

WRITING RESEARCH PAPERS

The following guidelines cover the preparation and writing of a longer research paper — either a term paper (a *Seminararbeit*) or a BA/MA thesis. For quick reference, please consult the summary under point 6.

1. PRESENTATION AND OVERALL STRUCTURE

1.1. Basic structure

Your paper should have a cover page which provides all relevant information:

- The title of your paper
- Your name and address
- Your email address
- The title of the seminar for which it is being submitted
- Your course of studies (e.g. *BA Anglistik, Magister Anglistik*)
- Where relevant (for BA/MA), the module you are submitting the paper for.

The second page of your paper should contain your list of contents. Your paper should be divided into clear, numbered sections with individual headings; the first of these should be the introduction. The other headings should have individualized titles which describe the specific focus. At the end of your paper, beginning on a separate page, you should include an alphabetical bibliography of works consulted, divided into primary and secondary texts.

The paper should be formatted for printing with 1.5 spacing between lines and with adequate margins for written comments (for example 4 cm on the left and 2 cm on the right), using a standard font size such as Times Roman 12.

1.2. Length and Organization of the Paper or Thesis

Standard lengths for papers written in the *Alte Studiengänge* are as follows: a *Hauptseminararbeit* should have about 17-20 pages (roughly 8000 words), while a *Proseminararbeit* should have about 10-12 pages (roughly 4000 words). A thesis at Magister or MA level should normally have a maximum of 80 pages. A *wissenschaftliche Prüfungsarbeit (Lehramt Gymnasium)* should have approximately 60 pages; a *wissenschaftliche Prüfungsarbeit (Lehramt Realschule)* should have approximately 40 pages. Students of the *Neue Studiengänge* (BA, BEd, MA) should check with their individual instructors and supervisors about the required length of papers, essays or theses.

If you find yourself writing more than the above recommendations, it means you should review your paper critically, streamline your argument, and discard or shorten any material which is less relevant to your topic or digresses from it. A longer term paper or thesis is often not a better piece of work: excessive length may well mean that your paper is not sufficiently focused or clearly argued; as a result it may not receive such a good grade in comparison to a shorter, more tightly argued and better disciplined paper in which the argument is clearly structured and developed, and every paragraph is relevant to the topic. Longer papers are therefore sometimes indicative of the fact that the writer has not taken sufficient time to clearly consider their argument and method.

Unnecessary space can also be taken up by long paraphrases of your primary text's story, and these should be avoided; any brief story summary should always pave the way for a discussion and analysis of a specific topic. In general, you should aim for a good balance of analytical and abstractive argument (theories and concepts) in combination with descriptive and illustrative material (discussion of and quotations from your primary texts).

If, conversely, you find that your paper is too short, this will definitely mean that it has covered the topic too superficially without sufficient analytical depth. You can improve on this by developing your understanding and definition of the key concepts and terms of your topic, and also expanding and deepening your analysis of passages and quotations from your primary texts. Double check that you have really articulated all your points clearly and in sufficient detail, and expand points which are too brief so that you feel sure that you have made your ideas absolutely clear to the reader; double check that you have contextualized and discussed quotations from your primary text/s with sufficient clarity.

1.3. Focus

For a term paper, you should either choose to discuss one primary text or compare two texts in the light of one topic; for a term paper, it is not usually a good idea to discuss more than two works in detail, although you can of course make passing references to other primary texts where useful. If you choose to deal with two different works or your topic concerns two related aspects, it is very important to take care that the treatment of both texts and/or aspects is balanced. For example, if your paper deals with two primary texts, it should apply the same concept and analytical criteria to both texts; if your paper has two different aspects in its title, you should also deal with both aspects in a balanced fashion. Your paper should, therefore, have a coherent and integrated approach and not be in danger of consisting of two loosely related topics.

2. PLANNING AND WRITING A GOOD PAPER

2.1. The Introduction

A good introduction is absolutely vital and many papers fail to get off to a good start because key preparatory steps in your argument — which should be undertaken in your introduction — are neglected. Your introduction has two important roles: it performs a rhetorical function, telling the reader exactly what the key concepts, methods, aims and focus of your paper are. Equally, however, writing a focused introduction helps *you* to formulate your ideas and develop a floor plan for your paper, clarifying your understanding of and strategy with regard to the paper's specific topic, in conjunction with the discussion of academic sources and definitions of your key terms. For this reason your introduction should be clearly focused; it should define your topic, methods, and aims. Your introduction should *not* contain any general information that is not relevant to your specific topic. For example, biographical information about the author of your primary text is not at all relevant and should not be included unless you have decided to analyze the influence of the author's own biographical development on her writing.

The introduction should therefore clearly state your aims and approach; it should provide initial

definitions of any important terms and concepts with reference to the secondary sources you have used to research your topic. (If your paper has a theoretical emphasis, or if it is a longer thesis, one of your main sections may well also be devoted to exploring a theoretical aspect, but your introduction should still provide a basic introduction into your overall concept and strategy prior to a more detailed exploration in a subsequent section.)

The title of your paper may well contain a key term from literary or cultural studies (e.g. “identity,” “hybridity”, “representation”, “multiculturalism,” “plot,” or “postcolonialism”). In this case you should provide evidence that you have researched theoretical literature which deals with and defines your key term/s. After reviewing the definitions and your own understanding of the key term/s in the secondary literature (briefly or more thoroughly, depending on whether you are writing a term paper or a longer thesis), you should above all make it absolutely clear which aspect or definition of the topic will be most relevant in your own paper and define how you will apply it to your primary text/s in your analytical sections. Including a clearly defined bridge section in your argument which defines how you will analyze your topic and/or apply your theoretical concept in the discussions of your primary text/s is essential to a good paper; papers often lose marks if this key stage in the development of the argument is weak or non-existent.

Rather, therefore, than simply providing an exhaustive but undifferentiated list of different definitions of your topic, you should critically evaluate the secondary literature on your topic or concept so you can clearly indicate which definition/s you find most applicable and why. Once you have established which are the less fruitful approaches or definitions of your topic, your account of these can be shortened or confined to footnotes; in this way, you still prove to your reader that you have done exhaustive research into the topic, but nevertheless prevent less useful secondary texts from cluttering your main text and obscuring the essentials of your argument. The same principle also applies if you are using a selection of secondary opinions on a primary text: instead of simply using multiple secondary sources to support your own argument, it is better to give an account of any key differences in opinion in your secondary sources. If your topic is more esoteric and does not have a well documented academic track record, it is all the more important for you to discuss and define it properly in your introduction. It is never sufficient to assume the reader will know what you mean: your key terms should always be defined.

After your introduction you should really feel that you are well set up to write the main sections of your paper; if you still find yourself making introductory remarks in the next section, it means that you have not yet sufficiently clarified your own approach and ideas and should review and plan the overall strategy and structure of your paper, and rewrite your introduction, before proceeding.

In addition, it is very important to review your introduction *after* you have finished writing your paper to check that it really does introduce the paper you have actually written. Sometimes your direction changes while you are writing the paper and you have important new insights and ideas; if so, you should rewrite your introduction so that it really acts as an argumentational gateway to the paper you have written.

2.2. The Conclusion

Your paper should also end with a brief conclusion summarizing your findings; if at this point you find it difficult to express your findings or state your main argument, this is an indication that the main points resulting from your analysis are insufficiently formulated and need better presentation.

2.3. Subheadings and Organization of Paragraphs

Like the title of your paper, the subheadings of your paper are very important. Term papers and the individual subsections of the paper need clear and differentiated headings. A paper with a vague title, especially one which is then not clearly defined and specified in the paper itself, will not get a good grade. Your individual section headings also help you to focus your argument.

Within the individual sections you should structure your ideas in clearly formed paragraphs. It is very important to write substantial paragraphs and to avoid a presentational and argumentational structure with multiple short paragraphs containing only single or two sentences; this kind of organizational style indicates that you have not yet sufficiently developed your ideas. Each paragraph should keep to one topic; when you move to a new topic or aspect, start a new paragraph or section.

Some people naturally write good cohesive and focused paragraphs, others need to practice. One way of practicing is to check that each of your paragraphs has a “topic sentence,” i.e. a sentence in which the main idea or finding of that paragraph is clearly articulated, and to which all other statements and examples are subordinated. Creating a topic sentence for each paragraph helps you to focus your argument. In English writing style, each paragraph (except for the first one after a new heading) should be indented; do not leave extra space between paragraphs but simply mark new paragraphs by indentation.

2.4. Keeping your argument focused

You should keep your main topic and your paper’s aims in mind throughout the paper. Especially towards the end of each section, it is useful to create bridge paragraphs which summarize how the section you have just completed has contributed to your topic and explain how the next section will continue the argumentational thread.

3. RESEARCHING YOUR TOPIC AND DEVELOPING YOUR OWN IDEAS

As a student of literature, it is necessary and desirable for you to be aware of the state of the art in academic research and also to prove this by good reference to secondary sources in your paper and bibliography. However, while you are in the early stages of preparing your paper, it can be extremely counterproductive to do exhaustive research before you have given sufficient attention to your own ideas and made room in your mind for your own individual strategy. Einstein famously said that imagination was more important than knowledge in his scientific work (Viereck 1929). This is because the ultimate goal of academic work, particularly at university level, is to produce new ideas and insights into a particular field of study: only an imaginative,

critical and questioning approach to existing material can do this. However, before you can produce new ideas, obviously you need to be well informed about the current state of the art in a particular field; for this reason, papers at the beginning of your studies are more likely to apply basic concepts to literary works, while at higher level in theses and longer papers, original thought and a more imaginative approach is necessary in order to get excellent grades.

Both knowledge and imagination therefore definitely play an important part in outstanding academic work; papers that contain clear evidence of your own ideas and personality alongside the documentation and discussion of other people's research are much more interesting and worthy of better grades than a paper which only provides a well-documented montage of other people's ideas. Therefore, as well as doing academic research, you should devote sufficient time to mapping your own ideas of what you understand by a topic, what interests you about it, and locating key passages in your primary texts which are most relevant to your specific topic and which will therefore provide key quotations for analysis in your paper.

Getting your own interests and your understanding of a topic clear in your own mind is also time-effective and helpful for the organization of your paper, because it means that you can then read secondary literature *more effectively*. Once you have defined your own personal focus, you will be able to evaluate the extent to which a piece of secondary literature is relevant for your own field of interest much more quickly. By contrast, if you immerse yourself in a broad sea of secondary opinions without having a clear idea of your own focus, you will probably find it much harder to decide on your individual approach and argument.

If you need help in working out how you are going to explore and apply a topic of interest in an analysis of your primary text/s, one way to kick-start your ideas is to select some relevant passages from your primary text, type them into your computer and analyze them. Ideas often come once one starts writing, so it is important to start writing in some way or another — even by transcribing key passages. Since a successful paper should make detailed reference to specific passages, this is also good preparation for your paper, although later you may find yourself having to select the most relevant passages and discarding others which are less relevant when it comes to completing the final version of your paper.

In researching your topic, as well as consulting theoretical texts and reference works for definitions of key topics, it is also important to check to see if there are any articles available on your specific topic with reference to your primary text. The best place to do this is the *MLA Bibliography*, which can be accessed online at the *UB*.

4. CITING SECONDARY SOURCES

4.1. Plagiarism

A source reference should *always* be given, whether you summarize ideas, cite a key concept or phrase, or quote someone else's words exactly. This applies to any information that you incorporate into your term paper or thesis; you should, therefore, also include detailed sources for any historical or cultural background information you researched for your paper. If you use other people's words or ideas, you must give them credit for it, otherwise you are plagiarizing – stealing

other people's words and ideas and passing them off as your own. Plagiarized papers are automatically.

When you give your sources, you are proving that you have done thorough research into your topic. Already when making preparatory notes from a secondary source, it is very important to note what is quoted material and what is summarized so that you do not plagiarize inadvertently.

4.2. Citation Forms and Documenting Sources

There are various set forms for the presentation of secondary sources, and each academic discipline has its own preferred forms, which means you may need to be flexible depending on where you submit your paper. In English studies, MLA style or forms of the author-date system like Chicago style are widely used. These involve a brief form of citation in the running text of your paper and for this reason they are used in preference to the more old-fashioned forms where each source is cited in full in a separate footnote. In MLA style only the author's name and a page reference is given in parenthesis in the main text. The author-date system is similar but the year of publication is also included together with the name in parenthesis. In all these systems, however, the full publication details of the text you are quoting only appear in the comprehensive alphabetical bibliography at the end of the paper.

For MLA style, see:

Gibaldi, Joseph. *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*. 6th edition. New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 2003.

For an example of the author-date system, see:

The Chicago Manual of Style. 15th edition. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2003.

"Chicago Style Citation Quick Guide".

http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide.html. Accessed 12 January 2010.

If you quote someone else's words, you must make this absolutely clear by enclosing the quotation in inverted commas ("...."). Short quotations can be integrated into larger sentences in your own text; longer quotations of three or more lines should be presented as a separate indented paragraph. It is generally also advisable to present quotations which are in a different language (for example German quotations in an English paper) as separate units, because a blend of English and German in one sentence can be syntactically problematic.

It is important to reproduce the quotation as presented in the original text. You should therefore not alter the quotation by, for example, reproducing it in italics if it is not in italics in the original (this is a very frequent mistake made by students). Any alterations, additions or omissions from your quotation should be indicated by square brackets (e.g. "[...]" for an omission). If an author has used italics to emphasize a word, you should also add a note after the page reference stating "emphasis in original" to indicate that the italics are part of your source. Conversely, if you want to highlight a phrase in the quotation which the author did not, then this is possible, but you should include a note with your reference saying that the emphasis is your own addition ("emphasis added").

4.3. Some basic examples of MLA style and the author-date system

Sentence summarizing an author's argument:

MLA style:

The classic conventions of tragedy were not adhered to by English dramatists in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century (Cuddon 988).

Author-date system:

The classic conventions of tragedy were not adhered to by English dramatists in the late sixteenth and early seventeenth century (Cuddon 1992, 988).

Compare the above form of citation with a sentence quoting the author's *exact words* (the following is an example in MLA style):

The form of tragedy became more flexible in Elizabethan England, so that “[d]uring the latter part of the 16th c. and until approximately 1640, dramatists paid less attention to the Classical rules and conventions” (Cuddon 988).

If you move beyond summarizing an author's ideas in your own words to quoting actual phrases or key concepts he uses, you must make it clear that you are quoting him by including all verbatim material in inverted commas. Otherwise you are still practicing plagiarism because you are implying that these are your own words and inventions and not those of another person (i.e. your author)

Whether in MLA style or the author-date system, the full reference then appears at the end of the paper in the bibliography:

MLA style:

Cuddon, J.A. *Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*. 3rd edition. Penguin: Harmondsworth, 1992.

Author-date system:

Cuddon, J.A. 1992. *The Penguin Dictionary of Literary Terms and Literary Theory*. 3rd edition. Penguin: Harmondsworth.

If in doubt, check with your course instructor/professor as to whether he or she prefers a particular citation style. I prefer the author-date system because it is more practical for referencing multiple works by the same author (in MLA style, if you have multiple books by one author, you need to add an abbreviation of the title to the short reference, which is more awkward than the author-date system where the year automatically distinguishes between different books by the same author). However, I accept papers which use either the author-date system or MLA style. The most

important thing is to choose a style and then apply it consistently.

4.4. Distinguishing between independently published and anthologized works

In addition to the specific citation systems, there are certain conventions concerning the presentation of the titles of primary and secondary texts. In their presentation the titles of independently published works (for example a play, a novel or a monograph) are distinguished from works which appear as part of a collection of texts in an anthology or periodical. The titles of independently published works should be presented by using italics (or by underlining), both in references to these texts in your paper and in the bibliography (here using MLA style for citation in a bibliography):

Gordimer, Nadine. *July's People*. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1982.

Pfister, Manfred. *Das Drama: Theorie und Analyse*. 5th edition. München: Fink, 1988.

Shakespeare, William. *Measure for Measure*. The Arden Shakespeare. London: Methuen, 1965.

By contrast, the titles of works published in an anthology (a poem, a short story, an academic article in a book or periodical) are enclosed in inverted commas:

Fowles, John. "The Enigma." *The Penguin Book of Modern British Short Stories*. Ed. Malcolm Bradbury. Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1988. 189-233.

Dannenberg, Hilary P. "Die Entwicklung von Theorien der Erzählstruktur und des Plot-Begriffs." *Literaturwissenschaftliche Theorien. Modelle und Methoden: Eine Einführung*. Ed. Ansgar Nünning. Trier: Wissenschaftlicher Verlag, 1995. 51-68.

Please note that you should also adhere to these conventions when only mentioning the names of primary texts in the course of your paper as well as when you cite the works in full in your bibliography.

5. FURTHER FREQUENT MISTAKES

Tense: Use the present (not the past) tense when describing the action in a fictional work; for example "In Shakespeare's *Measure for Measure*, Isabella pleads with Angelo for her brother's life" or: "In Fay Weldon's short story 'Weekend', Martha, her family and their guests spend the weekend at the family's country cottage."

Style: Avoid an over-personal style with an excessive use of the pronoun "I". For example "In my paper I want to investigate the time structure of..." does not sound as good as "This paper will investigate the time structure of ...". It is not, however, necessary to remove all references to yourself; you may wish to emphasize your own individual approach or strategy in contrast to that

of your sources, in which case it is fully legitimate to use the pronoun “I” for occasional emphasis.

It is, however, important to use a written style of English and avoid an oral or informal writing style such as addressing your reader with the pronoun “you”. Certain constructions are more usual in written English and it is important to avoid predominantly oral phrases; for example, “become” or “receive” (depending on the meaning) should be used and not the more oral “get”. Also aim to avoid an over-exclamatory style. Even if a key effect of literature at a first reading can be to provoke an emotional response, by the time you come to write your paper, you should have moved beyond the phase of reacting to that of analyzing.

Be critical of your own writing and cut out redundant, waffly or repetitive sentences and words before you hand in your paper. It is also very important to leave sufficient time to give your paper a final recheck for minor errors before handing it in. In particular, review the introduction to see if it has set the agenda for the main part of your paper. If it does not, then rewrite it.

6. QUICK CHECK LIST

- Give your paper a title page, followed by a list of contents, and a bibliography at the end.
- Give your paper a focused introduction which defines your topic, key terms, your aims and approach, with reference to definitions of key concepts from secondary literature.
- Do not weaken your argument, either in the introduction or the main paper, by including general information not relevant to your specific topic.
- Divide your paper into clearly numbered sections with titles and preferably also subheadings. (For a shorter essay as opposed to a full term paper, this kind of more elaborate division is not generally necessary, but the development of your argument should still be clearly visible in terms of paragraph divisions.)
- Write in clear and focused paragraphs
- Mark each paragraph (except the one immediately after a heading) by indenting it. Do not leave extra gaps between paragraphs except, occasionally, to indicate a major break in your argument.
- Make clear reference to all the secondary works you consulted while writing the paper, checking that you have quoted your source material correctly. Quote any words, even short phrases, you have read in secondary texts, in quotation marks (“...”). If you do not give your precise sources you will be practicing plagiarism and your paper will be failed.
- Do not alter the typeface of your quotations into italics to mark them off from your main text. Instead, present longer quotations in separate indented blocks of text.
- Present the titles of primary and secondary texts in accordance with the standard formats in English studies. For example: William Shakespeare’s *The Tempest*, Charlotte Brontë’s *Jane Eyre*, but Sylvia Plath’s “Mushrooms.”
- Use a consistent citation system, for example the author-date system or MLA style.
- After completing your paper, review it and check it for:
 - a) Consistency of reference to your topic
 - b) A good balance of analytical/discursive argument and descriptive/illustrative material
 - c) The presence of a clear bridge section after your definition of key terms and/or theoretical

introductions which explains how and with what aims you will apply your key terms to your primary text/s in your analytical sections.

- Revise any paragraphs which are very short (which would indicate a lack of argumentational organization or superficiality) by deleting, expanding or merging them with other paragraphs.
- Shorten or remove any sections of your paper in which you have wandered away from your topic or have included too much descriptive material, for example extensive summaries of a novel's story which have little analytical relevance.
- Check your paragraphs and overall writing style for the lucidity of argument. You should be able to identify a "topic sentence" somewhere in each paragraph which summarizes the main idea of the paragraph.
- Check that your conclusion states the key results of your paper and has accomplished the strategy and analytical goals you set out in your introduction.

References and Further Reading:

The Chicago Manual of Style. 15th edition. Chicago: Chicago University Press, 2003.

Gibaldi, Joseph. *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*. 6th edition. New York: The Modern Language Association of America, 2003.

Viereck, George Sylvester. 1929. "What Life Means to Einstein." *The Saturday Evening Post*. 26 October 1929.

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