

# Guidelines for Academic Research and Writing

These guidelines offer students a general introduction to the requirements and rules of academic writing. Please note that there is additional material including a style sheet for term papers, guidelines for oral presentations and catalogues of criteria for the evaluation of term papers as well as oral presentations available on our [website](#).

## What is Academic Research?

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At school, you will have learned to write essays on topics you were given by your teacher. In those essays you probably had to state your informed but nonetheless personal opinion. Moreover, you had to follow little formal criteria. Academic Research is different.

- It explores an idea, investigates a complex issue and solves a problem.
- It generates knowledge and seeks to find out something new.
- It wants to go beyond the researcher's personal resources.
- It participates in academic discourse and thus relates its research interest to what others have written.
- It is based on a combination of research of primary sources (such as novels, films, advertisements, etc.) and secondary material (scientific articles, books, etc.).
- It is a tool of communication among scholars and thus follows a set of conventions.

## How Do I Find a Research Topic?

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- Take notes of topics that you find particularly interesting during the seminar, referred to in secondary literature or in everyday contexts.
- Try to find a topic that really interests you; otherwise, you might lack motivation to start working on your research project.
- Once you have found a topic, you can start reading secondary literature. Doing so, will help you to further develop your idea.
- Narrow down your topic. You cannot present in-depth and problem-oriented research if your topic is too broad. Focus on a single aspect of your subject or a particular approach to the problem instead.
- You can use methods like brainstorming, mind-mapping and clustering to collect and structure your ideas.
- Formulate a research question and a research hypothesis.

## Outlining

Creating an outline will help you to develop the structure of your research. An outline visualises how the different parts of your paper are connected as well as the logical progression of your main argument. Throughout your research you will have to revise and update your outline continuously. The final outline can develop into your paper's table of contents.

In your table of contents...

- your individual chapters need numbering
- subchapters are indent
- the pagination is on the right-hand side
- use *speaking headlines*: your chapter headlines should tell a story

## Contents

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## How Do I Conduct Research?

For a thorough research you should try to read as deeply into the topic as possible, including books, collected volumes, articles from academic journals and covering issues such as the historical context of your topic, theory relevant for your research and articles on your primary source. Apart from standard literature you should focus on recent publications, so that you know the latest movements, theories and findings of the discourse you are participating in. Although you will have read more during your research, the works cited list of your finished term paper should include at least 7-10 titles.

## How and Where Can I Find Literature?

### The University Library

Search in our library's OPAC or go to the library and have a look at what is on the shelves.

### Schneeballverfahren

You start reading one text and research further literature by looking at its works cited list and so forth.

### Bibliographies

Bibliographies collect and list publications in one or more academic fields. They are constantly updated by scholars and used by researchers to find articles, journals, books and other publications on their topic.

Bibliographies in Cultural and Literary Studies include:

- MLA International Bibliography
- Literature Resource Center (LRC)
- British National Bibliography

There is a great number of more very specific bibliographies, as:

- Bibliography of Irish Linguistics and Literature
- Bonner-Online Bibliographie zur Comicforschung

Have a look at our university library's [website](#) to find bibliographies that help you to research literature on your topic.

### Online Databases

Getting access to secondary material can be difficult. The first place to go to is the university library. You should also check the [GVK \(Gemeinsamer Verbundkatalog\)](#) and its inter-library loan service (Fernleihe). [JSTOR](#), [MUSE](#) and [Project Gutenberg](#) are online databases, which also provide free access to a number of texts. You also might find it helpful to use Google Books or Google Scholar.

## Selecting Literature

Please use only literature that qualifies as academic. The following criteria can help you to identify academic literature:

- It should contain information that makes the text identifiable, such as a title, the name of the author, the place and time of publication and the publisher.
- It should reference its sources and contain a works cited list.
- Its argumentation is stringent, its analysis is methodologically correct.
- It is published in academic journals.

## How is Academic Work Structured?

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Works of academic research, such as oral presentations, handouts, essays, term papers, bachelor and master theses, generally contain an introduction, a main part and a conclusion.

### Introduction

- introduces the topic with a teaser or lead-in
- identifies a problem and specifies the research interest
- outlines the paper's approach and briefly summarises the outcomes of the individual chapters
- each part of the introduction has its own paragraph

### Main Part

The main part develops ideas and arguments that help to support the research hypothesis. It consists of a theoretical/methodological part, which should be 1/3 of the overall work and an analysis, which should be 2/3 of your paper.

#### **Theoretical/Methodological Part**

- If you analyse a film, you can make a character analysis, analyse the film's structure (image, montage, sound, etc) or you can analyse its production and distribution processes. Depending on your research interest, you have to focus on a topic and an approach and consult secondary material, which provides a framework and categories for your analysis.
- introduces and evaluates theories and theoretical concepts
- is based on a critical reading and evaluation of secondary sources
- outlines the methodological approach; a topic can be approached from various perspectives and you have to choose one that befits your hypothesis and helps to analyse your primary source

#### **Analysis of Primary Sources**

- studies the subject through first-hand investigation of primary material
- primary sources include literature, art, film, historical documents, etc.
- the analysis should concentrate on developing arguments rather, than summarising the source's content
- examples from the primary source are used to illustrate the arguments
- application of theoretical concepts and methodological approach

### Conclusion

- summarises and discusses the findings and theses
- relates findings to the initial research question or hypothesis
- gives an outlook to further research

- A red thread should be maintained throughout the whole paper. Keep your research hypothesis in mind as you are engaging with secondary and primary material. Structure your work in a way that helps you to systematically explore your hypothesis and to develop a plausible argumentation.

## What is Plagiarism? How Do I Quote and Paraphrase?

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### Plagiarism

is a form of intellectual theft, meaning that you quote or paraphrase someone else's ideas, information or expressions without acknowledging the source. If the work you submit contains plagiarism, it will have severe consequences.

It is important to reference **everything** that you quote or paraphrase from other texts.

**Direct Quote** Word-for-Word copy of a text, indicated by quotation marks (“”).

Edward Said writes that “the Orient was almost a European invention, and had been since antiquity a place of romance, exotic beings, haunting memories and landscapes, remarkable experiences.” (1)

**Paraphrase** Re-phrasing a text in your own words.

According to Edward Said, the Orient was constructed by and in contrast to the Occident (1). In doing so, the Occident not only defined the Orient but also Europe as different from and superior to the Eastern world (1).

On our [stylesheet](#) you find more information on in-text citations, correct referencing and the works cited list.

Source: Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. 1978. Rpt. London: Penguin, 2003. Print.

## Before You Start Writing...

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- Consult your lecturer. Your lecturer might have further advice on your topic, where to find relevant literature or how to outline your paper.
- Prepare a first working outline. Make sure that the parts of your paper are related to one another.
- Write down your thesis statement. Keep in mind that your thesis statement should be the answer to the question you have raised.
- Before you start writing the individual chapters, make notes and draft the structure and line of argumentation.

## Some Comments on Time Management and Motivation

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In most cases, you will have to work with a deadline. Additionally, you might have to submit different works around the same time. A good time management and motivation can help to meet your deadlines.

### Plan In Advance

Unlike timetables in school, university study programs leave you with a certain freedom. Use that freedom as you plan your semester timetable. Think about how many seminars you want to visit, how

many credit points you want to achieve and how much work you have to invest to do so. Are your plans realistic?

Presentations, reading tasks and deadlines for written homework or term papers are usually announced at the semester start. Make an overview, which work you have to submit and when. Do not start preparing your work two weeks before it is due. Look into your different tasks at the beginning of the semester to get an impression how much you will have to invest and when you will have to start to properly work on your project.

## Getting Started...

Sometimes the most difficult part can be getting started. This can have different causes:

- **Are you motivated?** Sometimes you might get assigned to a topic which does not interest you, resulting in a lack of motivation. Give the topic a chance. You might find something interesting in it after all. Keep in mind that you chose your study program.
- **Are you indecisive?** If you cannot settle on a topic talk to your fellow students or your lecturer, who might help you to choose an appropriate topic.
- **Are you distracted?** If Facebook is open, your friend is texting you or your flat mates bump into your room every five minutes, you need to find a working environment with less distractions. The university's library offers working [carrells](#), which you can rent for free.
- **You do not know where to start?** The outline of your work can provide you with an overview of what individual parts you have to work on. Prioritise: which part of your research do you have to do to provide you with material and knowledge you need for the subsequent parts?
- **Do you have self-doubts?** If you think you lack the abilities and competences to do the assigned work keep in mind that you do not have to be perfect from the start. You are allowed to make mistakes and learn from them. If you still feel too insecure talk to your lecturer, who might help you with your work.
- **Do you feel lonely?** Sometimes it can be hard to work all by yourself for longer periods of time. Your fellow students might go through the same. Get together in groups or find a sparring partner. You can motivate each other, talk about difficulties you are facing, read each other's work and take coffee breaks together.

## Allow for Breaks, Leisure Time and Time-Buffers

A work schedule should allow for breaks and leisure time, so that you can regain your concentration and maintain your motivation. It should also contain time-buffers in case of any unforeseen delays (e.g. illness, other urgent homework, difficulties in purchasing or accessing the necessary literature, a broken computer etc.).

## Difficulties You Might Have to Face

- starting your work late
- distraction by Facebook, television, etc.
- unrealistic work schedules
- lack of concentration
- lack of motivation
- overconfidence in your own abilities
- lack of confidence in your own abilities

If you have severe time management and motivational issues, suffer from exam nerves, extraordinary self-doubts or you feel put under too much pressure, the university offers [Psychosoziale Studienberatung](#) which will help you.

## Finishing

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### Layout

For information on our format requirements (such as typeface, font size, spacing, etc.) consult our [style sheet](#). Regarding the layout of your term paper you should focus on consistency. The longer your paper gets, the more difficult it can be to keep an overview. Using “styles and formatting” (*Formatvorlagen*) in Microsoft Word or alternative text setting programmes such as LaTeX and InDesigns might help.

The contents of your paper are of course most important. Nevertheless, the look of the printed version should leave a good impression on its reader.

- Use clean paper, when you hand in a print version.
- Do not spill food or drink over your work.
- Use a clean spring binder (*Klemmhefter*). Please do not staple or punch your work; this makes it very difficult to read.
- You can print out and have your papers bind at the university's copy shop on the main campus (next to the student club Barracke).
- Hand in your work via mail as a pdf-file as well.

### Checklist for Term Papers

- Do you maintain a red thread?
- Are all your references and quotes correct?
- Is your works cited list complete (including secondary and primary material)?
- Is there a table of contents, a list of abbreviations, a list of illustrations and your signed declaration of honesty?
- Do you meet all stylistic and formal requirements?
- Is your pagination correct?
- Did you proofread your paper? Did someone else proofread it for you?

You can also use our [criteria for the evaluation](#) of term papers as a checklist and in order to have a look at what issues influence your final grade.

### Reward Yourself

After you have handed in your term paper you should reward yourself. No matter the grade you will finally get, you committedly worked on something for a longer period of time, you faced difficulties, solved problems and improved a number of skills during the process. Take a few days off before you start on your next paper to clear your head, recharge your batteries and enjoy having finished and handed in your term paper.

### Handling Feedback

When grading your work, your lecturer will usually give you some form of feedback. After you have dedicated a lot of time and work in your paper, taking in criticism can be very difficult. Please note that the term paper you write is not just an assessment to provide you with a grade, it is also part of learning how to work and write academically. You are allowed to make mistakes so that you can learn from them and evolve your writing skills. Here is some advice on how to deal with your feedback:

- Be open: your lecturer does not criticise you for the criticism itself, but to help you improve.
- Learn from your feedback: what can you learn from it? What will you do differently next time?
- See your lecturer: if you do not understand the feedback do not shy from seeing your lecturer and talking to him/her about your paper.
- Look for positive criticism: it can be reassuring to know not only where to improve but also what was already very good.

## Further Reading

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