



Guidelines for PhD dissertation reviews Graduate School of Geography and Earth Systems Science, Faculty of Science, University of Zurich

Thank you for being prepared to write review of a PhD dissertation. The following document contains guidelines about your report. Please read it carefully, and if anything is unclear contact the person who asked you to write this report.

Relation to the candidate

If you are a committee member, you should clearly state your relationship to the candidate, and also make a statement with respect to their contribution to publications. It may also be helpful to comment on the independence of the candidate. For PhDs where the Committee Chair (*Vorsitz*) and the Main Supervisor (*Leitung*) are different people, both must write separate, independent evaluations. Note that the purpose of the evaluation is to review the dissertation and its content – other activities or constraints (e.g. teaching, organising workshops, illness, etc.) are not usually relevant to the evaluation.

If you are an external reviewer, please disclose any potential conflicts of interest: Please disclose possible conflicts of interest with the PhD candidate and their supervisors (shared research projects, grants, publications within past 6 years).

Purpose of review

The purpose of your review is to evaluate whether the dissertation should be **accepted**, accepted with **conditions/ corrections** or **rejected**. In exceptional cases, you may also propose a **distinction**.

If you propose a rejection, the candidate will be given the opportunity to respond to your comments and the PhD committee will decide whether further work, and an additional evaluation, are required. In such cases, the Dean of Studies must authorise the continuation of the process.

In all other cases, the candidate will be invited to defend their research in a two-part exam, with a one-hour public presentation and questions, followed by questions from the PhD committee and faculty members for a further hour behind closed doors.

Dissertation form

PhDs in our faculty can take two forms: either as a **monograph** or **cumulative**. In the case of cumulative dissertations, a synthesis typically introduces the overarching research problem, sets the scene for the research and summarises the methods and results, before discussing the contribution of the PhD as a whole. Where contributions are not single-authored, the candidate explains their contribution to each. The minimum requirements for a cumulative dissertation are three manuscripts, all of which have been submitted for peer review by external experts, and at least one of which has been accepted for publication.

Content of your report

There are no formal rules about the content of your evaluation. However, it is typically helpful if you include the following elements:

- 1) A brief introduction of your understanding of the **research topic and objectives** addressed in the dissertation.



- 2) A review of the **dissertation's content**, giving feedback on originality and relevance of the questions addressed, the work's embedding in the literature, and the scientific quality of the methodological approach taken, as well as the presentation and interpretation of the results.
- 3) Comments on the **formal presentation**: these may include the quality of language, writing and illustration.
- 4) A concluding evaluation, summarising the **main contributions** and setting out whether they are, in your experience, sufficient for the award of a PhD. You may also suggest changes to the dissertation, or questions for discussion at the oral exam.
- 5) Note that the University of Zurich is a signatory of the [San Francisco Declaration on Research Assessment](#) and as such "the scientific content of a paper is much more important than publication metrics or the identity of the journal in which it was published."

Formal aspects of your report

There is no formal template for your report, but it **must meet** the following criteria:

- 1) Please include a subject such as **evaluation report, naming the candidate and giving the title of their thesis** at the start of your report.
- 2) There is no standard expectation as to length, but typical reports are between 2 and 4 pages long.
- 3) Your report must be on **headed notepaper, signed and dated**. It should not be addressed to a specific person and should be sent as a PDF document to the chair of the PhD Committee.
- 4) It must end with a **specific qualified recommendation**, for example, concluding with:
 - a. An unconditional recommendation to accept the thesis and invite the candidate to defend his/her thesis
 - b. A conditional recommendation to accept the thesis (i.e., subject to improvements detailed in your report), inviting the candidate to defend his/her thesis
 - c. A recommendation to reject the thesis

Distinctions

No grade is assigned to the final work. However, it is possible to **award a distinction** to dissertations in our faculty, which are reserved for around the top 5% of candidates. If at least two external referees' reports recommend a distinction, then the candidate will be considered for a distinction. If you think this dissertation would merit a distinction, then you should include the following information:

- 1) How would you rate the **overall quality** of the thesis based on your experience (please provide a percentile value, e.g. top-x%)?
- 2) How **innovative** is the work compared to other similar works in the field?
- 3) How do you **estimate the impact** of this PhD thesis in the field?
- 4) If possible, can you **quantify the individual contribution** of the student to the achievements presented in the thesis?
- 5) How many **MSc and PhD students have you supervised?**
- 6) Please disclose **possible conflicts of interest** with applicant and supervisor of student (shared research projects, grants, publications within past 6 years).

Deadlines

You will have been given a deadline to deliver this review. This deadline is typically one month before the actual defense to allow enough time for the internal evaluation by the so called 'Zirkulationskreis'. Please note, that if we receive reviews too late, we may have to postpone the PhD defence, so please deliver the review on time.