



Universiteit Utrecht



UMC Utrecht

Master Writing Assignment Guide for Supervisors



Graduate School of Life Sciences

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Preface

This guide is intended for staff members of the Graduate School of Life Sciences or external supervisors charged with the task of supervising students performing a Writing Assignment as part of their Master's programme. A corresponding guide has been drawn up for students.

The purpose of this guide is to provide a helping hand, and refer to other sources for additional information or support.

Chapter 1. Quick Guide gives you an overview of the most important information you need to know in order to successfully supervise a student during their Writing Assignment.

Chapters 2-4 provide more extensive information for those that are interested.

A [Teacherguide website](#) has also been created to provide support to teachers and supervisors. Here you can find a wealth of information on all of the topics mentioned in this guide as well as all forms and documents you may need.

All official regulations are recorded in the Education and Examination Regulations, which can be found on the [Teacherguide](#) of the Graduate School of Life Sciences.

About the Graduate School of Life Sciences

The Graduate School of Life Sciences at Utrecht University combines research, training and education for Master's and PhD students. The curriculum of the GSLS Master's programmes is research-intensive. To train scientist for the future, the GSLS has linked all its education to high-quality international research. Students have the opportunity to work side by side with highly qualified researchers at one of the many excellent research groups of University Medical Center Utrecht (UMC Utrecht) and Utrecht University. The GSLS falls under the responsibility of the Deans of the three participating faculties (Medicine, Veterinary Medicine, and Science). The Deans have appointed an executive Board of Studies to act as managing body of the GSLS.

Master's programmes

The GSLS offers 17 research Master's programmes. These last two years and comprise a total of 120 credits (EC) (except Epidemiology Postgraduate, 90 credits). The main component includes a major research project and a profile. In addition, each programme offers one or more specific Master's courses. Students will also write an assignment and attend a number of seminars. Finally, each programme includes an elective component.

General programme scheme



GSLS principles on scientific integrity

When students write their assignment, they are part of the world of scientific research. This world has its own code of conduct, based on principles of proper scientific behaviour. The GSLS adheres to the principles of scientific integrity, as described in the *European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity*.¹

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A European Code of Conduct for Research Integrity, Pieter J.D. Drenth, 2010.

Source: www.esf.org/fileadmin/Public_documents/Publications/Code_Conduct_ResearchIntegrity.pdf

Chapter 1. Quick Guide

The Writing Assignment is subject to a number of rules and regulations, all of which can be found back in the [Education and Examination Regulations, the Rules and Regulations and the Student's Charter](#).

Learning outcomes:

After finishing their Writing Assignment students are capable of independently:

- conducting literature research, using scientific secure literature databases (e.g. PubMed);
- using scientific literature and insights in a critical manner;
- summarizing literature using their own words;
- integrating results and models of papers read into new models;
- formulating hypothesis for future research.

Supervision terminology and responsibilities

The student:

- is responsible for choosing a topic and finding a suitable research group and examiner / supervisor;
- has to apply for approval from the Board of Examiners before starting the Writing Assignment;
- has to adhere to the rules of scientific integrity;
- has to finish the project on the agreed end date or takes the appropriate action in case of delay;
- has to stay in contact with the examiner and if applicable daily or host supervisor;
- is responsible for seeking help when problems (either professional or personal) arise.

The examiner:

- is responsible for proposing a subject that is of a sufficient level, manageable given the time and which enables the student to achieve the learning outcomes.
- is responsible for the overall quality and academic level, and all aspects of assessment (including the final grading) of the Writing Assignment;
- In case of a Writing Assignment inside UU/UMCU/Hubrecht/PMC, the UU/UMCU/Hubrecht/PMC examiner and second reviewer both grade the assignment. The examiner decides on the final mark in close consultation with the daily supervisor (if applicable) and the second reviewer;
- In case of a Writing Assignment outside UU/UMCU/Hubrecht/PMC, the UU/UMCU/Hubrecht/ PMC examiner and the supervisor host institute both grade the assignment. The examiner decides on the final mark in close consultation with the supervisor host institute;
- is affiliated to Utrecht University or UMC Utrecht as a full, associate (UHD) or assistant (UD) professor with a tenured position. Professors on a UU/UMCU special chair (*bijzonder hoogleraar*), but in daily life affiliated to a non-UU/UMCU institute, can also act as examiner.
- Post-docs, PhD candidates, and professors not affiliated to UU / UMCU **cannot** act as examiner.

The daily supervisor:

- is responsible for the daily supervision of students during their assignment;
- works at the institute where the Writing Assignment is carried out;
- does not grade the Writing Assignment personally, but will advise the examiner on the grades;
- must be sufficiently capable of supervising a Master's student. If a daily supervisor is still rather junior (e.g. PhD candidate or postdoc), the examiner must provide support.

The host institute supervisor (in case of a Writing Assignment outside UU/UMCU/Hubrecht/PMC):

- is responsible for the (daily) supervision of students during their Writing Assignment;
- works at the institute where the Writing Assignment is carried out;
- grades the Writing Assignment;
- must be sufficiently capable of supervising a Master's student. If a (daily) supervisor is still rather junior (e.g. PhD candidate or postdoc), a senior scientist / staff member (e.g. their own supervisor) must provide support.

The second reviewer:

- should only be appointed for Writing Assignments inside UU/UMCU/Hubrecht/PMC. Assessment of the Writing Assignment by a second reviewer is mandatory;
- is a senior scientist (not a PhD candidate or postdoc) who is **not** directly involved in the Writing Assignment. Ideally, a second reviewer is a staff member from a different group than the examiner.

Duration of the Writing Assignment and extension

- Five weeks (7.5 EC) are scheduled for the Writing Assignment. The student cannot extend the Writing Assignment for credits.
- The Writing Assignment should be completed preferably within these five weeks, but maximally within a time span of three months, from the start date to submission of the assignment. This is only possible if the scope of the assignment is limited and clearly defined, the student works diligently, and the agreements between supervisor and student about the content and scope of the assignment are clear.
- If the Writing Assignment cannot be completed within the maximum allowed duration, students need to request an official extension. The procedure for this can be found on the [studyguide](#).

Contents of the Writing Assignment

- A Writing Assignment consists of several key stages: defining the topic, formulating a hypothesis, drawing up a timetable, literature research and the writing phase.
- Writing Assignments can have 2 formats:
 1. Literature Review - a review paper in the relevant research field
 2. Research proposal - an NWO Open Competition Domain Science – KLEIN-1 grant application

More information on the different formats can be found [here](#).

- Up-to-date reviews, based on recent literature (maximally 5 years old) are more useful to students and their supervisors than reviews based on older literature. A review based on recent literature has the added benefit of containing fewer references.
- The Writing Assignment should have an in-depth discussion, in which students demonstrate their ability to critically evaluate hypotheses and results, presents their own views, and draws conclusions that point towards new research opportunities.
- The body of the text (excluding legends, tables, footnotes, references, etc.) should be 6000– 8000 words long. It should be emphasized that the content is more important than the number of words. The assignment should include minimally 25 and maximally 60 references.
- The assignment should be written in English and contain a summary specifically aimed at informing the general audience about the content (layman's summary – in Dutch or English, 500 words, high school Biology or science level).

Interim assessment (feedback during the assignment)

An interim assessment is not mandatory, but it is important to evaluate the work and progress on a regular basis. The [Writing Assignment rubrics](#) can be used as a tool to discuss the applicable strong points and points of improvement of the draft and first version.

Fraud and plagiarism

Fraud or plagiarism is absolutely not allowed and will be dealt with as described in the [Education- and Examination Regulations](#). Sanctions vary from the invalidation of a paper and a record in OSIRIS to the permanent termination of programme registration. Students cannot graduate with Cum Laude honours if they have been found guilty of plagiarism or other scientific misconduct. The examiner:

- has the responsibility to ensure that no fraud or plagiarism took place. When you find or suspect that your student is committing fraud or is plagiarizing during their Writing Assignment, this must be reported to the Board of Examiners (BoE). You are invited to contact the BoE first for advice: [more information on how to deal with plagiarism or fraud](#).
- must check the final research reports for plagiarism using [Urkund](#), or an alternative comparable plagiarism checker.

- When the reported percentage of plagiarism in Urkund is >10%, but there is no case of plagiarism, a motivation written by the examiner explaining this should accompany the assessment form.

Supervisors should not hesitate to contact the Board of Examiners for an informal discussion before taking formal steps.

Please contact the secretaries of the Board of Examiners:

- For the Master's programmes of Biomedical Sciences of the Faculty of Medicine (Biofabrication, Biology of Disease, Biomedical Image Sciences, Cancer Stem Cells and Developmental Biology, Epidemiology, Epidemiology Postgraduate, Infection and Immunity, Neuroscience and Cognition, One Health, Regenerative Medicine and Technology, Toxicology and Environmental Health) contact **Kirsten Boersma van Nierop** via BoardofExaminersGSLs@umcutrecht.nl.
- For the Master's programmes of Biosciences of the Faculty of Science (Bioinformatics and BioComplexity, Drug Innovation, Environmental Biology, Molecular and Cellular Life Sciences, Science and Business Management) contact **Hira Bantvawala** via BoardofExaminersGSLs@uu.nl.

Grading

At the end of the Writing Assignment, the student is expected to have met the [learning outcomes](#). In order to assess whether the student has achieved these learning outcomes, the [Writing Assignment Rubrics](#) can be used.

1. In case of an assignment inside UU/UMCU, the assessment is performed by the examiner in close consultation with the daily supervisor and a second, independent reviewer (see 'Supervision terminology and responsibilities').
2. In case of an assignment outside UU/UMCU, the supervisor host institute¹ grades the assignment first. The examiner and supervisor host institute should contact each other in order to make sure that the assessment of all components is performed according to the guidelines of the GSLs-UU.
 - First, the supervisor host institute determines the grades according to his/her own marking system (e.g. Anglo/Saxon marking (F-A⁺)).
 - Next, the supervisor host institute consults the UU/UMCU examiner. The examiner converts the grade according to the Dutch marking system. The conversion table is available [here](#).

If the examiner's and host supervisor's marks differ by 2 or more points, the Board of Examiners should be notified by the examiner.

In order to meet the [cum laude requirements](#) a student should receive a 8.5 or higher for his/her Writing Assignment.

Procedure to complete the assessment

In case of assessment in Osiris Case/Zaak please read the instructions further down

- The examiner and second reviewer must complete the assessment within 10 working days after students have handed in their (final) Writing Assignment.
- To make sure there are no delays, make agreements with your student beforehand about the date for handing in the final report.
- It is the examiner's responsibility to deliver the assessment form and all other required documents to the Master's Administration Office as soon as possible.
- The [assessment procedure](#) for a Writing Assignment:
 - students download the assessment form from the study guide and fill in all necessary information;
 - examiners fill in their own grade and sign the assessment form, after ensuring the grade of the second reviewer or supervisor host institute are correct.
 - The examiner signs the form and sends the following to the to the Master's Administration Office, Master's programme coordinator and the student:
 - The assessment form
 - the written motivation for the final grade (e.g. rubrics) and

¹ If the supervisor host institute is still rather junior (PhD candidate or postdoc), they must be supported by a senior scientist (e.g. their own supervisor).

- the summary of (Urkund) plagiarism check (< 10%)
 - The student sends a PDF of the final report (including laymen's summary) to the Master's Administration Office.
- When the Master's Administration Office has received both the assessment forms from the examiner and the final report from the student, the result will be registered in Osiris.

Osiris Zaak (for students whose programmes participate in the pilot)

- If the project is registered via Osiris Zaak, the examiner must submit the assessment digitally in [Osiris Zaak](#) within 10 working days after the student has handed in the (final) report. In this case, it is not necessary to download and fill in an assessment form on paper.
- The assessment procedure for a Writing Assignment that is registered via Osiris Zaak:
 - In case of an assignment inside UU/UMCU, the examiner performs the assessment in close consultation with the daily supervisor and a second, independent review in case of an project inside UU/UMCU.
 - In case of an assignment outside UU/UMCU, the examiner contacts the supervisor host institute to be informed about his/her grading and to make sure that the assessment of all components are performed according to the guidelines of the GSLS-UU. The examiner is responsible for submitting the grades from both the supervisor host institute and him/herself in Osiris Zaak.
 - The student will be requested to upload his/her report in Osiris Zaak after the examiner has submitted the assessment. After uploading the report, the Master's administration will be notified to finalize the results.

Copyrights and publication

Students always write their assignment under experienced supervision, and their assignment is often part of a larger framework/project. It is therefore not unlikely that part of their work will be published. This can even happen during the writing process. In this light, it is important to note that the copyright (auteursrecht) of any written text always belongs to the writer, unless agreed otherwise. That means the student holds the copyright of their Writing Assignment. When supervisors, or others, use part of the data or texts in their publications, they need to follow the guidelines of scientific fairness and acknowledge the students' contribution. This can be done in a number of different ways and depends on the amount of data/text used, the quality of the work and the students' level of independence during the project. Students may be named in the acknowledgments, their report/Writing Assignment may be used as a literature reference or they may be asked to be a co- author on an article.

Problems or questions and further information

In case of any problems or questions, feel free to contact the [programme coordinator](#) first, or otherwise the [academic counsellor](#) or [research project coordinator](#). Students can also be referred to the study guide page about [guidance and counselling](#).

All official regulations of the GSLS are recorded in the Education and Examination Regulations, the Rules and Regulations and the Student's Charter and all other relevant documents and forms, can be found [here](#).

Chapter 2. The Writing Assignment process from A to Z

The main purpose of the Writing Assignment is to teach students how to independently perform literature research and write a scientific essay or proposal in a limited timeframe. After completing their Writing Assignment, students are expected to have acquired sufficient knowledge and skills to critically analyse and interpret scientific literature, as well as present their own views and formulate a research hypothesis for future research. Both the final level of knowledge and skills acquired by the student and the learning process should be taken into account during the final assessment.

Approval of the Writing Assignment application

- 1) When a student contacts you with the request to write their Writing Assignment under your supervision, make an appointment to discuss:
 - the possibilities
 - topic and the size and scope of the assignment
 - who the daily supervisor will be
 - what the supervision entails
 - how often you will be in contact
 - confidentiality if applicable.
- 2) The student will use the information from this meeting to fill out the application form to ask for approval from the Board of Examiners. This form has to be signed by the student, the examiner, the supervisor host institute (in case of an external Writing Assignment), and the student's programme coordinator.
- 3) The student needs to hand in the signed application form to the Master's administration office at least 20 working days (4 weeks) before the starting date of the Writing Assignment.
- 4) The quality and suitability of the topic will then be assessed by the Board of Examiners. **The student cannot start the Writing Assignment without this approval.**

Defining the topic

The student:

- decides on a topic
- determines the scope
- determines what the assignment is going to be about and what will not be part of it

The supervisor:

- discusses the topic with the student
- provides guidance and feedback.

Give the student time to play with ideas. Check if students really understand the topic by asking questions such as: 'In your own words, tell me what you are about to research. What is the research question or the problem? Why is this problem relevant?' Assist students in answering these questions and discuss thoroughly whether their plans are feasible.

Setting a timeline

It is advisable to start the project by drawing up a timetable that contains the different phases of the Writing Assignment.

- Specify when the different parts of the process need to be finished.
- Set clear targets.
- Make appointments with the student to discuss the progress of their work and determine when the writing plan, the first draft and final version need to be handed in and when they will receive feedback.

This timetable is a useful tool to avoid delays and gives an overview of the work that has to be done by both parties. The purpose of the timetable is to keep the student on track. It also provides a warning

signal when the target is not met, which is an opportunity to define problems and issues early. Regular check-in moments help with this.

- Check if students really understand the topic well enough before they start writing.
- Can the student give an elevator pitch on the topic of the Writing Assignment?
- Have all issues been addressed?
- Has the student's interest in the subject faded?
- Does the student put enough time and effort in the Writing Assignment?
- Is the student too critical of him-/herself or the contents of the Writing Assignment?

Diving into the literature

Once the topic of the Writing Assignment has been defined, the student can start searching for relevant literature. The three key references that the student has listed on the General Application form can be used as a starting point. Because it is easy to get lost in the sea of scientific information, it is important that the student stays focused on the chosen topic and doesn't spend (too much) time researching unrelated subjects or collecting too much information.

The Utrecht University Library provides [tips, theory and training for searching and using scholarly information](#).

The Writing Assignment end product

The specific format of the assignment should be discussed before the student starts actually writing.

- The assignment should be written in English.
- The body of the text (excluding legends, tables, footnotes, references, etc.) should be 6000–8000 words long, but keep in mind that the content is more important than the number of words.
- The literature section should include between 25 and 60 references.
- The assignment needs to include a summary of the content written for the general public. (laymen's summary – in Dutch or English, 500 words, high school Biology or science level).
- The assignment should have an in-depth discussion, in which the student demonstrates the ability to critically evaluate hypotheses and results, present personal views, and draw conclusions that point towards new research opportunities. This often requires the student to read additional literature. Many find this phase particularly problematic. Data needs to be presented in one manageable graph or figure that tells the story. This requires students to select, order, interpret and clearly present data. It's easy for them to lose sight of the objectives at this stage.

Writing plan

Students are advised to draw up a rough outline of the contents (writing plan) in order to gain clarity. This writing plan should contain the different sections of the assignment, each with a few sentences or words about the content of the section, relevant references and the figures that will be used. If producing this outline is hard for the student, try to find out what the reason is. Is the topic clear? Does the student have sufficient theoretical insight? Does the student understand the literature and data?

Discuss the writing plan with the student and give clear feedback, but leave room for the student to learn and grow. Encourage the student to submit the Writing Assignment in different phases. This way you can provide regular feedback, assess the students' learning process and keep them on track. But keep in mind that students are ultimately responsible for finishing their assignment.

If the student has chosen to write a literature review, a review format suitable for a relevant international peer-reviewed journal of high standard should be used. If the student has chosen to write a research proposal, the NWO Open Competition Domain Science – KLEIN-1 grant proposal format should be used. Check the [studyguide](#) for more information and to download a template.

Presenting

Students can be asked to present their Writing Assignment to the research group they worked in.

Confidentiality and accessibility of the Writing Assignment.

An external organisation may request confidentiality from the student, both during and after the Writing Assignment. It is however mandatory that the examiner (Utrecht supervisor) has access to the student's Writing Assignment at all times. If confidentiality applies, students will not be asked to provide a copy of the assignment to the Administration Office, but instead hand in a summary with additional contact information. The mandatory plagiarism check can be done without storing the report in the database, choosing the option 'under embargo'.

It is important that the report is available to the Board of Examiners upon request, due to rules regarding accreditation. You as an examiner are requested to keep a copy available for 7 years.

Publishing

It is not uncommon for the students' Writing Assignments to form the basis for a scientific article. Writing a scientific article is difficult skill to master. Make sure students finish their Writing Assignment and assess this assignment, before they start writing the review article which will be used for publication.

Please note that the product a student will hand in to the school should be an individual product. That means it cannot be edited for publication by you or other co-authors. Of course, feedback can be given. If you / your group decide to publish as a review, you can rewrite it after the student has handed in their individual report.

Chapter 3. Supervision

What is supervision?

There is more to supervising a student than giving a first instruction, keeping an eye on how things are going and grading their final product. As a supervisor you are also overseeing students' learning process. At the end of their Writing Assignment, students should have acquired skills, knowledge and competencies needed to become a Master of Science. These are written down in the rubrics which can be used for the interim assessment and final assessment and supervisors should be familiar with them.

Expectations

It is important to determine what supervisors can reasonably expect from their students. The assessment criteria cover the writing process as well as the final product. The students' analytical skills, initiative and attitude to work are also taken into account.

Due to the Masters' programmes flexible entrance criteria and the highly specialised nature of most research areas, each student has a unique combination of knowledge, skills and competencies. And each student is different. However, all should have an academic and critical mindset.

The rubrics can be used at the start of the (learning) process as a tool to steer students in the right direction, offer insights into what is expected, and how their performance will be graded. Supervisors should explain to students which elements (if not all) of the criteria are particularly important to them, and why, so that the students know what is expected of them right from the beginning. Students should be able to fill gaps in their knowledge by finding and reading relevant literature, and acquire skills with assistance from their supervisor. These can include but are not limited to formulating a research problem, performing literature research independently, and ordering, critically reviewing and integrating all necessary information.

Feedback

Constructive feedback is an important part of a successful learning process. In many evaluations, students indicate that they would like more feedback when writing their assignment. Students also express the need for well-motivated feedback and criticism in order to learn.

Giving constructive feedback is not an easy skill to master. It is not only about what they are doing well and what they are doing wrong. More importantly, it is about explaining why something is right or wrong, and providing useful advice on how to improve. Supervisors should adjust the way they give feedback depending on the student. Some students appreciate clear and direct feedback, while others might take such feedback personally. Assure all students that any feedback given is not personal. It is always meant to help them in the learning process. Don't just give your opinion ('I think this is not very good'), but tell the student why you think it is not good (yet) and give advice on how to improve. It is also important to focus on both performance and progress. Start by saying what you like about the work and attitude, and then talk about the things the student could improve upon. 'I think your writing is good, but shortening the sentences might make it easier to read' sounds better than 'The sentences are too long, it's very hard to read. The writing is good however.'

Here are five steps for giving constructive feedback:

1. State the purpose of your feedback. State what you will be talking about and why it is important.
2. Describe what you have observed and your reaction.
3. Give the individual an opportunity to respond.
4. Offer specific suggestions or solutions.
5. Summarize everything discussed.

Writing phase

During the writing phase, students start to put their ideas into words. Proper guidance and moral support are important during this process.

Encourage students to divide the Writing Assignment into a number of rounds: begin with a rough outline with titles of main sentences and paragraphs, and rephrase and refine this into a text with complete sentences. It is advisable to give feedback in rounds as well: on the rough outlines, on the content and on the details, dotting the i's and crossing the t's.

The supervisor's double role as supervisor and assessor can cause friction with some students. They may delay submitting their 'imperfect' first draft for fear of it affecting their final mark. It is therefore very important to talk about this during the start-up phase. Agree on the number of drafts the student will submit and the specific assessment criteria (the rubrics can be a helpful tool). Discuss if the draft version(s) will be assessed as well, or just the final version.

Next to all of the above, students are expected to indicate when they need additional help or want to consult you. Encourage them to do so, by showing willingness to help and ensuring your door is open for any question they may have. Actively keep in touch with your students to keep an eye on them and the writing progress.

Final assessment

When assessing the Writing Assignment, keep in mind that above all, it is supposed to be **a learning experience for students**. Take into account both the student's 'end product' (the Writing Assignment) as well as the overall learning process, such as the students' speed of learning, the ability to absorb new information and their work attitude.

[The Rubrics](#) contain a list of assessment criteria, which can be used as a guideline for the final assessment. Some supervisors determine the final mark by systematically weighing the assessment criteria they consider particularly important. Others may weigh up these factors more instinctively. Students are entitled to know in which areas they are to be assessed.

The regulations on assessments are described in paragraph 3, article 2 of the [Rules and Regulations of the Board of Examiners](#) of Graduate School of Life Sciences, of which the main points are listed below.

- The final version of the Writing Assignment will be graded by the examiner and a second reviewer. In case of an external Writing Assignment, the second reviewer is replaced by the Supervisor Host institute.
- If the Writing Assignment was supervised by daily supervisors other than the examiner, the examiner will consult with them closely on all marks.
- The examiner has to complete the assessment within 10 working days after the student has handed in the (final) Writing Assignment, by filling in and signing the [assessment form](#).
- If the Writing Assignment period surpasses the 3 months, the student is required to notify the Research Project Coordinator and hand in an explanation and a planning. Invalid explanations or a lack of it will result in an insufficient mark.
- In case of an insufficient mark higher than 4,0, the student, according to the EER is entitled to one repair opportunity. The content and time planning of which has to be specified in writing by the examiner and student and approved by the BoE. If you need help with issuing an insufficient grade, you can contact the [Board of Examiners](#), the student's [programme coordinator](#) or the [research project coordinator](#) for advice.

By signing the assessment form as an examiner, you state that the report was checked for plagiarism (see next paragraph).

If advice is needed on grading (for example when there is doubt or something is unclear), the [Assessment Support Panel](#) is available to answer such questions. They can be reached by emailing asp@umcutrecht.nl.

Plagiarism check (Urkund)

University Utrecht decided that all written products (essays, reports and Writing Assignments) have to be checked for plagiarism by using the Urkund software. This programme indicates to what extent plagiarism is committed, and which source is used. This plagiarism check is mandatory in theoretical

courses, research projects and Writing Assignments. Check the [teacherguide](#) and the [UU website](#) for more information on how to use Urkund.

Completion of the Writing Assignment

In order to complete the Writing Assignment and register the grade in Osiris, students and examiners need to follow these instructions:

- Students provide their examiner, second reviewer, and programme coordinator with a copy of their report.
- Check together if there are any restrictions on publication (embargo). If this is the case, supervisors should upload the Writing Assignment themselves in Urkund. This can be done under embargo.
- Students download the assessment form from the [Study Guide](#) (**open with Adobe Reader**).
- Examiners fill out their own grade and sign the assessment form, after ensuring the grade of the second reviewer or host institute supervisor is correct.
- Examiners save the form and email the Master's administration office and Master's programme coordinator (students can ask to be in CC as well) with:
 - The filled out and signed Assessment form.
 - Written motivation for the final grade (e.g. by the use of rubrics)
 - Plagiarism check report of the final Writing Assignment (<10%)
- Epidemiology students must hand in the assessment form at the education office of Epidemiology (MSc-Epidemiology@umcutrecht.nl).
- The student hands in a digital copy (PDF) of the Writing Assignment at the Master's administration office. This should include a Dutch or English layman's summary (in Dutch or English, 500 words, high school Biology level). Epidemiology students must also hand in the final report including layman's summary at the education office of Epidemiology (MSc-Epidemiology@umcutrecht.nl). If the assignment has to remain confidential, follow [these guidelines](#).
- As soon as the Master's administration has received both the assessment and the PDF of the Writing Assignment, the result will be registered in Osiris.

Chapter 4. Issues and problems

Identifying issues

There may be times when supervisors and students disagree about the progress or contents of the Writing Assignment, or when the student fails to meet the supervisor's expectations. A student may be experiencing personal problems, which can cause a delay in the writing process. It is important to identify and recognize issues in time and look for solutions to prevent further problems and delays.

Although students are expected to indicate when they need help, it is important to actively keep in touch with them to identify and discuss any issues that may arise. Keep the following questions in mind: Does the student feel there is enough time? Is the topic still sufficiently interesting? Does the student think it is going well? Is the feedback received understandable and is the student able to learn from it?

If a supervisor believes that the student's work is not of sufficient quality or quantity this can lead to friction. The student might not be happy with the (amount of) supervision offered. Both supervisor and student might feel that the other party has failed to meet expectations, such as maintaining a positive and pro-active work attitude, taking responsibility for specific issues and honouring agreements.

Problems

Below you will find a list of frequently occurring problems, accompanied by some useful questions for identifying and resolving them.

- Bottlenecks in the 'problem formulation' phase

If the scope of the Writing Assignment is too broad, or not clearly defined, the student will have no clear reference point and runs the risk of getting stuck in the information gathering phase. Because of this, it is important that the student defines his/her Writing Assignment subject carefully and precisely.

The following questions are particularly useful in this respect: Why have you selected this particular topic (in this research field)? Why does this topic interest you? What are the aims and objectives of your Writing Assignment? How can you demarcate your issue of interest? Which articles do you need to read if your keyword search produces 5.000 hits? Can the topic of interest be researched in the available time?

- Problems in literature assessment

The information from scientific literature needs to be presented in one manageable figure, graph or table. In order to make this figure, graph or table, the student is required to select, order and interpret scientific information. At this point a student could easily get overwhelmed by the data and lose control of the situation.

The following questions are particularly useful in this respect: Which papers will you use? What are your aims and objectives? How would you go about ordering and integrating the information to achieve these objectives? In what order will you be writing down the information?

- Problems during the writing of the assignment

Many students encounter problems during the writing phase. This tends to be the main cause for delays. Students often don't know how to start writing and to determine which information goes where.

The following questions are particularly useful in this respect: Who is your target audience (general science, scientific journal)? What are the standard criteria for the writing of an assignment? Do you have a rough outline of the table of contents? Do you know how to formulate scientific sentences, how to use references and how to edit a text?

- Attitudinal problems

Students may have a different perception of the Writing Assignment than their supervisor, or they might not know what is expected of them. Alternatively, a student may have problems of a personal

nature, causing a (serious) delay in the writing process. It is important to agree in advance about content and deadlines.

The following questions could be useful to talk about possible personal problems: How are you coping with the time pressure? Is the topic still sufficiently interesting? Are you receiving sufficient and appropriate feedback? Are you on track with regard to writing your assignment?

If the student has personal questions or problems, but doesn't want to discuss this with you or other group members, or neither can help, you are advised to refer the student to the programme coordinator or academic counsellor.

Many of these problems can be prevented by making clear agreements before the start of the Writing Assignment. If a dispute arises in spite of these agreements, the student and supervisor(s) are expected to discuss the issues with each other first. If this fails to resolve the dispute, the student and/or the supervisor can consult the programme coordinator or academic counsellor. Any conversation with the academic counsellor is confidential. With the prior approval of the student and supervisor, the academic counsellor contacts the other party, or other experts (e.g. the programme coordinator or institute director) for further mediation.

If consulting the programme coordinator or academic counsellor does not resolve the issue, the student discusses with the academic counsellor about the next step. This might be:

- Contacting one of the complaints coordinators, in case of a dispute on personal grounds.
- Or as a last resort contact the Examinations Appeals Board (College voor het Beroep van de Examens, CBE) in the case student disagrees with the decision of the Board of Examiners or an examiner.

Premature termination of the Writing Assignment

Students can also choose not to finish their Writing Assignment. This can be due to a variety of reasons, such as the assignment has failed to meet expectations, or the student is experiencing personal problems that make it impossible to continue. Before deciding to terminate the Writing Assignment, the student should contact the academic counsellor, discuss the problems and look for a solution. The academic counsellor will advise the student on further progress of the study programme. Students must notify their supervisor, programme coordinator and the Master's administration office as soon as possible of the decision to stop the Writing Assignment.

A Writing Assignment can also be terminated by the supervisor. Reasons could be because the student fails to honour the agreements or doesn't stay in contact.

The following guidelines should be used:

1. The student has failed to honour the agreements as agreed upon and written down in the application form, and has been reprimanded clearly on several occasions by the supervisor.
2. The student has been granted at least two opportunities to make up for past behaviours/attitudes by continuing the Writing Assignment in the agreed upon manner. The student must have been notified in writing.
3. The supervisor has mentioned a clear deadline in the second letter, warning the student that the Writing Assignment will end unless the student's behaviour is improved and lives up to the previously made agreements. The student will be notified in writing if the assignment is terminated.
4. The supervisor has sent copies of this correspondence to the programme coordinator and study counsellor.
5. The student is entitled to appeal this decision with the Board of Examiners. No credits will be given to prematurely terminated Writing Assignments.

Additional sources and contact information

A large part of the information you need, such as contact information of [Administration Officers](#), [International Officers](#) or the [Board of Examiners](#), is available on:

- The [Study Guide of the Graduate School of Life Sciences](#)
- The [Teacher's Guide of the Graduate School of Life Sciences](#)

Further reading

Below is a selection of books dedicated to conducting research, on effective interview techniques, and on avoiding and solving bottlenecks during the writing phase (all in Dutch):

- Heinze Oost en Angela Markenhof, Een onderzoek voorbereiden. HB Uitgevers 2005, ISBN 9055743763
- Heinze Oost, Een onderzoek uitvoeren. HB Uitgevers 2002, ISBN 9055743739
- Heinze Oost en Janny de Jong, Een onderzoek rapporteren. HB Uitgevers 2005, ISBN 9055743747
- Markenhof, M. Bastings, et al., Een onderzoek presenteren. HB Uitgevers 2002, ISBN 9055743755
- M. van de Berg, Effectieve tweegesprekken. Sdu Uitgevers 2006, ISBN 9052615683 Schoonhoven, Academic Services.
- M. J. A. Mirande en E. Wardenaar, Scriptieproblemen. Noordhoff Uitgevers b.v. 1997, ISBN 9001589332

Further training

The [GSLs PhD Course Center](#) offers several editions every year of the course 'Supervising a Master's student'. We encourage young researchers to take this course.

Other courses and material provided by Utrecht University for teaching in higher education can be found [here](#).

Contact

[Board of Examiners](#)

- Chair: [J.A. Post, PhD](#)
- Vice-Chair: I.E.T. van den Berg, PhD
- Secretary Biomedical Sciences: Dr. K. Boersma-van Nierop
(boardofexaminersGSLs@umcutrecht.nl)
- Secretary Science Faculty (UU): Hira Bantvawala (boardofexaminersGSLs@uu.nl)

[Assessment Support Panel](#)

- Reach them at asp@umcutrecht.nl.

[Programme coordinators](#)

[Research project coordinators](#)

All other GSLs contact information is given in the [StudyGuide](#) and [Teachers' Guide](#).