

Thesis seminar Sustainability Transition Policy (Bachelor and Master)

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Every student writing their Bachelor or Master thesis at the Sustainability Transition Policy chair must register for the Thesis seminar and participate in the meetings. This is not negotiable and the topics discussed at the meetings will not be discussed individually.

The seminar addresses issues that arise for all students. Such questions include things like evaluation criteria and expectations on writing, communication, and theoretical embedding. But also: How do I structure my thesis, and where do I place my Method section? How do I cite, and how can I make sense of my results? Every student stands before such questions, so we will address them together.

Further, students will present their work twice: their work plan (Block 1, early in the semester) and their preliminary findings (Block 2, mid-/late-semester). At each point, every student will present but they will also read and provide advice for one other student as a “discussant”. Telling others about your work is tremendously helpful for you to pause and think about what you’re doing, what it means, and what it’s good for. Critically but constructively exploring the work of others and providing advice for fixing identified problems helps reflect about one’s own work as well, and is a skill most of you will apply in your future jobs too.

Seminar outline

The seminar will consist of two block days, of 4-5 hours each (Fridays, in Zoom), including coffee and lunch if needed, and two short meetings in between. At these seminars, we will discuss issues of relevance to all students, such as how to write the thesis (e.g. structure, contents of sections, relevance of figures/tables and how to create them, and some basic scientific theory relevant for all theses), and how the theses will be evaluated. These block days will also hold student presentations and targeted student and advisor feedback. These block days will happen early in the semester and mid-term. The schedule for the Winter Semester 2024/25 is found below.

Between these blocks, there will be open sessions, at which we discuss problems that have arisen and possible solutions. Generally, students’ problems are related and solutions similar, although topics and methods are different: there is much to learn from each other during the process of researching and writing. These sessions will be entirely focused on students’ problems and questions.

Block 1: writing and student plans

In the first block, we will discuss *how to write a thesis*. This is the same for Bachelor and Master students, although the report length differs, as do the requirements for the depth and analytical quality.

In this block, the advisor team will hold an introductory presentation on structuring a thesis, and on writing the initial sections (introduction, theory, method). It holds some basic points on modern writing and how it contrasts with non-modern writing. We will say a few words about citations, which students generally fear much but for no good reason. We will also talk about the use of AI, such as ChatGPT and Elicit. We end this by discussing how to go about producing results along a sequence of displays (i.e. figures, tables).

We will also hold early-term student presentations. In these, each student presents their topic, research questions (RQs) and why these are relevant, and how they outline their methods for answering this research question. At this stage, students have formulated their work, but have generally not yet started working for real: there is still room to redirect work (slightly) and solve expectable upcoming problems. Sharpening research questions or aligning method and RQ are typical outcomes at this stage.

These presentations are short, up to 10 minutes, and may but must not follow the structure of the proposals. There are two aims of this early-term presentation. First, to let students focus their work and make it understandable for others: what is my story? What do I do, and why? Second, each student will be “discussant” of the presentation of one other student, giving her or him the opportunity to view a thesis through the eyes of an advisor (or examiner!): what is good, what is problematic in the presented work, and what can be done to fix these problems (and hence: what can I learn for my own work?)? *For this, each student must send in a written research plan in advance, which may be their proposal, for distribution to the group. Each discussant is assigned to someone else’s work, but we try to consider topics and methods to the extent possible.*

Block 2: synthesising and communicating

In the second block, the mid-term seminar, we discuss how to finalise a thesis, specially how to write a Results section and how to distinguish it from the Discussion. We pick up where we left in the first block and discuss how to use figures and displays to make a nice-to-read Results section. We talk about how to structure a Discussion and make sense of the findings by tying them back to the RQ and problem definition. We discuss how to write about the limitations in a way that is honest and useful, but without destroying the good work by being too critical. And we talk about how to write an Abstract, which is an art in itself.

At this meeting, each student presents their (expected) findings: what have I found out? What am I going to show, and why is that relevant (for whom)? At this stage, students have progressed far and have first (or final) results, but are not yet done with the thesis. Whereas there is no possibility for fundamentally changing the thesis now, there is much room for polishing RQs, solving methodological problems. A special focus at the mid-term seminar is to make sense of the (expected) findings, showing what they are, why they are important and why anyone should care about them. *As in the first seminar, each student will be assigned to be Discussant for one other student, and each student must send in their draft abstract in advance to allow for this.*

Open sessions

About a month after each block, the open sessions take place. Here, we discuss arising issues, focusing on questions and problems submitted in advance. For these meetings to be as useful as possible, students must mail problems and questions to their advisor at least 2 days in advance, so that we can prepare and give at least mildly intelligent but hopefully useful advice. We can of course improvise ad hoc, but preparation will improve the usefulness of the meetings.

Schedule for Winter 2024/25

The first date is fixed: the others may be changed to make it fit for all (e.g. block seminars etc).

First block: 18 October 9.00-14:30 in Zoom

Topic	Duration	Time
How to write a thesis: Introduction, Theory, Method	90 minutes	9:00
Evaluation criteria	45 minutes	10:30
Coffee	15 minutes	11:15
Student presentation + discussants + feedback	10 min presentation + 10 min discussion/thesis	11:30-14:30 (incl. lunch)

Open session 1: 15 November 9.00-10:30 in Zoom

Topic	Duration	Time
Questions & problems → answers & solutions	90 minutes	9:00

Second block: 13 December 9.00-13:00 in Zoom

Topic	Duration	Time
How to write a thesis: Results and Discussion	90 minutes	9:00
Coffee	15 minutes	10:30
Student presentation + discussants + feedback	10 minute presentation + 15 minute discussion per thesis	10:45-13:00

Open session 2: 24 January 9.00-10:30 in Zoom

Topic	Duration	Time
Questions & problems → answers & solutions	90 minutes	9:00