Editorial Standards for a Philosophy Thesis

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In this document, I explain editorial standards for a BA or MA thesis in philosophy. Most of what I say is uncontroversial. Some things are controversial in philosophy departments, but uncontroversial in the external world. Whenever I feel that something is controversial, I try to point out alternatives and leave the decision to you. I also recommend to double-check your choices with your supervisor!

There is one universally valid guideline: *form follows content*. Always. Good editing is good editing because it highlights the essential features of the content and helps the reader to digest it. The guidelines below are motivated by reaching this aim.

Note: this document does *not* cover citation style and how to compose a bibliography. For this, a separate document is required.

1 The Program: MS Word, Libre Office, or LaTeX?

The first question concerns the computer program you are going to use for writing the thesis. Perhaps you think: "**Microsoft Word**, what else?"

MS Word is certainly the most obvious choice, but there are two reasons to consider alternatives. First, you can use its open source counterpart, **Libre Office Write**. It works in the same way, has the same buttons and menus, but it is open source software and not owned by the Microsoft corporation. It is freely available for all operating systems.

Second, both MS Word and Libre Office Write are WYSIWYG editors: "what you see is what you get". In complex, highly structured documents like a BA/MA thesis, you may want to consider separating the content-oriented writing process from working on the visual appearance of the document. This separation is implemented in document markup programs such as LaTeX.

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What does this mean? Basically, you write the thesis in plain text in a LaTeX editor and you use logical markups for chapter or section headings, boldface, italics, etc. When you decide to compile your input file, the program typesets your thesis as a pdf file, deciding on the layout based on general typesetting principles and your chosen settings. The output looks in all likelihood much nicer than what you will generate in a WYSIWYG editor.

LaTeX is not for everybody, but for (many) more people than you may think. It can be applied in any subfield of philosophy.[1] If you are interested, you can download a small course on my website. The course materials also contain a LaTeX thesis template. So you can directly start writing, without having to configure the document first.

In a nutshell, the main advantages of LaTeX are professional appearance, consistent document structure (including amenities such as automatic table of contents), and a great bibliography management system.

2 The Structure

A thesis is usually structured in the following way: title page, acknowledgements, table of contents, introduction, main chapters, conclusion, appendices (if necessary), and the bibliography. See the sample file. Acknowledgements and table of contents can also be moved to the end of the thesis, though I prefer to have them at the front. An index ($\neq$ *indice*) is only recommended for long books.

All types of divisions—chapters, sections and paragraphs—serve to distinguish the themes you cover in your thesis, and to highlight its logical structure (e.g., exposition, argumentation, conclusion). They show to the reader how the parts work together in creating the whole. The structure of your thesis should serve this goal.

Chapters (*capitoli*) are the main divisions of books and book-like texts, such as a thesis. The heading of Chapter 1 might read, for example, "1. The theory of political parties in Gramsci's *Quaderni*".

The reason why I advise against Roman numerals for chapters is that chapters are structured into **sections** (*paragrafi*), whose number is preceded by the chapter number (e.g., "1.3. The historical necessity of political parties" denotes the third section of the first chapter).[2] I find it confusing to mix two numbering systems. Most international publishers agree and use arabic numerals only. Insch'allah! But quite some Italian publishing

[1] For any thesis involving formulas, the choice between LaTeX (=great formula editor) and MS Word (=poor formula editor) is automatic.

[2] Note that neither chapter nor section titles are concluded by periods.

houses are not troubled and use Roman numerals for chapter numbers. In case of doubt, check with your supervisor.

Should you number the introduction as Chapter 1? It depends. If it is short, about 1–2 pages, then don't. If it is considerably longer, then number it. Same reasoning for the conclusion. Personally, I recommend an introduction of about 3–4 pages: it allows you to present your research problem, your objectives and your methodology in reasonable detail. Same for the conclusion: take some time to look back on your achievements. But this is something you should discuss with your supervisor.

The first section of a chapter should not start immediately below the chapter heading, but after an introductory text that can be as short as one paragraph, but also as long as two or three pages (in a MA thesis). This depends very much on you, and on the content of the chapter. In any case, this initial part of the chapter should explain what the chapter is about, how you will proceed, and how the chapter is structured. A chapter may, but need not, contain a section with conclusions.

The use of **subsections** (*sottoparagrafi*), which divide sections, is a matter of taste. I tend to discourage their use in the context of a BA thesis. The entire thesis will usually be in the range of 40–60 pages; the division in chapters and sections will then provide sufficient structure. You won't need subsection 1.3.2 in most cases. Exceptions can be made for long sections which have an obvious internal structure.

The smallest division unit is the **paragraph** (*capoverso*). I will say more about it in the next section.

3 Layout and Design

Writing a thesis means you have to make various choices related to layout and design: font type, font size, spacing, margins, and so on. All these choices should be guided by considerations of what is *pleasant to read for the human eye*. These questions have been studied for a long time—look at medieval manuscripts and their wonderful typesetting. In my recommendations, I try to follow established best practice.

3.1 Font Type and Font Size

The first question concerns the **font type**. Do you want *serifs* or not? Serifs (*grazie*) are the small lines and strokes attached to the end of a letter—look at the bottom of the "r" and the "f", or the beginning and end of the "s". Without serifs, text looks like this.

Serifs originated in Greek and Roman times when engraving letters

into stones. The invention of printing notwithstanding, serifs have remained standard in typesetting. A well-known *serif font* is Times New Roman, whereas well-known *sans-serif fonts* include Arial and fonts from the Antiqua family. This text uses a serif font, too.

Online you will typically find sans-serif fonts, including e-publications of scientific articles, whereas print media (e.g., books, newspapers) prefer serif fonts. This is very much a matter of personal taste, and you can decide either way. If you are uncertain or indifferent, I recommend that you go with the prevalent tradition in philosophy and choose a serif font.

Once you have decided on the font type, you need to pick a particular font. There is a huge choice. I like Latin Modern Roman, both in the version with and without serifs. Times New Roman, with its small characters that are suitable for a newspaper publication, is not my cup of tea. But this is up to you. In any case, pick something which is not too fancy.

The appropriate **font size** depends on which font you pick. Often 11 points is fine (like in this document), but for some fonts, you might want to raise to 12 points or to lower to 10.5 points. It really depends.

Subsection headings (if you have them) should be slightly bigger than the basic font size and section headings clearly bigger. Chapter headings may be rather huge. See my sample document. If you use MS Word/Libre Office, you can achieve this by marking the headings as "Heading 1 [2, 3]", in decreasing order of font size. Or you make up your own system by hand (again, make sure to follow it consistently). If you use LaTeX, the program will scale up the heading font sizes automatically.

3.2 Alignment

Text should be aligned on the left and on the right. Headings are not aligned unless they stretch over more than a line.

3.3 Page Breaks

The first page of your thesis is the title page (*frontespizio*). All major parts of the chapter, i.e., acknowledgements, table of contents, chapters (including introduction and conclusion) and the bibliography start on a new odd-numbered page (*pagina dispari*). This can mean that you have a blank page between chapters. Don't worry about it.

A new section within a chapter is *not* accompanied by a page break, unless this happens by chance (i.e., because the previous section ends on the last line of a page).

3.4 Paragraphs and Indents

Paragraphs (*capoversi*) structure your text. The visual separation between two groups of sentences should, ideally, correspond to the logical structure of the text (e.g., an enumeration of different arguments, or moving from an argument to the conclusion). Remember: form follows content. This makes the text easier to read and to digest.

The appropriate length of a paragraph depends on the logical structure of your text, and to a certain degree on your personal preferences. Especially at the beginning or the end of a (sub)section, paragraphs can be as short as one sentence. More often, however, they are longer. In scholarly work, they are typically between 50 and 100 words, but it really depends. When you reach 150 words, think about splitting the paragraph.

Paragraphs are marked by **indents** (*rientri a capo*). When you start a new paragraph, you start a new line (*accapo* oppure *a capo*), but the first word of that line is shifted to the right. It is *indented*. We indent all paragraphs except the very first paragraph of a section, or when we start a paragraph directly under a table or figure. The precise indentation value is up to you. This document uses 20pt/7mm, which is rather generous.

Do not separate two paragraphs by an empty line. This is perfectly fine on websites, but scholarly work is supposed to be read in print. Empty lines are used at the beginning and end of a (sub)section and nowhere else.

3.5 Margins

How broad should the page margins of your thesis be? This depends on what is pleasant to read. Practice shows that you should by no means have more than 70 characters (*battute*) per line. I have opened some books by famous publishing houses: fiction and non-fiction, large and small format. None of them even exceeds 60 characters per line.

So ideally, we should use smaller paper. Yes. That's what printed books do. A4 paper is more suitable for handwriting than for printed text. But alas, printers love A4 and your thesis has to be printed on A4 paper with font size 11 or 12. This means that you need *wide margins* to avoid having too many characters in a single line.

The standard in the LaTeX typesetting software is to use only 70% of the paper width and paper height for the runnning text. This implies a margin of about 44mm to the left *and* to the right. Yes, I am serious. Top and bottom margin are even a bit wider (they include the footer and the header, though). Probably not what you are used to, but trust me on this.

You have some leeway to cut the margins, but don't overdo it. Sometimes I set all margins (left, right, bottom, top) to 40mm for reasons of

simplicity. That's in the range of tolerance. I would not tighten it more. However, some colleagues prefer smaller margins and bigger font size (e.g., 13 point) instead of wide margins and standard font size.

3.6 Spacing

Spacing mainly concerns the distance between the lines of the running tet. One of the most widespread false beliefs about a thesis, or any scholarly text, is that it should be written double-spaced, or with factor 1.5.

For adding handwritten comments, this makes sense. Double-spaced texts allow you to annotate and to rephrase specific formulations. Research articles submitted to journals had to be double-spaced for this reason. Nowadays, most referees and supervisors annotate your draft with a computer program and then, the text should above all be reader-friendly. *Double-spacing does not improve legibility. Actually, it decreases it.* There is not a single printed book with double-spaced lines. Even in electronic publications where printing costs do not matter, you will not find such wide spacing. Guess why.

This document uses single spacing—fonts are usually optimized for this. But perhaps you prefer to have more distance between the lines. After all, tastes can be different. Some books in my library have slightly wider spacing and I like it, too. In this case, try a proportional distance between 1.05 and 1.15. *In no case you should go beyond 115%.* You may use 1.5 lines spacing in your draft if your supervisor asks you to do so, but never, never do it in the final version.

3.7 Header and Footer

Of course, headers and footers are much less important than spacing and margins. Still, some brief advice.

For a book-style document like a thesis, the footer should contain the page number *at the outer side of the page*. In other words, it should be aligned to the left for even pages, and to the right for odd pages. This makes double-sided printing much easier. The local copy shops will confirm.

The header of the *even* pages should be aligned to the left and contain the chapter number and title (e.g., "Chapter 1. Bla bla"). The header of the *odd* pages, should be aligned to the right and contain the section number and title, without the word "Section" (e.g., "1.3. Specific bla bla"). Headers should be aligned to the outer side of the pages, too.

My thesis template for LaTeX takes care of this automatically. But you can also configure MS Word or Libre Office Write accordingly.

3.8 Widows and Orphans

Avoid to start a paragraphs on the last line of a page, or to finish it on the first line of a new page. These "lonely lines" are called *widows* and *orphans*. I have told my LaTeX template to avoid them. Also MS Word and Libre Office Write should do so by default.

3.9 Printing

The printed version of the thesis should be double-sided (*fronte/retro*). Saves paper and makes the thesis easier to read, too.

The binding (*rilegatura*) can be flexible—no need to spend money on hardcover.

4 Editing Quotations

The rules and conventions of in-text citations are a separate and important topic. Here I just want to talk about editing quotations.

First of all, emphasis and internal structure of the original text (e.g., division into paragraphs) should be preserved. If you decide to emphasize something in the quote, feel free to do so, but make clear that the emphasis is yours (e.g., finish the quote with "Carnap 1931b: 240, my emphasis").

In English and German, the spelling of historic texts should be adapted to modern conventions if your edition has not yet done so. The original spelling makes these authors look dusty and outdated. Whereas for historic texts in Italian, one often retains the original spelling (e.g., Machiavelli: "difficultà"). Check this point with your supervisor.

Second, **quotation symbols**. In American English, quotations are introduced and closed by a double quotation mark. Quotations-in-quotations are marked by a single quotation mark. This may (but need not) be reversed in British English, where conventions are less clear. I recommend to follow the American system, which is easy to remember and very widespread.

In Italian, you have more options. Some Italian philosophy books in my possession follow the American English system, with double quotation marks (=*virgolette alte*) as the primary quotation tool. However, most media outlets use *guillemets* in their place, e.g., «C'è del marcio in Danimarca». In Italian, guillemets are called *caporali* or *virgolette basse*.

So far, so good. Unfortunately, this is not the end of the story. Some outlets use guillemets for quotations and dialogues, but double quotation marks for quotations-in-quotations, scare quotes (e.g., «lei chiamava il suo gatto "il leader supremo"») and for distinguishing use from mention:

> La parola “negro” viene percepita come discriminatoria.

This system disambiguates between the use of quotation marks for different purposes, which is nice, but it complicates matters with respect to a simple system where one symbol does the job for everything.

Basically, I advise you to choose a style that you like and that is simple to remember (because you need to use it consistently in the thesis).

Third, should quotations be part of the running text, or should they be reproduced in a paragraph of their own, like in the example above? There are no hard rules here, but some guidelines. If the quotation reports just part of a sentence, it is usually left in the running text, with the reference given in parentheses. (For an author like Thomas Mann, you may rethink this guideline, but let's pretend that sentences have standard length.) If the quotation extends over two sentences or more, or over an extraordinarily long single sentence, you put it into a separate paragraph, which is indented with respect to the running text. In this case, we do *not* use quotation marks. I also recommend to lower the font size.

> Die Gleichheit fordert das Nachdenken heraus durch Fragen, die sich daran knüpfen und nicht ganz leicht zu beantworten sind. Ist sie eine Beziehung? eine Beziehung zwischen Gegenständen? oder zwischen Namen oder Zeichen für Gegenstände? (Frege 1893: 25)

As you see, we do not indent the paragraph that contains the quotation. But we do so if the quotation is very long and consists of more than one paragraph in the original work.

Finally, just to make sure that you know this: if you add something to a quote to make it more understandable, it should be in square brackets (e.g., “this essay [by Hume] was very influential”), and omissions in a quote are signalled by “[...]”.

5 Miscellaneous

Finally, I will advise you on some minor topics of editorial relevance, such as footnotes, lists, dashes and highlighting.

5.1 Footnotes

Footnotes have two main purposes: (1) providing bibliographical information (if you use the notes-bibliography system), and (2) providing useful, but non-essential information that would disrupt the flow of the running text.

The use of footnotes for purpose (1) depends on the nature of your thesis. Among historians the notes-bibliography system is standard and

so you will have many bibliographical footnotes if you write about a topic in the history of philosophy. In contemporary philosophy, and the analytic tradition in particular, the author-year system is standard and so you will not use footnotes for purpose (1).

All kinds of texts can, and will, use footnotes for purpose (2). Again, they are quite common in the history of philosophy, where you might often add a footnote about the sources, the chosen translation, etc. In systematically oriented work, however, I recommend to use them with caution. From the reader's point of view, jumping to a footnote is disruptive, and some people will not read them attentively. Think about what is important in the footnote, and consider merging the most relevant part with the running text, and deleting the rest. Of course, footnotes are sometimes the best solution, but don't think that the more footnotes you use, the more scholarly is your text.

5.2 Lists

Some guidelines for a thesis advise against using numbered or unnumbered lists (the latter are also known as "bullet points"). I agree with respect to avoiding **unnumbered lists**. Almost always there is a better solution using running text only. If you really think your case is an exception, go for it, but don't complain if your supervisor is unconvinced.

Numbered lists or enumerations *can* be more useful, since you can use the number of an item to refer to in the rest of the text. For example, let's suppose, Frege's famous essay "Über Sinn und Bedeutung" deals with three topics:

(1) the meaning of proper names;
(2) the meaning of entire sentences;
(3) how meaning changes in quotations and in hyperintensional contexts.

You can then say that "Frege does not provide a convincing solution for problem (2)", and so on, instead of having to repeat what the problem consists in.

5.3 (Small) Capitals

Everybody knows more or less when to use capitals (*maiuscole*). In Italian, they are limited to the beginning of a sentence and to proper names, as well as institutions ("la Santa Sede"), certain titles ("il Papa") historic periods ("Cinquecento") and historic or recurrent events ("la Riforma",

"Natale"). Sometimes, they are used for expressing a particularly high degree of respect ("mi rivolgo a Voi, Cardinale, perché [...]").

In English, you can capitalize important words in a heading, e.g., "Aspects of Scientific Explanation". But not in Italian.

Small capitals (*maiuscolette*) should be avoided altogether in English. In Italian, some people use them for author names in the bibliography, e.g., R. Carnap. I don't like this personally, but you can use them if you really want to.

5.4 Highlighting: boldface, italics and underlining

Our standard highlighting device are **italics**, called *cursivo* in Italian. We use them to give particular emphasis to a particular word, or a phrase. We also use italics for foreign language terms that we do not translate, such as *ex cathedra*. Or for a major work to which we refer in the text, such as Shakespeare's *Hamlet*.[3] We do *not* use italics for quotes, scare quotes or for distinguishing use from mention—for all this we have quotation marks.

Boldface or *grassetto* should be used for all types of headings (i.e., chapters, sections, subsections—but not for table or figure captions). Apart from that, you should use it very cautiously. In this editorial guidelines, I use boldface for marking the first occurrence of an important term or concept, but the text is no scholarly work. Boldface should, in any case, not be used as a standard tool for giving emphasis to a word or a phrase. As a tendency, I would avoid it in your thesis—apart from headings, of course.

Underlining looks rather ugly, as you see in this example. Therefore we avoid it. Keeps things simple, too.

5.5 Dashes

Many people do not know that there are three types of dashes. The narrowest of them is the **hyphen** (the Italian *trattino*) and it is used, appunto, for hyphenation and for semantic units, such as "double-spaced" or "italo-americano". The slightly wider **en-dash** (*lineetta enne*), is used for indicating ranges, such as "pp. 26–27" or "1914–18". The widest of all, the **em-dash** (*lineetta di sospensione*), is a punctuation mark used for structuring a phrase. It works similar to the comma or to parentheses, but is perceived as more interruptive, e.g., "Plato—one of my favorite philosophers—was

[3] This rule holds for books and book-type texts. For research articles such as Carnap's "Überwindung der Metaphysik", we use double quotation marks. In Italian, you can also use guillemets if you prefer—see the part on quotation.

Aristotle's teacher". Typically, the content between two em-dashes is secondary and connected to a change of perspective.

In MS Word/Libre Office as well as in LaTeX, the difference is made by typing one, two or three dashes. The programs will then convert automatically to the intended type of dash. By no means, en-dashes should be preceded by white space, e.g., "pp. 26 – 27". Don't! For em-dashes, it depends on the language. In English, white space is avoided also for em-dashes. In Italian, "Platone — un mio filosofo preferito — era il maestro di Aristotele" is fine.

6 Gender-Neutral Language

The use of gender-neutral language is a hotly debated topic in academia, but also in society as a whole (*quota rosa*, *genitore 1/2*, ecc.). Some people contend that Italian has inherently sexist features—the classical example is the *maschile non marcato* in expressions like "cari tutti" or "il capo" (most people do not say "la capa"). The argument goes that such features have undesirable real-world effects: for example, if we write "cercasi avvocato" in a job advertisement, fewer women will apply.

The empirical evidence for such claims is debatable. Nonetheless, there is no reason for preferring "a utilitarian might justify his position as follows" to "...her position..." or "utilitarians...their position...". We can simply use the plural, or alternate male and female pronouns. Or we write "cercasi avvocato/a" or—German style—"cercasi avvocato (m/f/d)". Some people even write "a utilitarian [sic] might justify *their* position", but in my opinion, this is an unnecessary display of political identity.

However, some authors also recommend deeper changes, like the use of the gender star (*asterisco*) and the *schwa* in Italian ("car* tutt*", "carə tuttə"). I discourage this practice in the context of academic writing.[4] Let me explain.

To begin with, most evidence on the causal connection between gender-neutral language and gender (in)justice in the real world regards specific contexts such as job advertisements. But even in those sensitive contexts, nobody writes "cercasi avvocatə" or "cercasi avvocat*". So which goal do we pursue when using schwa and gender star in academic writing? Think about it. Do you want to show that gender injustice matters for you, personally? Then explain to me why your political views are relevant for the reader of a philosophy thesis. Do you really think that writing "filosof*/filosofə da Platone a Carnap" mitigates gender injustice in the

[4]Social media posts, political pamphlets, etc., are a different piece of cake, but see p. 11, bottom.

real world? Do you want to convince the reader that gender injustice is important, that he or she should care, too? Then put a personal statement to this effect into the acknowledgements. But it is not part of your academic work.

Of course, things are different for a thesis on topics like trans people rights, metaphysics of non-binary gender identities, etc. In these areas, gender-inclusive language like the schwa, or the singular pronuon "they" in English, may actually make your formulations more precise, apart from showing that you are aware of peculiar sensibilities in the LGBTQ+ community. Most types of philosophical research, however, are unrelated to gender questions and do not interact with the reader as a job advertisement does.

There are also positive reasons for following standard Italian grammar and using the *maschile non marcato*. First, standard grammar is a bit like a citation style—to some degree arbitrary, but internally consistent. Whereas schwa and gender star run into lots of linguistic problems regarding pronounciation, the singluar/plural distinction, the use of articles, article-proposition contractions, and so on.[5]

Second, especially if your thesis concerns politically controversial topics (e.g., immigration, abortion rights, etc.), you want your arguments and conclusions to be convincing for people with more conservative inclinations, too. Otherwise you are just preaching to the converted. If your text is full of gender stars, many people will simply think that they are reading a political manifesto instead of a piece philosophical research. Don't let them shelve your work so easily. Try to convince them with good arguments.

Third, following standard grammar does *not* mean endorsing a peculiar political position—it just means accepting the conventions of a society that is substantially larger and more diverse than the humanities departments of *UniTO*. Linguistic conventions may and will change, but they have grown organically and at the moment they are the shared basis for communication between people with and without university education, old and young, voters of *Sinistra Ecologista* and voters of *Fratelli d'Italia*. Following standard conventions shows respect for people with different viewpoints and parts of society who are simply unaware of these academic debates. Using a idiosyncratic language promoted by a small elite will invariably produce more political polarization. If you don't think this is a problem, then have a look at the United States.

[5]See also Andrea Iacona, "Cari Tutti", *Accademia della Crusca*, 2022, URL: https://accademiadellacrusca.it/it/contenuti/cari-tutti/19528, and Andrea De Benedetti, *Così non schwa*, Torino: Einaudi, 2022.

7 The most important things at a glance

- Form follows content. Always.
- The structure of your thesis follows the requirements of the content.
- Paragraphs structure the logical flow of your argument. They are marked by starting an new line, which is indented with respect to the rest. Paragraphs are aligned to the right and to the left.
- Start each major unit of a thesis (chapters, bibliography, etc.) on an odd page, and print the thesis double-sided.
- A standard serif font like Latin Modern Roman and 11pt font size is a reasonable choice.
- Use wide margins: 40–45mm at the sides, a bit less at the top, a bit more at the bottom.
- Never use double-spacing. Use single-spacing or a proportional spacing between 105 and 115%.
- Italics are the standard tool for highlighting.
- Think well about which symbols you want to use for highlighting quotation, distinguishing use from mention, scare quotes, etc., and use them consistently. The American system (=double quotation mark for everything) is the simplest, but there are alternatives.
- Think about whether you want to learn how to write with a LaTeX-based editor.