

Use Your Master's Thesis Supervisor

This booklet was prepared in dialogue with the heads of studies at the faculty, and it was approved by the dean of the faculty. Thus, this leaflet expresses the faculty's policy within the area of supervision, and it functions as an appendix to the curriculum regulations regarding Master's theses.

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This booklet is available for free to students and supervisors at the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Southern Denmark

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CONTENTS

1. WHAT IS GOOD MASTER’S THESIS SUPERVISION?	3
2. HOW DO YOU SELECT YOUR SUPERVISOR?	6
3. HOW DO YOU MAKE YOUR SUPERVISION CONSTRUCTIVE?	7
<i>The preliminary phase.....</i>	<i>8</i>
<i>The supervision process after the first two meetings</i>	<i>9</i>
<i>Supervision by email</i>	<i>10</i>
<i>Should your supervisor approve (parts of) your thesis before submission?</i>	<i>11</i>
<i>How much can you expect your supervisor to read?</i>	<i>12</i>
<i>Which texts are suitable for supervision?</i>	<i>13</i>
4. WRITING GROUPS.....	16

1. What is good Master's thesis supervision?

This booklet is for you if you are about to write your Master's thesis as a conclusion to your studies at the Faculty of Social Sciences, University of Southern Denmark.

Working on your thesis is filled with numerous study-related challenges and subject-related lightbulb moments. Now you have the chance to immerse yourself in an academic topic that you yourself have chosen, and this will be in close dialogue with a supervisor from your subject. In this context, your supervisor will have a very central function, and therefore it is important that the cooperation between you works optimally. Here is a list of the most important aspects that, according to the boards of studies at the Faculty of Social Sciences, characterise a good Master's thesis supervision process:

- As the student, you are the driving force in the supervision process. You send drafts and formulate an agenda before all supervision meetings.
- The supervisor responds to the basic elements of your thesis, such as your method, your choice of theory, your empirical data and your primary literature. The supervisor judges whether the thesis can be written within the time limit and the academic limits which are set out in the regulations.
- The supervision process starts from the first day you work on your Master's thesis and continues with regular meetings until the basic elements are solidly in place. The extent to which supervision is required in the final third of your thesis work is more open to discussion. More minor concerns towards the end of your thesis work can possibly be clarified by email. It can be a good idea to plan as early as possible when your supervision meetings will be.
- Your supervisor will consider selected draft texts from the thesis. In other words, the supervisor's response takes as a starting point the drafts

that you have sent beforehand. By so doing, your supervisor will have the opportunity to see how you actually write and carry out your intentions, and, based on this, will work out where you need help. Please note that it is not the intention that the supervisor should read the entire thesis before you submit it. That would not be appropriate, and there is not enough time for it.

- Your supervisor will comment on the written product and respond, focusing on the future, to what now needs to be investigated and written. Your supervisor will constantly attempt to provide constructive recommendations for what to do next.
- The supervision is a professional relationship, and not a private one. The supervisor receives time for his or her part of the work. In principle, you should be able to write a summary of decisions taken or of topics covered in your meetings in the same way that the minutes of a meeting are written. You might even be able to send such ‘minutes’ to your supervisor after each meeting to be sure that you are in agreement on the outcome of the meeting.
- The supervision is not just a relationship between you and your supervisor, but also involves the whole institution where you study. The board of studies and the department play a visible role for every student receiving supervision. They provide quality assurance, evaluations, and different types of educational support for both the student and the supervisor. As a student, you can, for example, always receive advice from the head of studies or the supervision co-ordinator in cases of problems in working with your supervisor. Both supervisors and students at the Faculty of Social Sciences can also contact the Teaching and Learning Unit for an exchange of ideas and for educational inspiration. See section 5 for other options for support.

The above is the faculty’s proposals for a good process of supervision, but when it comes to how the proposals can be realised in concrete terms, there are many divergent opinions. As a result of this, there can be striking differences between types of supervisor and between types of supervision.

There is, in itself, nothing wrong with this, especially as students' needs are just as varied. Some students, for example, need a supervisor who comes up with a lot of good ideas, even if many of the ideas have to be rejected afterwards. Others have more of a need for structure and the setting up of limits, and do not want too much diverse input from the supervisor.

2. How do you select your supervisor?

Different rules and procedures exist for the allocation of supervisors on the Master's programmes at the Faculty of Social Sciences. Start by reading the guidelines set out in the curriculum and the student handbooks.

You can also ask your head of studies or supervision co-ordinator which supervisors would suit you best, and which would have time to supervise you. And you can always knock on the door of any potential supervisors for a short chat about your thesis. Many supervisors have office hours for this type of meeting.

If you speak to other students about their experiences of supervision and supervisors, please remember that one student's experiences of supervision or of a particular supervisor are not always relevant for all students.

Without exception, your head of studies or supervision co-ordinator will have to approve your choice of supervisor. Unfortunately, it is not always possible to guarantee that you are allocated the supervisor you would prefer, as the supervisor in question might be occupied with other duties. If you are not allocated your preferred supervisor, you are advised to find out what qualities are possessed by the supervisor you have been allocated, and then to make best use of those qualities.

In general, try not to attach too much importance to which supervisor you are allocated. Usually there will be more than one potential supervisor. The right supervisor for you might not necessarily be *the* expert in the area you want to write about. Nor is the best supervisor necessarily the most popular supervisor. It is at least just as important that you can understand what your supervisor is saying, and that your supervisor has the time to supervise you, and, indeed, wants to supervise you.

Furthermore, note that you and your supervisor have to fill in and sign a supervision contract. This needs to be done as soon as possible, and at the latest by the end of your second supervision meeting. You can read more precise instructions for the supervision contract on the form that you and

your supervisor have to fill in and hand in to the head of studies or supervision co-ordinator.

3. How do you make your supervision constructive?

Constructive supervision results from the interaction between you and your supervisor. On the one hand, you are the person writing your thesis. Your motivation, academic knowledge and interests are central, and for that reason you have the main responsibility to make the supervision process work.

On the other hand, your supervisor is an experienced professional who has worked with similar academic problems before. A good supervisor is able to predict pitfalls and can advise you on how you can construct your thesis.

It is clear that you have to be the *dynamic party* in the interaction between you and your supervisor. It is you, and not your supervisor, who has to set the agenda.

Conversely, it is also clear that you can make demands of your supervisor. If you follow the advice in this booklet, and in general do what you can to make constructive use of your supervisor, then it is not unreasonable for you to make demands of your supervisor. He or she should as a minimum be well-prepared for meetings. In other words, he or she will have read your draft and will have prepared a constructive response. Also, your supervisor ought to be able to express himself or herself clearly and precisely. If you are unsure about anything, you can always ask for explanations or clarifications.

On the whole, discussions and critical argumentation will dominate the meetings. Supervision is not a monologue, and neither the supervisor nor the student should restrain themselves from asking the other party for more clarification of a claim or an analysis. Only through mutually challenging dialogue can the argumentation in the thesis be honed.

The preliminary phase

During the first supervision meetings is the time when you have to put your thesis on the right track. By the second supervision meeting at the latest you have to have written, and had approved, your **project description** (also known as your ‘research proposal’, or in Danish *opgaveformulering* or *projektbeskrivelse*). In connection with this, you have to agree with your supervisor on your **problem formulation** (also known as your ‘research questions’, or in Danish *problemformulering*), the limits of your thesis, and your work schedule.

As a result, your supervisor has an important role to play in the *beginning* of your thesis project. In other words, we advise you to contact your supervisor early in your thesis project, and preferably as soon as you know who to contact.

During the first supervision meeting, you and your supervisor should spend time discussing, in addition to academic matters, which expectations you have of each other:

- When particularly, while you are writing your thesis, will you need to receive supervision?
- How much of a contribution do you expect of each other?
- How ambitious are you? Are you dreaming of getting a funded PhD position, or just of ‘getting it over and done with’?
- Do you need all-round supervision (text, writing process and academic)? Or should the supervision focus on the academic content?
- When can you meet, and how many meetings can you expect to hold with your supervisor? In some cases it can be wise to arrange ‘every third Tuesday’. In other cases it is better to decide on a more open arrangement, with the option for acute supervision by email. In either case, it is still necessary to be aware of the number of hours of supervision allowed; see the regulations in the curriculum.
- Is your supervisor willing to be contacted between meetings, possibly by email or telephone? What do you think of supervision by email?
- How many pages can you send before each supervision meeting?

The first meeting should end with a clear understanding of what you have to write in your supervision contract and your *project description*. These have to be approved at the latest at your second supervision meeting.

At the second supervision meeting you and your supervisor have to sign the supervision contract, including an *project description*. If you have not reached agreement during the first meeting or by email, it is necessary that during or immediately after the second meeting you are able to register possible changes in your *project description* and return it to be signed.

It is a good idea in advance of the second meeting to send your supervisor a draft of your *project description*, as described in the guidelines for the supervision contract. This *project description* is of benefit for you and for your supervision process, not least because it ensures from the start that your supervisor (and the head of studies or the supervision co-ordinator) believes that:

- your *problem formulation* makes academic sense.
- it will be realistic for you to be able to write an acceptable Master's thesis within the time constraints.

By the end of the second supervision meeting at the latest, you and your supervisor should plan your future supervision meetings, which will then be able to act as milestones while you are writing your thesis.

The supervision process after the first two meetings

Make sure that you are always well-prepared for your supervision meetings. First and foremost, you have to send your supervisor your draft text well in advance of each meeting. You should also always attach an explanatory text, in which you write precisely what you would like to discuss at the next meeting and why. This makes it possible for your supervisor to read your text focusing on what you want him or her to focus on, leading to a better response.

At an actual meeting you can start by providing your assessment of the draft you have sent to your supervisor. What are you satisfied with and what do you yourself find problematic?

Your supervisor can now provide feedback on your material. It is important that the feedback is both concrete and forward-looking. If necessary, ask your supervisor literally to point in the text at what he or she is commenting on. Questions to consider include:

- Is the text relevant to the *problem formulation*?
- Does your supervisor understand your text in the way that you intended it?
- Do you agree with your supervisor's suggestions for changes?

Always ask your supervisor to say what is good in your writing, as this will help you to understand what to keep and build on. It is not the role of your supervisor to secure you a high grade, but he or she should provide you with clear guidelines for where he or she will place emphasis when assessing your thesis.

Take notes during your supervision meetings. Normally, many topics are discussed, and some of the supervisor's comments can be difficult to understand during the meeting. If your supervisor agrees, you might even make an audio recording of your meetings.

Last but not least, it is advisable to keep your supervisor informed of what you have been doing as a result of previous supervision meetings. You can begin each meeting by 'evaluating' the feedback you received at the previous meeting in terms of whether you:

- could use the feedback.
- found the feedback to be of less use.

Supervision by email

Increasingly, supervision is happening via email, both long and short in nature, and this is for many good reasons. Emailing is an easy way to communicate irrespective of time and place. Also, it is often a useful tool for maintaining, focusing and making explicit the dialogue between the student and the supervisor. Quite simply, it is harder to go 'off-track' in writing than when speaking.

By using email as one aspect of the supervision it can be clearer to see what you and your supervisor think. However, bear in mind that a large part of being supervised is that of brainstorming and discussing, and therefore when you read or re-read emails you should remember the context that they were written in.

The problem with emails is first and foremost that it can be time-consuming to write and reply to long emails. In principle, you should deduct this time from your supervisor's hours allocated to providing you with supervision. Note that if supervision primarily occurs via email, it risks suffering from a lack of the spirited, informal discussion that is characteristic of many good supervision meetings.

Therefore it is necessary for you and your supervisor to agree on how you will organise this part of your supervision. You should make an agreement concerning:

- What can be supervised by email and telephone.
- How long you can expect to wait for a reply, including weekends and holidays.

Many students writing their Master's thesis expect to receive a reply at the latest one week after having sent an email, and the longer they have to wait, the more frustrated they become. Their expectations are not necessarily unreasonable, but their supervisor might of course be engaged in other matters. In cases where the supervisor is away for extended periods due to travel, illness and so on, he or she ought to inform you in advance, and it should also be displayed as an auto-reply email from the supervisor's email account. If you have not heard from your supervisor within one week of you sending an email, it is acceptable to send a reminder. If this does not help, you might want to contact your head of studies or your supervision co-ordinator to hear his or her advice.

Should your supervisor approve (parts of) your thesis before submission?

Many students seek (consciously or not) their supervisor's approval of their thesis before they submit it. Most supervisors do not however see

approval to be central to their supervision. This is a classic conflict which has no simple solution.

On the one hand, the supervisor's advice is clearly not only casual brainstorming, but also contains an *element* of approval. A supervisor is duty-bound *to a certain degree* by his or her own supervision. Subsequently, during grading he or she should not, for instance, criticise the most central choices of theory, empirical data and methods if he or she was involved in these choices. But the supervisor is of course only duty-bound by his or her supervision if a student wants to and is able to take note of his or her advice.

On the other hand, students should always treat approval or other concrete comments (both positive and negative) with care. Firstly, it must be remembered that the external grading of the thesis has greater formal influence on the final result than the supervisor's assessment. Secondly, sections of the thesis that seem to make sense in isolation might be problematic within the context of the work in its entirety, or vice versa.

In other words, you should avoid uncritically seeking your supervisor's approval, and furthermore you should always ask your supervisor detailed questions. Do not settle for comments such as: "The structure looks fine" or "You cannot use that model for analysis". Always make sure you hear the *arguments* for why the structure looks fine, or why you cannot use that model for analysis.

How much can you expect your supervisor to read?

We do not recommend you to ask your supervisor to read thoroughly every paragraph of your thesis. Firstly, there will only be time for a few meetings if your supervisor has to read large amounts of text before every supervision meeting. Secondly, your supervisor's response to forty pages of draft text will typically not be in as much detail (and thereby constructive) as with three to ten pages.

One rule of thumb is for your supervisor to read between three and thirteen pages of rough draft before each supervision meeting. During the entire

period of supervision, this will result in your supervisor reading no more than a total of around half of your thesis in draft form.

You might decide that it would be helpful for your supervisor to skim several pages before a supervision meeting in order to gain an overview of a whole chapter, for instance. If so, you should be especially meticulous when you point out in your email which sections of text require particular attention.

Another rule of thumb is that only in particularly exceptional cases should your supervisor read different drafts of the same section of text.

Use your supervisor to discuss the *problem formulation* of your thesis, the method, your choice of theory, the structure, and the paragraphs heavy in analysis. It is important for you to be careful in your choice of draft text that you send to your supervisor.

Which texts are suitable for supervision?

No-one expects you to produce a finalised text for supervision. On the contrary, it would often be a waste of your time and your supervisor's time if he or she is not involved from an earlier point in your writing process. So be prepared to supply your supervisor with text that is in an early stage of development.

The quality of the supervision depends greatly on your attitude towards how your text will be received. This includes your need, desire and willingness to edit, alter and re-write the text. One might say that suitable supervision texts 'want to be discussed'. If, however, you do not want to hear constructive feedback on the text you have sent, either consciously or not, the quality of your supervision meetings will then be limited.

The introduction and other texts that provide an overview as suitable supervision texts

The introduction (including the *problem formulation*, the limits of the thesis and the structure) is the 'informative labelling' of the thesis, and as such it steers the whole thesis, both as a product and as a writing process.

The supervision contract ensures that this ‘informative labelling’ is agreed on early in the process of writing your thesis when you create your *project description*, which cannot be altered substantially without the consent of your supervisor and the head of studies or supervision coordinator. You should refer to your *project description* constantly during supervision to check that your writing is still on track.

As soon as possible, other pieces of text will also reveal the coherence and cohesion of your paragraphs, your chapters or the whole thesis. These texts, which will also be suitable for supervision, include your table of contents, your plan and your outline. The various meta-texts in your thesis (eg at the start and end of each chapter) are suitable texts to send to your supervisor.

Your choice of literature as a suitable supervision text

Early in the writing process your supervisor should comment as clearly as possible on your choice of literature and references. He or she can help by:

- supplementing your proposed literature.
- determining if it matches the aims of your *problem formulation*.
- considering methodological aspects in your search for appropriate literature.

Remember, however, that your supervisor is not necessarily *the* expert in your chosen field, and that in connection with specific literature you will need to make independent decisions.

Analytical sections as suitable supervision texts

You need to be able to give your supervisor the chance to have as precise an impression as possible of how and why you are writing your text in the way you are writing it. For this to be possible, your supervisor will have to read drafts in which you use and discuss the theories and methods that you have chosen for your thesis.

Pure summaries are rarely suitable as supervision texts

If you send your supervisor summaries of the literature, unannotated transcriptions, or statistical calculations with no comments, you risk your

supervision being limited to a type of quality control of the correctness of your summaries, transcriptions or calculations.

Suitable supervision texts are always accompanied by an explanatory text.

When you send your text to your supervisor, you should *always* include an explanatory text. It is not sufficient to write: “I look forward to hearing your opinion of my text” or: “I am interested in whatever you think it is relevant to comment on”. You should make time to write a well-planned explanatory text for your email that is the equivalent of between half a page and a whole page, considering the following:

- What are you sending? Where does it belong in your thesis? (Attach the latest version of your table of contents if necessary.)
- How near completion would you say the text you’re sending is? At the brainstorming stage? Halfway through? Almost finished?
- What should your supervisor’s comments focus on? Which are the most pressing questions?
- How well are you keeping up with the workplan you have arranged? What are you doing now, and what will you be doing next?

4. Writing Groups

Writing groups are groups in which four to six students writing their Master's theses meet regularly to provide each other with prepared feedback on each other's drafts.

Writing groups are an important supplement to academic supervision. It can be of benefit for both you and your supervisor if you are able to integrate writing groups naturally into the process of writing your thesis.

- People other than your supervisor will challenge you in your writing process.
- You will be informed of where your text lacks clarity, which you might not have been aware of due to you (and your supervisor) being too close to the material.
- By reading other students' drafts you will gain ideas for improving your own text.
- You will receive suggestions for how to deal with issues that are causing you problems and taking away your focus.
- You will be able to exchange your experiences about the writing process with other students who are in the same situation.
- You will be able to improve your awareness of language.
- The process will help you keep going.