care and thought (e.g., consistent style, section headings and reference formatting). You are free to use any standard reference formatting style (APA, Chicago, MLA), but you should follow the same style throughout your thesis.

Evaluation

Theses will be evaluated primarily according to the following three criteria:

- **Work and Diligence:** Did the student put effort into the project and writing the thesis? Are there noticeable errors or gaps in the work that arose from carelessness or lack of effort? Did the student identify the relevant literature? Did the student satisfy expectations regarding work on a research project? Does the final document demonstrate concern for presentation and style?
- **Competence:** Does the work demonstrate knowledge of the skills necessary to graduate with the relevant degree, with a focus in behavioral economics? If there are technical elements to the thesis, does the student demonstrate sufficient mastery? Does the student demonstrate sufficient knowledge of the relevant literature, theories and methods?
- **Creativity and Contribution:** How valuable is the student's original thinking and perspective on the project? Did the student provide novel and insightful ideas and perspective?

The first two criteria are the main requirements to produce a competent and acceptable thesis. The thesis should clearly identify both that you know behavioral economics well enough to write an informed thesis in this area and that you worked hard enough to produce a convincing and well crafted written document. Any thesis that falls significantly short on either of the first two criteria will be considered unacceptable.

The final criterion is necessary for a thesis to be considered "excellent" or "outstanding." To receive the grades that are at the highest levels, you have to be able to independently contribute ideas or perspectives that are new and highly creative. Fully satisfying the Creativity and Contribution component requires a significant original contribution on your part.