

Near and Middle Eastern Studies
Department of Social Sciences
University of Basel

Guidelines for the preparation of an independent
research paper in the module “Research in the Near
& Middle Eastern Studies” (Arabic or Turkish)

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

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1 About the purpose of these guidelines

These guidelines are intended to help students in the master's program Near & Middle Eastern Studies (NMES) and to clarify the expectations, objectives and content of the compulsory 5-credit research paper in the module "Research in Near & Middle Eastern Studies".

2 Basic contours of the research paper

Students write an independent research paper using a larger original language corpus in consultation with an supervisor selected by the student. Students use the research work in this independent, yet nevertheless guided study to deepen their reading skills and to practice handling larger amounts of original language sources. A learning contract is concluded for the purpose of the research paper. The potential supervisor must have an academic degree that authorizes to supervise master's thesis.

The research paper is assessed with a grade, which appears on the student's transcript but is not counted towards the final grade.

3 About the nomenclature

In the officially binding curriculum published by the faculty and the Dean of Studies and thus officially binding study plan the term "5 CP from guided independent study" is used. When creating the learning contract please select this option: *guided self-study*. For the sake of simplicity and consistency, the term *research paper* is used throughout these guidelines.

4 Basic information

Devoting oneself to both languages, Arabic and Turkish, during the Master's program is welcome, but not obligatory. Most students will decide at their beginning of their MA studies whether they will focus on Arabic or Turkish.

In the master's program Near & Middle Eastern Studies, linguistic and philological competence in Arabic and / or Turkish is practiced and rehearsed through the modules "Advanced Near & Middle Eastern Studies", "Research in Near & Middle Eastern Studies" and (if it applies) the Master's thesis.

In the module "Advanced Near & Middle Eastern Studies" a seminar paper must be written, based either on Arabic or Turkish sources. In the module "Research in Near & Middle Eastern Studies" one has also to select a source language (Arabic or Turkish) for the research paper. In contrast to the seminar paper, however, the fundamental aim of the research paper is to enable master's students to engage intensively with a larger original language corpus (Arabic or Turkish).

The research paper does not necessarily have to be linked to a (research) seminar. For this very reason, the research paper is agreed with a supervisor by means of a learning contract. The choice of the supervisor to the research paper is entirely up to the student, with the restriction that the designated supervisor must have a doctorate and the linguistic competence (Arabic or Turkish) to supervise the research paper. Please note that the research paper is obligatory even in the case that you study NMES as a minor (the master thesis not being written in the field of NMES). If you consider to chose NMES as your major it is recommended that

master's students, when looking for a supervisor to their research paper, should already have in mind that the supervisor to their research paper should also be the potential future supervisor of the master's thesis. Don't panic: This is only a suggestion and not a requirement. As you have the liberty to choose for your master thesis another subject than in the research paper, the supervisors to the research paper and the master thesis may also differ.

5 Objectives of the research paper

The master's program is characterized above all by participation in master's seminars or colloquiums, which have higher requirements than courses at bachelor's level; otherwise, the format and the requirement profile at MA level is not fundamentally different from the coursework completed in the bachelor's program. For this reason, the task of having to write a large-scale master's thesis (in case that students decide to take their major in NMES) may give the students the impression of an inordinate challenge, abruptly increasing the degree of difficulty in comparison to the preceding parts of the master's program. In addition, due to the high level of difficulty of Arabic and Turkish, effortless reading of larger quantities of text in Arabic and Turkish is anything but a matter of course, even at the end of a master's degree.

The fundamental objective of the research paper is to give master's students the opportunity to engage intensively with source material. The underlying idea is that the master's students carry out genuine research work through their research paper, which will lead them towards their master's thesis in terms of subject and content. The idea of facilitating the study program is thus in the foreground: By working with a text corpus at an early state, master's students can continue to practice their philological skills and test the attractiveness and feasibility of a topic to be worked on as part of the master's thesis. The topic of the master thesis is of course not predetermined by the topic dealt with in the research paper. The definite topic of the master's thesis will only be fixed when registering for the master's thesis.

6 Characteristics of the research paper in relation to the seminar paper

The research paper takes a different approach in comparison to a regular seminar paper. A seminar paper is intended as an exercise in independent academic work. It aims to develop a clear question, make a comprehensible argument, search for conclusive answers and building up a central thesis. Technical aspects such as adequate literature research, methodical work with scientific literature and the correct use of citations and annotations are also practiced.

These requirements are not waived in the research work, but practicing them is not the main focus here. The focus of the research paper is on the intensive involvement with an original language (source) corpus – documented by the literal and meticulous translation of a long section of text.

7 Identical formal requirements as for a seminar paper

The same formal criteria apply to the research paper as to a seminar paper: The right margin is at least 3 cm wide. The font and spacing should be as follows: Font size 12-point and spacing 1.5 in the text and 10-point and line spacing 1 for quotations and notes. The basic structure of the research paper with title page, table of contents, text, bibliography is identical to that of a

seminar paper. Therefore, see the guidelines for seminar papers which also apply here with the research paper: <https://nahoststudien.philhist.unibas.ch/en/studies/documents/>

8 The scope of the research work

The scope of a research project is primarily determined by the size of the source corpus to be processed. In principle, a distinction is made here between (a) non-fiction prose (e.g. historiographical works, newspapers, journals) and narrative literature on the one hand and (b) linguistically much more demanding text types (such as poetry or complex texts, e.g. of a philosophical or theological nature) on the other. The respective definition of the level of difficulty of the text corpus is the responsibility of the supervisor. Texts in category (a) require 15 pages of translation text, texts in category (b) 10 pages. “Page” is defined here as “output page”, i.e. the length of the translated text is decisive (see the previous chapter for information on formatting). In addition a contextualization of the translated text section has to be added with a minimum length of at least 10 pages.

Research in ethnography or oral history often uses oral sources such as interviews. Whether transcripts and translations of these interviews conducted by the students can be used as a corpus for a research paper must be decided in consultation with the respective supervisor. It should be noted that the substantive content-related part of the interview must be at the length of at least one hour and be conducted with a native speaker of the respective language. Formal rules for transcription are agreed with the supervisor.

9 Contextualization performance

The contextualization of the translation (of at least 10 pages) presents the selected text corpus, explains the reasons for the selection of the whole text (from which the part to be translated was selected) and the translated part of the text. The context (historical, intellectual, literary, etc.) in which the text dealt with here has to be placed in is to be discussed in detail. The contextualization allows the translation work and the research paper in general to appear as a potential research achievement, i.e. from the interplay between the translated part of the text and the contextualization must result a scientifically convincing argumentation and presentation.

10 Originality of the translation

The selection of texts is primarily the responsibility of the individual student; in other words, it is part of the research work required.. Students are of course entitled to be supported by the respective supervisor. It goes without saying that the text passage to be translated should not be available in a translation in another language. For example, it is not permissible to state that the effort at translation consists of comparing the original with an existing translation.

11 Formal structure

The formal structure of the research paper is, as mentioned, identical to the requirements for a seminar paper. Nevertheless, the essential components are listed here once again:

- *Title page*: Title and subtitle of the research paper; name of supervisor; name, address and semester number of the author; date of submission.

- *Table of contents*: Titles of the individual chapters and subchapters with the corresponding page numbers.
- *Central text*: Contextualization (can be placed before or after the translation part) and translation, summary/concluding remarks.
- *Appendix*: Original sources and relevant lists/illustrations, if they are not included in the text.
- *Bibliography/List of abbreviations*.
- *Declaration* that you have worked scientifically honestly and have not plagiarized.

12 AI Tools

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.

AI as large language models are particularly powerful when it comes to translation. The use of AI tools has to be discussed with the respective supervisor and to be meticulously documented in the research paper. Here in particular, supervisors may request a discussion regarding the content, structure, and reasoning of the written assignments prior to the final evaluation.

In case that AI tools are systematically used for the translation of the original text, much larger portions than those indicated above (15 respectively 10 pages) in chapter 8 have to be processed. The precise amount of the length of the text to be translated has to be agreed upon in collusion with the individual supervisor.

12 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.