

ROTTERDAM SCHOOL OF MANAGEMENT  
ERASMUS UNIVERSITY

MASTER OF SCIENCE

MASTER THESIS MANUAL

The business school that thinks  
and lives in the future



## Introduction

**This manual is for students studying for the pre-experience Master of Science at Rotterdam School of Management, Erasmus University.**

During the MSc at RSM, students are required to conduct independent, individual research in the academic field of their chosen master programme. Students should be able to report the entire research process leading to the master thesis, from problem formulation to describing findings, conclusions and recommendations. The aim of the master thesis is to provide master students with insights, experiences and tips for improving their skills in practical scientific, business and management research. The master thesis counts for 20 ECTS and forms an integral and important part of all MSc programmes. This manual gives detailed requirements for the structure, content and assessment of the master thesis.

Students are referred to the Examination Administration (EA) website **[www.eur.nl/rsmmastergraduation](http://www.eur.nl/rsmmastergraduation)** for general procedures, rules and regulations for submitting the master thesis proposal form, the final master thesis and the Graduation ceremony. Master thesis coordinators can inform students of additional MSc programme-specific rules and procedures (see Appendix 1 for contact information). Also, research clinics and similar courses can provide valuable information.

**Check [www.eur.nl/rsmmastergraduation](http://www.eur.nl/rsmmastergraduation) for more information on dates, deadlines and timelines**

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Rotterdam School of Management, Erasmus University  
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The Netherlands

## Structure

**The master thesis document should be a maximum of 70 pages (approximately 30,000 words), excluding executive summary, literature list and appendices. The master thesis should be written in English and have a clear written style.**

The master thesis should comprise the following elements.

**Cover page** including:

- The master thesis title
- Author's name and student number
- The MSc programme followed
- The full names of the master thesis coach and co-reader
- Date on which the master thesis is completed

**Preface**, stating that:

The copyright of the Master thesis rests with the author. The author is responsible for its contents. RSM is only responsible for the educational coaching and cannot be held liable for the content.

**Executive summary**, approximately 1,000 words.

**Table of contents.**

**Introductory chapter** containing most of the information formulated in the research proposal.

**Theoretical chapter(s)** describing the literature review and the conceptual framework.

**Chapter(s) on the research findings** containing descriptions of research methodology, data collection and data analyses.

**Concluding chapter** with the answers to the research question, interpretation of the findings, recommendations and reflections on the thesis research project.

**Reference list** in which all theoretical and practical sources are properly ranked and listed.

**Appendices** can be added to complete the master thesis.

*For additional information on writing a thesis report, consult the Skills Sheets<sup>1</sup> or other sources, e.g. the APA Publication Manual ([www.apastyle.com](http://www.apastyle.com)). These explain suitable and consistent reference styles (i.e. quotations, reference citations in texts, and reference lists).*

- 1 Tulder, R.J.M. van (2007). Skill Sheets: an integrated approach to research, study and management. Amsterdam, Pearson Education Benelux.
- 2 Verschuren, P. & Doorewaard, H. (1999). *Designing a research project*. Utrecht, LEMMA.
- 3 Again, for suggestions you might consult: Verschuren, P. & Doorewaard, H. (1999). *Designing a research project*. Utrecht, LEMMA. There is ample information available (e.g. in the university library) on quantitative research, qualitative research, observational studies, case studies, interview techniques, literature review methods, etc.

## Content

### 1. Identify a research question and project design – the master thesis proposal

The proposal delineates a research idea that the research will pursue. The master thesis subject, project design, theoretical approach, research question and research methodology should relate to the subject and field of the student's MSc programme.

The **master thesis proposal** serves as a starting and anchor point for the master thesis. The proposal gives the coach and co-reader an initial idea of what to expect from the student.

It should identify a research question and project design. More specifically, the proposal should:

- Set the scene and briefly describe the context.
- Describe the research objective: what will the research contribute to theory and/or management practice? In practice-oriented research, is the contribution aimed at finding a problem, diagnosis, design, implementation or evaluation?
- Formulate a research question or questions which should be answered in order to achieve the objective.
- Explain why the study is important and to whom.
- Formulate a provisional conceptual model: What are the main concepts and how are they related in theory?
- Describe and explain the research design (e.g. survey, experiment, case study), measurement of concepts, detailed fieldwork plan and the plan for analysis of data.
- Provide a timetable for the master thesis.
- Make a provisional literature list.

### 2. Write a critical review

With the research question in mind, the student should critically review relevant theories and research from available literature in books and journals (e.g. consult the Web of Science).

### 3. Define working concepts and conceptual frameworks

The conceptual framework should contain all theoretical concepts relevant to the research question, and their relations (see for example: Verschuren & Doorewaard, 1999<sup>2</sup>). The conceptual framework can be used to organise and analyse research data in an effective way<sup>3</sup>.

#### 4. Collect and analyse research data

Research methodology and methods should be clearly visible through the whole master thesis. In this section:

- Display research data.
- Discuss the nature of the questions asked and choose an appropriate methodological stance for answering the questions.
- Describe, explain and justify the research methods used.
- Describe the practical and technical aspects of conducting the research.
- Discuss any ethical issues connected with the project.

In the presentation and analysis of findings:

- Describe findings and their meaning.
- Refer back to the literature review and the conceptual framework.
- Use the literature to interrogate and evaluate own research material and vice versa.

Presentation and analysis may require several chapters, e.g.:

- one chapter for presentation and one for analysis;
- several chapters, each presenting a different case study.

Students should give only a description of actual findings at this stage of the master thesis.

#### 5. Define, validate and evaluate solution/models, interpret findings sensitively as a basis for making recommendations

When all data are collected and analyses are completed, findings should be interpreted. In case of design-oriented research, a decision model and problem solution should be generated, tested, validated and evaluated. Always refer back to theory findings and research material to present the relation between the outcomes of research related to those already existing.

In the conclusions and recommendations:

- Formulate an answer to the main research question;
- Summarise the main argument and its theoretical and practical relevance;
- Discuss the validity and reliability of findings and arguments;
- Frame the conclusions and recommendations if appropriate;
- Discuss any issues concerning the implementation of the conclusions or any recommendations;
- Reflectively critique the account provided in the thesis concerning theoretical approach and methodology;
- Make recommendations for future research.

Conclusions are formulated at the end of the master thesis process. These are not the same as research findings or research analysis, but instead should be an interpretation of the findings. Here it would be appropriate to discuss the key contribution of the research in the light of previous knowledge.

There can be three types of conclusions:

- Research conclusions: students' understanding of the processes and dynamics of the subject the researched.
- Strategic conclusions: students' ideas about what actions should be taken in response to the strategic question.
- Recommendations: practical steps that should be taken to implement the strategic conclusions.

## 6. Write a persuasive, well structured report

### *Line of reasoning and argumentation*

The master thesis should contain essential elements in a logical arrangement. It should describe a clear line of reasoning and argumentation. The content should be clear and consistent. There are three types of elements essential in a master thesis:

- Elements relating to the **basic line of reasoning**: What is it about? What is the basic issue? Which questions should be asked? How should the student answer these questions? What data has the student found? What are the answers to the questions?
- Elements relating to the **theoretical line of reasoning**: What kinds of ideas exist about the subject in the field of Business Administration? Which ideas or models tie in with the problem or development with respect to the subject? What is known about these ideas or models? What have other researchers had to say about the subject? What theoretical notions or concepts are selected and how do they answer the questions? How does the student make theory findings manageable in order to apply them in practice? How do these theoretical notions pertain to the subject and to the problem? The theoretical elements constitute the focus: the methods or means of getting to the facts, the lens through which one sees them in practice. The reasoning is funnel-like, from general to specific.
- Elements relating to the **empirical line of reasoning**: To which practical situation – sector, company or product – do they refer? In general, where can research data be retrieved? Where can the student obtain data at any given time? How should the data be arranged and compared? Considering the research question, what practical description can now be given? The empirical elements ultimately comprise the locus: the facts being examined. The reasoning is funnel-like: from general to specific.

The basic line of reasoning, the theoretical line of reasoning and the empirical line of reasoning should be aligned (see figure 1).

## 7. Research ethics and management of relationships and processes

Master students should bear in mind that the thesis process is a learning track. Students are expected to show managerial skills and take the initiative to ask for and receive feedback from their coach and co-reader in order to graduate successfully. Clear agreements about regular meetings and consultations should be made with the coach and co-reader. During the graduation process, students should be able to demonstrate the ability to conduct individual research and make coherent connections between theory and practice. Successful completion of the master thesis remains the responsibility of the individual student.

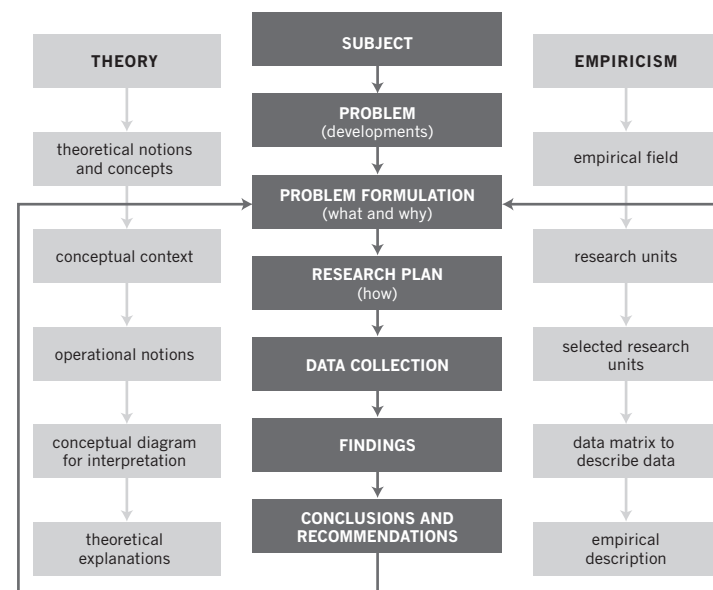


Figure 1: Alignment of basics line of reasoning (centre), theoretical line of reasoning (left) and empirical line of reasoning (right).

## 8. Master thesis presentation and oral defence of candidate (graduation)

The master thesis must be orally defended by each student individually during the master graduation ceremony. Students should be well prepared for their oral defence, which comprises 10 minutes within the overall 60 minute graduation ceremony. In it, they can give a short presentation containing a summary of their research and its main conclusions and are advised to make use of no more than approximately 10 PowerPoint slides. Students can make use of the projector or smartboard in the graduation room, but should bring their own laptop and e-presentation. Students can make their presentations in Dutch or English. The complete oral defence, including the graduation ceremony, lasts approximately one hour:

- The coach makes an opening speech.
- The student has 10 minutes in which to present the subject, findings and main conclusions of their master thesis.
- The master thesis committee questions the student for 35 minutes.
- The master thesis committee withdraws for 10 minutes of consultation to establish the student's final grade and determine the degree classification (in Dutch: *judicium*).
- Finally, the coach officially hands over the MSc degree and other relevant documents to the new graduate.

See also [www.eur.nl/rsmmastergraduation](http://www.eur.nl/rsmmastergraduation) for the RSM Graduation Ceremony

## Assessment

### Eight dimensions to evaluate and assess a master thesis

Each master thesis at RSM will be assessed and evaluated according to the criteria formulated in the diagram in Appendix 2. Each column in the diagram represents a dimension of performance in the master thesis. Please note that the dimensions correspond to the eight paragraphs of the 'Content' chapter. Each row corresponds to a level of achievement. The combined dimensions constitute the basis for the final master thesis grade. The diagram is not imperative but rather guiding. The items mentioned under a dimension / column corresponding to a grade level are by no means exhaustive and determination of a grade level includes further interpretation.

The master thesis committee will use the diagram to determine the grade of the master thesis. Students are advised to check this diagram in the early stages of conceptualising their master thesis.

## Coaching and advice

### 1. Master thesis contacts

Help and advice for all aspects of the master thesis, before and after the process of writing it, can be provided by the MSc programme master thesis coordinator.

Each master thesis will be assessed by a **master thesis committee**. The master thesis committee consists of a coach and a co-reader. Both coach and co-reader should belong to the teaching staff. PhD students may only partake on this committee after the Examination Board has given their permission in response to a written request by the student.

### 2. Master thesis coach

Once a student has determined a subject, a coach should be appointed, usually after consultation with the student's master thesis coordinator. The coach must be a member of RSM faculty attached to the student's MSc programme.

The **master thesis coach** is responsible for:

- Guiding all student activities in the context of the master thesis.
- Agreeing the content of the guidance track, including timely submission of documents and feedback, with the student.

- Safeguarding the overall thesis process and granting permission for graduation together with the co-reader.
- Making regular contact with the student to discuss progress.
- Regularly assessing the student's written master thesis documents.

### 3. Master thesis co-reader

After deciding on a subject and appointing a coach and before the data-collection phase, the student should start looking for a suitable co-reader. A co-reader should be a member of RSM faculty, but from a different MSc programme to the coach, unless otherwise stipulated by the Examination Board. The coach can advise on a suitable co-reader, but students can also make their own inquiries to find a co-reader.

The request for a co-reader must be sent to the master thesis coordinator in another RSM MSc programme. The master thesis coordinator should be informed when the student and/or coach have a preference for a specific co-reader.

The **master thesis co-reader** is responsible for:

- Encouraging the student to view research from different academic perspectives.
- Discussing fundamental criticism on the master thesis with the student and coach.
- Giving advice in case of major differences of opinion between coach and student.
- Safeguarding the overall thesis process and granting permission for graduation together with the coach.
- Arranging at least four meetings with the student: during and after the submission of the master thesis proposal, during the writing of the master thesis, and during graduation.

### 4. Competencies of RSM faculty and extra co-readers

All business and management master thesis subjects concerned with the way people perform in international companies and organisations, and society as a whole, are covered by the competencies of RSM faculty. However, some master theses relate to other academic disciplines and require specialisations that RSM faculty do not possess. In such cases, experts from outside RSM can take part in the graduation process as **extra co-readers**, with the prior permission of the RSM Examination Board.

## Other master thesis issues

### 1. RSM code of ethics

Whichever research methodology or method is used, students intending to gather empirical material should always announce they are master students from RSM in the process of preparing their master thesis. Students should take care to avoid giving the impression that data collection is for research by RSM faculty. It is forbidden for students to make use of the RSM official name, logo, letter headings or stationary.

For information about confidentiality, plagiarism and fraud, please refer to the *Confidentiality Form* and the *Admission to the Master Thesis Defence Form* ([www.eur.nl/rsmmastergraduation](http://www.eur.nl/rsmmastergraduation)).

Students are responsible for starting, working on and completing their master thesis. They are responsible for managing the overall process, scheduling appointments and meeting deadlines.

The thesis must consist exclusively of the undersigned student's original work, and must be unique to the student and programme in question, and cannot be used towards the purpose of any other degree programme, at RSM or otherwise. In cases where the work cites, builds on or otherwise uses research or data provided by others the report makes due acknowledgement and reference.

In all cases, the thesis' author assumes responsibility for its content.

### 2. Timing the master thesis at RSM

Students are advised to start looking for a master thesis topic, coach, co-reader and preparing their proposal for the master thesis while taking core courses during the autumn.

Most MSc programmes host special master thesis research clinics. Detailed information about these is provided on the SIN-online channels and can also be provided by master thesis coordinators.

On average, it takes around eight months to complete the entire master thesis process. Students can expect to spend three months of this time working full-time on theory and research findings.



**3. Judicium: classifications of the Master of Science degree**

A master thesis can be graded from 5.5 to 10 in half-point increments. The additional classification of *cum laude* (with distinction) will be awarded when the following three conditions are met: average grade for the examination parts is at least 8.25; no individual grade is lower than 5.5; the grade for the master thesis is at least 8.0. Please consult the most recent Rules and Regulation for details.

All master core courses and master electives, including the master thesis, and other courses that appear on the list of grades, will be factored into the determination of the classification (tests assessed with a 'pass' or 'fail' cannot be included in the GPA calculation).

The judicium is calculated by multiplying the grade of an individual course by the number of ECTS of that course: add together all the course scores calculated in this way, then divide the total by the total number of ECTS, and exclude courses for which no grade is determined.

**4. Graduation in pairs**

A master thesis is considered an individual project and students may not complete a thesis project jointly with a colleague.

**5. Combine a master thesis with an internship**

RSM Career Services can support students wishing to combine a master thesis with an internship, or find a company-related subject.

**6. RSM master thesis repository**

The RSM Business Information Centre (BIC) can be consulted by students wishing to browse in the RSM master thesis collection. Theses produced after June 2009 are in digital format.

## Appendix 1:

### *Find your master thesis coordinator*

Accounting & Control	thesis.ac@rsm.nl
Business Information Management	thesis.bim@rsm.nl
Chinese Economy & Business	thesis.cheb@rsm.nl
Entrepreneurship & New Business Venturing	thesis.eship@rsm.nl
Finance & Investments	thesis.fi@rsm.nl
Global Business & Stakeholder Management	thesis.gbsm@rsm.nl
Human Resource Management	thesis.hrm@rsm.nl
Marketing Management	thesis.mm@rsm.nl
Management of Innovation	thesis.mi@rsm.nl
Organisational Change & Consulting	thesis.occ@rsm.nl
Strategic Management	thesis.sm@rsm.nl
Supply Chain Management	thesis.scm@rsm.nl
International Management	thesis.im@rsm.nl

## Appendix 2

### MASTER THESIS ASSESSMENT MATRIX

IDENTIFY A RESEARCH QUESTION AND PROJECT DESIGN	WRITE A CRITICAL REVIEW	DEFINE WORKING CONCEPTS AND CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORKS	COLLECT AND ANALYSE RESEARCH DATA	DEFINE, VALIDATE AND EVALUATE SOLUTIONS / MODELS, INTERPRET FINDINGS SENSITIVELY AS A BASIS FOR MAKING RECOMMENDATIONS	WRITE A PERSUASIVE, WELL STRUCTURED MASTER THESIS	RESEARCH ETHICS AND MANAGEMENT OF RELATIONSHIPS AND PROCESSES	MASTER THESIS PRESENTATION AND ORAL DEFENCE OF CANDIDATE
1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
<b>Excellent - 9-10</b>							
Well-balanced and innovative composition of research question, project design and research method	Literature review is itself a significant contribution	Significant additions to the theoretical / conceptual understanding of the subject	Contribution to development and methods for collecting and analysing research material and/or methodological debate	Sophisticated interpretation of the material. The conclusions are based on the findings but transcend them	Work of art written with style and with strong arguments	Research and its management has contributed demonstrably to enhanced concerted action or understanding of two or more parties involved in the research	Superior mastery and power in defending the research in its setup, methodology and execution
<b>Very Good Distinction Level - 8-9</b>							
Clear and specific research question, project design and research method	Literature well described / evaluated from new or complex perspectives	Attempt, maybe not wholly successful, made to theorise beyond current state of literature	Modifies and develops research methods reflecting methodological understanding	Sophisticated interpretation of findings and conclusions are firmly based but show a creative spark	Clear and persuasive and well-structured document	Research manages the project carefully and sensitively with open mindedness in the face of interests of parties in the research	Under scrutiny managing to defend or justify choices, methods and conclusions made, while showing proficiency in transparent communication
<b>Good - 7-8</b>							
Well-defined research question, sensible project design and clear plans for conducting research	Literature cogently evaluated using positions already available in literature	Conceptual framework is developed, or existing one adapted, in context of evaluated literature	Uses methods for gathering and analysing research material well and shows an understanding of methodological issues	Uses techniques for interpretation in a mechanical way. Conclusions based well on findings	Expressed well or technically correct (but not both). Clear structure, adequately argued	Research has been carried out open minded or sensitively (but not both)	Answering questions but not always confident and well-prepared
<b>Competent Pass Level - 6-7</b>							
Explicit ideas but there are some doubts about relation between question, design and methods	Good description of appropriate field(s) and some general criticisms made, but no close evaluation of concepts	Concepts clearly defined and appropriate, set in the context of literature	Methods for gathering and analysing research are used competently	Findings are treated as straightforward and unproblematic. Conclusions have some connection with the findings	Adequate expression but several mistakes. Argumentation sometimes replaced by assumption or assertion	Research is managed straightforwardly but has not explicitly addressed issues of contextual interests and concerns	Taking effort in answering questions, sometimes loses focus and tendency to enter into irrelevant issues
<b>Borderline Fail - 5-6</b>							
Identified interesting topic but broad research question, while design and methods are vague	Inadequate or limited description of literature, and / or no criticism or evaluation	Definition and use of theoretical concepts is confused and no attempt made to theoretical synthesis or evaluation	Methods for gathering data and analysing research material are confusing and unsystematically used	Occasional insight takes the place of interpretation and conclusions have a tenuous link with findings	Sentences often do not make sense, therefore using bullets to disguise lack of arguments	No understanding of impact, on interest or concerns of parties in the research	Occasionally showing effort giving precise answers but often wanders into feeble excuses, showing lack of abstract argumentation
<b>Fail - &lt; 5</b>							
Project focus, purpose and method are unclear	Author appears to have read little and understood less	No conceptual or theoretical discussion of any value	No primary research of any value	Not providing evidence knowing what the outcome is about	Scrappy presentation, illogical structure, no arguments or silly ones	Research has treated interests and concerns of parties in an arbitrary way	Giving ambiguous answers and showing clear lack of systematic, abstract thinking

## Rotterdam School of Management Erasmus University

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