

Institute of Philosophy and Semiotics, University of Tartu
Guidelines for preliminary reviewers of doctoral theses¹

1. What is a doctoral thesis?

1.1. A doctoral thesis is an independent research paper that presents a well-argued original solution to a specific scientific problem and the results of which are published in international professional literature. A doctoral thesis contains (the order may vary):

1.1.1. an overview of the current situation of the field of research and the position of the research problem in it;

1.1.2. the formulation of the research task;

1.1.3. the statements presented for defence;

1.1.4. a description of methodology;

1.1.5. the course and/or proof of the resolution of the research task;

1.1.6. conclusions;

1.1.7. a summary;

1.1.8. a list of references;

1.1.9. an exhaustive Estonian summary of different parts of the thesis if the doctoral thesis has been written in a foreign language or an exhaustive foreign-language summary of different parts of the thesis if the doctoral thesis has been written in Estonian;

1.1.10. in the case of an artistic project, its documented and published public presentation;

1.1.11. the author's curriculum vitae including the name, date of birth, an email address that continues to be valid after graduation, education and professional history, information about the main fields of research, research publications or patents, and membership in professional organisations.

1.2. A doctoral thesis may be presented in one of the following formats:

1.2.1. As an integrated collection of research publications: a summary article accompanied by the compilation of previously published articles (generally three), the collection of which is published in the university's publication series "Dissertationes ... Universitatis Tartuensis". In this case, the prerequisite is the publication of at least two articles in leading international peer-reviewed scientific journals, which have an international panel, are internationally distributed, indexed in several international databases, and open to contributions; or in publications of recognised international research publishing houses; the third article may have been peer-reviewed by two internationally recognised independent researchers selected by the council. If an article

¹ These guidelines are based on Regulations for Doctoral Studies (*Doktoriõppe eeskiri*), approved by the Senate of the University of Tartu, Regulation No. 4 of 28 May 2021. In case of dispute or ambiguity, the authority lies with Regulations for Doctoral Studies.

forms a part of a joint research, the contribution of the doctoral candidate must be significant and thoroughly described in the doctoral thesis.

1.2.2. As a monograph to be published in the university's publication series "Dissertationes ... Universitatis Tartuensis", which meets the requirements listed in section 1 of the present guidelines and which has received a preliminary review by at least two independent recognised researchers of the specialisation. The author of a monograph to be published in the university's series of doctoral theses must have published or received an acceptance for publication at least one research publication on the topic of the doctoral thesis meeting the criteria described in 1.2.1.

1.2.3. As a monograph published by an internationally recognised research publishing house, supplemented by a summarising review article meeting the criteria described in clause 1.1.

1.2.4 As an artistic research, see more at RDS (clauses 93–95).

1.3. Research publications accepted for publication (but not yet published) meet the requirements listed in 1.2.1 and 1.2.2, if an official confirmation about acceptance for publishing is submitted.

2. The evaluation process and the role of the preliminary reviewer

2.1. A doctoral thesis is evaluated in two stages of which the preliminary review is the first, and the defence is the second.

2.2. The preliminary reviewer has great responsibility in guaranteeing the quality of the doctoral thesis, ensuring that an incomplete work is neither allowed to be defended nor published. From the point of view of the legal rights of the PhD candidate, it is particularly problematic if it is noticed only during the defence that the thesis does not meet the requirements.

2.3. The preliminary reviewer must clearly state in a well-reasoned, written opinion whether the thesis can be allowed to be defended or not, i.e. the preliminary reviewer must decide if the thesis in its present form or with small modifications meets the minimum requirements for a doctoral thesis. An opinion should not be presented conditionally, i.e. to deem that a thesis can be defended only after specific revisions.

2.4. The manuscript is evaluated according to the following criteria:

2.4.1. The choice of topic, research problem, scope of the task and research questions: the information value of the topic must be significant.

2.4.2. The account of previous research: the study must be a purposeful continuation to an earlier discourse, or present a new approach to the topic. Earlier studies must be taken into account, but they should not be repeated.

2.4.3. Clarity of terminology and argumentation, command of the theory of the topic: it must be clear to the reader what the research is about.

2.4.4. Methodology employed: the researcher must reflect on the chosen approach and justify it.

2.4.5. Presentation of the results and conclusions: the importance of the results and conclusions must not be either over- or under-valued from the point of view of the

advancement of science. The analysis must be logical and take into account different viewpoints. A further merit of the work may be the possibility for future research and the importance of the research for society.

2.4.6. Formal aspects: the presentation must have a logical structure and be clearly written. The ideas must not be submerged in a flood of information.

2.4.7. Undogmatic approach: a researcher must be critical about earlier studies, theories, methods, materials, sources and the scientific value of their work. In other words, a good piece of research is original and independent.

3. Negative or positive opinion

3.1. The preliminary reviewer must suggest not allowing the thesis to be defended if it is clear that it does not meet the requirements stated in section 1.1 of the present guidelines. The preliminary reviewer also has grounds to consider a negative decision if the work has other serious problems, for instance:

3.1.1. largely deficient conceptual framework;

3.1.2. serious shortcomings in the familiarity with the literature in the field;

3.1.3. incongruence between theory and analysis;

3.1.4. plagiarism.

On the other hand, shortcomings that can be corrected by simple editing, additional material, or expanding the reference list, and can be provided with reasonable effort should not prevent a positive opinion.

3.2. In case of a negative preliminary opinion of the thesis, the Council of the Institute may ask for a new opinion after the modifications pointed out in the review (and/or other changes) have been completed, and the supervisor's opinion has been taken into account: either from the preliminary reviewer who pointed out the problems or a new preliminary reviewer.

4. Quality of language of the thesis

4.1. Some of the manuscripts sent for preliminary review may not have been proofread yet. The PhD candidate is responsible for editing the final version of the thesis. Thus, the preliminary reviewer does not have to correct the language, but they may comment on it, especially where the text contains incorrect usage of terminology, translation errors, or other common mistakes that may impede comprehension.

5. Thesis based on articles

5.1. As described in section 1.2.1, a doctoral thesis may be presented as an integrated collection of research publications: a summarising review article accompanied by the compilation of articles or chapters (at least 3) on a related topic.

5.2. The summarising review article must contain an overview of the research topic, the description of goals of the accompanying articles in the context of the current situation of the field of research, and explanation of the methods used. The summarising article unifies the results and conclusions of the accompanying articles into a coherent whole and provides an evaluation of the importance and applicability of the results and contribution to further research on the topic. The summarising review article must meet the formal requirements for research publications.

5.3. There are some differences between evaluating a doctoral thesis based on articles and a monograph:

5.3.1. Some of the articles may form a part of a joint research, in which case the contribution of the doctoral candidate must be significant and thoroughly described in the doctoral thesis.

5.3.2. The reviewer must present their opinion about the scientific level of the whole thesis (based both on the summary article and on all submitted publications). This should address the question whether the different parts of the thesis form a sufficient, coherent and comprehensive whole. No detailed review of the publications is necessary, but questions about their content may be presented in the academic discussion.

5.3.3. Publications are presented in an unmodified form. In the articles that deal with similar topics, a slight degree of overlap and repetition is allowed.

6. Ethical guidelines

6.1. Institute of Philosophy and Semiotics pays particular attention to the objectivity and transparency of the preliminary review, thus aiming to avoid the conflict of interests. If a conflict of interests occurs with respect to the evaluation task, the reviewer must declare this immediately in writing to the Head of the Institute. The preliminary reviewer must also inform the Head of the Institute of any other aspects that may influence the objectivity of the review.

6.2. A conflict of interests occurs when:

6.2.1. the reviewer may benefit in any way from the outcome of the defence;

6.2.2. the reviewer has supervised or otherwise substantially advised the doctoral candidate in the preparation of the thesis (this does not include the advice given as a part of the preliminary review, or the case when the reviewer has peer-reviewed the accompanying publications);

6.2.3. the reviewer is a close research collaborator of the candidate or one of the co-authors of accompanying publications, or stands in the superior-subordinate relationship with them;

6.2.4. the reviewer has a close familial or personal relationship with the doctoral candidate or one of the co-authors.

6.3. In order to avoid legal problems, the reviewer presents their opinion directly to the Institute. During the decision-making process, the reviewer communicates only with the Head of the Institute or an appointed representative of the Institute, i.e. the reviewer does not pass their opinion to the doctoral candidate, supervisor, or any third parties. During the review process, the reviewer must not consult with the doctoral candidate, supervisor, or third parties, nor give them information about the contents of the review.

6.4. The preliminary reviewer must not supervise the doctoral candidate, or receive a corrected version of the thesis or any other materials connected to the work directly from the candidate. These can only be forwarded by the Head of the Institute. In case the reviewer knows the candidate personally, their earlier collaboration or other aspects that may influence the objectivity of the opinion have to be described briefly in the review.

6.5. The head of the Institute or an appointed representative of the Institute (Secretary or Academic Secretary of the Council) sends a copy of the review to the PhD candidate, the supervisor(s), and the members of the Council.

6.6. The doctoral candidate has the right to present comments about the review to the Council before the thesis is allowed to be defended.

7. Preliminary review

7.1. The review must be presented within one month for article-based thesis and within two months for monograph-based thesis. If there is a justified need to extend this deadline, the Head of the Institute has to be informed immediately.

7.2. The recommended length of the review is 2 to 5 pages.

7.3. The review may contain suggestions for corrections and modifications, but it must be clear whether the preliminary reviewer recommends giving permission to proceed to defence or not. If the reviewer wishes additionally to draw attention to small mistakes, e.g. spelling mistakes, a separate list of corrections (or the thesis file with the reviewer's corrections and/or comments) may be added to the review.

7.4. The signed copy of the opinion must be sent by email to the Secretary of the Council.

8. Fee

8.1. The work of the preliminary reviewer is remunerated with the fee of 250 EUR. The fee is transferred to the bank account specified by the reviewer after receipt of the opinion.

9. Subsequent stages of the defence process

9.1. If the Council of the Institute decides to allow the doctoral thesis to be defended, an opponent or opponents are appointed. The Institute may ask the preliminary reviewer to be an opponent. At later stages, the reviewer does not have to follow the process of making corrections in the text of the thesis; the responsibility for this lies with the doctoral candidate.