

Data protection instructions

Are you starting a thesis? Congratulations! Some theses include surveys, interviews or other methods that involve the processing of personal data. Before getting started with your thesis or at the outset of the process, take a minute to consider what this means for your thesis.

By taking data protection into account, you are demonstrating a professional approach and knowledge of data protection questions in your field. Data protection means protecting personal data and people's privacy when processing personal data. The purpose of data protection is to prevent personal data from falling into the wrong hands or being misused. Data protection is based on the European Union's General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR) and the Finnish [Data Protection Act \(1050/2018\)](#).

How do I know if I am processing personal data?

There are many different types of personal data. The easiest to identify are a person's name, personal identity code and contact information. There are also many details that may not seem like personal data, but that are personal data nonetheless. Whenever you process personal data, you must take data protection into account. The following examples may be of help:

- Name or other identifier (personal identity code, student ID, etc.)
- Email if it contains a name or student ID
- A photo in which a person can be identified
- Vehicle registration number, other unique machine/device identifier that can be attributed to the owner
- Geolocation data
- IP address
- Details in a veterinarian's register, displaying information about the owner
- Unique health information (e.g. dental chart)
- List of hereditary diseases of grandparents

The last two on the list belong to special categories of personal data, which means that their processing is regulated in greater detail than the others.

The combination of the following data can constitute personal data:

- Age
- Gender
- Place of residence
- Place of birth
- Workplace

- Professional status
- Field of study
- An identifier that connects, for example, a service user to a specific person

For example, the fact that someone is 24 years old does not qualify as personal data in itself, but if it is combined with other data – for example, a 24-year-old woman who works in a male-dominated workplace X – the result may qualify as personal data if it does not apply to any other person.

Even if you do not ask for personal data in your thesis, but instead collect customer experiences, please note that any list of email addresses or contact information provided by the client contains personal data and means that you are processing personal data. In other words, your work can easily involve personal data processing. This is why it is so important to pay attention to these matters when planning your thesis.

So what if I process personal data?

Data protection does not prevent the processing of personal data. After all, we need to reliably identify other people. Moreover, data protection does not prevent the publication of personal data. For example, if you interview the CEO of Company X, you must be free to publish their name, if you're supposed to describe the company. If you collect personal data, take care to only collect personal data that is relevant to the research. **Do not** collect any unnecessary data.

Photos

In the case of individuals, separately agree on the use of photos in your thesis. If you photograph events, and the photos show several people, it is good practice to tell people at the event that photos will be taken there and possibly published in a thesis. You should also give participants the opportunity to avoid the camera. Exercise particular care when photographing children and determine in advance whether you need parental consent for taking and publishing photos.

If the publication of photos is related to the journalistic, academic, artistic or literary expression referred to in section 27 of the Data Protection Act, you should acquaint yourself with the section and contact your supervisor.

Providing information about data protection

If you process personal data in your thesis (other than the names of books and names and publications of authors), you should also consider how to inform those whose data you process. Make this part of your thesis plan to ensure it is done in time.

In some cases, the client commissioning the thesis takes care of communications concerning data protection (this must be agreed in connection with the thesis contract), while in others, you are in charge of it. The easiest way to provide information about data protection is to compile a [data protection information package for your thesis](#). In it, you explain why you are collecting data, how you will handle the data, who else will have access to the data (e.g. the instructor, the client) and how long you will retain the data. Personal data should not be stored any longer than is necessary for the thesis. After this, the data must be disposed of.

Surveys

If you are conducting a survey and cannot tell in advance whether the answers will constitute personal data, it is advisable to start from the assumption that they will. According to the basic principles of statistical research, groups of less than five respondents are not processed, so even if you receive a survey response from the only 68-year-old male midwife student, you must reduce the possibility of the respondent being identified in your analysis to ensure that individuals cannot be identified in the final thesis. This is something you should also tell the respondents in advance.

Even if you do not know in advance whether the answers will generate personal data, you should prepare for it when considering the background variables. The more background variables you collect, the more likely it is to get personal data. Only collect the background variables you really need.

Don't forget to mention data protection in the survey invitation.

Interviews

Consider in advance whether to anonymise the interviewees and how to do it, or whether to have the interviewees appear in the study under their own names or as representatives of their organisation, e.g. Nurse 1 from Sunshine Hospital. In the latter case, the information, if adequate, can be used to find out the respondent's identity, but the name does not appear directly in the thesis. This is an example of pseudonymisation.

The interviewee must know where and how you store the interview material. You need to make sure that extra background information does not fall into the wrong hands. You must tell the interviewees how you will be handling the interview material which includes the in-

interviewees' responses that they have provided under their own name concerning, for example, their company. Consider a situation where the interview material could cause harm to the interviewee if it fell into the wrong hands. Such situations include at least interviews related to people's health and job satisfaction.

Please note that even if you conduct an interview with a single person, you are still processing personal data when you contact the person by email, for example. Personal data processing also encompasses material that does not end up in the final published thesis.

Health information

There are many types of health information, including dental charts, genetic information and other information that uniquely identifies a person. You might be conducting a survey to determine how the emergency services of a hospital have worked over a specific period: Even if you do not ask the respondent for any background information or why they visited emergency services, the simple fact that the respondent was a customer of emergency services may constitute personal data – indeed, it may qualify as special data that must be kept particularly confidential. Health data are a special category of personal data, the processing of which is usually prohibited, unless a separate purpose defined by law exists for it. The processing of such data should be carefully agreed with the client and discussed with the supervisor.

Contact information

If you have received a list of contact details from the client commissioning the thesis, you can use the list to contact the people on it. However, when contacting the people please inform them where you got their information. It is also a good idea to agree with the client that you will dispose of the data when you no longer need them. **Do not** leave the data in your inbox or elsewhere in your files. Make sure you discard the data when you no longer need them. The disposal of personal data applies to all personal data, not just contact information.

Information from public material

Examples of public material include court cases or other related information. When dealing with such material, consider whether you have grounds to include a person's information in the thesis, regardless of whether the same information is publicly visible elsewhere. If the information concerns a person performing a public function, you, too, can publish it. However, if the information concerns a private individual, and it is not necessary to specifically mention their name, avoid doing so. For example, if you refer to a court case where the

Supreme Court documents display the name of the person who the case concerns, you can refer to the case and the person by using the letter X.

Conclusion

If you process personal data in your thesis, you should also describe in the report how you took this into account. Discuss data protection with your client and supervisor. If you nevertheless encounter problems that you are unable to solve together, you and your supervisor can ask for advice from: tietosuoja@oamk.fi