

Near & Middle Eastern Studies

Department of Social Sciences

University of Basel

Guideline for Master's Theses in the Master's Degree Subject “Near & Middle Eastern Studies”

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These guidelines are based on the new study regulations
active from fall term 2026 onwards



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1 Introduction

1.1 Major or Minor?

Students who decide to complete the master's degree in Near & Middle Eastern Studies with a master's thesis (30 credit points) study the subject as a *major*. For those writing the master's thesis in their other degree subject, the subject Near & Middle Eastern Studies is a *minor*. Students writing the master's thesis in the other subject are welcome to use this guide as a suggestion, but it is essential that they pay attention to the requirements of the subject in which they are writing their master's thesis.

1.2 Overview

The master's thesis in the master's degree subject Near & Middle Eastern Studies earns you 30 credit points and thus represents a quarter of your total credits in your master's studies. For this reason alone, meticulous planning and execution is particularly important for the successful completion of your master's studies. The registration period for the master's thesis is usually in May or November; the master's thesis must be submitted no later than nine months after the deadline for registration of the master's thesis. Links to information can be found in the following chapter 2. Deadlines for registration can be found at <https://philhist.unibas.ch/de/studium/termine/> (only in German).

1.3 Official Documents

This guide is primarily intended to address those aspects that are not explicitly addressed in the official regulations. At the same time, this guide cannot contain all formal regulations that are important for your studies of the master's subject Near & Middle Eastern Studies or even for the master's thesis—otherwise, the guide would become too complicated!

In order to orient yourself on your way to the master's thesis in our subject, do (re-) read the document "Guidelines for the Master's Degree Subject: Near & Middle Eastern Studies", available at the web site: <https://nahoststudien.philhist.unibas.ch/en/studies/documents/>

For the formal aspects and requirements of master's study and the master's thesis in particular, you can find numerous information sheets and forms on the informational webpages of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences: <https://philhist.unibas.ch/de/studium/dokumente-merkblaetter/> (scroll down for master's studies) (only in German).

Please note! These guidelines are not an official document of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences. In case of contradictions or ambiguities, the regulations of the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences on master's studies or the study plan for the degree subject Near & Middle Eastern Studies take precedence.



2 What is a Master's Thesis and Why Write One?

The master's thesis serves as proof of general academic competence. The topic of the written thesis deals with a specifically defined regional and thematic issue in the field of Near & Middle Eastern Studies. The master's thesis should be based on the processing of original language sources (such as publications, archives, collections, literary texts).

To give you an idea of the different degrees of challenges you will face on your way from writing a proseminar paper (*Proseminararbeit*) to a master's thesis, we might compare your situation to sailing a ship. In a proseminar paper, you sail out onto a smaller lake with predictable wind conditions. You practice your first moves and smaller maneuvers. In a seminar paper (*Seminararbeit*), the lake is larger and the wind conditions less predictable. You may even venture out to sea, but always take care to stay close to the shore. The basic maneuvers are already familiar to you, but remain a challenge. With a master's thesis, you reach out further: The coast usually remains within sight, but you can sometimes move considerably away from it. Everything becomes more complex: you are underway for a whole day and you have to plan the day well in order to arrive safely in port in time before nightfall. Wind and weather conditions can vary over the course of a day. If you have already internalized the basic work methods from the seminar papers (*Seminararbeiten*), the master's thesis will be rougher sailing, but you will safely return from this trip.

The master's thesis is the cumulative achievement of your bachelor's and master's studies. In it, you bring together the skills you have acquired over the last few years. For this reason, it is all the more important that you examine the topic you choose even before registering for the master's thesis. The topic should be crafted in such a way that it will continue to be interesting and worthwhile for you during the following nine months. It should allow you both to successfully incorporate the knowledge you have acquired in the previous years into your master's thesis and also enjoy the potential of opening up new horizons.

3 On the Way to Your Master's Thesis

The content of the master's thesis follows directly from the preceding building blocks achieved during the master's studies. The most important blocks leading to the master's thesis are:

3.1 Seminar Paper (*Seminararbeit*)

In the module "Advanced Near & Middle Eastern Studies," students write a seminar paper (*Seminararbeit*). While the (research) seminar focuses on the intensive study of longer texts in the original languages around a common theme, the seminar papers improve your writing routines and solidify academic working methods already practiced in the bachelor's degree subject. For the seminar paper at the master's level, the "Guidelines for Proseminar and Seminar Papers" continue to apply. Like all program guidelines, they can be found at: <https://nahoststudien.philhist.unibas.ch/en/studies/documents/>



3.2 Research Paper

In the module “Research in Near & Middle Eastern Studies,” students are required to carry out an independent research project based on original Arabic or Turkish texts in guided independent study. This independent academic work is considered to be a preparatory exercise dealing with original language sources for the master’s thesis. Ideally, the research paper will expand the linguistic corpus used for the master’s thesis (in Arabic or Turkish). Even if unrelated to a master’s thesis, however, it can at least serve as a kind of “test run” on the search for possible thesis topics.

3.3 Master’s Colloquium

Students in both the major and minor are required to participate in the colloquium “Academic Discussion of Master’s Theses in Near & Middle Eastern Studies” (*Wissenschaftliche Diskussion von Masterarbeiten in den Near & Middle Eastern Studies*). The master’s colloquium provides a forum for discussing potential problems in the conception, sourcing, and writing of the master’s thesis. Since the colloquium takes place only once a year (usually in the spring semester), it is not always easy for students to find the right time to attend the colloquium. As a rule of thumb: It is better to attend sooner than later and before starting work on the master’s thesis than after the thesis has been completed. In the latter case, it is mainly the other participants in the colloquium who will benefit from the insights and knowledge you gained during the master’s thesis, but you yourself will no longer benefit.

3.4 Academic Advising

In the months before registering for your master’s thesis, take advantage of the opportunity to seek advance advising from various instructors in Near & Middle Eastern Studies. Instructors in Near & Middle Eastern Studies are happy to advise you, even if you are planning to write your master’s thesis in your other subject. Often, new insights and horizons open up during the conversation.

3.5 Conclusion

To sum up, you should try to productively incorporate these four elements while preparing your master's thesis. The seminar paper (*Seminararbeit*) will help you to practice and further routinize the ways of researching, conceptualizing, narrowing down, and writing about an academic topic. The research paper (*Forschungsarbeit*) gives you the opportunity to gain confidence in dealing with original language material. The master’s colloquium allows you to further develop your concept of a master’s thesis in a group through presentations and discussions of other master’s thesis drafts, or even to inspire you to write a first draft at all. Academic advising helps you to clarify questions of feasibility and implementation during a confidential and constructive discussion.



4 Selection of Supervisors and Expectations of Supervision

Before registering for a master's thesis, students must discuss their topic with the designated first supervisor (naturally, in the case of a major, with an instructor in Near & Middle Eastern Studies). One of the two evaluation reports must come from a holder of a regular professorship in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences of the University of Basel. The other, second supervisor (co-supervisor) must at least have earned her respectively his doctorate. The Office of the Dean of Students (*Studiendekanat*) decides on justified exceptions upon request. The supervisor (i.e., the person who is responsible for the first supervision) and the student determine the co-supervisor in joint consultation.

5 Primary Sources as the Basis of your Master's Thesis

In a master's thesis in Near & Middle Eastern Studies, dealing with sources in original language (usually Arabic or Turkish) is a central and indispensable part of your work. The assumption (or hope) that a thesis based only on secondary literature might be "easier" is unfounded. The danger is all too great that you will get lost in the abundance of secondary literature and ultimately submit a master's thesis that lacks contours in terms of content and argumentation. Think very carefully about how you are going to include primary sources. Primary sources are usually written sources; however, the subject of the analysis can also be films or interviews conducted by you. Searching for and selecting primary-source material requires a great deal of effort in the beginning. After this step is over, however, the work will become easier and more satisfying.

6 Formal Aspects

6.1 General Requirements

The Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences does not specify any formal requirements for the preparation of the master's thesis. However, see above all § 18 of the Faculty's Regulation on Master's Studies for the preparation of the master's thesis: <https://www.unibas.ch/dam/jcr:18f59129-a4a3-4ad6-952e-51810526dd92/>.

The master's thesis, i.e. the actual text (without illustrations, references, bibliography, etc.), should generally not exceed 80 pages, i.e., 30,000-35,000 words. A maximum of nine months is allowed for the preparation of the master's thesis. The master's thesis in Near & Middle Eastern Studies can be written in English or German.

Detailed information on form and layout, structure, literature research, citation, bibliography, and the development of your guiding research question can be found in the "Guidelines for Proseminar and Seminar Papers" of the Program in Near & Middle Eastern Studies. Be sure to read Chapter 5 of these Guidelines, "From Topic to Thesis," carefully.



6.2 Exposition Paper (*Exposé*)

The students write the master's thesis independently. Motivation, independence, responsibility and successful time management can and must come from the students themselves. However, as already described in detail above, we would like to encourage you to regularly seek contact with the two instructors supervising your master's thesis (supervisor and co-supervisor).

An obligatory milestone for all students writing their master's thesis in Near & Middle Eastern Studies is to submit an exposition paper (*exposé*) of your master's thesis. The exposition paper is to be 3,000-3,500 words and to be submitted *at least six months before the deadline for submission of the master's thesis*. The exposition paper must contain, at a minimum, the following parts: Preliminary research question, rationale for selection of (original language) primary source(s), hypothesis(es), list of important secondary literature, and proposed methodology. Please do not wait for the supervising instructors to request this exposition paper from you, but do *submit it of your own accord*. You will receive written feedback from at least the first supervisor of your master's thesis within four weeks of submission.

6.3 Declaration of Scientific Integrity

A separate declaration must state whether help has been received and from whom, whether text passages were written with the help of AI-supported tools, and whether the master's thesis has already been submitted to another faculty or university for review. At the end of the thesis, the declaration of scientific integrity, dated and signed, must be added;

https://philhist.unibas.ch/fileadmin/user_upload/philhist/Dokumente/Studium/Master/FOR_Erklaerung_Wissenschaftliche_Redlichkeit_MA.pdf (in German only).

Artificial intelligence tools and its use are a particularly dynamic field. The university provides information on this topic on the following page: <https://www.unibas.ch/en/Studies/Learning-and-Teaching/AI-in-learning-and-teaching.html>

Of particular note here is the guide titled "Citing AI: How to use AI-Based Tools in university Studies" (as of August 2025), which can be found on this page.



6.4 Cover Sheet of the Master's Thesis

The faculty does not give precise guidelines for the design of the cover sheet of the master's thesis. However, the following information should be included on the cover sheet:

Master's Thesis in Near & Middle Eastern Studies at the Program in Near & Middle Eastern Studies at the University of Basel [Title of the master's thesis] Submitted by: [first name last name] [Indication of both master's degree subjects] Current semester of study: [number] Matriculation number: [specify matriculation number] Address: [specify postal address and e-mail address of the University of Basel] Date of submission: [date] Supervisor: [specify person] Co-supervisor: [specify person]
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Good luck and have fun with your master's thesis!

10 Rating Criteria

All faculty members of our Near & Middle Eastern Studies unit use the following grading criteria when evaluating written assignments as well as the oral MA exam:

Evaluation criteria	Description	Scale MA Seminar Paper (and in case: Proseminar paper)	Scale MA Research Paper	Scale MA Thesis	Scale MA Oral exam
Formulation of the research question	› Independent formulation of a clear, appropriate research question › Clear definition and narrowing of the topic	15	10	15	10
Definition of key terms	› Key terms defined clearly, concisely, and accurately	10	5	10	10
Analysis and argumentation	› A thorough analysis of the chosen research question or topic › A convincing and balanced argument supported by relevant primary sources and secondary literature › A clear answer to the research question, illustrated with specific examples	20		20	20
Language	› Strong ability to express ideas clearly in the chosen language › Correct and precise use of technical terminology, correct and consistent transcription	15	5	15	10
Structure	› Clear structure › Goal-oriented build-up › The logical structure of the work is reflected in a concise and clear table of contents	15	5	15	
Literature and sources	› Appropriate selection of the supporting literature › Careful selection and clear interpretation and evaluation of primary sources	15	10	15	10

Evaluation criteria	Description	Scale MA Seminar Paper (and in case: Proseminar paper)	Scale MA Research Paper	Scale MA Thesis	Scale MA Oral exam
	› Correct and appropriate use of scholarly tools (particularly footnotes and the bibliography)				
Formalities	› Full compliance with formal requirements and citation rules › Appropriate use of the annotation system	10	5	10	
Translation	› Accurate and appropriate translation of the selected text passages		30		
Contextualization	› Effective contextualization of primary sources		10		
Summarize and explain	› Ability to reproduce the content of the texts read and to explain the central theses, themes, and elements				20
Evaluate, justify, and compare	› Ability to assess the texts read, justify these assessments, and compare texts or positions with each other				20
Discussion of the translation	› The translation can be explained convincingly in a conversation		20		
Final assessment discussion	› a final discussion regarding the content, structure, and reasoning of the written work, which may be requested by the evaluators if necessary				
		100	100	100	100

Note: If necessary, evaluators may request a discussion regarding the content, structure, and reasoning of the written assignments prior to the final evaluation.

Grading scale: < 59,9 = Fail; 60–67 = 4; 67,1–75 = 4.5; 75,1–83 = 5; 83,1–91 = 5.5; 91,1–100 = 6.