Institute of Philosophy and Semiotics, University of Tartu
Guidelines for Preliminary Reviewers 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 one of 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.

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.

1 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.
2. The evaluation process and the role of the preliminary reviewer

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. The preliminary reviewer has great responsibility in guaranteeing the quality of the PhD dissertation, ensuring that an incomplete work is not recommended for defence nor printed. From the point of view of the legal rights of the PhD candidate, it is particularly problematic if only during the defence it is noticed that the work does not meet the minimum requirements for the PhD dissertation.

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

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

   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. Thus 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 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 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. Aspects of the form: 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: the researcher must be critical about earlier studies, theories, methods, materials, sources and the scientific value of his/her 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 work to be defended if it is clear that the dissertation 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 contains other serious shortcomings, for instance:

   3.1.1. a very 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 with simple editing, additional material or additions to the reference list literature that can be provided with reasonable effort should not prevent a positive opinion.

3.2. In the case of a negative opinion, if the corrections pointed out in the review or other changes have been included into the dissertation manuscript and the supervisor’s opinion has been taken into account, the Institute Council may ask for a new opinion from the preliminary reviewer who gave the negative review, or a new review from a different preliminary reviewer.

4. Quality of language of the dissertation

4.1. Some of the manuscripts sent for preliminary review might not have been proofread for language mistakes. The PhD candidate is responsible for the editing of the written text in the final version sent to print. Thus, the preliminary reviewer does not have to correct the use of language, but he or she may comment on it, and in particular in those cases where it contains incorrect usage of terminology, translation errors, or common mistranslations from the candidate’s mother tongue that may impede comprehension.

5. Dissertation based on articles

5.1. 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.

5.2. 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.

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

5.3.1. Some of the articles may be co-authored, in which case the candidate must specify his/her independent contribution.

5.3.2. The preliminary reviewer 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 address whether the different parts form a sufficient, coherent and comprehensive whole. No detailed review of the publications is necessary.

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

6. Ethical guidelines

6.1. The Institute of Philosophy and Semiotics pays particular attention to the objectivity and transparency of the preliminary review, thus aiming to avoid any conflict of interest. A
preliminary reviewer is a specialist appointed by the Institute. In case a conflict of interest occurs with respect to the evaluation task, the reviewer must declare this immediately in writing to the Head of the Institute. The 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 interest occurs when

- 6.2.1. the preliminary reviewer benefits in any way depending on the outcome of the defence;
- 6.2.2. the preliminary reviewer has supervised or otherwise substantially advised the applicant in the preparation of the dissertation (this does not include the case when the preliminary reviewer has peer-reviewed the accompanying publications);
- 6.2.3. the preliminary reviewer has been a co-author of the applicant in the last five years;
- 6.2.4. the preliminary reviewer 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;
- 6.2.5. the preliminary reviewer has a close familial or personal relationship with the applicant or one of the co-authors.

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

6.4. The preliminary reviewer must not supervise the PhD candidate, or receive a corrected version of the dissertation or any other materials connected to the work directly from the candidate. These can only be passed on by the Head of the Institute or his/her appointed representative. In case the reviewer knows the candidate, he/she has to state briefly in the opinion any earlier collaboration or other aspects that may influence the objectivity of the opinion.

6.5. The Head of the Institute or his/her appointed representative sends a copy of the opinion to the PhD candidate, to his/her supervisor, and to the members of the Institute’s Council.

6.6. The PhD candidate has the right to present comments about the opinion to the council before permission is given to proceed to a defence. An opinion is appended to the minutes of the council meeting which gave the permission to proceed. After this, the opinion is disclosed to the public.

7. Opinion

7.1. The opinion must be presented within one month for article-based dissertation and within two months for monograph-based dissertation. If there is a justified need to extend this deadline, it must be made known to the Head of the Institute immediately.

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

7.3. The opinion 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, he/she may add a separate list of corrections to the opinion, or send the manuscript containing the corrections back to the Institute. In this case the Institute passes on the list of corrections, or the manuscript containing corrections, to the PhD candidate. In other cases it is not required to return the manuscript.

7.4. The original, signed copy of the opinion must be sent to the following address: Institute of Philosophy and Semiotics, Ülikooli 18, University of Tartu, 50090 Tartu. To expedite the process, an electronic copy (as an attachment) of the opinion should be sent to the email address of the head of the institute on the day of the posting of the original, signed copy.

8. Fee
8.1. The work of the preliminary reviewer is remunerated with the fee of 200 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 Institute Council decides to give permission to proceed to the defence, an opponent or opponents are appointed. The Institute may ask the preliminary reviewer to be an opponent. After expressing his/her opinion, the reviewer does not have the right or duty to follow the process of making corrections in the text of the dissertation; the responsibility for this lies on the PhD candidate.