## A guide to writing a BSc thesis at RHI



In this document you can find information on writing a BSc thesis at the chair group Economic and Environmental History.

If you are interested in writing a BSc thesis with RHI, you can contact the education coordinator Pim de Zwart ([pim.dezwart@wur.nl](mailto:pim.dezwart@wur.nl)).

For more information on RHI, visit our website: <https://www.wur.nl/en/research-results/chair-groups/social-sciences/economic-and-environmental-history-group.htm>

## Economic and Environmental History (RHI)

You can write your BSc thesis at RHI if you follow the specialisation *Economics of Development* of the Bachelor’s programme *International Development Studies* (BIN), or the programme *Economics and Governance* (BEB). If you follow a different Bachelor’s programme it is possible that RHI co-supervises your thesis in collaboration with another chair group.

The mission of RHI is to offer temporal depth to societal debates and social theories on sustainable and equitable welfare development. We apply comparative historical methods to better understand long-term patterns of interdependence between people, institutions and environments. Our empirical work builds on a combination of qualitative sources and large statistical datasets, which we construct from historical archives across the globe. Our current research projects are situated in Africa, Asia, Europe and Latin America (c. 1500-2000).

Research topics include:

* Agricultural development
* Colonialization, decolonization, postcolonialism
* Environmental history
* Globalization
* Global inequality
* Health and pandemics
* Long-run economic development
* Migration
* Shocks and resilience
* State formation processes
* War and famine

We expect students who write their thesis at RHI:

* to study a topic from a historical perspective. This can either be several decades or several centuries. It is key that students take developments over time into account.
* to actively engage with theory and academic debates.

Moreover, it is possible to perform an empirical analysis, using quantitative methods (analysing archival or digitized statistical sources) and/or qualitative methods (such as conducting interviews, performing a discourse analysis, or studying archival or digitized reports). However, for a BSc thesis it is also possible to perform a literature study.

RHI offers several elective courses that can help you prepare for a BSc thesis with a historical perspective, such as *Sustainability and Resilience in Historical Perspective* (RHI-50806), *Global Economic Inequality, 1500-present* (RHI-55306), *Global Migration* (RHI-54806), and *African History* (RHI-51806).

Check our website for more information on RHI courses:

<https://www.wur.nl/en/research-results/chair-groups/social-sciences/economic-and-environmental-history-group/education-2.htm>

## Finding a supervisor and topic

Depending on your interests, you will be linked to a supervisor. RHI supervises theses on a variety of topics. Below you can find a list of thesis supervisors and their research expertise and regional focus, which gives an impression of the topics we supervise. In consultation with your supervisor you will decide which topic you will study and how to approach this topic methodologically and theoretically.

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| **Supervisor** | **Research topics** | **Region of expertise** |
| Prof.dr. Ewout Frankema | Global inequality, state formation, trade, capitalism, migration | Africa, Asia & Latin America |
| Dr. Anne-Lise Bobeldijk | Memory studies, transnational history, war, conflict | Europe |
| Mr.dr. Piet van Cruijningen | Agrarian history, environmental history | Western Europe & North America |
| Dr. Pablo Fernández Cebrián | Trade, state capacity, education | Africa |
| Dr. Daniel Gallardo Albarrán | Health inequality, public health, well-being | Global |
| Dr. Michiel de Haas | Migration, inequality, (politics of) rural development | Africa |
| Dr. Sandra de Pleijt | Human capital, long-run economic growth, industrialisation, inequality | Europe & Asia |
| Dr. Larissa Schulte Nordholt | Decolonization, colonial history, world history | Africa |
| Dr. Tom Westland | Industrialisation, living standards, inequality, labour history | Africa & Asia |
| Dr. Pim de Zwart | Globalization, inequality | Asia |
| Dr. Ingrid de Zwarte | Food, famine, conflict | Europe & Asia |

You can check Research@WUR (<https://research.wur.nl/>) for the scientific output of RHI researchers.

What can you expect of your supervisor?

* Regular meetings to discuss your progress (e.g. every two weeks).
* Feedback on your research proposal
* Feedback on draft versions of chapters
* Feedback on final draft of the thesis
* Final assessment (together with the examiner) during the presentation/defence

In return, we expect students to:

* sign a learning agreement (see page 5)
* clearly communicate their progress
* write a research proposal (see below)
* respect deadlines
* respect the principles of academic integrity (see below on ‘guidelines for writing and referencing’ and ‘data management policy’)

## Writing a research proposal

As a first step, you will write a research proposal, which needs to be approved by your supervisor.

The research proposal (ca. 3 pages) should contain:

* Introduction of the topic
* Research context
  + Relevance and academic debate
  + Literature review
* Research questions
* Methods and sources
* Chapter outline of the thesis
* Time schedule
* Bibliography

## Guidelines for writing and referencing

Below you can find some general guidelines for writing and referencing.

How to structure your thesis, is a topic you will discuss with your supervisor early on in the research process. As a general rule you can follow the following chapter outline:

* Abstract
* Table of content
* Introduction, including:
  + Problem statement and relevance
  + Research questions
  + Theoretical framework
  + Approach
  + Structure of the thesis
* Literature review (could also be part of the introduction)
* Methodology (could also be part of the introduction)
* Results (could be divided over different chapters)
* Discussion / conclusion
* Bibliography
* Appendices

How to formulate a research question? A good research question:

* is clearly defined in terms of topic, location and time period;
* requires an analytical argumentation for answering it;
* cannot be answered by a simple yes/no, or a mere description of events.

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| Examples of poor research questions: | Example of a good research question: |
| * What were the main causes of the Arab Spring? * Did economic factors play a role in the outbreak of the 2011 revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya? | * To what extent did difference in the causes of the 2011 revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya affect their outcomes? |

Sub-questions systematically investigate smaller elements of the research question. The combination of sub-questions leads to an answer to the main question. This means that all sub-questions need to be relevant to the main question, and that all aspects of the research question need to be covered in the sub-questions.

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| Main question | Sub-questions |
| * To what extent did difference in the causes of the 2011 revolutions in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya affect their outcomes? | * What are the underlying social-economic and demographic conditions in the countries that experienced a revolution in 2011, and how were these conditions different from the years preceding? * What were the main political concerns that the revolutionary actors voiced during the revolution and how had these concerns developed over the years leading up to the revolution? * What explains the variation in the response from the elite coalitions following the onset of protesting? * How did these factors influence the variation in the long-run outcomes of these revolutions? |

A general rule for the structure of a paragraph is as follows:

* You start with a topic sentence in which you introduce the content of the paragraph. Ideally this sentence does not refer to literature, but indicates what *you* see as the core argument of the paragraph.
* You then provide evidence or examples of the topic sentence in supporting sentences.
* You end with a concluding or linking sentence, in which you either sum up the main argument or indicate what the next paragraph might cover.

You can think of a paragraph as a mini essay, discussing a single idea or argument. The topic sentence functions as the introduction, the supporting sentences form the body, and you finish with a conclusion.

Accurate referencing is important in all academic work. We expect you to be transparent about the sources that you use and to avoid plagiarism (also see page 7 and Appendix I). We check for plagiarism after you have submitted your thesis. In case of plagiarism we will inform the Examining Board of Social Sciences which can impose sanctions (such as exclusion from the examination for a year). You are allowed to choose which reference style you want to use, as long as you follow the rules consistently. On the website of Scribbr you can find student’s guides to different reference styles, such as APA and Chicago style. See: [www.scribbr.com](http://www.scribbr.com).

Tables and figures need to be numbered, they need to have a title and a reference to the source. It is also important that you describe in the main text what the reader needs to take from the table or figure, instead of only referring to it.

During your thesis project, you might realise you would like to improve your writing skills and develop new writing strategies. The Wageningen Writing Lab offers individual writing tutoring. Contact them via: [info.wageningenwritinglab@wur.nl](mailto:info.wageningenwritinglab@wur.nl)