

Guidelines for reviewing Bachelor's and Master's theses in the Department of Geography, University of Tartu

A review is a reasoned assessment based on a critical analysis of a student's independent research. According to the established requirements, the opinion must be submitted in writing, and in case of absence thereof, the thesis cannot be defended. The role of the reviewer is essential in the defense of the thesis, as it shapes the impression of the listeners, including the evaluation committee, and the most important part of the defense of the thesis - the debate. The guidelines provided here for drafting an opinion are indicative and are intended primarily for younger colleagues with little or no experience in reviewing research.

The vast majority of theses defended in the Department of Geography belong to descriptive/experimental theses, the recommended structure of which follows the traditions of research on natural science. To a lesser extent, there are theoretical theses where there is no empirical part, in this case, the structure of the thesis depends on the logical development of the topic. For example, in the field of human geography, the structure of the thesis may be the same as used in the social sciences or humanities.

At the beginning of the review, there could be a declarative part, stating to which field of research the thesis belongs and describing the structure of the thesis. When writing the analytical part of the opinion, attention is paid to the following substantive and formal aspects:

1. Relevance, novelty, and usefulness of the work, what is the contribution of the thesis to the research of the field from the cognitive and/or applied aspect.
2. The problem statement revealing whether and how the goals set in the thesis have been achieved.
3. Adequacy and relevance of literature and other source materials.
4. Clarity and logic of topic development.
5. Feasibility of the methods used, the correctness of their description, and application. In the case of theoretical theses, it is extremely important to define the terms used to avoid misunderstandings.
6. Rationale for the conclusions.
7. Correctness of formatting, including citation, professional terminology and style used.
8. Adequacy and clarity of tables, figures and other illustrative materials.
9. Consistency between textual parts and the annexes.
10. The title of the thesis as the shortest summary of the thesis could characterize the central idea of the thesis.

The opinion addresses first the substantive aspects and then the formal aspects. Also, the positive aspects of the thesis, the valuable moments are highlighted first, then the mistakes and shortcomings are pointed out if the reviewer found them. In most cases, the reviewer has questions and objections about both the content and the format of the work.

The final, concluding part of the opinion should include an answer to the following questions:

- a) whether or not the comments and corrections made reduce the substantive value of the thesis;
- b) whether the independent research meets the requirements for the given type of theses (e.g., Bachelor's or Master's thesis);
- c) whether the author deserves the degree pursued in the case of Bachelor's and Master's theses.

In the concluding sentence, the reviewer proposes his/her grade for the thesis. In the event of questionable issues in the thesis, the reviewer may make successful defense a prerequisite for awarding the recommended grade.

Comments and suggestions from Professor Tõnu Oja, 11.05.2011.

1. *The purpose of a review is not to show how smart a reviewer is or how foolish a defender is (which an overzealous reviewer can easily reverse to his/her detriment), but to help the defender understand his/her mistakes and draw conclusions from them. Looking at this procedure from aside, the Committee usually obtains the impression it needs long before the debate is over.*
2. *The purpose of the review is not to put the audience to sleep or kill time. Keep it short and specific.*
3. *The remarks and criticisms should be precise, and with specific examples (if you say that the language is bad, give an example or two), substantive questions can also be question hooks. In the case of formal and linguistic errors, the reviewer may do all the work not done by the defender and the supervisor and address them all (in the written version, this is certainly to the defender's benefit), but not all of them can be discussed orally in defense.*
4. *When presenting a review orally (preferably by the reviewer), it is not necessary to read aloud the entire review - based on point 1, the reviewer may shorten the oral presentation. For example, it is not necessary to orally discuss (all) errors of the same type in formatting or language. Write down the text as the student support - he/she will read and draw a conclusion if he/she can. Summarize it in the speech, it is normal if the review together with the answers does not take more than 10 minutes.*
5. *If the written review is longer than 1.5 pages, the reviewer must think seriously about having to use a shorter version during the oral presentation. The version of the oral review needs to be thought through first, shortening it on the go usually takes more time than reading the entire text.*
6. *The recommended review aspects above (10) mean part of the sentence for each aspect, not a subchapter. For example, set your goal to cover all aspects in three sentences. The concluding part of the opinion, together with the grade proposal, is one final sentence.*
7. *The substantive assessment of aspects must be based on the purpose of the thesis in the curriculum, e.g., in the case of a report style Bachelor's thesis it is not necessary to look for a contribution to world science - the sole purpose of this work is to show the author's understanding.*
8. ***The most important part of the review is the discussion of substantive issues that also takes the longest time in the defending. This is a place where the student can be allowed to explain and create a debate, which shows how much he or she possesses the material, is able to defend himself or herself and justify his or her choices, and so on.***