

# GUIDELINES MASTER'S DISSERTATION BIOLOGY

EXAMINATION BOARD MASTER BIOLOGY

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## REGISTRATION OF MASTER'S DISSERTATION TOPICS

1. Around **October 1**, the Chair of the Educational Board Biology (EBC) calls upon (1) all ZAP-members and postdoctoral researchers of the Department of Biology (WE11) as well as (2) the lecturers of other departments involved in the Biology training to submit topics for the assignment related to the course 'Academic Grant Writing' (referred to as 'PhD project') (current academic year) and the resulting master's dissertation (next academic year).
2. ZAP-members and postdoctoral researchers of the Department of Biology, and of other departments within or outside the Faculty of Science, belonging to Ghent University and involved in the Biology programme, can act as supervisor. Other ZAP-members (e.g. honorary visiting professors) can act as supervisor provided that this is approved by the Examination Committee.
3. ZAP members and employees (in possession of a doctoral degree and appointed for at least the duration of the master's dissertation) from other universities or scientific institutions can submit topics through a senior academic staff member or postdoctoral researcher of the Biology Department or via lecturers from other departments involved in the Biology training. If an external supervisor is involved, an internal supervisor needs to be appointed too. The persons involved decide between themselves who becomes supervisor and who co-supervisor.
4. Topics (always in English) should be submitted before **November 24** via [Plato](#), where the following information is required: (1) the tentative title; (2) the supervisor (promoter); (3) facultatively also the co-supervisor; (4) the effective tutor (this may be a ZAP member (whether or not the supervisor), a postdoctoral researcher or a doctoral student with expertise on the subject); and (5) the description of the subject (max. 1 page). The guidelines for this procedure will be communicated via Ufora.
5. The subjects of the past two academic years will be published to the students of the 3rd bachelor year. These files can be used as a guideline to direct their choice, so that they will be able to inform themselves in a more targeted way with the supervisors at the start of the new academic year. This will provide students with sufficient time to consult with the supervisors. Supervisors will thereby get a better overview of the interest of students into the research subjects of their research group. Students will be able to express their motivation in a more detailed way, so that subjects of interest can already be assigned to the student at that time. The supervisors will consequently have more time to decide if additional subjects could and should be submitted (regarding the supervision in their research group) to students that didn't express their preferences yet.
6. Subjects can be submitted from the start of the academic year, with the deadline being postponed until **24 November**. By then all subjects have to be submitted (both assigned and others). These will be approved by the EBC in December.
7. On **December 12th**, the EBC will spread the approved subjects among the 1st Master year students. Students that did not get a subject assigned to yet, can start with the reservation of a subject of choice from the start of the catch-up week until the first week of February. Subjects will then be assigned in the first week of the 2<sup>nd</sup> semester at the latest.
8. The PhD project (part of the course 'Academic grant writing') is worked out during the second semester of the first master year. If the student succeeds for this course, he/she/they can start with the implementation of the master's dissertation. The final title and readers, as proposed

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by the supervisors, are fixed in March. Only in exceptional cases, the master's dissertation can deal with a subject other than the PhD project and this always requires a thorough motivation of the supervisor and ratification of the Educational Board.

9. Per master's dissertation, three readers (commissioners) are indicated, where at least one member is not part of the supervisor's research group or is part of this research group but involved in a distinctly different research line. A reader that is not a PhD, should have at least four years of experience in scientific research. A tutor cannot act as reader, because tutors are already involved in filling out the score form "supervisor" together with the supervisor. A co-supervisor may act as reader, on condition that the other reader is external to both the research groups of supervisor and co-supervisor, or is involved in a distinctly different research line.

## ASSIGNMENT, OBJECTIVES AND EVALUATION OF THE TASK WITHIN THE COURSE ACADEMIC GRANT WRITING–PHD PROJECT (1<sup>ST</sup> MA BIOLOGY)

10. The assignment involves the development of a full project proposal (format is FWO PhD grants), which involves the topic of the master's dissertation as the central theme.
11. The objective of this assignment is twofold:
  - a. Putting in practice the skills of scientific reporting, with obtaining research funding for the project as a (virtual) goal (as explained during the lectures "Academic Grant Writing");
  - b. Working out the conceptual framework and literature state-of-the-art that is related to the topic, making clear what the scientific question/problem is, what the objectives/hypotheses of the project are, and how they will be tackled (methodologically). The master thesis should then be a subtopic of this proposal (See [ECTS sheet](#) for more details)
12. The evaluation is based on the objectives set out above, and is performed by one of the instructors(lecturers) of the course and by the supervisor(s). The lecturers evaluate the work mainly with respect to the first objective (a) and will focus more on generic competences, whereas the scientific content (objective b) is evaluated by the supervisor (and co-supervisors). The evaluation happens by means of a form, where a rating is assigned to different sections that apply to the research proposal and that reflect the competences being achieved (learning outcomes).

## FORM, MINIMUM CONTENT AND SUBMISSION DATE OF THE MASTER'S DISSERTATION

### GENERAL

13. The master's dissertation must be written in Dutch or English and include the following sections (general guidelines and tips for writing scientific texts are handed over in the course "Wetenschappelijke methode en Bachelorproef"): (1) introduction (incl. problem), (2) objective(s), (3) material and methods, (4) results, (5) discussion (6) conclusion, (7), summary (8), acknowledgments, (9) reference list ((10), see also paragraph 22).
14. **Level, quality and depth of the master's dissertation must be equivalent to or in the form of a scientific publication in a peer-reviewed journal. The master's dissertation should, in other words, pursue conciseness: the quotation of the master's dissertation does not depend on its volume.** In addition it may even be opted to write the dissertation in manuscript form for a scientific publication in a peer-reviewed journal. This should be done in consultation with the supervisor. It may be decided that additional information (which may be inserted into a dissertation, but not in a manuscript) is added as an appendix.
15. In the section *Introduction*, the problem is specified in a general and sufficiently thorough scientific-historical context, with reference to the relevant scientific literature<sup>1</sup> and the research question(s). The subject is situated in the research field of the research group where the student works on the dissertation (where relevant, with reference to the project in which the research is done).
16. In the section *Objective*, the objectives and working hypotheses (that are to be focused on in the discussion and summary) are clearly defined and described.
17. In the section *Material and methods*, the experimental design of the research is clearly formulated. Here a brief description of the nature and origin of the study objects and a thorough and complete review of the methods is given: study field, sampling equipment and techniques, identification work, experimental design, statistical and/or mathematical processing, used equipment and techniques, software ... The research groups and institutions where the work (or parts of it) was performed are also explicitly mentioned.
18. In the section *Results*, observations and results from the analyses are presented in a clear and logical structure. Tables and figures are clearly integrated in the text or displayed separately (if there are many illustrations, it is desirable to include them in a separate bundle) and must always be provided with a clear legend. In any case, the text should refer to every table and/or figure explicitly and unambiguously. Extensive tables with primary data (measurements, counts, etc.) should never be included *in* the text, but should be enclosed as an appendix (see paragraph 25).
19. In the section *Discussion*, the results are critically discussed and compared with the relevant literature, all in relation to the hypotheses formulated earlier. No new observations from the

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<sup>1</sup> A separate and comprehensive section 'study of literature' is not mandatory, and must focus on the topic of the problem. A 'study of literature' is not a compilation of all information that indirectly relates to the master's dissertation (see lectures 'Academic Grant Writing').

study should be presented here. Only those results should be summarized and discussed where additional information (through integration with literature) is being provided (so, the Discussion should not be a repetition of what is already mentioned in the Results part).

20. At the end of the *Discussion* follow the *Conclusions*. These include a brief and in consecutive points formulated summary of the main findings of the study (focusing on those that directly answer the hypotheses formulated).
21. The *Summary* must cover minimum two, maximum three pages. An English translation of the summary is required, especially if the work is situated within an international project. If the master's dissertation is written in English, a Dutch summary should be added.
22. The *Reference list* contains only publications referred to in the text by author's name and year (articles and books), with full reference, in a clear alphabetical list (by author's name). Background literature read by the student, which is not explicitly referred to in the work, is not included in the reference list. In [this document](#) tips can be found concerning citation and references.
23. In specific cases it is advisable to add a glossary, an index of taxa and/or keywords, etc..
24. The title page can be produced in [Plato](#), or students can make it themselves : it should include at least the information mentioned below. In case of confidential scientific data, a copyright clause may be included (see below). This clause can be listed on the first page after the title page.  
(A template for the cover page and first page can be found [here](#), where fields can be filled out using the F11 key.)

- a. Name research group
- b. Name & surname student
- c. Title master's dissertation
- d. Names & titles supervisors and co-supervisors (in case of a co-supervisor external to Ghent University, also name institution)
- e. Name of tutor(s)
- f. Listing:
  - i. **NL:** "Masterproef voorgelegd tot het behalen van de graad van Master of Science in Biology"
  - ii. **ENG:** "Master's dissertation submitted to obtain the degree of Master of Science in Biology"
- g. Copyright clause:
  - i. **NL:** "© Deze masterproef bevat vertrouwelijke informatie en vertrouwelijke onderzoeksresultaten die toebehoren aan de UGent. De inhoud van de masterproef mag onder geen enkele manier publiek gemaakt worden, noch geheel noch gedeeltelijk zonder de uitdrukkelijke schriftelijke voorafgaandelijke toestemming van de UGent-vertegenwoordiger, in casu de promotor. Zo is het nemen van kopieën of het op eender welke wijze dupliceren van het eindwerk verboden, tenzij met schriftelijke toestemming. Het niet respecteren van de confidentiële aard van het eindwerk veroorzaakt onherstelbare schade aan de UGent. Ingeval een geschil zou ontstaan in het

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kader van deze verklaring, zijn de rechtbanken van het arrondissement Gent uitsluitend bevoegd daarvan kennis te nemen.”

- ii. **ENG:** “© All rights reserved. This thesis contains confidential information and confidential research results that are property to the UGent. The contents of this master thesis may under no circumstances be made public, nor complete or partial, without the explicit and preceding permission of the UGent representative, i.e. the supervisor. The thesis may under no circumstances be copied or duplicated in any form, unless permission granted in written form. Any violation of the confidential nature of this thesis may impose irreparable damage to the UGent. In case of a dispute that may arise within the context of this declaration, the Judicial Court of Gent only is competent to be notified.”

25. The student consults with the supervisor how the **primary data** (counts, measurements, etc.) on which the master's dissertation is based, are to be presented. Uploading the primary data is possible in [Plato](#).
26. Printed copies of the master's dissertation are no longer handed in. The student asks the supervisor if a printed copy is needed for the supervisor, co-supervisor and the tutor, and delivers these him/herself. Note: It is allowed and even desirable that the master's dissertation is printed on recycled paper. Choose high-quality paper so that text and figures don't lose legibility. Double-sided printing is also encouraged. A pdf version should be uploaded to [Plato](#). This pdf will automatically be forwarded to the Ugent-supervisors, and the members of the advisory- and evaluation committee will be able to consult the pdf in Plato.
27. First examination period (January) : only students that have no other courses in the second semester and can finish their studies in January, can submit the dissertation in January: deadline for submission is **January 6 before 12:00 am**. The students will be contacted in November by the Faculty Student Administration to indicate whether they want to submit the dissertation in semester 1 or 2. If they choose semester 1 and they don't submit before the January deadline, they are automatically postponed to the second examination period (September). In the first examination period (June), the master's dissertation is submitted on **May 25 before 4:00 pm** (see 26). Students are urged to submit the master's dissertation during the first examination period. Only in specific circumstances and after consultation with the supervisor and the Examination Board, a master's dissertation can be submitted in the second examination period (September). Master's dissertations that are not submitted by the deadline of the first examination period, will automatically be postponed to the next examination period. In the second examination period, the deadline for submission is **August 18 before 12:00 am**.
28. In preparation of the oral defence (Dutch or English) of the master's dissertation, a PowerPoint presentation is to be prepared. This should be done in consultation with the supervisor and tutor. The results are to be presented in a lecture room (reserved by the supervisor). The supervisor makes the reservation and invites co-supervisors, readers, tutors and student. The defence can be organized per research group, where the students working in the same group attend each other's presentation, or it can be organized student per student.



## CODE OF CONDUCT

29. The data obtained by the student in the context of the master's dissertation are not his/her/their personal property. They belong to the client requesting the research, the research group, the funding authorities and/or institution where the research was carried out. Scientific knowledge, funded by the community, belongs to the community.
30. Students have the right to be co-authors of publications that directly follow from the data obtained within the master's thesis. The rights to co-authorship of the student expire after two years (unless otherwise agreed), if he/she/they has shown no interest in publishing until then, despite former agreement about it.
31. When two (or more) students work on closely related subjects, where even data from one student have to be mentioned in the master's dissertation of the other student (and eventually further processed), every student states clearly which data were collected by him/herself and which by the fellow student. Since the master's dissertations, as a formal course to be examined, imply an individual assessment of each student, they should also be made individually by each student. In all fairness, no data from one student can be recorded by the other one without acknowledgment, even if they went together in the field or carried out experiments together. In this case, the students, together with their supervisors, make correct agreements on the separation of data (in terms of authorship) in the master's dissertation. In contrast to the preparation of manuscripts for scientific publications, where no individual examination assessment is involved, and that can be fully achieved through teamwork (and thus justify a co-authorship), master's dissertations are courses from the second cycle of the individual training that need to be assessed individually.
32. As of 2024-2025, Ghent University explicitly allows the use of **generative AI(GAI)** for bachelor's and master's dissertations and other writing tasks. Concrete : You will need to add a **short statement** to your master's dissertation in which you specify whether or not AI tools were used for your dissertation. If you did, please specify (1) which AI tools you used, (2) for what part of the process you used them and (3) how you used them ([see faculty guidelines](#)). An example of a short statement: *"During this master's dissertation, Perplexity was used for searching scientific literature among other standard search engines. ChatGPT3.5 was used to brainstorm for a catchy dissertation title as well as for inspiration on the experimental design. During the writing process, ChatGPT3.5 was used to improve spelling and grammar in the introduction and discussion parts of the written dissertation."*
33. The supervisor must obviously be qualified for the subject, if necessary assisted by a tutor and/or a co-supervisor. In any case, the supervisor has the final responsibility regarding the continued supervision of the student (available for meetings, problem solving, act in case of delays so that the deadline is met, ...).
34. A change in supervisor can only be allowed at the request of the initially appointed supervisor.
35. The supervisor has to make available the necessary physical infrastructure (in terms of instruments, computer and space), literature and financial means for the student (s) or he has an agreement regarding this with a colleague. Within the foregoing context, there may initially be more master's dissertation topics presented to the students by a potential supervisor than there is room available, but ultimately, there may be no more subjects allowed to students then (1), the space available needed to perform the required research

activities, and (2) that the mentoring capacity allow, but (3) in any case, there will be no more than three master's dissertations per supervisor-tutor or per tutor allowed within each research group (eg: max 3 if the supervisor is also tutor, max 3 if the supervisor is not a tutor and disposes of a tutor, max 6 if the supervisor is not a tutor and disposes of two tutors, or if the supervisor is tutor, and disposes of one additional tutor, etc...).

36. The supervisor makes sure that the student submits the master's dissertation before the absolute deadline (build in safety margin in the timing!) (See paragraph 27); the student respects the agreed timing and keeps in mind that the supervisor and/or tutor can read the texts and provide feedback before the final version is submitted. The supervisor convenes the reading committee for the defence (and individually claimed defence if needed) of the master's dissertation and the final deliberation on it.
37. The supervisor and the other readers commit themselves to (1) duly fill out the evaluation forms they will get access to (in [Plato](#)), (2) to be present on the defence of the master's dissertation by the student, (3) to participate in the final deliberation on the master's dissertation, (4) to fill out the final assessment with the other readers and supervisor and (5) to fill out the final score in Oasis (supervisor).
38. Readers working and living outside Ghent are reimbursed by the Biology Department for the substantiated travel expenses submitted by them regarding the presence on the presentation of the master's dissertation and the subsequent final deliberation.
39. In case of absence on the defence and the final deliberation of the master's dissertation, the reader motivates this in advance with the Chair or Secretary of the Examination Board, the reader also informs the supervisor, and communicates where, as well as when and how (phone, e-mail) he/she/they can be reached for the final deliberation regarding the final assessment of the master's dissertation. The reader shares the agreement with the final marks by e-mail. Obviously, every supervisor does everything in his/her/their power to be present at the defence and to lead the subsequent deliberation with the other readers.
40. The students, supervisors and tutors may at any time in the first order contact the Chair of the Examination Board, if difficulties arise with regard to the master's dissertation in which they are involved. Of course, the student can, in the second order, in non-satisfaction, formulate a complaint to the [Ombudsdepartment of the Faculty of Sciences](#).

## EVALUATION AND MARKS OF THE MASTER'S DISSERTATION

41. The supervisor-reader fills out his/her/their part of the evaluation form (see also 37).
42. The other two readers fill out their part of the evaluation form (see also 37).
43. Prior to the oral public defence of the master's dissertation (using a PowerPoint presentation), students will in advance be able to look into the evaluation documents (specified in 41 and 42). The supervisor ensures that the partially completed form (part before defence, filled out by supervisor and both readers) is filled out in [Plato](#), at least 2 days before the presentation. Students that don't see the report timely in Plato, can contact their supervisor. The defence includes: a summarizing explanation of the master's dissertation for maximum 15 min and answers to questions from the jury and other audience for maximum 15 min. This defence can take place in Dutch or English.
44. The defence of the master's dissertation occurs in the presence of the supervisor, readers and tutor. The supervisor decides whether the defences of his/her/their students are organized in one group, or individually.
45. After the defence, the supervisor deliberates with the other readers, and the final score on 20 is determined based on the reports of the readers and the evaluation of the oral presentation and defence. The supervisor finishes the [Plato](#) evaluation form, which is made visible to the student after the official deliberation date of the Master Biology programme.
46. Prizes: All master's dissertations (submitted in June or August) are eligible for the prizes mentioned below. The prizes themselves (certificate + sum of money) are handed over to the winners at the graduation ceremony for the Faculty of Science (October 2025) in the Aula:
  - a. "**Prize Pierre Verkerk**" for the "best master's dissertation". The two best master's dissertations are selected by a separate committee.
  - b. "**Prize Francine Ronsse**" for an excellent master's dissertation dealing with social or philosophical interfaces with biology. Master's dissertations that carry out an important message to a wider audience, where the importance of the scientific method and the clear, rational thinking is stressed, are eligible. Examples of possible topics are the potential dangers for science in general and biology in particular, of certain forms of ideological thinking; animal welfare; the role of evolutionary theory in philosophical debates, and the like.
  - c. "**Prize Gabriëlle De Waele**" for a master's dissertation in Dutch or in English, with a broad summary in Dutch, written in a clear language, that makes use of the plant collections present in the Botanical Garden of Ghent University in an exhaustive and explicit way.