



**LUNDS**  
UNIVERSITET

*Institutionen för kommunikation och medier*

## **Writing a Masters Thesis MKVM13 (30 credits)**

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If you are starting work on a Masters thesis in Media and Communication Studies, you are about to embark on an exciting – and demanding – academic journey. Writing a masters thesis is a challenge, and requires concentration, discipline, and planning. The remarks here are intended to help orient you to the process, so that you complete the project successfully. You should start early, as the sooner you prepare for your dissertation the more confident you will be in the process. Part of the challenge in writing a proposal is in fact to define the project and format your work in such a manner that it fits into the allotted time frame. We therefore strongly underscore the importance of getting started as early as possible.

### **Course aim**

The thesis course provides the opportunity for students to conduct an independent piece of research within media and communication studies. Students taking this course should follow the guidelines provided here and in the course outline, and also the individual advice of members of staff who supervise students during the course. A thesis usually consists of a combination of theoretical and empirical analysis related to an issue within media and communication studies. In most cases the thesis is based on a case study, and mixes theoretical and empirical research together, so that empirical research is analysed in relation to relevant theories and concepts for the topic of study. Please choose a topic that is relevant to the areas of study within the programme. It is important that all students have a green light for their thesis outline from their supervisor before beginning the research during the Spring term.

### **What is a Masters thesis?**

A Masters thesis is a scientific research project of limited scope that is intended to demonstrate the student's capacity for doing this kind of independent work. It is intended to be a genuine contribution of new knowledge. Thus, a Masters thesis is not a form of journalism, a review of literature, or an essay. Further, it belongs to a specific genre of writing, namely scientific research. There are a few key elements that define this genre and distinguish it from other genres; in other words, there are some 'rules of the game' that need to be followed, for the work to be defined as part of this genre. These rules should not hamper creativity, engagement, or even prevent one from having a strong view about the topic to be investigated. And rules can be followed in innovative ways. Thus, rather than an exercise in some suffocating formalism, the process of research as well as the writing of the thesis will offer an occasion for creativity and intellectual growth within the context of a scientific project. The satisfaction at the end – for having done a good job – is immeasurable.

### **The course**

You will be doing the research and the writing of your Masters thesis within the context of a course. The course is primarily based on individual supervision. Our department runs a specific course for all students where you will be developing your project, determining your methodological approach, defining your empirical materials, and getting practical advice about writing a thesis. You will be doing this in cooperation with other students who will also be working on their respective theses. Not least, in the seminars in February, you will be presenting parts of your ongoing work and getting feedback from the others. MKV also runs an international research seminar series which we encourage you to attend, see our website for details. At the end of the course, as part of the evaluation process, your thesis will be critically discussed in an examination seminar headed by an examiner. You too will serve as discussant on a classmate's thesis.

### **Your supervisor**

Beyond these seminar sessions you will also be meeting with your supervisor a number of times for individual guidance while working on your thesis. At MKV we prioritise face to face meetings and expect our students to be based in Lund for the spring term. Only in exceptional circumstances will supervision take place via telephone, email or web based telephony, and only during short periods of time.

Your supervisor is someone who helps guide you through the project, offering constructive advice and criticism. However, the project is your responsibility; the advisor takes neither blame nor credit for what you finally accomplish. When you will present your thesis at a final seminar, the examiner who will evaluate your work will always be a faculty member other than your supervisor.

### **The aim and the research questions**

It is difficult to over-emphasise the importance of developing a clear, coherent, and well-formulated aim for the thesis. Each student must develop their own independent project. This is the core of your work: what is it you want to find out? All too often students do not devote enough time and energy to this aspect, with the consequence that there remains an element of uncertainty as to what the thesis is actually about. And thus, neither they nor the examiner can really be sure whether they have adequately answered the research questions posed. On the other hand, students often find that arriving at a fine-honed aim, with its research questions, is half the battle. With that clarity as a platform, they can then throw themselves into the research with focused energy.

Developing the aim of your project is not done in a vacuum. Not only will you be discussing it in the seminars and with your advisor, but you will also have to spend time reading relevant research literature, where similar work has been reported. Thus, the aim of your thesis emerges in the interplay between your ideas, discussions in the seminars and with your advisor, and with the relevant research literature. At some points this will therefore involve 'juggling' several balls at once – i.e. taking into account input from various directions – before finalising the direction of your project.

### **The topic – importance, relevance**

The field of Media and Communication Studies is broad, and the topics you might choose for your research are virtually endless; sometimes this extensive choice can seem overwhelming. The media interface with just about all sectors of society and culture; mediated

communication processes are central to all human settings and endeavours. The options may seem bewildering.

Yet, there are some strategies for narrowing your focus and arriving at your topic. For one thing, the topic you choose should be 'important' in some sense; the findings, the results, should be of significance for some audience, for some context. A masters thesis is a piece of scientific research; it should add to our knowledge about the world, help us to understand something better, or see it in a new way.

You could visualise the kinds of results you hope to find: formulating questions helps you think about what the answers might look like. Reflect on the potential findings: in what ways might they be significant? Any potential answer that is likely to evoke a response of 'Yeah, OK, but so what...?' on the part of a reader would signal a thesis that is trivial or uninspired.

Also, you need to consider the time frame: your aim must be 'do-able' in the allotted time. It is often easy to think of grand projects; the trick is to formulate one so that it fits the schedule you have. Often students can express an interest in a broad area or theme; this is a good start. From there a more manageable research topic can be formulated.

Another consideration is your own area of interest. Often the work flows better, one feels more motivated, if the topic is in some way personally meaningful. In short, a little passion – and genuine curiosity – goes a long way in helping you finish your thesis successfully.

### **Scientific background – previous research, empirical findings, theoretical horizons**

As mentioned above, in the early phase of the work, it is important to ascertain what other related or relevant work has been done on this topic. There is no point in re-inventing the wheel. At the same time, previous work can offer you a good deal of help; it can provide you with overviews of research, give leads on other references, and generally save you time by updating you on the topic. With such overviews, which you will summarise in your thesis, you can more specifically orient your own aims and research questions. In some cases you might be adding to a cumulative body of knowledge, while in other cases you might be challenging previous work by formulating an aim that questions earlier findings. Or you might find that earlier theoretical horizons offer you a path for pursuing a similar topic but in a different context.

Theory plays an important role in a project of this kind. It can be difficult to speak about theory in a general way, since there are different kinds of theories and they can be used in different ways. Sometimes theory offers an analytic grounding to a project, or a general orientation, or a framework for generating research questions. Theory is definitely not some kind of decorative 'window dressing', tacked on to some data or an argument; it must be central and decisive for the project at hand. While more traditional forms of theory may help develop hypotheses to be tested in the thesis, other forms can be understood as systematic set of ideas or intellectual traditions that can help us make sense of a phenomenon, thus serving as the conceptual scaffolding for the thesis. Please refer to the two books by Chris Hart on *Doing a Literature Review* (Sage publications 1999) and *Doing a Literature Search* (Sage publications 2001).

### **The approach/methodology**

With your topic in hand, you also have to reflect on exactly how you will go about answering the questions that you have formulated. What approach will you take? What methods will you

use? Some methods are quantitative in nature, while others are more qualitative. You may stick with one particular method, or you may end up by combining several. The methods have to do with how you will gather your empirical materials, as well as how you will analyse them – how you will handle them so that they give you answers to the questions you pose in the thesis.

Our department and the supervisors for the theses are methodologically broadly based and can help you with different approaches, ranging from analyses of texts and ethnographic data to quantitative procedures. Please think about what methods are commonly used in media, communication and cultural studies, from narrative or genre analysis, to content analysis, surveys, interviews, to analysis of policy documents, media institutions, and social and cultural trends. There are many methods books devoted to media and communication research methods that will help you consider the best methods for your topic of analysis.

### **The empirical materials/selection**

In selecting your empirical materials, you will most often be in a situation where there is more available than you can actually use. Thus, you must be selective. How you select should be based on some principle of logical coherence. Often this at least in part has to do with managing the scope of the thesis: you need to put boundaries on your topic, and this will generally guide you as to what kinds and how much empirical materials will be suitable. You should also keep in mind the possibility of doing secondary analysis on already existing materials available from a variety of databases.

### **The analyses/results/findings**

Especially in this phase there are many ways of doing things. There are different styles of writing, often associated with different research traditions. A key element, however, is to probe deeply into your data and generate an analysis that faithfully builds upon the empirical materials you collected. Also important is transparency: the reader should be able to follow the various steps of your analyses, the different sequences in your march towards the results and conclusions. Here you link up with your original research questions, providing answers and pulling together the findings so that they are clear and accessible.

### **Conclusions/discussions**

In the final sections of your thesis, along with the conclusions that you offer from your work, you may wish to extrapolate more freely on your findings, pursue lines of thought that have a bit more exploratory character. Do some questions still remain to be answered? What new scientific issues might emerge from your work? Can you suggest directions for further related research?

### **The writing/exposition**

Again, the writing should be in keeping with the scientific genre – but need not therefore be dry or impersonal. The basic organisation of the text, the clarity of exposition, and the ease of reading are all important aspects that require attention – and are an important part of the evaluation. Drafting and re-drafting a thesis is essential. You need to allow time for your thesis to go through several drafts before being ready for submission. You should have your text proof-read; here you and your fellow students can offer each other a valuable service.

## **The timeframe**

After the first meeting with your supervisor in January you should write a schedule for your research and writing of the thesis.

The time you will have at your disposal can roughly be scheduled as follows:

The first period from January to February will involve preparing and finalising your aims, specifying your research questions, collecting and delving into the relevant literature, working on the design of your research methods, piloting data. You will discuss the thesis outline and your progress in February, presenting this work in seminars organised by the department, and applying the feedback from this in your research progress.

The second period from March to April is where you will be chiefly engaged in gathering your empirical data. You will be maintaining contact with your supervisor; if this fieldwork takes you away from Lund, this contact will go via e-mail, upon agreement with your supervisor. You will discuss your research and focus on the analyses of the data with your supervisor.

In May you will prepare your thesis for submission to the department, following our guidelines for submission. The examination seminars will take place during the end of the term.

Please observe that supervision takes place during the course of the semester; the right to supervision expires after the term has ended, unless some other arrangement is agreed upon in advance.

## **The final evaluation**

The thesis will be evaluated according to all the standard criteria for scientific work; basically these coincide with the topics discussed in the sections above. The grading system used on the Masters thesis is the A-F scale, as detailed in the course outline.

It is best to be clear about an issue that has on occasion arisen: any form of plagiarism will be dealt with immediately and severely. Lund University has a process for plagiarism. Students involved in a plagiarism case risk their studies at Lund University and/or may experience real difficulties to finish their studies. While it is easy – and may seem tempting – to download text written by others and try to pass it off as your own work, or to paraphrase as an example of plagiarism, it should be kept in mind that there are various systems in place that can easily detect such academic dishonesty. Always be clear about who is saying what in your work through the use of quotation marks and proper referencing within the Harvard system. If you are unsure about what might count as plagiarism and not in a specific instance, please ask your supervisor.

Note: these remarks are only guidelines; you will also need to keep in close touch with your supervisor during the work of your thesis to discuss the detailed issues that arise in the course of your research.

### **Selected Reading**

- Altheide, David and Schneider, Christopher (2013) *Qualitative Media Analysis*. Sage.
- Bailey, Stephen (2006) *Academic Writing for International Students*. London: Routledge.
- Barass, Robert (2006) *Speaking for Yourself: A Guide for Students*. London: Routledge.
- Bazeley, Patricia (2013) *Qualitative Data Analysis: Practical Strategies*. London: Sage.
- Bruhn Jensen, Klaus (2012) *A Handbook of Media and Communication Research: Qualitative and Quantitative Methodologies* (second edition). London: Routledge.
- Craswell, Gail and Poore, Megan (2011) *Writing for Academic Success*. London: Sage.
- Edwards, R and Holland, J. (2013) *What is Qualitative Interviewing?* London: Bloomsbury.
- Hart, Chris (1999) *Doing a Literature Review: Releasing the Social Science Research Imagination*. London: Sage.
- Hansen, A., and Machin, D. (2013). *Media and Communication Research Methods*. Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan.
- Hine, Christine, ed. (2013) *Virtual Research Methods*. Sage.
- Jackson, Howard (2005) *Good Grammar for Students*. London: Sage.
- Kaplan, David (2004) *The Sage Handbook of Quantitative Methodology for the Social Sciences*. London: Sage.
- Oliver, Paul (2010) *Understanding the Research Process*. London: Sage.
- Ridley, Diana (2012) *The Literature Review: A Step-by-Step Guide for Students*. London: Sage.
- Seale, Clive; Silverman, David; Gubrium, Jaber F. and Giampietro, Gobo (eds.) (2006) *Qualitative Research Practice*. London, Sage
- Wallace, Mike and Wray, Alison (2011) *Critical Reading and Writing for Postgraduates*. London: Sage.
- Woods, Peter (2005) *Successful Writing for Qualitative Researchers*. London: Routledge.