

Master of Arts in African Studies

Master's Dissertation

Vademecum / Thesis Manual

Academic Year 2025-2026

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Titles, terms and references

Doctor	Person who obtained a PhD, recognizable by the abbreviation ‘dr.’ in front of their name.
Supervisor	The supervisor is the (main) coach of your MA dissertation. With her/him you will agree on the topic, the approach, the checking of the various chapters, etc. This may be someone from the program in African Studies, or any other lecturer whose course you took during your curriculum.
Co-supervisor	At times an MA dissertation is coached by two people. The second person is the co-supervisor. At least one of the coaches has the title doctor (dr.).
Second reader	Each MA dissertation of the program in African Studies is read by at least two people: the supervisor(s) and a second reader (also called “reading commissioner” or in short “commissioner”). They also meet together with the other members of the exam committee, in order to attend and evaluate your oral defence (cf. <i>infra</i>).
Evaluation form	The readers of your MA dissertation use a standard evaluation form. This form may be found online, here https://www.africanstudies.ugent.be/en/information-for/info-for-students/#anchor2 .
Exam committee	The exam committee of the program in African Studies deliberates over the final mark of the MA dissertation, based on the reading reports of the supervisor(s) and the second reader, as well as your science communication and oral presentation.

Secretary	For the secretary of the exam committee in charge for African Studies, see https://www.ugent.be/lw/nl/over-de-faculteit/bestuur-en-organisatie/commissies/examencommissies.htm .
Ombudsperson	The names of the relevant ombudspersons may be found at https://www.ugent.be/lw/nl/student/studiestudentenbegeleiding/ombudspersonen.htm .
A005119	Code of the Ufora course 'Master's dissertation' in African Studies. Here the program-specific information with regard to your MA dissertation may be found.
MA app	Here all faculty-general information with regard to your MA dissertation may be found: https://plato.lw.ugent.be/ .

Relevant websites

https://plato.lw.ugent.be/	MA application of the faculty: This is where you will register the (preliminary/final) title and supervisor(s) of your MA dissertation, and upload the final text of your MA dissertation
https://www.africanstudies.ugent.be/en/	Website of the programme in African Studies
https://www.ugent.be/lw/en	Website of the faculty of Arts & Philosophy
https://www.ugent.be/student/en/study-facilities/academic-writing/center.htm	Supporting site for all writing assignments in English at UGent
https://lib.ugent.be/	Following the successful oral defence of your MA dissertation, this is where your MA will become part of the UGent university library collection

What is a master's dissertation?

Contents and concept

As a capstone to MA studies each student has to write an MA dissertation. In the MA dissertation proof needs to be given that the candidate is able to undertake independent academic research, can reflect critically, and can also contextualize the research topic by framing it in a broader theoretical and methodological context.

The choice of a topic and the (co-)supervisor

Choosing a topic

You may choose your own topic. Some supervisors have a list of suggestions, which you may find at <https://www.africanstudies.ugent.be/en/information-for/info-for-students/#anchor2>: these are lists of research topics for which the student may approach the respective supervisor for guidance. Students may also come up with their own suggestions, and based on that, develop a research topic together with their supervisor(s).

For inspiration, do take a look at previous theses written by former students, here: <https://lib.ugent.be/en/catalog?q=%22Master+of+Arts+in+African+Studies%22>.

Choosing the (co-)supervisor

The student is supposed to find their supervisor(s) on their own. This may be someone from the program in African Studies, or any other lecturer whose course was taken. The student chooses the supervisor in function of the topic. As the occasion arises, if you choose a supervisor from another academic programme, and especially if you choose a supervisor from outside the faculty of Arts and Philosophy, the secretary of the exam committee of African Studies may force you to look for a co-supervisor from within the programme in African Studies, this to ensure the Africa contents of the work. You yourself have the responsibility to find a co-supervisor. At least one of the supervisors has to have a PhD (i.e., is a 'dr.').

Role of the (co-)supervisor

This information is part of the 'Brochure' of the faculty's Plato app: <https://plato.lw.ugent.be/>.

Agreements with the (co-)supervisor

This information is part of the 'Brochure' of the faculty's Plato app: <https://plato.lw.ugent.be/>.

Information sessions

A total of four information sessions are organised by the Staff of the African Studies programme, and it is obligatory to attend these sessions. By attending them, students automatically get 2 (out of 20) points of their final mark.

The dates of these information sessions for the 2025-2026 academic year are:

- (1) Monday 29 September 2025, 11:30-14:30, Rozier 44, Aud. M (18.01.105.015):
General session on writing a Master's Dissertation in African Studies at UGent

- (2) Monday 6 October 2025, 11:30-14:30, Rozier 44, Aud. M (18.01.105.015): Staff members present **possible topics** & Visit to the **library**
- (3) Monday 1 December 2025, 11:30-14:30, Rozier 44, Aud. M (18.01.105.015): On **referencing, plagiarism** and the use of **generative AI**
- (4) Monday 27 April 2026, 14:30-17:30, Blandijn, ground floor, room 0.2 (18.01.100.141): On **reporting** your research to the **wider public** via infographics, video pitches, podcasts, ... (= science communication)

Administration

Registering your (preliminary/final) MA title as well as the name(s) of your supervisor(s) is done via the faculty's Plato app: <https://plato.lw.ugent.be/>.

Submission dates

The dates to submit your MA dissertation for the academic year 2025-2026 are:

- Tuesday 26 May 2026 (= first Tuesday of the second-semester examination period), before 16:00
- and/or**
- Monday 17 August 2026 (= first Monday of the retake examination period), before 16:00

Notes on the so-called 'third session'

In case you did not pass for your MA dissertation, it is possible to retake it in a subsequent academic year. On the condition that you passed all other first- and second-semester courses as well as all year courses, there is a possibility to hand in your dissertation in January, and thus to graduate in February.

However: Although this is colloquially referred to as a 'third session', it is important to keep in mind all of the following points:

- You have to re-enrol for the new academic year, and to add the MA dissertation to your curriculum (+ submit it for approval). Following this, you will need to re-register your supervisor(s) as well as your MA title.
- You will again have to pay the MA tuition fee.
- You will again put in study credit in order to take the MA dissertation.
- You may submit in January, but you are not obliged to do so. A submission in May is still possible. In both cases: in case of failure, your next opportunity to submit is August.

Therefore, the three relevant dates for the academic year 2025-2026 are:

- Monday 5 January 2026 (= first Monday of the first-semester examination period), before 16:00

or

- Tuesday 26 May 2026 (= first Tuesday of the second-semester examination period), before 16:00

and/or

- Monday 17 August 2026 (= first Monday of the retake examination period), before 16:00

Timeline for the writing process

Within the programme in African Studies the following timeline is used, this with the aim to submit your MA dissertation during the first exam session.

- (1) Monday 13 OCT 2025: Choice of **supervisor** and **research domain**. Inform the secretary of the exam committee in charge for African Studies: <https://www.ugent.be/lw/nl/over-de-faculteit/bestuur-en-organisatie/commissies/examencommissies.htm>.
- (2) Monday 17 NOV 2025: Delimitation of the **topic** and **working title**, as well as discussion of potential fieldwork (including timing and financing), with your supervisor. Inform the secretary of the exam committee in charge for African Studies: <https://www.ugent.be/lw/nl/over-de-faculteit/bestuur-en-organisatie/commissies/examencommissies.htm>.
Note that this day is also the deadline to put the same information — i.e., working title and supervisor(s) — into the faculty's Plato app: <https://plato.lw.ugent.be/>.
- (3) Monday 15 DEC 2025: Compilation of a **bibliography** (whereby the student indicates which works she/he already read). The supervisor offers suggestions for further (compulsory) reading.
- (4) Monday 12 JAN 2026: Submission of a paper with the **status quaestionis** and **methodology**. The supervisor provides feedback.
- (5) Monday 16 FEB 2026: Submission of a detailed **table of contents**. At each section the student indicates the core by means of well-chosen keywords. She/he also prepares a timeline: how much time is needed for each section? To be sure: this table of contents is obviously indicative and may (and will) change as the research and write-up progress. The supervisor provides feedback.
- (6) Monday 16 MAR 2026: Submission of a **chapter** of one's choice (but not the introduction or the conclusion), in consultation with the supervisor. In parallel the student will also continue work on the other chapters. Those other chapters

do not need to be read by the supervisor before final submission, unless the supervisor insists on this.

(7) Monday 4 MAY 2026: Delivery of the **introduction** and **conclusion**. The supervisor provides feedback.

Each deadline is the very last day on which the student may hand in the respective item. If the student misses a deadline, the supervisor may decline to give feedback on that item.

If needed, the supervisor may change or add deadlines. Students may also ask for changes to the schedule, on the condition that good reasons are brought in for that (for example because fieldwork is planned).

Contents of a master's dissertation

Contents and structure

The piece of work that the student will produce will have the form of an extensive **scientific text**. This means that the following parts must at the very least be present:

- introduction
- problem statement, research question, or goal
- theoretical framework & literature review
- method & data collection
- analysis
- synthesis
- conclusion
- discussion
- reference list
- addenda: 'the raw data' (e.g., audio, video, pictures, transcribed texts, scanned logbooks, etc.), 'ethical aspects' (i.e., consent forms), ...

The exact order of these parts may vary. Depending on the topic, some aspects may receive more or less attention. Discuss this with your supervisor.

It is also important that the student clearly indicates that the MA dissertation departs from a well-defined **problem statement**, **research question**, or **academic goal**. This is best done at the very beginning of the piece of work (preferably already in the first paragraph of the introduction). An MA dissertation which is goal-oriented is one which aims at a "tangible end product" (e.g., a syllabus revolving around a certain topic, a dictionary, etc.). Note that a goal-oriented end product should also adhere to the principles of an academic piece of work. As such it is quasi inevitable that the student, in her/his progress towards the end product, will encounter certain partial scientific

research questions (e.g., what are the minimum requirements to which a syllabus should conform?, how do I go about the compilation as a lexicographer?).

Language requirements

Given that the MA in African Studies is taught in English, you will also write your MA in English. If you want an exception to this rule, you will need the permission from your supervisor(s), including a motivation.

Applying for exceptions is done via the faculty's Plato app: <https://plato.lw.ugent.be/>.

Size

Between **25,000** and **50,000** words, including footnotes or endnotes as well as references (but excluding possible addenda).

Form of a master's dissertation

This information is part of the 'Brochure' of the faculty's Plato app: <https://plato.lw.ugent.be/>.

References and bibliography

The correct use of reference-management software — such as EndNote, Reference Manager, Zotero, etc. — is strongly recommended. Using such software (some packages of which are made freely available to students at UGent) will save you countless of common inconsistencies, both with regard to the citation apparatus, as well as the list of references and/or bibliography. See for more information https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Comparison_of_reference_management_software.

Students who still prefer to take care of these aspects manually, are advised to adhere to a single style, for instance the MLA style (cf. <https://www.mla.org/MLA-Style>).

(Note that this advice is not only valid for the MA dissertation, but also for all other papers that need to be handed in at UGent.)

Avoiding plagiarism

See the separate document on this topic, within the present Ufora environment.

Use of generative AI (artificial intelligence)

The ability to use generative AI is not only allowed but even encouraged. However, you should, at all times, be fully aware of the ethical and deontological implications. This for

instance means that you should mention its use, meaning when, where and how you employed such tools, with reference to the tool itself (e.g., ChatGPT, Gemini, DeepSeek, or any of the 200+ models out there, see <https://lmarena.ai/>) and include the exact text of the prompts.

Evaluation

Calculation of the examination mark

The final mark for the MA dissertation is arrived at as follows:

- 2/20 of the mathematical examination mark is determined by the participation in the information sessions at the beginning of the academic year (cf. supra).
- 16/20 of the mathematical examination mark is determined by the evaluation of the submitted dissertation and of the oral presentation (cf. infra). In the oral presentation, students are expected to demonstrate their in-depth understanding of the dissertation and to explain the research steps they have taken. Hence, the dissertation and the oral presentation will be evaluated as a whole.
- 2/20 of the mathematical examination mark is determined by the student's performance in science communication to the general public after submitting the dissertation (cf. infra).

Participation in the science communication and oral presentation is mandatory. Students who do not participate in these two parts of the evaluation cannot receive a final examination mark higher than 9/20. Students must also achieve at least 10/20 for the dissertation and the oral presentation in order to pass. If this is not the case and the mathematical examination mark nevertheless exceeds 10/20, the final examination mark will be reduced to 9/20.

Evaluation form

At the program in African Studies, the supervisor(s) and second reader of your MA dissertation use a standard evaluation form for the assessment. This form may be found on the UGent African Studies website, here:

<https://www.africanstudies.ugent.be/en/information-for/info-for-students/#anchor2>.

Oral presentation

Each student has to expound on their MA dissertation orally, on a day which has been scheduled during the regular examination period. The defence has the following format: 15 minutes of presentation by the student, followed by 10 minutes of questions posed by the members of the exam committee.

Science communication

In addition to the ability to report in a scholarly form about one's own research for academic peers, in written and oral form (= the dissertation + the oral presentation), the student must also be able to report on their research results for the wider public, via infographics, video pitches, podcasts, ... The deadline to hand in this type of science communication will be exactly one week before the oral presentation.

Feedback

On the day the results are made public, you will get to see the reader reports of the supervisor(s) and the second reader via the faculty's Plato app (<https://plato.lw.ugent.be/>).

If so wished, each student may then request an appointment with their supervisor(s) and/or the second reader of their MA dissertation for further feedback.

Checklist

Use this checklist while you work on your MA dissertation:

CHECKLIST MASTER'S DISSERTATION in AFRICAN STUDIES

<i>Date</i>	<i>Action</i>	<i>Done?</i>
1. Information sessions		
sessions		
29 September	General session: Writing an MA dissertation in African Studies	<input type="checkbox"/>
6 October	Presentation of research topics by supervisors + Library tour	<input type="checkbox"/>
1 December	Referencing, plagiarism, generative AI	<input type="checkbox"/>
27 April	Workshop: Science communication	<input type="checkbox"/>
2. Arrangements with your supervisor		
13 October	Choice supervisor and research domain	<input type="checkbox"/>
17 November	Delimitation topic and working title, planning	<input type="checkbox"/>
15 December	Compilation bibliography	<input type="checkbox"/>
12 January	Delivery status quaestionis and methodology	<input type="checkbox"/>
16 February	Delivery detailed table of contents	<input type="checkbox"/>

16 March	Delivery chapter of one's choice	<input type="checkbox"/>
4 May	Delivery introduction and conclusion	<input type="checkbox"/>

3. Formal requirements

Spelling check	<input type="checkbox"/>
Grammatical check	<input type="checkbox"/>
Have your MA dissertation read by a third party (fellow student, friend, family member, etc.)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Mention the word count of the main text on the cover page (expectation: between 25,000 and 50,000 words)	<input type="checkbox"/>
Have the pages been numbered correctly?	<input type="checkbox"/>
Is the cover page in order?	<input type="checkbox"/>
Have the section and page numberings of the Table of Contents been updated/refreshed?	<input type="checkbox"/>
Has the introduction been completed?	<input type="checkbox"/>
Has the conclusion been completed?	<input type="checkbox"/>
Is the citation apparatus in accordance with the norm and consistent?	<input type="checkbox"/>
Have all sources been mentioned/listed correctly?	<input type="checkbox"/>
If you used a generative AI (artificial intelligence) tool like ChatGPT, Gemini, DeepSeek , ... has each use been mentioned? Failure to mention the use of AI amounts to plagiarism, and will be sanctioned!	<input type="checkbox"/>
Have the addenda been added, either in print or in digital form (as a CD, USB stick, link to an online website or archive, ...)?	<input type="checkbox"/>

4. Defence

26 May	Deadline to hand in the text of your dissertation	<input type="checkbox"/>
June exam period	Science communication of your dissertation	<input type="checkbox"/>
↓ 1 week later		
June exam period	Oral presentation of your dissertation	<input type="checkbox"/>