Guidelines for Academic Research

Chair of Anglophone Cultural and Literary Studies

Effective: August 2020

Introduction

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?

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.

Finding a Research Topic

- 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 (or to go through with) working on your research project.
- Once you have found a topic, you can start reading secondary literature. Doing so, will help you to develop your idea further.
- 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, or clustering to collect and structure your ideas.
- Formulate a research question and tentative answers to these questions. These answers will build the foundation for your thesis statement.

Outline

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 and reflects 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 flush right
- use *speaking headlines*: your chapter headlines should tell the story of your paper

How to 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. In addition you should familiarise yourself with 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 includes only the sources which you have actually cited. It should encompass at least 7-10 titles.

How and Where to Find Literature

University Library

Search in the university library's OPAC or go to the library and have a look at what is on the shelves. The library's website also provides information on research and the library offers research courses.

Schneeballverfahren

Start reading one text and research further literature by looking at its works cited list. Thus, you will find new text and by looking at their respective works cited lists, you will accumulate more and more texts. This method is especially useful to identify the core texts for your research project, as they are likely to be cited very often.

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, such as:

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

Have a look at our university library's website to find bibliographies in the DBIS catalogue that help you to research literature on your topic. Please note that almost all bibliographies, including the ones listed above, have to be accessed from within the university network and through the university library. If you want to connect from home, you have to use the VPN network connection.

Online Databases

Getting access to secondary material can be difficult. The first place to go to is the university library. But you should also check the GVK (Gemeinsamer Verbundkatalog) and its inter-library loan service (Fernleihe). JSTOR, Project 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 Academic 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 and its analysis is methodologically correct.
- It is published in academically verified sources, such as journals or anthologies.

Structure of Academic Work

Works of academic research, such as oral presentations, handouts, essays, term papers, bachelor and master theses, generally contain an introduction, a body, and a conclusion. A red thread should be maintained throughout the whole paper. Keep your thesis statement in mind as you are engaging with secondary and primary material. Structure your work in a way that helps you to systematically explore your thesis statement and to develop a plausible line of arguments.

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

Body
The main part develops ideas and arguments that help to support the thesis statement. It consists of a theoretical/methodological part (roughly 1/3) and an analysis (roughly 2/3).

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 and the focus of your topic, the theoretical and methodological premises provide a framework and categories for your analysis. Since any one topic can be approached from various perspectives, you have to choose one that befits your hypothesis and helps to analyse your primary source.

- introduces and evaluates theories and theoretical concepts
- is based on a critical reading and evaluation of secondary sources
- outlines the methodological approach

Analysis of Primary Sources

Primary sources can be any cultural artefact that you wish to study. This includes literature, art, film, historical documents, but also cultural practices. Overall, your analysis should concentrate on developing arguments rather than summarising the source's content. Use examples from the primary source to illustrate your arguments, but keep in mind that examples alone will never make your point for you. Depending on your theoretical approach, you will have to contextualise them.

- studies the sources through first-hand investigation of primary material
- applies of theoretical concepts and methodological approach

Conclusion

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

Citation and Plagiarism

In your term papers, you have to cite other sources, such as textual evidence from your primary sources or points from secondary literature to emphasise your own argument. It is important to reference *everything* that you quote or paraphrase from other texts. This also includes thoughts and ideas that are are not your own. The Chair for Anglophone Literary and Cultural Studies follows the guidelines by the Modern Language Association (MLA) in this regard. The mechanics of citation according to MLA Style of Reference are specified in the associations eighth handbook and in our Style Sheet. In general, MLA distinguishes between direct quotations and paraphrases (or indirect quote).

Direct Quote

A direct quote is a word-for-word copy of a text. The quote is 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

A paraphrase is a re-phrasing of 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).

Source: Said, Edward. *Orientalism*. 1978. Penguin, 2003.

Plagiarism

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 your submitted work contains plagiarism, you will automatically fail the assignment. Plagiarism violates basic principles of academic conduct and may result in expulsion.

Before Starting to Write

- Consult your instructor. Your instructor might have further advice on your topic, where to find relevant literature, or how to outline your paper.
- Prepare a first draft of an 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 research question you have raised.
- Before you start writing the individual chapters, make notes and draft the structure and line of arguments.

Some Comments on Time Management and Motivation

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 programmes 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. Ask yourself if your plans are realistic. The Study and Examination Regulations provide orientation regarding how many credits you should do per semester.

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 only two weeks before it is due. Look into your different tasks at the beginning of the semester to get an impression of 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 unmotivated?** 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 instructor, 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 carrels, which you can rent for free.

- **Do you not know where to start?** The outline of your work can provide you with an overview of which individual parts you have to work on. Prioritise: which part of your research do you have to do to provide you with the material and the knowledge you need for the subsequent parts?

- **Do you have self-doubts?** If you think you lack the abilities and competencies 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 instructor, 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, proofread 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 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 social media, 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 are able to recognise the difficulties you have, or might even be able to anticipate them, it will be easier to overcome them. In addition, 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 student services offer Psycho-social Counselling, which will help you.

Finishing

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 style templates in Microsoft Word or alternative text setting programmes such as LaTeXand InDesign might help.

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

- Use clean paper when you submit a print version.
- Do not spill food or drink over your work.
- Use a clean spring binder. Please do not staple or punch your work, this makes it very difficult to read.
- You can print and have your papers bound at the university's copy shop on the main campus (next to the student club Baracke).
- Submit your work electronically in PDF format as well. Your instructor will provide you with the details in this regard.

Checklist for Termpapers

- 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 affidavit?
- 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 which issues influence your final grade.

Reward Yourself

Reward yourself when you have achieved intermediate goals in your work. For example, take a day off after you have finished a chapter. After you have submitted your term paper you might even take a few days off before you start on your next paper to clear your head, recharge your batteries, and enjoy having finished and submitted your term paper. No matter the grade you will finally get, you worked with commitment on something for a

longer period of time, you faced difficulties, solved problems, and improved a number of skills during the process. Keep in mind, however, that such work-reward practice requires thorough time management. If you have started late, there will be no time for rewards.

Handling Feedback

After having graded your work, your instructor will usually give you some form of feedback. If they do not offer feedback of their own accord, we strongly recommend asking for it. If the feedback is provided electronically, do not shy from making an appointment with your instructor and talk to them about your paper. Taking in criticism can be very difficult after you have invested a lot of time and work in your paper. 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 hone your writing skills. Here is some advice on how to deal with feedback:

- Be open. Your instructor does not criticise you for the criticism itself, but to help you improve.
- Learn from feedback. Ask yourself what you will do differently next time.
- Look for positive criticism. It can be reassuring to know not only where to improve but also what was already very good.

Further Reading

Aczel, Richard. *How to Write an Essay*. 13th ed. Klett, 2014.

Bänsch, Axel, and Dorothea Alewell. *Wissenschaftliches Arbeiten*. 10th ed. Oldenbourg, 2009.

Boeglin, Martha. *Wissenschaftlich arbeiten Schritt für Schritt: Gelassen und effektiv studieren*. Fink, 2007.

Broders, Simone. *Wissenschaftliches Arbeiten in Anglistik und Amerikanistik*. Wilhelm Fink, 2015.

Echterhoff, Gerald, and Birgit Neumann. *Projekt- und Zeitmanagement: Strategien für ein erfolgreiches Studium*. Klett Lernen und Wissen, 2006.

Karmasin, Matthias, and Rainer Ribing. *Die Gestaltung wissenschaftlicher Arbeiten: Ein Leitfaden für Seminararbeiten, Bachelor-, Master- und Magisterarbeiten sowie Dissertationen*. facultas.wuv, 2014

Kruse, Otto. *Keine Angst vor dem leeren Blatt: Ohne Schreibblockaden durchs Studium*. 12th ed. Campus, 2007.

Macgilchrist, Felicitas. *Academic Writing* Schöningh, 2014.

The Modern Language Association of America. *MLA Handbook*. 8th ed. Modern Language Association of America, 2016.