

TPO PRE-ASSIGNMENTS

Academic year Autumn 2023– Spring 2024

MUO-E0023 Thesis Plan Orientation (TPO) provides practical information that you need to write your thesis plan proposal and manage your thesis process. The course will take place during the Orientation week. Alternatively, TPO can be studied independently in a self-paced manner. Whichever way you'll choose, the course begins with four (4) pre-assignments described in this document. In the pre-assignments, you are guided through doing an inventory of your thesis ideas and options.

Pre-assignments can be written in English, Finnish or Swedish. Submit the assignment(s) in MyCourses in PDF format. You can submit 1-4 files. In other words, you can do these assignments as one file or submit them separately.

TPO is graded from 0-5. The course grade is based on assignment performance. The assignments are graded with fail-revise-pass-pass with distinction. An assignment is "pass" if everything that has been asked has been done and "pass with distinction" if the assignment exceeds expectations by, for example, being exceptionally well structured, visualised and/or beneficial to the student's thesis process.

Below are the 5 pre-assignments, of which you'll do 4 based on your needs.

- If you don't have a specific thesis topic in mind, do pre-assignments 1a, 2, 3 and 4.
- If you already have an established thesis topic, do pre-assignments 1b, 2, 3 and 4.

1a. Topic Development

This pre-assignment is beneficial to the students who do not yet have a clear idea about their thesis topic. The assignment consists of 4 steps, as instructed below.

1. **Inventory of your interests.** Keep a careful diary about what draws your attention for at least three (3) weeks. What articles, books, chapters, headlines and social media posts are you reading with interest? Which movies, pictures, events, lectures, products and topics of discussion draw your attention? Try to keep as careful as possible record about your interests. Then briefly reflect on what especially is the thing that actually interests you in each of your records. Format and method are free. Notice that you don't have to record all of your media consumption — just the ones that actually feel interesting and make your heart beat a bit faster.
2. **Categorise your interests.** After careful collection of this nearly [autoethnographic](#) data, the next step is to organise data so that you can begin to make sense of it. We suggest that you do the organisation based on relevance to your personal and professional development and how doable the interest would be as a thesis. To categorise your interests, you can draw a 2x2 matrix to map your data into four categories (Picture 1 at

the end of this document) or make a long list of your data and mark each piece of interest with an appropriate category (Picture 2). Miro seems to be a good option for a 2x2 categorisation. Common spreadsheet programmes such as Microsoft Excel and Apple Numbers are useful, especially with the long list option. You can also come up with your own version of the categorisation if you find our recommendation to categorise your data not working for you or if you want to make the organisation of data more detailed by adding categories. In fact, our suggestion is based on modification by one of the students in previous years.

3. **Make sense.** If you have done the assignment so far carefully, you should have four categories of interests:
 1. *Professionally relevant and doable.* Your best options for a thesis topic are here. Focus on this category.
 2. *Professionally relevant but not doable.* These are also good options, provided you are prepared to modify your thesis interests so that the overall workload will be within the recommended 4,5-5 months of full-time work.
 3. *Doable but not professionally relevant.* Maybe not. Having a professionally relevant topic in the thesis is usually a good idea.
 4. *Not professionally relevant and not doable.* Maybe your interests have already changed during data collection. This is a good thing! Now you know you can stop thinking about these things.

Select one of the categories (“Professionally relevant and doable” is recommended) as your thesis topic development playground.

First, organise the items of the category into topical groups and **then** into topical subgroups. Let's say that you have been consuming with great interest stuff relating to food and eating. That is then one of your topical groups. On closer look, you might notice that some items in this topical group relate to “Future of food”; some items relate to “Sustainable eating” and some are discussing “Cultural practices of dining”. These are the topical subgroups. Do this subgrouping to all the topical groups in the category that you are playing with.

4. **Reflection.** Finally, write short descriptions and reflections of each of the topical subgroups in the (for example) “Professionally relevant and interesting” category of your interests. If you are lucky, you may already realise that the topical subgroups have a joint overlapping area that suggests a very good thesis topic. In the food example above, such a topic could be “Sustainable future dining”, which would allow you to discuss all that you are interested in, with a clear focus on the visioning of sustainable practices of culturally and humanly important activities of dining. In any case, you’ll have a small set of very potential topic candidates you can start discussing with, for example, department teachers and professors.

SUBMISSION: hand in steps 2-4 as a PDF file. Otherwise, the format of expression is free. As feedback, we may, for example, recommend literature or comment analysis of data. Feedback is guaranteed if you submit by August 18.

1b. Literature Safari

This pre-assignment is beneficial to the students who already have a clear idea about their thesis topic. Pre-assignment consists of 4 steps, as instructed below.

1. **Locate** at least 30 peer-reviewed journal articles, conference proceedings and/or books and book chapters potentially relevant to your topic. The Aalto-library database ([Primo](#)) and Google Scholar (scholar.google.com) are good platforms for locating literature. To decide whether an article or paper is peer-reviewed, pay attention to the record. For example, Primo often notifies about the record's status. You can also check [Julkaisufoorumi/Publication Forum \(julkaisufoorumi.fi\)](https://julkaisufoorumi.fi) for their database and ranking of peer-reviewed journals and conferences. For books, check the publisher's name. In general, universities are reliable publishers, in addition to academic publishers such as Routledge and Gaudeamus. If you don't know the peer-review status of your references, mark them in your list.
2. **Document** your literature findings by recording full references and a very short description of what the source is about if it isn't clearly stated in its title. Additionally, for your own use, you should also save abstracts whenever possible. To remind how to record references, see for example "Lyhyt opas viittaamiseen" or "instructions to Harvard referencing" in TPO "Useful stuff" page in the course's MyCourses space. At this point, it is also high time to consider using reference management software such as [Zotero](#) (free browser-based tool), [Bookends](#) (paid Mac app) or [Paperpile](#) (inexpensive, tailored to work best in a Google environment), or simply spreadsheet software ([MS Excel](#), [Apple Numbers](#)).
3. **Categorise** your literature references into topical groups and subgroups. Give each group and subgroup an expressive, sensible title and organise them into a logical order.
4. **Reflect**. Finally, write a couple of sentences reflecting on the list of sources: Briefly describe the thesis topic that inspired your literature hunt. Are you happy with the results? Lots of work still to be done? Could you write a thesis literature review based on these titles? Is something missing?, *etc.*

SUBMISSION: hand in steps 3-4 as a PDF file. Otherwise, the format is free. As feedback, we may, for example, recommend literature or comment on the structure. Feedback is guaranteed if you submit by August 18.

2. Department of Design Theses

This pre-assignment consists of 3 steps.

1. **Study** the general character and style of the Department of Design Master's theses available at [Aalto University Master's thesis database](#). This is also a chance to learn to use this database. For example, you can limit the results to a particular department from the menu on the right.
2. **Identify** at least two recent (no older than 2018 graduation) Aalto University Master's theses relevant to your interests.

3. **Summarise** in 1-2 pages of text: 1) your impression of the Department of Design theses; 2) list the authors and titles of the theses that you chose, and 3) explain how the two theses are relevant to you.

SUBMISSION: hand in step 3 as PDF file. Otherwise, the format is free.

3. Five Thesis Structures

Master's Thesis is an academic text. Academic texts often follow so-called "IMRAD" - structure, which means "Introduction - Data & Methods - Results - (and) - Discussion". Alternatively, the common structure can be thought of, for example, as "Introduction - Background - Research question - Data & Methods - Findings - Conclusions - Discussion". In this assignment, your task is to work with your thesis interests by creating five realistic versions of your thesis structure.

This pre-assignment consists of 3 steps.

1. **Select** one theme that you are interested in. **Crystallise** it with five different working titles. Number the titles from 1-5. Then **create** thesis structures for each of the working titles. For example, think about how to introduce your readers to the thesis, what kind of research questions you could put forward and which research methods would be most beneficial. Be honest. This is an exercise in self-reflection and critical analysis of your thoughts, so for this pre-assignment to be useful, do not settle on just randomly generating vaguely artistic or designerly thesis chapter titles. Reserve at least a full day for this work. Coming up with accurate ways of expressing *your* true interests is hard work.
2. **Elaborate** on the five structures. In a few words, **summarise** what you would write about in each of the chapters in the structures. Try to be specific and keep writing close to your actual ideas. In other words, write "Introduction to the environmental issues and cultural importance of dining, and the clash of them" instead of a vague "introduction to the topic".
3. **Reflect** with a couple of sentences on the results. Are you happy with one or more of the structures? What makes them good to you? Are you less satisfied with one or more of the structures? Why?

SUBMISSION: hand in steps 1-3 as a PDF file. Otherwise, the format is free. As feedback, we may, for example, express our excitement or comment on which of your results we find exceptionally potential thesis structure. Feedback is guaranteed if you submit by August 18.

4. ARTS Thesis Guidelines

This pre-assignment consists of 2 steps.

1. **Read** Master’s Thesis Guide or Opinnäyteohje, both available on the TPO MyCourses “Useful stuff”-page, and on your Master’s Programme home page, in the section “During your studies > Thesis” (Master’s Programme in Design, IDBM, CS).
2. **Summarise** the guide by making notes about all information relevant to you, such as minimum length, contents of the title page and advisory work. You can also include questions that you still have after carefully reading the guide. We may add your questions to TPO FAQ or reply to you in the comments to your assignment submission. Please highlight your questions so that we notice them when grading your work.

SUBMISSION: hand in step 2 as a PDF file. Otherwise, the format is free. As feedback, we will notify you about misunderstandings and answer questions if they are clearly highlighted in the submission. Feedback is guaranteed if you submit by August 18.

PICTURE 1. Example of 2x2 (Assignment 1a)

		Professionally and personally interesting	
		Professionally relevant	Not professionally relevant
Within scope and capabilities	Doable	Professionally relevant, within 4,5 months of full time work scope and aligns with my goals, capabilities and skills	Within the scope of 4,5 months of full time work but not professionally relevant
	Not doable	Professionally relevant but not within the scope of 4,5 months of full time work and/or does not align with my goals, capabilities and skills	Not in the scope and not professionally relevant.
		Not a professional learning goal	

PICTURE 2. Example of list (Assignment 1a)

	Professionally relevant	Within my skill set	Not professionally relevant	Too much outside my skill set
Article about circular economy	X			X
A book about flying carpets		X	X	
BBC document about future food	X	X		
Podcast about history of eating	X	X		
TED about yoga			X	X
Article about eating out	X	X		
Book about oriental rugs		X	X	