**Guidelines for writing a research proposal with the Agricultural Economics and Rural Policy Group**

This document gives some guidelines on how to write a research proposal with the Agricultural Economics and Rural Policy Group. Formal requirements for writing a thesis are given in the course guides of the theses. First, the structure of the proposal is discussed. Second, some writing tips are provided. Finally, referencing is discussed.

1. **Structure**

A research proposal starts with the background, is then followed by the research objective and questions, followed by the research methodology, next an overview of the contents of the thesis is given and it ends with a time planning.

**Background**

The ‘*background*’ of your research introduces the field of research and indicates the gap in knowledge. Possible hypotheses can be indicated here. Important is also to delineate the research, you cannot do everything and it is important to be clear about that. You can use references very effectively to delineate your research. For example, Janse and Pietersen (2020) provide an overview of all trade agreements. However, what is missed in their overview is a discussion of the CETA agreement between the European Union and Canada. This implies you can concentrate on CETA and that you do not have to discuss other trade agreements.

**Objective and research questions**

The ‘*objective of the research*’ states the gap in knowledge (as indicated in the background) in the form of the goal of the research. The objective is followed immediately by the ‘*research questions*’ which indicate via which steps the objective can be reached. Research questions need to be operational in the sense that it should be possible to give a specific answer to them. As chapters have different subjects it can be useful to link the research questions to the chapters of your thesis. For example, What does the literature tells us about...’, ‘Which data are required to estimate ...’.

**Methodology**

The ‘*methodology*’ part specifies the theory and methods used to answer the research questions. Examples of theories are ‘micro economics’ and ‘institutional and organisational theory’. Examples of methods are ‘literature research’, ‘cluster analysis’ and ‘semi-structured interviews’. Indicate the methodology for each research question separately. For example, research question 1 will be answered using a literature research. I will use the theoretical framework as presented by Jansen et al. (2020) to structure the literature overview.

**Overview**

The ‘*overview*’ states the contents of the subsequent chapters of the thesis. This has to be done both in words and in the form of a contents overview of the thesis. The first chapter is the ‘*introduction*’ which largely overlaps with the research proposal. The last chapter is always ‘conclusions and discussion’. The conclusions summarize the main findings and provide direct answers to the research questions formulated in the introduction. You also have to indicate if your conclusions are confirmed by others or fit within the literature. The general discussion provides a critical reflection on the research and mentions the caveats of the study, and therefore puts the conclusions into perspective. From the caveats, suggestions for future research (i.e. recommendations) can be derived. Caveats usually concentrate on data quality and availability and methodological issues (e.g. was the used method appropriate). In some cases you can also provide policy recommendations. The general discussion is an important assessment criterion.

There is no unique order for the core chapters because this depends on the topic and the methodology that is selected. However, in most empirical research the first core chapter (i.e. chapter 2) presents either a literature overview (which could also be part of the introduction) and or (economic) theory (i.e. theoretical framework). The second core chapter (i.e. chapter 3) presents the available data (and how this data is collected) or a description of the sector or case study area. In the third core chapter (i.e. chapter 4) theory and data are confronted leading to an empirical model. This chapter also indicates how the coefficients of the empirical model are determined e.g. by econometric estimation or calibration. The last core chapter presents the estimation results and their discussion (i.e. signs and size of effects) in case of an econometric model. Alternatively, in case of a simulation model, it presents the scenarios, the results of the simulations and a discussion of the results. In the case of a qualitative research design, this chapter may present and discuss interview or other results in a structured way, i.e. in line with the literature review or the theoretical model that was presented in chapter 2.

**Other elements of a proposal**

There are four other elements of a research proposal. First, the title of the thesis. The title of the thesis should be short and should summarize your research. Second, indicate your name and registration number, whether it is a BSc or MSc thesis and the study programme for which you write the thesis. Third, at the end of the proposal you give a reference list. Finally you include a time planning. Try to make the time planning realistic. Your supervisor will not check your progress (that is your own responsibility) but if you do not finish your thesis on time (the time you indicated yourselves) this will negatively affect the final mark of your thesis.

1. **Writing tips**

Some writing tips:

1. The length of a proposal should preferably not be longer than 2 pages (main text). Nobody nowadays reads long texts. Careful delineation of you research (i.e. be selective and focus on what is new and what you contribute), using effective referencing (i.e. do not rewrite other people’s text) and appendices can help to keep your text short.
2. Use references, do not express your personal views or ideas. Your ideas can be expressed when selecting and delineating the topic of your thesis.
3. In a scientific text you have to avoid words like: should, could, would, huge, tiny, etc. These are examples of vague and subjective use of language. Something is true or not, an author states this and another author states something else, and size has to be indicated with (relative) numbers. Always mention the year if you use numbers.
4. Always provide a source in case you use tables, figures or graphs.
5. Make short sentences containing only one subject.
6. Always carefully check the units in which numbers are expressed.
7. Avoid using a lot of abbreviations and always define them, e.g. European Union (EU).
8. There is UK and US spelling, e.g. labour versus labor, modelling versus modeling and analyse versus analyze. Be consistent.
9. "Good writing is rewriting," and you should make a serious effort at editing, rewriting, and fine-tuning before you hand in (parts of) your text to your supervisor. It takes much longer to read poor writing than good writing. It is a waste of a supervisor's time to read material that is not yet ready to be presented – and it is disrespectful to expect him or her to do so.
10. Avoid passive constructions wherever possible. The rule that you must avoid personal pronouns is antiquated and has been rejected by most scientific journals. If you collected the data using a survey, there is nothing wrong with saying, "I collected the data using a survey." Where it would be repetitive to use personal pronouns ("I did this. I did that. I did the other thing."), or where it makes the sentence more awkward to use the active voice, you may occasionally, use the passive voice (e.g. data have been collected using a survey).
11. Do not use long words where short ones will do. Do not use jargon where regular language will do. Do not use special words to make your writing seem more technical, scientific, or academic when the message is more clearly presented otherwise.
12. **References**

Although there are many formats for referencing and a reference list (i.e. bibliography) agricultural economists usually use the one below. It is always important to be consistent.

In the text you mention author plus year in case you refer to a text in a book or report (e.g. Jansen, 2019). If you use a literal citation from a text, you add also the page number where the citation can be found in the original text (e.g. Jansen, 2019: 2). In case of two authors you mention both (e.g. Jansen and Pietersen, 2018). In case there are more than two authors you mention the first plus et al. (e.g. Jansen et al., 2019). In the reference list (or bibliography) you give the complete reference.

*Article:*

Samson, S., Gardebroek, C. and Jongeneel, R.A. (2017). [Analysing trade-offs between milk, feed and manure production on Dutch dairy farms](http://edepot.wur.nl/408138). *European Review of Agricultural Economics,* 44(3): 475-498.

# *Chapter in book:*

# Klijs, J., Peerlings, J. and Heijman, W. (2016). Regionalising input-output tables: Comparison of four location quotient methods. In: [Matias, Á.,](https://www.scopus.com/authid/detail.uri?authorId=23991048000&amp;eid=2-s2.0-84978346642) [Nijkamp, P.](https://www.scopus.com/authid/detail.uri?authorId=7102958684&amp;eid=2-s2.0-84978346642), and Romão, J. (eds.), *Impact assessment in tourism economics*. Basel: Springer International Publishing: 43-65.

*Book:*

De Gorter, H., Drabik, D. and Just, D.R. (2015). *The economics of biofuel policies. Impacts on price volatility in grain and oilseeds markets*. New York: Palgrave MacMillan.

*Internet source:*

European Commission (2018). Proposal for a Directive of the European Parliament and of the Council amending Directive 2008/98/EC on waste. <http://eur-lex.europa.eu/legal-content/EN/TXT/?qid=1453384548330&uri=CELEX:52015PC0595>. Accessed 6-4-2018.