MA Thesis Criteria

April 2026

General

The thesis raises the claim of a scientific work and as a historical, conceptual or ethnographic examination goes beyond the framework of a project documentation or a workshop report by developing independent and relevant theses for design, economy, society and culture. It is based on profound research and an in-depth, innovative examination of the chosen topic.

The length of the work for an individual project is between 25'000 – 35'000 words. In case of a project with 2 or more students, the maximum word count should not exceed 45'000 words.

The work should be designed in a suitable format and submitted in printed and digital form.

Structure

These are structural standards for your final MA written work.

- **Front Page**
- **Imprint**
  - Title: Title
  - Author: First Name Last Name, ...
  - Matrikel-Nr.: 0000
  - Date: June 2026
  - © Zurich University of the Arts, Department Design, Interaction Design
  - Mentors: First Name Last Name, ...
  - Typeface: Name
- **Abstract** (125 – 250 words) — general insight into the topic, project and findings
- **Acknowledgments**
- **Table of Contents**
- **Main Content** — Format of the organisation is flexible but it needs to feature:

Word Count Requirements

- **Single-author thesis:** minimum 25'000 words / maximum 35'000 words
- **Group thesis (2+ students):** maximum 45'000 words

Word counts below reflect the single-author min/max. Group projects writing toward the 45'000-word maximum should scale each section proportionally (≈ 1.29× the single-author maximum).

General Introduction

- Single-author: 1'250 – 1'750 words
- Group (max): up to 2'250 words

Background Research

- Single-author: 7'500 – 10'500 words
- Group (max): up to 13'500 words

Content to cover:

- Current state of the context, historical background, societal, political or economical perspectives
- Literature Review — how has the topic been explored, discussed, advanced so far in essays, academic papers, art & design, pop culture, different fields of knowledge (medical, scientific, computer science, engineering, etc) or different cultures
- Community outreach — discussions with experts, with stakeholders, participants, etc
- Identifying assumptions, 1–2 Research Questions + Hypothesis
- Detailing methods to verify hypothesis
- Motivation, Intended Outcome and Contribution
- Chapter Overview (narrative or organisation of your content)

Concept

- Single-author: 5'800 – 8'150 words
- Group (max): up to 10'500 words

Content to cover:

- Concept and Angle
- Related work pertaining to your concept, including projects that embody elements of the proposed idea
- Field Research in-depth: interviews, expert discussions, user studies, observations, technology inquiry, etc
- Workshops: Co-design, participatory, knowledge exchange, etc
- Involvement of your stakeholders
- Findings and Next Steps

Project Development & Evaluation

- Single-author: 7'500 – 10'500 words
- Group (max): up to 13'500 words

Content to cover:

- Used Methods: Brainstorming, Experiments, User Journeys, Personas, Prototypes, A/B-Testing,

etc
- Ethics, inclusion, sustainability, accessibility
- Evaluation of results by participants/users/prototypes/yourself
- Role of Exhibition and Video-storytelling

Critical Reflection and Conclusion

- Single-author: 1'650 – 2'500 words
- Group (max): up to 3'250 words

Content to cover:

- Transfer of Knowledge
- Critique of process and achievements
- Contributions: original and unique perspective advancing your field
- Findings & Outcomes
- Future Steps

Bibliography

No word count.

References & In-Text Citation

Bibliography

Organised alphabetically by order of source genre: book, book chapter, journal article, conference article, academic thesis, newspaper article, web article, etc.

Accepted styles: APA, CMS, or other or refer to the document ba_thesis_viad_2017.pdf for details for each type of reference. The important part is when you choose your style to be consistent and homogeneous throughout.

Usually, you can follow this guideline: Last name, First name. Date. Title. Publisher.

For book chapter, journal and conference papers, study, etc. It's usually Last name, First name. Date. “Title of article”. In book title or publication. etc.

For web URLs, you need to feature the link, the author(s) of the article/reference featured in the link, the date it was created, AND the date you retrieved the information.

Additional elements

You should feature at the beginning acknowledgments, especially if you worked with users and

participants, if you benefited from all sorts of support, including your mentors 🙂 etc.

At the end, if needed, add an **annex** with additional documents.

Number your pages.

It's good practice to add a **header** throughout with the title of your document and the current chapter.

Footnotes should be used sparingly and only if they have a strong added value.

Text and Numbers

Provide the source for all references you're making throughout the document, images, data statistics, quotes, arguments supported by theories and case studies.

Citation are made throughout the text by putting in brackets the name of author, year and page if it's a quote or a precise argument.

Ex. (Deleuze 1974: 53)

For two authors, the two names are mentioned e.g. (Deleuze & Guattari 1973)

For more than two authors: (Deleuze et al 1974)

The name and year then refer to the bibliography at the end.

Image Caption

All images have to be captioned either directly below the image or in a table of illustrations that list all images used with the page where they're used or the numbers that they have. Images should be captioned with title, year, author of project, author of image (this can be two different authors), where it's been retrieved from and when (website link) or other source. In the case of an art piece, mention the format, the material (“net art”, “oil on canvas”, etc) and if appropriate where it is hosted (museum, gallery, etc).

Helpful Sources

- **APA Style**
  - >> Reference Guide
  - >> In-Text Citation Guide
  - >> Image Citation Guide
- **CMS Style**
  - >> Reference & In-Text Citation Guide
  - >> Image Citation Guide

Authorship and Plagiarism awareness, AI Declaration

In case of two students authoring the document, please mark clearly each student's contribution with different colors. An effective way in the past was to work in a shared document, e.g. Google Docs. This way the mentors can see clearly who has written what.

Use of LLM & ML tools

A word about plagiarism (german excerpt from ba_thesis_viad_2017.pdf):

Gemäss Allgemeiner Studienordnung (ASO) § 16 haben Studierende ihre Leistungen eigenständig zu erbringen. Die Verwertung nicht deklarierter fremder Arbeitsergebnisse (z.B. Plagiate) gilt als unredlich. Unredliche Leistungen werden als nicht bestanden bewertet. Ein Ausschluss des fehlbaren Studenten, der fehlbaren Studentin von der ZHdK ist gemäss ASO § 24 Abs. 2 möglich. (Beschluss der Hochschulleitung 11.05.2011)

Um Plagiate zu vermeiden, muss für jede Textstelle, für jeden Gedanken und jede Idee eines fremden Autors die entsprechende Quelle angegeben werden. Auch indirekt zitierte Textpassagen und Gedanken müssen eine Quellenangabe erhalten. Nur eigene Gedanken und Ideen, sowie allgemein bekannte Tatsachen («Ein Tag hat 24 Stunden») benötigen keine Quellenangabe.

General Literature

- Jürg Niederhausen, Duden: die schriftliche Arbeit, 4. ed. (Mannheim: Duden-Verlag, 2006). Wolfgang Weimer, Logisches Argumentieren (Stuttgart: Reclam, 2005).
- Kate L. Turabian, A Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations: Chicago Style for Students and Researchers, 7th Edition (Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2007).
- Otto Kruse, Keine Angst vor dem leeren Blatt: Ohne Schreibblockaden durchs Studium (Frankfurt am Main: Campus Verlag, 2004).
- Michael Harvey, “Nuts & Bolts of College Writing (Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing, 2003).
- Christian Boulanger and Raimund Krämer, Wissenschaftliches Schreiben (Potsdam: Universitätsverlag, 2005).
- Nigel Warburton, Basics of Essay Writing (London: Routledge, 2006.)

Examples of how to combine theory and practice in a thesis

- Making Spaces: How Design Worksbooks Work
- Attention To Detail: Annotations of a Design Process
- The Presence Project

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