# EUROCULTURE Thesis topic and portfolio checklist

**(note: this document was compiled by using the following sources: Ballenger, Paltridge and Starfield, Turabian et al. See bibliography for details).**

**Introduction:**
Deciding on a suitable topic for the MA Euroculture thesis is a process that takes some time and quite some thinking. It is good to keep in mind that a Euroculture thesis should be on a problem or issue that can be located within a contemporary European context (20th and/or 21st century). During the first part of the third semester, you are required to work on finding and defining a suitable thesis topic that can be worked out into a proposal.

We have compiled the following checklist to help you to get to the point where you are able to submit a well-developed thesis portfolio. Working through this checklist will certainly help you in this process of developing your thesis portfolio. We suggest that you use the whole of the third semester to work through this checklist, taking the two deadlines (5 September to submit your thesis topic, and 1 December to submit your thesis portfolio) as milestones in completing the portfolio itself. The goal of this portfolio is to help you develop your research in a structured manner. You are still allowed (and are, in fact, expected) to continue to develop the direction of your research project after the submission of this portfolio.

**A) Part One:**
The first part of the checklist is something to work on during the summer months towards achieving the first milestone of submitting a **thesis topic by Monday 11 September.**

1) Draw a shortlist of topics (speak with other students, a teacher, or a potential supervisor).

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| Activity: |
| Make an "interest inventory" |
| Draw a shortlist of possible research topics, and write a sentence or two about each one. Consider which issues might arise with each of the topics, and write this down. Consider such aspects as practicality, originality, focus, scale, etc. |

2) Select a topic for investigation.

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| Activity: |
| Read broadly and widely to find a subject/topic about which you are passionate. Immerse yourself in the literature: use the library, read abstracts of other recently completed (Euroculture) theses.  Look for inspiration at the work done by others |

on the topic you are interested in (both that of experienced researchers in the form of published journal articles/academic books or junior researchers' recently completed MA theses, for example) to see how they approached the topic and how they conducted their research: what research questions did they ask and which methodologies did they use to conduct their research?

3) Formulate a general question: that is, turn the topic into a relevant question. Keep in mind: "narrow and deep" is often a better strategy than "broad but shallow".

4) Focus the question and set the parameters of your project. Your proposal should not only mention a research area and a topic within that area, but narrow the focus down further in the form of a research question. Be as focused as possible about what the study will investigate and where to draw the parameters of the project. This is often difficult to do - don't underestimate the time you might need to get this part of the proposal right. Also keep in mind that you might need to continue with other steps first, and return to this point to refine the question.

The question needs to be:

- ***Significant:*** *Your question needs to be worth answering*
- ***Urgent:*** *Your question needs to be relevant to an ongoing academic discussion that needs further development*
- ***Feasible:*** *Your question must be capable of being answered within the scope and scale of a Master Thesis project and given your own capacities, skills and circumstances.*

Activity:
Ask yourself: "Why am I doing this project, and not a different one?"
Read up-to-date material: make sure your idea is achievable and that no one else has done or is doing what you want to do.
For yourself, write down a few lines to explain why you have decided on this topic. What stirred your initial interest in the topic? Why do you think this is a relevant topic to work on in the context of the Euroculture programme?

Consider the implications of your research question: what will we know at the end of this research that we didn't already know before? Write this down as one or two sentences.

5) Identify the aims and objectives of the study or formulate a hypothesis.

The provisional thesis topic (max 350 words) should include:
- A tentative title

- A description of what it is that you want to do (topic/problem/type of research)
- Motivation for doing this project and reflection on feasibility and significance of proposed research

**Milestone one: submit a provisional thesis topic to the coordinators of the first and second university by Monday 11 September 23:59 CET**

**B) Part Two: Towards the Thesis Portfolio**
If the thesis topic has been approved, a thesis supervisor will be appointed to you from each university or you can start finding a supervisor yourself (this differs per university; please check with the course coordinators what the case is at 'your' two universities).

The rest of the checklist should be worked through now in order to be able to submit your thesis portfolio by 1 December.
If your thesis topic has not been approved, you need to return to the drawing board and work through steps 1 - 5 again.
If the topic has been approved, it is time to start fleshing it out into a full-blown thesis proposal (the "thesis portfolio").

6) Think about the data/sources that need to be collected to answer the question
7) Draw the initial research plan
8) Read literature (secondary literature) to decide whether the project is on the right track. Look at previous research in the area, especially at journal articles, research reports and other theses (or even doctoral dissertations).
9) Write a detailed proposal, including definitions of key terms used in the proposal.

**The detailed proposal (i.e., the portfolio) should include the following elements:**
1)   Working title and functional/informative sub-title of the thesis
*[Why? To summarize, in a few words, what the research will be about]*

2)   Introduction section: summary and purpose/significance of the proposed study
*[Why this section? To introduce the reader to the topic and create the reader's interest in the project]*
>    Introduce the reader to the topic and its background. Contextualize the thesis topic. Describe generally the problem that you want to investigate and narrow the problem down to a case that you want to work with. Explain the rationale for doing this study and motivate why the proposed research is needed: why is it important to work on this topic. This section should create curiosity with the reader about the project/topic. The introduction should lead to the problem description and research question (next step).

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(This part introduces the project and describes the rationale and relevance/significance of the proposed research; this is an introduction to the "what and why" part of your research proposal).

3)   Problem statement and/or research question:
*[Why this section? To provide an explicit statement of what the study will investigate]*
Describe/state the problem/topic that you are going to investigate, and focus it by means of formulating a clear research question that you want to answer by means of the proposed research. If relevant state the hypotheses that you will be investigating. What are the delimitations and limitations of the study? Define key terms

(This is the elaborated "what" part of your research proposal).

4)   Statement about European dimension of your thesis (significance of the research)
*[Why? To provide an explicit statement about the European dimension of your thesis]*
Explain why this thesis is suited to be examined as a Euroculture thesis. This statement should also make clear/explain/motivate the European dimension of your topic. This part could be seen as a further focus of the rationale and significance of the thesis.

5)   Contextualisation of the research (review of relevant literature):
*[Why? To demonstrate the relationship between the proposed study and what has already been done in the particular area, to indicate the 'gap' that the study will fill]*

Relate the proposed research project to existing scholarship on the problem/phenomenon. Discuss existing scholarship on the topic/question and explain how your research will relate to this existing scholarship. Also explain what your study will contribute to the existing literature (what conclusions were reached in previous research, by whom and when; are the conclusions in agreement or in conflict with one another; main issues or controversies that surround the problem; significant gaps in previous research in this particular area; how previous research is relevant to the proposed study). **See also last point about annotated bibliography.**

[This is an elaboration of the "why" part of your proposal]

6)   Proposed research methodology:
*[Why? To explain the steps the project will go through in order to carry out the research]*
Identify and motivate the proposed theoretical assumptions and conceptual framework and that you will use in your research. Describe an appropriate research approach for the particular question as well as a

well-defined list of procedures to be followed. Describe which sources or data you will use and demarcate this corpus carefully and clearly, explaining also how the data/sources will be collected and why these sources/data will be used. Explain which methods of analysis and interpretation you will use in relation to the sources and data. State the questions you will pose to your data/sources. Consider which resources are necessary to undertake the proposed research. Would you have adequate access to these resources? Is the proposed research plan *feasible*? Provide sufficient background information to enable your supervisors to assess the methodology and methods proposed

(This is the "how" part of your research, describing how your research plan should be executed following the logic of the research question/problem, the theoretical/conceptual framework that you will be using and the material/data/sources that you will work with).

7) Proposed framework of the study:

*[Why? To give an overview of the scale and anticipated organization of the thesis]*
Structure the outcome of the proposed research project into sections and provisional chapters and explain briefly what you expect the main content of each chapter to be, based on the results of your literature review and methodology section.

8) Research ethics (if applicable):

*[Why? To provide a statement as to how participants will be advised about the nature of the study and how informed consent will be obtained from them]* If applicable, explain and discuss any particular ethical concerns related to your research project. Indicate if you will need informed consent from informants and if yes, how this will be obtained.

9) Timetable to meet 1 June/1 August deadline:

*[Why? to provide a working plan for carrying out, and completing the proposed study]*
Include a realistic timetable for finishing different stages (or chapters) of your thesis. This is important because it will show how feasible the proposal is. In consultation with your supervisors, deadlines may be set for these stages. Please also consider that your supervisors will take some weeks of vacation during June/July and/or August/September which would mean that there is no supervision possible during those weeks; you should take this into consideration while planning. The deadline for submitting the final thesis is either 1 June or 1 August (4th semester).

10) List of references and annotated bibliography:

*[Why? To provide detailed references and bibliographic support for the proposal]*
Don't forget to include a list of references to works you have referred to in your proposal. Also include an annotated bibliography of key publications (at least 10 annotations that clearly indicate the relevance of the

publication to your research project), and provide an overview of at least 15 other sources that bear relevance to your research. The annotations and additional references should come from a range of sources, including book-length publications, articles from peer-reviewed academic journals, and chapters from edited volumes. The references and bibliography should be in a consistent reference format. Note: Referencing methods are dealt with in Eurocompetence I. If you are not sure which method to use, consult with your supervisors.

**Milestone two:** submit your thesis portfolio (the elaborated thesis proposal) to both supervisors and the coordinators of the first and second university by 1 December. Assessment (pass or rewrite) of the supervisors is required before Christmas. If necessary, your supervisors may refer the portfolio back to you for revision. Note that you need to have your portfolio approved by both supervisors ultimately by 15 February. Only students who have their portfolios approved by that date may participate in the fourth semester's thesis seminar.

**Some tips concerning the thesis portfolio writing process:**
1)      Read some past Euroculture theses in your area of interest to get a sense of the 'genre' and kind of text you need to write (see for example: https://arts.studenttheses.ub.rug.nl/. Select "Search repository and under "Opleiding", tick the box "M Euroculture" to see completed Euroculture theses)
 2)      Whether reading for initial orientation, doing desk-top research, or writing, keep full bibliographic details (including page numbers) of everything you refer to. Not doing this step often results in much agony and frustration and often much time-consuming work to retrieve a reference.
3)      Keep a research journal in which you record your readings, your thoughts, questions, planning, observations, frustrations, and luminous ideas. *If you are interested in the idea of a research diary, read further on below for more information.*
4)      Work with short-term targets (bite-size chunks) and a timetable (schedule time in your agenda to work on the thesis).
5)      Talk to other people than your supervisor about your thesis, for example, friends or fellow students.

**Keeping a research diary or journal:**
(adapted from:
https://web.anglia.ac.uk/anet/rido/docschl/training/Keeping_a_Research_Diary .doc)
Why do so many books and supervisors advise to keep a research diary? A research diary is a means of keeping track of your thoughts and the research process. Thinking and writing are discursive activities that construct knowledge and insight. Writing a diary or journal is an excellent means to develop this knowledge and insight by putting our 'ideas' or thoughts as words and arguments onto paper, thereby externalising them and creating separation from our ideas (in our minds) and the ideas as textual arguments (on paper) that can be worked on.

A research diary/journal will help you to keep track of the history of your research project, the development of your topic and skills and your understanding of the problem or issue you investigate.

It also provides a context to reflect on issues and problems that the research process presents.

How to proceed with a research diary/journal:
- Choose a format for your diary that is practical and manageable for you (digital as a file on your computer, or in hand-written hard copy in a note book)
- Keep your diary to hand – this is where the format you've chosen is important;
- Aim to make an entry every day you work on your project, or whenever something useful that you want to remember comes up;
- Consider writing 'end-of-week' and 'end-of-month' reviews. Over time, this helps with maintaining momentum and motivation;
- Remember to lay your diary pages out clearly as you go along and leave space for comments and additions;
- Sometimes there will be a lot you want to record; other times there will be less.  You do not have to standardise your diary entries.

What to put in your diary - some examples:
- What you've done on a day-to-day basis, described in practical terms;
- Factual accounts of things that you did, people you met and what they said, books or papers that you read, lectures or conferences you went to;
- Notes from discussions or useful conversations;
- Ideas that you might want to remember or follow up;
- Questions that you might want to explore, discuss or find out more about;
- Suggestions about reading, contacts, ways forward on problems;
- Reports of observations, experiments, events;
- 'Think pieces' – discursive notes about ideas or directions;
- Brainstorming notes or diagrams;
- Strategic plans for developing ideas;
- Personal views and opinions;
- Problem analysis;
- 'To do' lists or action plans.

## C) Part three: The thesis writing process

4th semester teachings will start at the earliest from 1 March onwards (some universities will start at a later date).  Apart from Eurocompetence III, the fourth semester will include a Thesis Seminar. You are advised to use the period between 1 January and 1 March to keep working on the thesis:
- reading/selecting literature
- prepare a literature overview/annotated bibliography

- have a meeting (online if necessary) with your supervisor(s) etc. (note: Please respect the office/working hours of your supervisors when settling meetings.

A separate guide on the thesis is available on the Euroculture *Blackboard Site* (www.brightspace.rug.nl). You will also find the relevant documents for the Thesis Portfolio and thesis on that site (cover sheets, assessment sheets, etc.)

**D) Bibliography:**
There are some very good books on the process of writing a thesis.
We especially recommend the following books (which we have used to compile this document):

Ballenger, Bruce*. The Curious Researcher: A Guide to Writing Research Papers.* Pearson, 2015.

Paltridge, Brian, and Sue Starfield. *Thesis and Dissertation Writing in a Second Language*. Routledge, 2007.

Turabian, Kate L., et al. *A Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*, Eighth Edition. University Of Chicago Press, 2013.