Institute of Philosophy and Semiotics, University of Tartu
Guidelines for Opponents of PhD Dissertations

1. What is a PhD dissertation?

1.1. A PhD dissertation is an independent research paper that presents a well-argued, original solution to a specific scientific problem and whose results are published in international professional literature. A PhD dissertation must contain (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 therein;
1.1.2. the formulation of the research task;
1.1.3. the statements presented for defence;
1.1.4. a description of the methodology;
1.1.5. the course and proof of the resolution of the research task;
1.1.6. a summary;
1.1.7. a list of references;
1.1.8. an exhaustive Estonian summary of various parts of the paper if the dissertation has been written in a foreign language or an exhaustive foreign-language summary of various parts of the paper if the dissertation has been written in Estonian.

1.2. A PhD dissertation may be presented in the following formats:

1.2.1. As a summary article accompanied by the compilation of previously published articles, the collection of which is printed in the university’s doctoral dissertations series (Dissertationes ... Universitatis Tartuensis). In this case, the prerequisite is the publication of at least three articles in leading international pre-reviewed scientific journals, which have an international panel, which are internationally distributed, which are indexed in several international databases and which are open to contributions or chapters in books published by renowned international research publishers. If an article has more than one author, the PhD candidate must specify his/her contribution to its preparation.

1.2.2. As a monograph published in the university’s doctoral dissertations 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, internationally recognized researchers of the specialization. In this case, the prerequisite is the publication of at least one article on a related topic in the publications that correspond to the criteria described in 1.2.1.

1.2.3. As a summary article published in the university’s doctoral dissertations series (Dissertationes ... Universitatis Tartuensis) that complies with the requirements set out in section 1, along with the monograph specified in section 16.3 of the Procedure for Awarding Doctorates.

These guidelines are based on the Procedure for Awarding Doctorates, “Doktorikraadi andmise kord”, approved by the Senate of the University of Tartu, Statute No. 23, 20 December 2013. In case of dispute or ambiguity, the authority lies with the Procedure for Awarding Doctorates.
1.3. Accepted publications meet the requirements stated in 1.2.1 and 1.2.2 in case there is an official note of acceptance from the editor.

2. The evaluation criteria

2.1. The PhD dissertation is evaluated in two stages of which the preliminary review is the first, and the defence is the second.

2.2. By allowing the dissertation to be defended, the Institute’s Council confirms that the dissertation complies with the requirements and that the applicant deserves a doctorate in the event of successful defence. The dissertation can nevertheless be failed to be defended successfully in the extraordinary case in which serious problems are found with the content or the form of the dissertation or with the oral presentation of the candidate.

2.3. The opponent must present a written review that contains the comments and questions for the academic discussion and the overall evaluation of the dissertation.

2.4. The dissertation should be evaluated according to the following guidelines:

   2.4.1. The choice of topic, the research problem, the scope of the task and the 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. Thus earlier studies must be taken into account, but they should not be repeated.

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

   2.4.4. Methodology: the researcher must reflect on the chosen of 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 comprehensive.

   2.4.6. Aspects of the form: the presentation must have a rational structure and be clearly written. The ideas must not be submerged in a flood of information.

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

2.5. As described in section 1.2.1, a dissertation may consist of a summary article accompanied by several published scientific articles or book chapters (at least 3) on a related topic, or manuscripts accepted for publication. The summary article must contain an overview of the research topic, a description of the goals of the accompanying articles in the context of the state of the art of the field and an explanation of the methods used. The summary 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. There are some differences between evaluating a dissertation based on articles and a monograph:

   2.5.1. Some of the articles may be co-authored, in which case the candidate must specify his/her independent contribution.
2.5.2. The opponent must present his/her opinion about the scientific level of the whole dissertation (based both on the summary article and on all submitted publications). This should also address whether the different parts form a sufficient, coherent and comprehensive whole.

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

3. The defence of dissertation

3.1. The defence of dissertation takes place at a meeting of the Institute’s Council as a public academic discussion. At least one opponent must be present for the defence to occur (one can also participate via Skype or video conference).

3.2. A defence consists of the following parts:

   3.2.1. introduction by the chair of the meeting with a check of the quorum;
   3.2.2. a short overview of the applicant’s CV and of the supervisor’s opinion;
   3.2.3. presentation by the applicant (lectio praecursoria);
   3.2.4. remarks by the opponents;
   3.2.5. academic discussion between the applicant and the opponents;
   3.2.6. academic discussion between the applicant and the members of the Council;
   3.2.7. academic discussion between the applicant and the attendees;
   3.2.8. final remarks of the applicant;
   3.2.9. adoption of the decision of the Council;
   3.2.10. declaration of the decision of the Council.

3.3. The adoption of the decision takes place in a closed discussion involving the members of the Council, opponents and supervisors who do not have the right to vote. Taking into account the assessments of the opponents, the applicant’s presentation and the ability to carry out the academic discussion is evaluated. The Council will, in a public vote, make one of the following decisions:

   3.3.1. the dissertation was defended successfully (grade: ‘defended’). To award a doctorate to the applicant;
   3.3.2. the dissertation was not defended successfully (grade: ‘not defended’). Not to award a doctorate to the applicant;
   3.3.3. not to make a decision due to suspicion of plagiarism or academic fraud. To send the dissertation to experts for assessment.

4. Ethical guidelines

4.1. The Institute of Philosophy and Semiotics pays particular attention to the objectivity and transparency of the evaluation process, thus aiming to avoid any conflict of interest. In case a conflict of interest occurs with respect to the evaluation task, the opponent must declare this immediately in writing to the Head of the Institute. The opponent must also inform the Head of the Institute of any other aspects that may influence the objectivity of the review.
4.2. A conflict of interest occurs when

4.2.1. the opponent benefits in any way depending on the outcome of the defence;
4.2.2. the opponent has supervised or otherwise substantially advised the applicant in the preparation of the dissertation (this does not include the advice given as a part of the preliminary review of the dissertation or the case when the opponent has peer-reviewed the accompanying publications);
4.2.3. the opponent has been a co-author of the applicant in the last five years;
4.2.4. the opponent is a close research collaborate of the applicant or one of the co-authors of accompanying publications or stands in the superior-subordinate relationship with them;
4.2.4. the opponent has a close familial or personal relationship with the applicant or one of the co-authors.

4.3. In order to avoid legal problems, the opponent communicates during the decision-making process only with the Head of the Institute or with his/her appointed representative, i.e. the opponent does not pass his/her comments to the PhD candidate, his/her supervisor, or any third persons. During the process, the opponent must not consult with the PhD candidate, his/her supervisor, or any third persons, nor give them information about the contents of the review.

5. Review

5.1. The review must be presented at least one week before the agreed date of defence by sending it as an attachment to the email address of the Head of the Institute.

5.2. The original, signed copy of the review must be brought along to the defence or in case the opponent participates via a real-time two-way audio-visual communications channel or cannot participate in the meeting, the original must be sent to the following address: Institute of Philosophy and Semiotics, Ülikooli 18, University of Tartu, 50090 Tartu, Estonia.

6. Fee

6.1 The work of the opponent is remunerated with the fee of 100 EUR. In addition, the costs incurred by travelling to the defence and accommodation are reimbursed.