Institute of Estonian and General Linguistics, University of Tartu
Guidelines for Preliminary Reviewers of PhD Dissertations

1. What is a PhD dissertation? ¹

1.1 A PhD dissertation is an independently conducted piece of research which presents an original and reasoned solution to a specific research problem, the results of which have been adequately disseminated internationally in the field. A PhD dissertation must contain:

1.1.1 an overview of the state of the art in the field of research and the position of the research problem therein;
1.1.2 a description of the research task;
1.1.3 the hypotheses proposed;
1.1.4 a description of the methodology;
1.1.5 an account of the process and outcomes of the research;
1.1.6 a summary;
1.1.7 a list of references;
1.1.8 a comprehensive summary in Estonian covering the contents of each part of the dissertation, if the dissertation is written in a language other than Estonian, and a comprehensive summary in a language other than Estonian covering the contents of each part of the dissertation, if the dissertation is written in Estonian.

1.2 A PhD dissertation is published in the University’s dissertation series (Dissertationes … Universitatis Tartuensis) and may be presented in one of the following formats:

1.2.1 as a summarising article that complies with the requirements set out in section 1, along with previously published research publications on the topic of the dissertation, of which at least three have been published in the publications specified in paragraphs 16.1-16.2 of the Procedure for Awarding Doctorates of the University of Tartu. If an article has more than one author, the PhD candidate must specify his/her contribution to its preparation.
1.2.2 as a monograph that complies with the requirements set out in section 1, which has been pre-reviewed at an international level by at least two independent researchers acknowledged in the relevant field, and on which topic at least one research publication has been published in the publications specified in paragraphs 16.1-16.2 of the Procedure for Awarding Doctorates of the University of Tartu.
1.2.3 as a summary article that complies with the requirements set out in section 1, along with a monograph as specified in paragraph 16.3 of the Procedure for Awarding Doctorates of the University of Tartu.

1.3 The PhD dissertation submitted for preliminary review must be written in the same language as the one submitted in the final version.

2. The evaluation process and the role of the preliminary reviewer

¹ On the basis of the “Procedure for Awarding Doctorates” (Doktorikraadi andmise kord), approved by the Senate of the University of Tartu, Regulation No. 23, 20 December 2013 (entered into force on 1 January 2014, amendments entered into force on 1 January 2016)
2.1 The PhD dissertation is evaluated in two stages, the first of which is the preliminary review, and the second is the defense.

2.2 The preliminary reviewer bears a great responsibility in guaranteeing the quality of the PhD dissertation, ensuring that an incomplete work is not recommended for defense. From the point of view of the legal rights of the PhD candidate, it is particularly problematic if it is not noticed until the defense that the dissertation does not meet the minimum requirements for PhD dissertations.

2.3 The Institute Council assigns (at least) two preliminary reviewers to each PhD dissertation. The preliminary reviewer must clearly state in a reasoned, written opinion whether the dissertation is of a standard to be defended or not, i.e. the preliminary reviewer must decide if the dissertation in its present form or with small modifications meets the minimum requirements for a PhD dissertation. An opinion should not be presented conditionally, i.e. to deem that a dissertation can be defended only after specific revisions.

2.4 The manuscript is evaluated according to the following criteria:
2.4.1 The choice of topic, research problem, scope of the task and research questions: the information value of the topic must be significant.
2.4.2 The account of previous research: the study must be a purposeful continuation of earlier discourse, or present a new approach to the topic. Thus earlier studies must be taken into account, but they should not be repeated.
2.4.3 Clarity of terminology, definitions and theoretical command of the topic: it must be clear to the reader what the research is about.
2.4.4 Methodology employed: the researcher must present his/her methods and justify their use.
2.4.5 Materials: the materials must be qualitatively relevant and quantitatively sufficient considering the topic under investigation.
2.4.6 Presentation of the results and conclusions: the importance of the results and conclusions must not be either over- or under-valued from the point of view of the advancement of science. The analysis must be logical and take into account different viewpoints. A further merit of the work may be the potential for further research and the importance of the research for society.
2.4.7 Structure: the presentation must have a logical structure and be clearly written. The ideas must not be submerged in a flood of information.
2.4.8 Critical approach: the researcher must be critical about earlier studies, theories, methods, materials, sources and the scientific value of his/her work. In other words, a good piece of research is original and independent.

3. Negative or positive opinion?

3.1 The preliminary reviewer must recommend not allowing the work to be defended if it is clear that the dissertation does not meet the requirements of the Procedure for Awarding Doctorates, which states: “A dissertation is an independent research paper that presents a well-argued, original solution to a specific scientific problem and whose results are published in international professional literature”. The preliminary reviewer also has grounds to consider a negative opinion if the work contains other serious shortcomings, for instance:
3.1.1 a very deficient theoretical framework;
3.1.2 too little research material for a PhD dissertation;
3.1.3 serious shortcomings in familiarity with the literature in the field;
3.1.4 incongruence between theory and analysis.

On the other hand, shortcomings that can be corrected with simple editing, additional material that can be procured with reasonable effort, or additions to the literature review that can be provided with reasonable effort should not prevent a positive opinion.

3.2 The preliminary reviewer must give an opinion of the dissertation according to the following recommendations:

3.2.1 allow the dissertation to proceed to defense without corrections;
3.2.2 allow the dissertation to proceed to defense after minor corrections;
3.2.3 major corrections must be made to the dissertation;
3.2.4 not to allow the dissertation to be defended.

3.3 In the case of a recommendation of either 3.2.3 (major corrections) or 3.2.4 (negative evaluation), once the corrections pointed out in the review or other changes have been included in the dissertation manuscript and the supervisor’s opinion has been taken into account, the Institute Council may ask for an opinion from the same preliminary reviewer, or a new review from a different preliminary reviewer.

4. Quality of language of the dissertation

4.1 Most of the manuscripts sent for preliminary review have not been proofread or edited for language usage. The PhD candidate is responsible for ensuring that the written text in the final version sent to print has been proofread and edited. Thus, the preliminary reviewer does not have to correct the use of language, but he or she may comment on it, particularly in case of incorrect usage of terminology, translation errors, or infelicities arising from the influence of the mother tongue on text written in a foreign language, if they impede comprehension.

5. Dissertation based on articles

5.1 A dissertation may consist of several scientific articles or manuscripts accepted for publication (3–7, depending on their scope) on a related topic and an summarising overview chapter. The summary must contain an introduction to the topic, the goal and methods of the articles, and an evaluation of the significance and applicability of the results.

5.2 Some of the articles may be co-authored, in which case the candidate must specify his/her independent contribution to these.

5.3 The preliminary reviewer must present his/her opinion about the scientific merit of the whole dissertation (based on both the summary and all the articles). The evaluation should consider whether the different parts form a sufficient, coherent and comprehensive whole, from the point of view of the requirements set for PhD dissertations.

5.4 Published and accepted articles are presented to the preliminary reviewer in unmodified form. In articles which deal with similar topics, a slight degree of overlap and repetition may be allowed. In this respect, a dissertation based on articles should be evaluated on a different basis than a monograph.
6. Ethical guidelines

6.1 The Institute of Estonian and General Linguistics pays particular attention to the objectivity and transparency of the preliminary review. A preliminary reviewer is a specialist appointed by the Institute. In order to avoid legal problems, the preliminary reviewer presents his/her opinion directly to the Institute. During the review process, the reviewer communicates only with the Head of the Institute or with his/her appointed representative, i.e. the reviewer does not give his/her evaluation to the doctoral candidate, his/her supervisor, or any third persons. During the review process, the reviewer must not consult with the PhD candidate, his/her supervisor, or any third persons, nor give them information about the contents of the review.

6.2 The preliminary reviewer must not supervise the PhD candidate, or receive a corrected version of the dissertation or any other materials connected to the dissertation from the candidate. These can only be received through the Head of the Institute. In the event the reviewer knows the candidate, s/he must briefly describe in the evaluation any earlier collaboration or other factors that may influence the objectivity of the evaluation.

6.3 The Head of the Institute or his/her appointed representative sends a copy of the preliminary review to the PhD candidate, his/her supervisor, and the members of the Council of the Institute of Estonian and General Linguistics.

6.4 The PhD candidate has the right to present comments about the preliminary review to the Council of the Institute of Estonian and General Linguistics before permission is given to proceed to a defense. The preliminary review is appended to the minutes of the Institute Council meeting where permission to proceed to defense was granted. After this, the preliminary review is available to the public.

7. Evaluation

7.1 The evaluation, or preliminary review, must be presented by the date established by the Institute Council, usually within a period of two to three months. If there is a justified need to extend this deadline, it must be made known to the Head of the Institute of Estonian and General Linguistics immediately.

7.2 The recommended length of the evaluation is 3–5 pages.

7.3 The opinion may contain suggestions for corrections and modifications, but it must be clear whether the preliminary reviewer recommends giving permission to proceed to defense or not. If the reviewer wishes additionally to draw attention to small mistakes, e.g. spelling mistakes, s/he may add a separate list of corrections, or send the manuscript containing the corrections back to the Institute. In this case the Institute passes on the list of corrections, or the manuscript containing corrections, to the PhD candidate. In other cases it is not required to return the manuscript.

7.4 The original, signed copy of the evaluation must be sent to the following address: Institute of Estonian and General Linguistics, Ülikooli 18, University of Tartu, 50090 Tartu. To expedite the process, an electronic copy of the evaluation must be sent (as an attachment) to the email address of the Head of the Institute of Estonian and General Linguistics on the same day as the original, signed copy is posted.
8. Fee

8.1 The fee to be paid for the task of writing the preliminary review is 300 euros (bruto). The fee is paid by bank transfer to the bank account specified by the reviewer after receipt of the evaluation.

9. Subsequent stages of the defense process

9.1 If the Institute Council decides to give permission to proceed to a defense, an opponent or opponents are appointed. The Institute may ask the preliminary reviewer to act as an opponent. After expressing his/her opinion in the evaluation, the preliminary reviewer does not have the right or the duty to track the process of making corrections in the text of the dissertation; the responsibility for this lies on the PhD candidate.