

Master International Relations: Thesis Guidelines

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Purpose

This document outlines the procedures and requirements pertaining to registering, writing, and submitting an MA thesis in the MA International Relations: Global Politics and Social Theory.

Preparing the Thesis

During the third semester, you should begin to think seriously about your MA thesis. You should consider potential topics as well as (more specific) research questions, and you should ask yourself who might be suitable for supervising the thesis. You need two supervisors; and you must nominate both, when you register your thesis and the countdown to the deadline begins. The Zentrale Prüfungsamt (ZPA) (registry) will only accept nominations that are consistent with the guidelines adopted by the program's examination board (Prüfungsausschuss). In cooperation with the examination boards that are in charge of other BA or MA programs at the Institute of Political Science (IPW), the MAIR's examination board has put together a (continuously updated) list of eligible supervisors of BA or MA theses. If you choose your supervisors from this list¹, you are on the safe side, as it were, and the ZPA will accept your suggestions without further ado. This comes with two qualifications, however. First, your choice is constrained by the requirement that at least one supervisor is a professor (Prof. Dr.) or holds the title of a Privatdozent (PD, Dr. habil.) and both supervisors hold a Ph.D. (Dr.). Second, choosing a supervisor whose name is not on the list is not strictly off the table. The rules of the university allow that the second supervisor is an external individual (non-member of the university) if there is a plausible reason for his or her involvement and the program chair – in this case, Professor Schlichte (klaus.schlichte@uni-bremen.de) – gives his consent. This is to deal with situations where it is not possible to find a local professor or researcher with suitable expertise, while you know a professor or researcher from another university who possesses precisely this expertise and is willing to serve as an “external supervisor” of your thesis.²

¹ The list can be found [here](#). The key part is the table, which includes the eligible supervisors with their coordinates as well as information on their academic titles. You can learn about the professors' and researchers' (“academic staff”) research interests and specializations by checking out their personal homepages, which you can access via the membership list(s) on the IPW's [website](#). If you are uncertain about who might be a suitable supervisor for your topic, consult with your academic advisor or the program chair Professor Schlichte.

² If you consider requesting the participation of an external supervisor, you should turn to Professor Schlichte for advice early in the process.

You should start to talk to potential supervisors early on, and some amount of “supervisor shopping” (talking to several people, possibly about several potential topics) is perfectly fine as long as you come up with a topic and two supervisors in time. You should not only seek the consent of the professor to supervise your thesis but also have a first substantive discussion with him or her about your topic before the thesis is registered. The supervision should not only begin when you are halfway into the thesis!

Registration of the Thesis

Having found a topic and two supervisors, you may formally register your thesis, provided you have acquired at least 72 credits (CP). To register your thesis fill in the required form, which you can find [here](#) (“Application for admission to the B.A./M.A. thesis phase” under “Forms for the B.A./M.A. thesis phase”) and send or take it to the Prüfungsamt.³ Note that both you and your supervisors have to sign the form.⁴ Once the Prüfungsamt has processed the application, it will notify you of your deadline (which is 22 weeks after this notification). There are also forms you should use if you wish to involve an external supervisor (“Request for external supervisor for the thesis”) (see above) or in order to request an extension of the deadline because of illness (“Extension of time allowed for Bachelor’s/Master’s thesis due to illness”).

It is advisable to choose a thesis title⁵ that is not overly specific and hence is likely to continue to fit if you have to modify your initial agenda in the process in consultation with your supervisors. If, however, it turns out to be necessary to change the title of your thesis at some point, you can do so by turning to the Prüfungsamt and requesting a modification.⁶ Note that modifying the title of one’s thesis sometime between registration and submission is different from “returning a topic”. According to the general rules of the university (Allgemeiner Teil der Masterprüfungsordnung [AT-MPO], § 10, 7)⁷, students may once and within eight weeks after the registration took effect give up their topic, i.e. ask for permission to switch to a new one. This is on the condition

³ The *Prüfungsamt* is located on the “Boulevard” between the Central Library and the Mensa. (Its postal address can be found [here](#).)

⁴ This has to be done on a printout of the form. Digital signatures are not accepted.

⁵ The ZPA does not distinguish between the title and the topic of your thesis.

⁶ The procedure is informal: send (or take) a letter to the Prüfungsamt asking for the title to be changed. The letter must include your name and matriculation number, and both you and your first supervisor must have signed it. It is up to you when you file this request and it is even admissible to attach the letter to the thesis when submitting it. In lieu of the physical letter, the ZPA also accepts a digital copy.

⁷ The AT-MPO can be accessed [here](#) under “Formalities”.

that they can make a convincing case that the topic is not tractable for substantive reasons (aus fachlichen Gründen) within the designated period. Switching to a new topic in this manner entails that the student continues with the same attempt (“returning one’s topic” being different from a fail!) and the 22-week period allowed for writing the thesis starts anew.

To finish the program within the regular study period (Regelstudienzeit) of two years you should register your thesis by 15 April. (This is not mandatory but if you register your thesis later, you run the risk of not receiving your final grade in the summer semester, i.e. before 1 October.) Note that you must be enrolled (matriculated) at the university when you register your thesis, but not necessarily when you submit it (although the Prüfungsamt recommends that students stay enrolled until they have completed the program). Hence, you need not re-enroll with the university if your deadline is in the following semester. (Re)enrollment is not required even if you fail in your first attempt and have to write a new thesis on a new topic. The option to refrain from re-enrolling (or to ask to be disenrolled) after the registration of your thesis is not available, however, if there are other modules that you still have to pass: taking exams other than the thesis necessitates that you are (still) enrolled in the program.⁸

Additional Formal Requirements

The thesis has to be written in English. The upper word limit for the thesis including the bibliography is 35,000 words. Appendices (annexes) do not count towards the word limit. There is no lower limit, but students should be aware that a much shorter thesis may make them vulnerable to the charge that parts of their work could have benefitted from elaboration. For further information including formal requirements of the thesis (title page, formatting, citations, quotations, footnotes, reference list), please consult the MAIR Study Guide, which can be downloaded from the [program website](#).

The program’s examination policy (EP) (Fachspezifische Prüfungsordnung) (see [here](#) under “Formalities”) grants the possibility of (no more than) two students writing a joint thesis as a group (Gruppenarbeit) (EP § 6, 4). This is on the condition that in the thesis each author’s contribution is recognizable, distinguishable, and gradable (erkennbar, abgrenzbar und bewertbar). Typically, this is achieved by attributing, in the table of contents, chapters or sections to individual authors. The upper word limit for a joint thesis is 70,000 words (including the bibliography but not annexes if applicable).

⁸ The ZPA urges students who have decided not to re-enroll for the next semester to register their thesis no later than a month before the end of the semester. This is to make sure that students will not be in trouble if unexpected obstacles to registration arise, when the ZPA processes their request. For more on the university’s rules regarding disenrollment see [here](#).

MA Thesis Seminar

While working on their thesis, students attend the MA Thesis Seminar, which is intended to support the working process in various ways. The seminar is an obligatory part of the curriculum and consists of three one- or two-day workshops, which usually take place in mid-April, end of May, and end of July, respectively. Participants inform each other about their projects, discuss issues of research design, and present intermediate results.

Technically, the MA Thesis Seminar and the MA Thesis are the two parts of the module “Master Thesis”. The module is worth 30 CP with 27 CP being obtained by passing the thesis and 3 CP being obtained by passing the MA Thesis Seminar.⁹ To pass the (ungraded) seminar participants must submit three “reports” of varying length, which inform about the nature of their project and the progress of its implementation. For details see the seminar outline or the module catalogue. Students sign up for the module by registering their thesis (i.e. there is no need or possibility for registering for the master thesis module via PABO).

Deadline Extension

Should you fall ill during the period in which you are working on your thesis (i.e. between the official date of registration and the deadline), you can request an extension of your deadline by the number of days for which your inability to work is confirmed by your physician. Send the doctor’s note together with the completed notification of illness form (see [here](#)) to the Prüfungsamt, which will subsequently inform you about the new deadline in writing. Note that if you wish to base a request for an extension of your deadline on a medical certificate, you must do so “without delay” (unverzüglich) after receiving the certificate.

In addition, the Examination Board as represented by the program chair Professor Schlichte is authorized by the examination policy to grant students an extension of the deadline by up to seven weeks (EP § 6, 3). Such a concession may be made only once and only at a well-founded request by the student. Students who need additional time to finish their thesis must send a signed letter to the Prüfungsamt in which they explain in some detail the reasons that necessitated their request and specify the number of extra days or weeks they are asking for. This letter is passed on to the program chair, who, after consulting with the two supervisors, makes a decision, which is then, once again via the ZPA, conveyed to the student. You should be aware that the purpose of this provision in the examination policy is not to de facto prolong the time students are

⁹ Nonetheless, the grade for the thesis contributes 25% (corresponding to 30 CP) to the final GPA (see EP § 7).

given for writing their thesis; rather it is meant to provide the program chair with some flexibility in special cases when students get into trouble for reasons not entirely under their control. It is therefore very important that you plan your work well with your deadline always firmly in view. If your agenda turns out to be too ambitious, consult with your supervisors how you might reduce it to doable proportions.¹⁰

Submission of the Thesis

According to the general rules of the university (AT-MPO § 10, 10), students are required to submit three hard copies (bound printouts) of their thesis as well as a soft copy (pdf, docx, or rtf) saved to a USB stick to the Prüfungsamt. You can take the hard copies and the USB stick to the ZPA in person, ask someone to do this for you¹¹, or send them via traditional mail. Note that, regardless of which option you choose, what matters for meeting the deadline is the day the thesis is received by the ZPA. (The ZPA's postal address can be found [here](#).) In addition, after submitting your thesis to the ZPA, send your supervisors a digital copy of the thesis by email.

Each submitted copy of your thesis must include a "Declaration of Authorship and Consent for Checking with Plagiarism Software and the Declaration of Publication for Bachelor's and Master's Thesis". Use the form that can be downloaded [here](#). Please fill it in completely and add your signature as requested. Usually, the declarations are placed at the very end of the thesis. To make sure you are fully aware of what constitutes plagiarism and hence must be avoided in any scientific work including seminar papers and theses, please read the relevant section in the MAIR Study Guide (which is available [here](#)) or the annex [below](#). If you have questions regarding the declarations or the meaning of plagiarism turn to the program chair.

Assessment of the Thesis

According to the general rules of the university, the supervisors are expected to review and grade the thesis within eight weeks (AT-MPO § 10, 12). The grading system is the same that applies throughout the program (see AT-MPO § 16). In most cases, the grade for the thesis is simply the (rounded) average of the grades chosen by the two supervisors. There are two exceptions, however. If the supervisors' evaluations differ by two grades or more (e.g. one choosing 4.0, the other 2.0) or one of the two supervisors

¹⁰ If the thesis title is no longer adequate as a result of this operation, you can apply for a revision (see [above](#)).

¹¹ You (or your trustee) can use the ZPA's mailbox 24/7. If you (or your trustee) hand(s) in the thesis at the ZPA's Service Point or with a member of staff you (or your trustee) can obtain a confirmation of receipt. There is a form which can be downloaded [here](#) ("Confirmation of receipt of bachelor's/master's thesis"). For the ZPA's office hours see [here](#).

rates the thesis less than “sufficient” (4.0), a third examiner will be brought in by the Examination Board (Prüfungsausschuss), and the final grade will be the average of the best two out of the three grades. Only if both of these grades are 4.0 or better has the thesis been passed (AT-MPO § 10, 13).

A failed thesis can be made up for once. The student must choose a new topic and register the new thesis within three months after being informed about the (insufficient) final grade for the thesis. The same rules apply as with the first attempt – except that there is no additional attempt should this one be unsuccessful as well. (Moreover, students are allowed to make use of the option to “return their topic” only once.)

After receiving the supervisors’ reports the Prüfungsamt enters the grades into PABO and the result can be accessed by the student. In addition, the ZPA offers to send the student a digital copy of the supervisors’ reports.¹²

Annex: Plagiarism

Using someone else’s ideas or phrasing and representing those ideas or phrasing as one’s own, either on purpose or through carelessness, is a serious offence known as plagiarism. “Ideas or phrasing” include written or spoken material – from whole papers and paragraphs to sentences, and, indeed, phrases – but they also include statistics, maps, lab results, art work, etc. “Someone else” can mean a professional source, such as a published writer or critic in a book, magazine, encyclopedia, or journal; an electronic resource such as material we discover on the World Wide Web; another student at our school or anywhere else. You must credit all sources you use in writing your research paper or thesis with a citation and in the bibliography. (“Oral communication” can be credited in a footnote.) To do otherwise is to plagiarize and to run the risk of serious negative consequences.

Note that you do not avoid plagiarism by simply referencing your sources. A very important convention is that verbatim quotes are put in inverted commas. If you fail to respect this convention you are committing plagiarism even if you dutifully report the source. The reason is that the absence of quotation marks signals to the reader that what she is reading are your words rather than those of the author of the source. Note also that all is not fine if you merely subject the original to some linguistic engineering, as it were. Put differently, if you copy and paste a paragraph from a source into your

¹² If you consider objecting to the grade, you should turn to the ZPA, which will inform you about the steps to take. Having said that, if you are convinced that your work is underrated, it makes sense to first ask your examiner(s) for an appointment enabling them to explain to you more fully the reasons for their evaluation of your exam. (This applies as much to “normal” module examinations during the first three semesters of the program.)

text and then cut out a few words and replace a few others with synonyms you are still implicitly misrepresenting and overstating your intellectual input: (legitimate) “paraphrasing” or “using one’s own words” in this context is properly understood to entail presenting the results of your cognitive engagement with the source(s) cited (which is very different from looking up words in a thesaurus).