

Guidelines for Writing a Term Paper in English or American Literature

1. Finding a Topic:

Please contact your instructor in time during his/her office hours in order to discuss and decide on the **topic and structure** of your paper. This cannot and should not be done via email. **Please observe the deadlines given in Moodle and decide on your topic at least 6 weeks earlier!** This will leave you enough time to work with appropriate source material.

As a rule, it is part of your task to come up with a suitable topic that is of interest for investigation from a literary or cultural studies perspective. A good scholarly topic usually develops from your observation of ideas or formal elements that appear to be relevant for the material (usually a text or film) you are dealing with. The topic allows you to approach your material on a more general, abstract basis, looking for the deeper implications or functions of certain elements. In order to discuss your topic adequately, you will have to make use of a theoretical framework (remember the theoretical approaches discussed in your Introduction class) and you will have to make yourself familiar with the ACADEMIC use of the key terms connected with your topic (this means that, no, you cannot simply use definitions from dictionaries or general lexica, but you must take the effort and check literary and cultural studies handbooks for the particular implications of this term in this contexts. Otherwise you will produce something that may be appropriate for an amateur discussion in a pub or a social network, but not for an academic level).

Often, your topic also helps you to relate an individual example (e.g. a text) to a larger context (either a genre or a cultural context). It usually helps if you develop a question which has not already been dealt with to exhaustion – otherwise, you will have to dig through myriads of secondary sources and you will have to deal with the rather frustrating experience that everything you want to say has actually been already said. Therefore, it is always easier to come up with a question that is at one point slightly original – this will enable you to use secondary material as well as your own finds in a more balanced way. Last but not least, in order to deal with your topic, you will need to work with the text, that is, you will have to analyse selected exemplary passages in detail in order to develop your argument and to support your thesis.

Considering all this, the following examples generally do NOT make good topics:

- an author's biography or the description of a cultural phenomenon (such a topic will basically make you summarize what others have already found out; however, you should display your ability to analyse and evaluate material on your own and not just to reproduce);
- analysing a character or a stylistic feature for its own sake (this is what you might have done in essays at school, but hey, we are at university here, so you should be eager to advance some steps further: if you are interested in certain characters or stylistic features, think about what exactly makes these items interesting, what could be the function for their particular representation/use and what could be their function in the text and/or with regard to their context? Once you begin to ask these questions concerning character and style, you will easily transform a bland school-essay topic into something more sophisticated and appropriate for academic research)

2. Finding your Secondary Sources:

Once you have decided on a topic, you should first try to find the necessary secondary literature on your own, by checking the **MLA-Bibliography** or the **ABELL-Bibliography** (both are actually the best starting point for any research paper; they are available in the list of databases of the University Library website) and the library catalogue ("Systemsuche" is sometimes more helpful than just typing in a keyword in the very general search mode on the entry site of the University Library). As comfortable online research tools may be, you should also **GO TO THE LIBRARY** and browse through shelves containing the books that are important for your topic. At the beginning, it is often quite difficult for students to think of the key words that will yield them an adequate selection of secondary material – the more knowledge you have in the field the easier it gets; but at the beginning, you may often come up with either too many or no results at all. Therefore, in many cases, you will find books more quickly if you take out what is shelved in the respective thematic sections in the library and have a brief glance at the table of contents, the blurb and, perhaps, some paragraphs of the introduction and the conclusion.

As a rule, library catalogue search will only yield book titles. But as most of the publications that may be of interest for your topics will be published as article in journals or essay collections, you must use another search engine. This is where *MLA* and *ABELL* come in: they are the most comprehensive and up-to-date literary and cultural study research databases listing individual essays and chapters within books or journals. A number of the titles listed there might have to be ordered via interlibrary loan (“Fernleihe”), therefore begin as early with your work on your paper as possible. The articles on *JSTOR* may be easier to get, because you can simply download them. But *JSTOR* lists only a very small portion of what you can find in *MLA* and *ABELL* – and its articles are, as a rule, generally at least 5-10 years old (which is basically another generation than contemporary research paradigms).

GOLDEN RULE: Always consult *MLA* and *ABELL* first!

If ALL your efforts of finding material are unsuccessful, please contact your instructor during his/her office hours. Your instructors are always ready to help you, but will not conduct your bibliographical research (i.e. simply tell you the titles or give you books) – this is part of your task!

Please consider that finding and selecting your secondary material is usually the most time consuming part of your task. Therefore, try to find a topic as early as possible (best: a few weeks before the end of the term, so that your instructor is able to see you and help you) and begin your search for material immediately. This will give you enough time to collect and read material (unless you select an extremely new topic, you should be prepared to go through title lists of up to 300 results from which you will have to select about 50 titles to look at, before you will come up with the 10-20 that will turn out actually useful...) – and to use interlibrary loan. Please note that bad time management in this respect (late decisions on topics, late search for resources) is not an excuse for a badly researched paper.

BAD or outright UNACCEPTABLE sources for researching the secondary literature for your academic research paper are:

- Google and comparative search engines (It may be enticingly fast and simple, but “fast and simple” is basically contrary to good research. For experienced scholars, who have enough background to evaluate critically what the engines offer, Google can be helpful. Anyone who is not yet in the PhD stage should use the databases listed above unless they are dealing with material that is less than 3-5 years old. Otherwise they risk coming up with unspecific, unapproved and simply inadequate material. Please also note that Google Books – as wonderful as it seems to be – also has its limits, because you never have the full texts; sometimes the important bits, which may contradict the rest, stand exactly in the pages that have not been digitized. If you want to have a research database with real full text contents, you may check www.questia.com, which also offers cheap or even free trial and short-term access: this is a database with the full texts of scholarly books and journals of major publishers, with word-by-word index – it can be very convenient!).
- Posting questions in social networks or forums: The majority of the self-declared “experts” that offer their advice there, are no better qualified than yourself. If you are stuck somewhere, ask your instructor. Any other support (if you should really happen to come across a qualified person) will border on cheating: Keep in mind that YOU are the one who is supposed to do the work. So please be prepared to make an effort and think for yourself. That is the most rewarding way, anyway. In real scholarly forums, students asking for hints for secondary material usually get the answer: Look for yourself, this is part of YOUR task!

- *Wikipedia* (Although this encyclopedia is getting better and more detailed in its contents, it is still no acceptable academic source, because anyone can meddle with it. Besides, it is general in character, like any encyclopedia, whereas you need discipline-specific secondary sources in order to back your research.)

3. The Scope of your Term Paper

Keep within the range of page numbers or word count given by your instructor (such information can usually be found on your moodle class pages or in the LSF description).

Please keep in mind that writing a paper in a particular length is part of the grading criteria. If a topic cannot be dealt with within the given scope, you will have to reconsider the topic and/or cut parts. Papers that are more than 10% above or below the demanded word count will not be accepted.

4. The Language of your Term Paper:

You are studying English, so: English.

5. General Outline of your Term Paper:

Title Page: The very first page of your term paper should be a title page. This page must contain the following pieces of information: Title of your paper; your full name, address including e-mail address, matricule number, name of your study programme, semester number; title of the course in which you are submitting the paper, name of instructor, term; module element and number of credit points you wish to obtain. How you arrange all this on the title page, whether you add some visual elements, whether you hand in your paper with fancy binding – that is all up to you. What we require is the above mentioned information, in clearly legible form, and a paper submitted as a word-file AND in a hardcopy that has the individual pages connected with each other in one way or the other.

Table of Contents: After the title page, use one single page for your TABLE OF CONTENTS. This table of contents must present the outline of your paper, with all the headings that also appear in the paper itself. At this point, one should mention that you are expected to arrange the argument in your paper in different chapters, which should be numbered (in Arabic numbers) throughout (i.e. 1., 2., 3 etc.). If you feel that your chapters should have subchapters, please use a numerical structure to indicate the different chapter levels. This means, for example: 1. – 1.1 – 1.2 – 1.2.1 – 1.2.2 – 1.3 – 2. – 3. – 3.1 – 3.2 – 4. etc. The way you structure your paper in your table of contents indicates that you are consciously arranging your argument in main aspects and subordinate aspects. A table of contents that simply lists chapters 1, 2, 3, 4 etc. usually betrays that the student is not aware which aspects logically belong together.

Please keep in mind that your argument in a term paper is arranged in chapters and paragraphs. Paragraphs are coherent units of thought consisting of several sentences (AVOID one-sentence paragraphs!). Chapters usually consist of several paragraphs that are logically combined into an argument addressing an aspect with some closure. Therefore, if you find that your table of contents actually gives chapter headings to each paragraph, you should revise your chapter structure again.

Last but not least: As you will notice once you work with books, the lines in a table of contents usually consist of three elements: Chapter number – Chapter Title – Page number of the first page (and only the first page) of the chapter. The same should apply to the table of contents in your term paper.

Introduction: The paper should start with an introduction, which develops the major topic and problems of the paper, formulates a thesis and explains your method and procedure. If you use significant key terms, please explain them. Should those explanations demand extensive elaboration, discuss them in an extra chapter at the beginning of the body/main part of your text. Please do not write an author's biography as an introduction if it does not relate directly to the topic. Summaries of the contents are usually superfluous as well (except if absolutely necessary; such questions are best discussed with your instructor during an office hour). References to current societal matters are in most cases as irrelevant to academic writing as are personal declarations of interest, compassion and the like (i.e. "I write about this poem because it deeply touched me", or "because it addresses an issue that is highly topical in today's society").

In brief: Try to explain **WHAT** your topic is, **WHY** this topic is an important one for the primary material you are dealing with, **HOW** you are going to approach it (and why you think this is the appropriate way), **WHAT MATERIAL** you are going to use, and **WHAT** your major thesis is.

Body/Main Part: Elaborate on the thesis formulated in the Introduction in a concise and compelling argumentation. Position yourself in the context of the current state of research via references to secondary literature. Working with secondary literature does not mean that your reader will think you have no ideas of your own. One goal of an academic paper is that you demonstrate your knowledge of different academic positions regarding your topic. Therefore, you should express your opinions and conclusions regarding a particular text always in view of the existing state of the art in research; and you then present and hold your own position within this context. By verifying your statements with exemplary passages from the text you make sure that other readers can follow your argument and be convinced about it. As a rule, your readers do not just read in order to be informed about what you think about a text. They also want to understand why you have reached particular conclusions – only then it is possible for them to decide whether they agree or not.

Remember not to simply retell the contents of the text but to focus on general issues and to keep up reference to the initial problem. For example, in order to assess a character, you should not only say what s/he looks like or what s/he is doing, but you must also draw conclusions about what these features or actions indicate about the character of this figure.

Avoid "intentional fallacy" (= search for the intention of the author) and "affective fallacy" (= empathetic interpretation which treats fictional characters as if they were real life persons). Please keep in mind that, when reading a text from a literary scholar's perspective, it is important to keep a critical distance and to ask how a text is doing certain things or achieving certain effects. So your main attitude towards the text should be one of critical reflection. It is largely irrelevant for a literary scholar whether one can identify with characters or texts, or whether one likes them.

Try to connect paragraphs logically and to arrange your ideas progressively in an argument. Paragraphs should contain a complex of ideas that form some kind of unit. Therefore a paragraph usually contains more than one line/sentence. Generally speaking, the topics you raise in your paper should all be connected with or referred back to the general topic. It is your task to remind your reader of this connection time and again.

Conclusion: In this final part of your paper, you bring together your observations from the body by going back to the theses formulated in the Introduction. You may offer an outlook for possible future research prospects if they relate to the topic. References to current societal matters and solely personal opinions and emotional affirmations are not suitable for academic writing.

6. Style (including Citation and Referencing Style)

Your quotations ought to follow **MLA Style** (please consult the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*, 7th edition, or the Purdue OWL fluid MLA style sheet in the web).

Please note that our term papers differ from MLA Style insofar as we want you to prefix a title page and a table of contents to your paper. Also, the most sensible way of formatting is to use margins of 2,5 cm on each side of your page, Times New Roman 12 pt as font, spacing of 1.5 lines, justified (= Blocksatz) paragraphs, and page numbers either in the right-hand margin on the top of your page or in the centre at the bottom. Please also indicate the headings to your chapters according to your table of contents.

Apart from that, just follow MLA-Style, especially for quotations and bibliographies (which we call “list of works cited”).

If you do not follow MLA-Style (e.g. if you decide to use a different way of citing despite these instructions), the paper will be handed back to you immediately even if you pursued “your own style sheet” consistently throughout the whole paper. Observing a particular format for citations is a common academic practice (each and every publisher insists on his way of citing and will not publish anything which is submitted in a different style) and will influence the grading of the formal aspects of your paper significantly.

Therefore, use only the formats given in the Style Sheet and not different ones. Please avoid fancy font types or formats – they are inappropriate for scholarly texts. In scholarly papers, italics are generally only used in bibliographical references – NOT in quotations, and NOT to emphasize something (emphasis should be expressed through your formulation, not through any kind of fancy formatting) or to mark words you consider important. Using italics for emphasis or for quotations is confusing, therefore please do not do it.

Please keep in mind that academic papers require a certain style and register, which is more formal than what you may use in colloquial English. This includes that you must use full forms for your auxiliary verbs, hence “it is”, “I will”, “cannot” etc. instead of “it’s”, “I’ll” or “can’t”. Also, the phrase “get to know” can often be expressed with much more appropriate verbs – please use them and expand your vocabulary! Please also keep in mind that even in a formal register, English tends to prefer verbal phrases in active mode over nominal phrases and passive mode – the good thing about English is that even in a more formal register it is never as stiff as German academese.

Finally, please use the keyboard keys correctly. For example: ’ is an apostrophe (and is found on a German keyboard as the upper case of #), whereas ´ or ` (found on their own key on a German keyboard) are accent markers used in French, but not in English! [A short note on grammar: Although the use of ’s for plural has become quite common for German restaurant owners and designers of advertisements who are neither competent in German nor in English orthography and grammar, this does not mean that this nonsense has meanwhile become acceptable for correct English usage. So please remember what you have been taught in your first two years of English at school: it’s = it is; its = possessive pronoun; -s indicates plural and ’s indicates genitive or possessive form.]

7. List of Works Cited

The **List of Works Cited** does not contain all the works you have read, but only those which you refer to in the text. **Important:** If information is available in relevant media in the library, we usually cite the books/articles and not the internet sources (e.g. contexts of history, biography, genre etc.). In general, your Bibliography/List of Works Cited should mostly be based on printed media, if the topic permits it. In most cases, you have access to enough printed material, so you need not rely on doubtful internet sites. Please make sure your secondary sources are appropriate for the topic. For example, when clarifying terminology, do use handbooks or dictionaries specialising in literary or cultural studies, where the terms are explained in their specific literary/cultural context. General dictionaries or lexica are in most cases insufficient.

If you use resources from the internet, please use only suitable sources, i.e. relevant specialist literature (no *Wikipedia*, general encyclopaedias, “Abi-Wissen”, private homepages, students’ presentations published in the internet). Please list internet sources adequately.

8. Important Things to Consider

➤ **IDENTIFY ALL QUOTATIONS AND PARAPHRASES FROM OTHER TEXTS WITH THE ADEQUATE REFERENCES. PLAGIARISM IS A SERIOUS OFFENCE AND LEADS TO AN IMMEDIATE “FAIL” OF THE COURSE AND A NOTE IN YOUR STUDENT FILE!!!!**

The time and energy invested in concealing plagiarism is much better invested in thinking for yourself and writing your own text. Besides, you will really learn something that way. If you plagiarize, you not only cheat your instructor but mostly yourself!

➤ **Papers that are handed in after the expiry of deadlines will not be corrected.**

Should it be impossible for you to hand in the paper in time for *unforeseeable* reasons (i.e. illness), the deadline can be extended if necessary, if you contact your instructor in written form in time (i.e. at least one week before expiry of the deadline).

In most cases, your instructor will announce the deadline for submitting your paper in the first session of the term. Please adapt your time management accordingly so that you can submit your paper in time. If you have to work on the side, or have to do an internship or go abroad during the term break, you normally know this in advance and can plan accordingly. There is always the option to begin work at your paper already during the term time!

If your submitted paper fulfils the formal requirements (Style Sheet, Scope) it will be marked and graded. A revision of the paper for a possible improvement of the grade is not possible.

➤ **Please hand in a hard copy of your paper, AND send an additional complimentary copy as a WORD attachment to your instructor by email.** The date of submission of the version that first reaches your instructor will count as submission date.

➤ **Your instructors are allowed 6 weeks for grading your paper...**

... and will often need this time, because they have a lot of additional work which they hope to be able to do, especially during term breaks. So please do allow this time span before you start asking when your grades will appear in LSF. If you need the grades earlier than 6 weeks after the deadline (for example, in order to register for exams), please tell your instructor about this when you fix the topic. Of course, in such cases you should also be considerate and responsible enough to start work on your paper as soon as possible and, ideally, submit your paper **WELL BEFORE** the final deadline, instead of merely expecting of your instructor to work swiftly. Also, if you are close to your exams, consider that submitting a paper does not automatically mean passing it – and that being close to exams does not mean your instructor is obliged to be as lenient as possible. Instead, try to be most diligent with your work if you are approaching your exam: put in as much effort as possible and submit your paper in time!