

Supervision by Frederik Van De Putte – a philosopher’s dream or an economist’s nightmare?

In what follows I try to give you an idea of what you can expect and what I expect of you, qua supervision of a thesis in the Research Master Philosophy & Economics @EUR.

What I offer, as supervisor

As supervisor my aim is to give you advice and comments on the thesis throughout, from the very first ideas to the final draft. Of course, I can only do so on the basis of what you provide me, either in spoken or in written form. So it is crucial that you do exactly this. This may be in the form of emails or conversations (especially in early stages), but towards the end it should be drafts of chapters. On the basis of your input, we will have regular meetings. A tentative plan for the meetings looks roughly as follows:

- First meeting where we discuss your overall interests, ambitions, and ideas for the thesis and try to get more focused – beginning of first block (early Sept)
- A couple of meeting(s) and email conversations to get more concrete idea(s) for thesis topic and research questions – during Fall
- Third meeting, based on your thesis research proposal and outline, where we discuss main issues to be tackled, relevant literature, etc – during Fall
- Fourth meeting, based on a first draft chapter and detailed outline, where I give in-depth feedback on the content and form of your writing and further ideas – Spring
- Fifth meeting, based on draft of full thesis – two weeks before the advisor needs final version (please check this with your advisor, depends on their agenda)
- Sixth meeting (if necessary) on how to deal with the advisor’s feedback

Of course, this is a tentative schedule and in practice timing depends on the needs of the student. However, it should give you an idea of what you can expect from me in terms of time investment. At any time you should feel free to ask for an ad hoc (short or longer) meeting when e.g. you get stuck, when you want to change plans and/or are in doubt about what to do, etc. Also, should you not be able to stick the above indicative timing, that should not be a reason to give up altogether.

My expectations

In a nutshell, it is very important for me that the student “owns the process”, i.e., that they are the driving engine behind the thesis research, writing, and re-writing. If I don’t hear anything from you, I will check in at some point to hear if all is well; it is however not my task to keep things going and to remind you of any deadlines.

- You take the initiative to schedule the above-mentioned meetings with me (i.e. you get in touch whenever you think the next meeting is due)

- You update me, before the meetings, and (where relevant) provide the draft material the meeting is about
- You keep notes of what is being said during those meetings (as you deem fit)
- You reach out to the advisor to check with them around when they would need your final draft, in order to provide feedback on it and approve it
- You provide a draft version of (a) detailed overview of the thesis; (b) one chapter, by two months before advisor's deadline latest
- You provide a complete draft version of the thesis, two weeks before the deadline for approval by advisor
- When writing up full drafts that you want in-depth feedback on, you keep an eye on the "checklist" at the end of this document

It is very important that you try to set yourself (realistic but somewhat ambitious) deadlines throughout. You are free to communicate these to me or not. This should make for some mental peace and self-reward in knowing that you are getting there, but it will also allow you to readjust in case you are not. It is also definitely good to reward yourself for meeting said deadlines, every now and then.

Your ambitions?

As your supervisor, it is important for me to become aware of what your ambitions are. Do you simply want to write a decent REMA thesis before moving on to the (non-academic) job market? Do you want to get the highest grade possible in preparation for a PhD at Oxford? Do you want to somehow influence ongoing practice in science, policy, or elsewhere?

Each of the above ambitions can be perfectly fine. But depending on which of them you actually have, supervision needs to be adjusted in certain respects.

Your interests?

What is it you would like to write this thesis about? How did you get there? What did you already read on the subject? Are there perhaps different topics or questions between which you are undecided? Try to get some clarity on this before the first meeting.

My personality as a supervisor – academic writing

I am a bit of a purist when it comes to (written) language and structure of text, even though I am aware that my English is far from perfect. Perhaps the following is just an ad hoc rationalization of my behavior, but anyway: I think that whenever one sees typos, grammatical flaws, ill-composed sentences, bad layout, or the like this at best distracts from what is being said, and most often creates a negative bias: "if the language is already full of mistakes, then probably so is the argument itself". This bias may be unreasonable but (at least in my case) it is very hard to get rid of entirely. On the other hand, it is easy to get around it by taking just a bit of time to double-check things.

One way to avoid such bias is by *reading your own draft material on paper*. That is anyway highly recommended: it is physically and mentally healthy to get away from your computer every now and then; it creates distance and thus helps you reflect more critically; it allows you to (literally) overwrite earlier thoughts and formulations. I may well at some point just tell you to print your notes or drafts and read them on paper, when I find that there is too much that can be corrected by a mere glance (see also the checklist below). After all, I will read your work on paper, in the expectation that you did the same (at least for draft chapters).

Apart from the above I also find it very important that, in formulating an argument of your own or criticizing someone else's, you make the form of the argumentation very clear. What are the key assumptions? Where do you see crucial steps, what are possible points of attack? What are your conclusions, how do they relate to each other?

Finally, it is always important to keep an eye on how one bit of text fits in with the rest of the thesis. This requires specific care for a thesis, as this is a much longer text than a seminar paper or even a journal article, and since you are aiming for a relatively broad audience (say, analytic philosophers with a specific interest in the areas relevant for the REMA). In the checklist below I provide some concrete measures that can help you in this regard.

Writing a readable thesis – a checklist

Here are some more concrete rules of thumb you may check yourself, before handing in a draft for which you want to get in-depth, detailed feedback. Some of these may sound overly superficial or even trivial (if so, then you are probably already doing very well), but they can really make a difference for those giving you feedback. Using a text editor like LaTeX may make a lot of this much easier, but also in Word or other editors you can automate many of these things.

Please bear in mind that these remarks apply in particular to draft versions of chapters, as you send them in during the final months of writing. This should not keep you from sending informal emails and/or notes along, just in order to get feedback on specific ideas and questions.

1. Create a consistent and detailed numbering of sections and subsections across the various chapters.
2. Choose chapter and section titles carefully, so that they inform your reader of what these bits and pieces are doing within the whole thesis.
3. Refer to section numbers whenever suitable, in particular, in introductory paragraphs of chapters or when referring back to things you introduced more than one page ago.
4. Make sure your layout is *consistent* throughout the thesis (e.g. indentation of paragraphs, white lines between paragraphs and sections, etc).
5. Distribute your text evenly between the margins (in Word this is done by selecting the text and pushing Ctrl+J).

6. Double-check your text, in particular, introductory and concluding remarks, for incomplete or ill-formed sentences that would hamper reading. It helps to just read out crucial passages aloud.
7. Double-check your text for missing references (for a draft: make sure you indicate where you still need to add references, so that your reader knows you are aware of this).
8. In particular, when making claims about “the academic debate” or “the literature”, make sure these are backed up with references. One cannot just trust you to have read all the relevant sources. When in doubt, indicate that you are not sure whether a reference is needed.
9. Make sure that each chapter starts with introductory paragraphs that answer each of the following questions clearly and unambiguously:
 - (i) What is the main contribution of this chapter? (you can mention tangential contributions as well, but clearly distinguishing them from the main aim);
 - (ii) How does this fit within the overall aim and setup of the thesis? Are you setting the stage for Chapter X, are you solving a problem that was brought up in Chapter Y, are you tackling one specific critique?
 - (iii) How does each section in the chapter serve this aim? Give a brief outline of what is to follow.

You may also end each chapter with a short summary of what you have accomplished but try to avoid too much repetition in comparison with the introductory paragraphs. Also, although it is nice to make the bridge to what is to come, try to avoid that you already "give away" too much substance of what you will be doing in subsequent chapters. Where possible, stick to the chapter level, when talking about what goes on in other chapters.

10. Create and regularly update a separate “thesis outline” document in which you only write down the gist of your sections, chapters, etc. – no references, no written-out examples, just the fundamental points and terms. Try to keep this outline in mind and rethink and rewrite it as you move along. If you yourself are not super clear about this, then it is unlikely that your reader will see it. In contrast, if you know very well what the underlying structure is, it will be easy for you to also convey that message to the reader and to see where your text could be more clear about this.