INTERNATIONAL PROGRAMME OFFICE
INSTITUTE OF PHILOSOPHY
KARDINAAL MERCIERPLEIN, 2
B-3000 LEUVEN
BELGIUM

Guidelines for the MPhil Thesis

Contents

1. The MPhil Thesis in the MPhil Programme: General

The MPhil thesis is the key element and pinnacle of your MPhil programme. Within this programme it has a weight of 24 out of 60 study points. In your MPhil thesis you have to demonstrate an ability to do high-level independent research and to write a dissertation on a specialised topic in the area of philosophy you have chosen. Ideally, your MPhil thesis includes the first outline for a doctorate so that after obtaining the MPhil you can immediately start with the application procedure of your doctorate and doctoral programme.

The topic of your MPhil thesis should be linked to the research domain of your Major electives. You will carry out your research under the immediate of a supervisor who most likely will also be the promoter for the doctorate. "Common Seminar" which all MPhil students are required to attend has been set up to help you develop necessary research skills. Part of the MPhil programme is the MPhil thesis workshop and a library session (for the details please see the Calendar of the Institute of Philosophy available on the website of the Institute of Philosophy and/or in the Study Guide). The chair of the MPhil/International Programme programme will help you if you have problems in finding a supervisor. Before choosing her/his subject and supervisor the student can use the list of philosophically relevant subjects and available supervisors, listed by supervisors (alphabetically) and by research centres and updated every year and made available on the website of the Institute of Philosophy. (Post-docs can be also supervisors of the MPhil thesis). It is up to the student to take a first step, look for a supervisor and submit to him or her the proposal. The supervisor's task is to make sure that the project is well-defined, realisable and sufficiently philosophically relevant. The supervisor also helps with defining the theme and with finding relevant literature. It is important that the student sends to the supervisor at regular intervals the pieces of her/his work, which the supervisor reads and comments on. If it is necessary the supervisor helps the student with the research.

All the forms and links referred to below in the text are available and can be downloaded from http://hiw.kuleuven.be/eng/programmes/mphil/mphilthesis.html

2. Realisation of the work: practical tips

<u>The role of the supervisor</u>
The relationship between the student and the supervisor is an important factor for the realisation of the work. Obviously, you need to write the thesis yourself, but good contact with your supervisor can very much help with this. S/he can give you preliminary orientation in the available literature, ask you questions, and give you comments on your first drafts, etc. In short, it is in your interest to keep a good relation with your supervisor. It is also helpful to make and keep appointments with her/him. It can sometimes be the case that you experience difficulties in your work and you feel the tendency to avoid your supervisor. In these cases you need to realise that such an attitude only makes the problem worse and you need to talk to her/him as soon as possible.

<u>Gathering and structuring the material</u>
The coherent structure of your thesis is based on the order with which you collect and process the information. The best way to begin is researching the most fundamental information that you can find in reference books such as encyclopaedias, lexicons and thematic articles. However, you need to be aware right from the start that this phase is only a small first step and take care that from here you continue quite quickly to research literature more specific to the subject and aim of your thesis. Collections and bibliographies can prove to be very useful here.

It will not be possible for you to read everything and therefore you will have to learn accurately and quickly to evaluate your sources. In the beginning you will be dependant in this on your supervisor. The more you read, the stronger your evaluative skills will become. The following are the important criteria for judging your sources well:

- the influence that the author has on your area of interest
- the basic idea of the work (Therefore you need to pay special attention to the blurbs of books and the abstracts of periodical articles .)

- contemporary pertinence of the work (which does not mean that you should not pay attention to older works. An 'old' work can also be very current!)

When researching the literature you should work methodically, which means that you note down systematically all your findings. In the first place this comprises complete bibliographical references, supplemented if necessary with places where the references can be found in the library. You should not forget your value judgment. At the same time you need to outline your plan: you lay down the basic framework which you would like to give to your thesis.

Reading and Writing

You should begin to write your thesis as soon as possible and should continue to write regularly. Students are often inclined to postpone writing because they have not read all the relevant literature, feel they have nothing original to say, or cannot see how a particular topic will fit into their final thesis. To avoid these pitfalls, it is important not to ask too much of yourself. Your initial research proposal will inevitably have been couched in fairly vague terms, and one of your aims should be to get a clearer and more precise view of the problems you want to study. Do not embark on a long course of unfocused reading. Start by writing a critical account of a small part of the literature on your topic. This will help you to understand the issues being discussed and see what problems they raise. As you go on, you will be able to produce a clear set of questions which your thesis will answer and arrive at an overall plan. Remember that you will not be able to settle the form or content of your thesis before you have begun to write, since the process of writing will alter your conception of the problems you are studying.

Even if you manage to follow all this advice, you may find that you achieve less than you and your promoter were expecting. If this happens, do not let embarrassment prevent you from keeping in touch with your promoter, and do not feel that you have to complete a piece of writing before contacting her/him. Be sure to tell your promoter of any intellectual or personal difficulties that are holding back the progress of your research. He or she is there to help you

prepare the thesis! Further to this, please contact the head of the MPhil POC, to discuss any other academic problems that may be affecting your work.

<u>Final editing</u>

In this section we will talk about some technical aspects. They are not directly connected with the content of your thesis but they still help your writing to be better understood. It is important to take these aspects into account right from the first drafts. During the final phase of your work you should in any case check if each of the aspects has been taken care of.

In the end you will also have to check such important aspects such as spelling, grammar and the consistent use of punctuation and abbreviations.

General lay-out

The possibilities for lay-out are almost limitless thanks to computers. Unfortunately, the standards for a good lay-out are rather strict. Therefore you should choose a sober, easily legible lay-out and you should not venture any experiments.

It is best that you fix the page specifications already with the first piece that you want to hand in to your supervisor. Please see above for the form requirements. For the footnotes you should the same font but in smaller size. Short quotations are marked in the text by quotation marks; for longer quotations the left margin needs to be a bit wider and spacing a bit smaller, and the quotation marks are not necessary here. For the title of the chapter and for page numbers you use headers and footers (for the footnotes and quotations see 4a and 4b).

Dividing up the text

The division of your thesis into sections is based on the previously made outline. You need to make sure that your division is logical (first the whole and then the parts), balanced (all parts/sections should be equally long) and sufficiently worked-out. You should also pay attention to the wording of your titles. You can divide the sections themselves through well-considered use of paragraphs.

In numbering you have the choice between numerical division ('1, 1.1, 1.1.1, 2, etc') or the alpha-numerical system. ('I., 1, A, B or 1, 1a, 1b'). You should not use both systems at once.

Once the division of your thesis is ready, you have the basis for your table of contents, which can be either at the beginning or at the end of your thesis, but which in any case needs to be completely at the beginning or at the end. What remains to be filled in then are page numbers.

Giving emphasis

Be careful with emphasizing concepts and sentences. Do not give your readers the impression that you are taking them through baby-steps. Underlining sentences, parts of a sentence or sub-titles is not acceptable. You can use italics only in the following cases:

- non-English words that are not generally used
- scientific terminology: for example, terms in Latin
- titles of individual publications (these are books and magazines).

Quotation marks

Normal quotation marks are used to cite the words of somebody else. You can use single quotation marks for:

- concepts that we have not learned yet
- terms to which we would like to connote as 'so-called'
- titles of non-independent publications (these are articles in magazines and chapters in books).

Binding

Binding is the completion of your work and usually you have it done in a copy centre. You should take into consideration that this can take some time and have the binding done on time. After having your thesis bound you should check to see that there are no missing pages and that everything is in its place.

3. Techniques

Finding and consulting relevant information sources

Good heuristics is based on the adequate knowledge of the available reference books and bibliographies. This knowledge has aspects with respect to both content (Which resources are there?) and technique (How can I use them in the most efficient way?). You will also discover very quickly that each sub-branch within philosophy has its own information sources. You will get to know either in the library or through your supervisor which these are.

Technical aspects are more universal and they are applicable in different forms of the scientific work: skills for examining the catalogues and databanks (formulating question and interpreting answer) and working efficiently in the library.

If it seems that you need help in this phase, do not hesitate to look for it so as to avoid frustration and the loss of time.

Quotations

To support your claims it is often necessary that you use the words of somebody else and here come into consideration only recognisable authors. However, you do not need to support all your claims in such a way.

A good quotation is a faithful reproduction of the source and it contains an unambiguous reference to the author and the work. The latter can be a problem if you are quoting two authors in a confused way. You should always use the source that is best referenced and you can quote text in the original or you can translate it into English. In any case you should be consistent. If you have translated a quoted text once, then you should continue to do so and you should also check to see if there is a (good) translation of the concerned text available. For the works of the classical philosophers this is usually the critical editions of their work. If you want to omit a part of the text within the quotation you should indicate it with […]. If you want to add to the text then you have to place it between the square brackets []. You should put quotations not longer than three lines between quotation marks for longer quotations you should use a different form. You should not end a sentence in English with a quotation in

another language. You need to translate the quoted part of the sentence into English, place it between quotation marks and then quote the text in the original in the footnote.

You need to provide each quotation with its bibliographical reference and page number so that the reader can check the correctness of your quotation. There are two techniques for quoting:

- In the first – the quotation-note system - you need to place the reference in the footnote, which consists of the name of the author (the first name or their initials and the surname) and the short quotation of the title followed by the page reference. You need to include the complete reference in the bibliography.

- In the second technique – the author-year system - the quotation is followed within the text itself by the name of the author, the year when the book was published and the page reference. These are all between the brackets, for example: (Whitney 1968:251), except for the case when you have already mentioned the name of the author in the sentence, for example:…. someone like Kim (1990:14). In the bibliography each instance of the name of the author is then followed by the indication of the year so that it is possible to find every reference from the text very easily.

Both techniques, the quotation-note system and the author-year system, have advantages and disadvantages. The first technique gives you more freedom to illustrate your own position with respect to your source. The disadvantage is that when you use the source the second time and you use 'Ibidem' (in the same work) or 'Idem' (by the same author), or when you refer to the previous note, the whole becomes difficult to survey. From this point of view the author-year system is certainly handier. It works best when the bibliography connected with your subject is strictly specialised and homogenous (for example, no source from the exact sciences is interchanged with a literary source). The author-year system is very often used in the Anglo-Saxon world, but it is not applicable for philosophical masterpieces and it is completely inapplicable for ancient and medieval authors, because in these cases the year of 'publication' is very often not known.

The distinction between a quotation and your own assertions must always be very sharply drawn. If this border disappears, then it becomes an issue of plagiarism, which is not accepted in the scientific world. This rule is so strict that it is almost taken for granted that you will not

break it. Unintentional plagiarism happens much more often and it is often a result of careless note-taking. While reading you should therefore always make a clear distinction between the passages that you are quoting and your own comments. However, it is not forbidden to summarise and paraphrase somebody else's thoughts. A real paraphrase (with the reference to the source and with the clear indication of the paraphrase) is allowed. Quoting without the quotation marks (for shorter quotations) or without differentiating lay-out (for longer quotations) is not allowed.

Notes

One of the most important functions of notes is the indication of the source by quotations. Given that by the author-year system the year and not the title is used as the reference, in this case the space for notes can be rather limited.

Yet notes can be used for different reasons:
- to give the translation of a quotation that was in the original in the text
- to give other supplemental quotations
- to nuance or supplement your assertions when these nuances or supplements are valuable but not immediately necessary for the development of your argument
- to refer to assertions elsewhere in the text

Notes are numbered and are placed either at the end of the page (footnotes) or at the end of the chapter or at the end of the thesis (endnotes). Each word-processing programme on the computer allows for you to have your notes automatically numbered and to provide sufficient space for them. From this point of view there is no reason to use endnotes, which are for readers much less handy then footnotes.

Bibliography

Everybody who reads your thesis should be able to check the correctness of your claims. Therefore you need to mention all the works to which you refer and you need to indicate all the information which makes it possible to find them. This happens in the form of a list with

bibliographical references: the bibliography. The bibliography also serves to show that you are familiar with the usual literature in your area of interest. You should pay sufficient attention to your bibliography because your readers will make sure that it is formulated according to the proper standards

The extensiveness of your bibliography depends on your subject. There is a great difference between a bibliography for a literary study or if your thesis is a critical analysis of a given text. In each case you do not have to mention all the works that you have come across during your research. Sometimes there is an excellent bibliography on your subject available and in this case several references will save you a lot of work. You should not mention in your bibliography the works which you have not consulted and which you only know from the footnotes of the text that you have read.

A good bibliography should not be a problem for a student from the MPhil programme. You can choose from different systems. You should take care to make references to different types of works in the same way, which means not only independent works (books) but also non-independent works such as articles in magazines and chapters in monographs.

Finally, you will also have to order all your references. The division you follow will depend on your subject. The following is the standard division:
- sources
- bibliographical reference books
- secondary literature
- added material

You should also make sure that within each sub-division you order your references alphabetically according to the last name. You should pay attention when you have this ordering done through the programme of your computer as to which spaces are to be taken into account. This could mean, for example, that 'Vanden Brande' does not come immediately after or before 'Van den Brande'.