

University of Cologne
English Department II
Bartosch/Schäfer/Rosenau

How to Write a Term Paper: Some Dos and Don'ts

Name of Class/Module
Name of Teacher

Name of Candidate

Date of Submission

Matriculation Number

Email Address

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1. Preliminary Considerations

When writing a term paper, you want to demonstrate that you are not only capable of academic argumentation and scholarly analysis but that you can manage to handle the formal and structural procedures of academic discourse as well. This is why it is not only necessary to come up with a clever line of argumentation or solid research question but also to show that you are able to bring your thoughts into adequate academic form, i.e. of abiding by the standards and formal requirements of writing a term paper. Make sure you follow the instructions outlined here as assiduously as possible. You can of course always contact our teaching staff in case of questions – but if you want to make a more or less good impression, getting the basic requirements right seems advisable.

The following sections will contain information on finding the right topic and turning it into a proper research question for your assignment, suggestions on how to find and use secondary literature in libraries and on the net and some advice on communication with your academic teacher or tutor. All information provided here is formatted according to our requirements and thus may help to get a sense of layouting as described in this overview.

1.1 How to Find a Topic

Bear in mind that your choice of topic should reflect your professional and hopefully personal interest in a specific field of research as well as demonstrate your ability to cover all relevant aspects of the respective module of which your term paper forms the concluding part. This means that on the one hand, you are requested to find a topic that is broad enough for you to prove that you have an adequate overview; on the other hand, it requires you to be as precise and small-scale as possible in order to actually cover the topic of your choice within the confines of a term paper. Usually, students aim at too broad a topic for fear of running out of ideas halfway through the paper – “The Representation of Gender in Anglophone Fiction” or “Inclusion,” however, are hardly proper topics for a twelve-page paper, while “Gender Subversion in Select Short Stories by Angela Carter” or “Inclusive Education in Primary School: How to Open Tasks for a Heterogeneous Group of Learners” may very well be.

In any case, make sure that you discuss your topic before you start writing: your academic teacher will be able to provide suggestions and helpful criticism. Some

teachers expect you to hand in a table of contents before you start writing; others may request a short abstract outlining your general argument – make sure to follow these instructions and to agree on both a topic and a title beforehand. If you want to discuss your thoughts or ask for advice (see 1.3), it is helpful to have formed some basic idea of a possible topic before turning up at the office hours or writing an email. In most cases, you can develop a topic that has already been addressed in class in more detail and with an eye on theoretical or practical contexts, or you could pursue a question that particularly interests you; if the topic is suitable, your academic teachers will help it to take shape.

The list of possible topics is almost endless – you could analyse a given text in light of a specific theoretical position and in the context of existing research, or you could concentrate on stylistic or rhetoric features and the imagery evoked by its language; you could illustrate central concepts such as differentiation (in ELT) or intertextuality (in literary and cultural studies). Please make sure in any case to be precise in your research question and/or thesis statements and in your use of language and terminology in general. Do not use ‘humanist’ when you mean ‘humane’ rather than a philosophical school; do not ‘deconstruct’ if you mean to read a text critically. If you are writing about teaching practice, please refrain from imagining some classroom setting for which you devise tasks and games and concentrate on the theoretical aspects you have chosen to write about instead. And please do not talk about “didactic” approaches when in actual fact talk about teaching methodology (see also the glossary provided on our website).

In all cases, you will need secondary sources (arguing that ‘I mainly used my own ideas’ is nice but not acceptable). As opposed to literary texts you might be working with for a paper in literary studies (*Moby-Dick*, say, or *A Midsummer Night’s Dream*), secondary literature comprises monographs and anthologies as well as essays, book chapters, empirical studies and so forth from researchers rather than novelists, playwrights, or poets. There is no fixed number of such texts but bear in mind that it is hardly possible to come up with a completely novel topic so considering existing literature is a crucial aspect of working academically. As a rule of thumb, you could say that with less than 10-15 sources, a term paper will hardly be acceptable.

1.2 How to Find Literature

It is your obligation to go and find the literature you need. While many students quite naturally turn to googling their topic in order to find suitable texts, Google is never the best choice: A plethora of library catalogues, databases and, of course, our library will do the trick much better. If you have already read something on the topic of your choice, a first step might also be to check the list of works cited in this essay or book and find related material. Consult the KUG (*Kölner Universitäts Gesamtkatalog*, kug.ub.uni-koeln.de/portal/kug/home.html) for books and the e-media and other databases of the University's library (www.ub.uni-koeln.de) for essays and the like. Using VPN will give you full access to the databases and online texts of the libraries. If you have trouble finding the right texts, check out the tutorials offered by the library or get in touch with your instructor. If you are going to write about methodological topics in the context of TEFL, do not only use texts written before 2005: too much has changed, and you want your paper to be topical.

1.3 How to Get in Touch with Academic Teachers

If you have made up your mind about a topic you would like to write about, and if you have found some literature (or failed to do so), you will want to get in touch with your instructor. Please make sure to

- always abide by the standards of academic and formal rules of communication. An email to a professor or instructor is a digital letter – no need for emoticons or all-too colloquial expression but for formal greetings, politeness and adequate register
- state your case clearly and precisely, naming your inquiry as well as your matriculation number. If you have had email exchange before, it makes sense to reply to the last mail you received so that previous communication is still attached: please keep in mind that our staff receive plenty of email each day and might find it hard to remember your case immediately
- check the institute's website: maybe the answer to your question can be found there, in the handouts, the *Modulhandbücher*, or this very manual?

2. How to Write a Successful Paper

Once you have decided on a topic and got all the answers to your questions, you might want to start writing your paper. Principal marking criteria are academic expression and your ability to show a comprehensive knowledge of primary and secondary texts and their relevant contexts; it is advisable to demonstrate that you are able to integrate the various aspects of the respective module and even go beyond this by linking your topic and argument to the larger field of Anglophone Studies and/or education.

2.1 On Writing Well

Besides an original and knowledgeable argumentation, your paper should have a clear and logical structure. Explain what you are going to do in your paper in the introduction, cover all relevant aspects in the main body of your paper, and use the conclusion not to move on to another topic but to recapitulate your findings and, possibly, provide an outlook. Bear in mind the professional conventions of your discipline: If you are writing about literary texts, for instance, there is no need to look for ‘the’ message of the work in question, and author biographies are hardly ever necessary.

If you are having trouble finding the right way to working towards precision, relevance, and a logically coherent structure, get in touch with either your instructor, the *Kompetenzzentrum Schreiben* (www.schreibzentrum.phil-fak.uni-koeln.de), or refer to one of the many guides to text composition (e.g., Zinsser 2006). Avoid truisms, generalisations and empty phrases, redundancies, contractions, and the all-too obvious (“At the end, a summary will summarise...”). Mind your register and avoid merely subjective statements: There is nothing wrong with using the first person singular in an English academic text – but this does not mean you are free to simply state unverifiable opinions (note the difference between “My main interest is in redesigning task formats, which is why I will first discuss task-based approaches and then move on to...” and “I really don’t like the theory at all” – the former is perfectly acceptable while the latter is worthless).

2.2 On Formatting

Formatting your text might seem like a nuisance, especially since there are many diverging conventions, and each seems to have its advantages and disadvantages. However, it is crucial that you observe, and adhere to, the formal framework that is required. There are numerous online sources that provide overviews on the most common formatting styles (MLA, Chicago Style, Harvard Style, and so forth); we are fine with almost all of these styles and with your choice of either in-text citation or footnotes – as long as you are consistent in your use of one particular style. In any case, mind the following, essential aspects (if they contradict set rules by one of the style guides quoted above, adhere to the ones below):

- font and font size: use Times New Roman, Arial, Garamond etc. with 1.5 line spacing (12 pt for main text, 10 pt for indented quotations)
- a term paper should have between 10-12 pages (BA level) and 15-20 pages (MEd level), i.e. between 24,000 and 35,000 keys (excluding blanks)
- pagination starts with your introduction (no front page, no table of contents)
- typographic alignment: the text should be justified (*Blocksatz*) with a margin of 3 cm on each side
- quotations should be given within the main text (“in-text quotation”), citing author(s), year, and page number (“Miller 2010: 73”). If you prefer footnotes, please keep in mind that you are requested to provide the full source in the first footnote and from then on should proceed by giving a shortened reference (“Miller, *Teaching English*, 73”).
- quotations longer than 3 lines are indented (1cm) and come without quotation marks
- make sure to *always* quote verbatim; if there is a mistake in the original source, indicate this by using “[sic]”
- there is no need to translate German quotations unless you feel that a quote does not go well with your syntax or paragraph; in that case, translate the quote and add “my translation” to the reference
- paragraphs are units of thought and therefore should always consist of more than a single sentence
- stick to either British or American linguistic and formal conventions; make sure your computer does so as well (i.e.: change set language to “English (United Kingdom),”

for instance) and pay attention to apostrophes and quotation marks (“” or ‘’ rather than „“)

- Works Cited: this is a *complete* list of all the literature used in your paper. Please follow the basic conventions outlined in Chapter 4.

After finishing the paper, give yourself a break of a couple of days and then return to the text from some distance for a final and thorough check: Is your argument coherent? Have you followed all formatting rules, included all sources, minded spelling/punctuation and does your paper, on the whole, look like a ‘proper’ academic assignment? Good! Have you listed all works you have been quoting from in the final section?

2.3. On Failing an Assignment

Let us be very clear: Plagiarism is a serious crime in academia, and all attempts at plagiarising will lead to your failing the assignment. In particularly serious cases, plagiarism might lead to your being expelled and prosecuted. So make sure that you quote every source you have used fully and correctly, indicate where you are using other people’s research and thoughts, and double-check your bibliography and notes for missing references. Additionally, provide the *Eidesstattliche Erklärung* at the end of your paper.

If you fail because of the quality of your argument, command of language, or because you have ignored the rules discussed here, you will have to repeat the assignment; it is only in rare cases that a paper can be revised. This is only due to the workload of all academic teachers; please do not take it personally.

3. After Handing In

Make sure to hand in both a print version and a digital copy of your paper. You will usually hear about the result and grade after 8 weeks time; if you have not heard anything by then, or if you feel the need to discuss your assignment and feedback, get in touch with your instructor (see Chapter 1.3). Make sure to check your marked paper thoroughly. Due to legal obligations, most papers will have to remain with us, but you will always have the opportunity to have a look, copy the paper and its annotations, and

discuss your work with your instructor should any questions have come up. We want you to improve your writing and argumentative competence, so it is paramount that you actively work with the marked assignment in order to become a better writer and thinker.

* * *

The following chapter shows you how the bibliography at the end of the paper should be formatted. Please take note of italics, use of commas and full stops, and the clear distinction between text types that is indicated through specific notational features. Those are not just bits and bobs but make a difference when it comes to the formal qualities of your paper, so please pay close attention. Please note: In an actual paper, the bibliography should begin on a new page.

4. Works Cited

Monographs:

Zinsser, William. *On Writing Well. The Classic Guide to Nonfiction*. New York: HarperCollins, 2006.

Book chapters:

Volkman, Laurenz. "J.M. Coetzee's *Disgrace* (1999): A Disturbing Literary Representation of the New South Africa". *Teaching the New English Cultures and Literatures*. Eds. Maria Eisenmann, Nancy Grimm and Laurenz Volkman. Heidelberg: Winter, 2010. 165-182.

Journal article:

Fischer-Lichte, Erika. "Auf dem Weg zu einer performativen Kultur". *Paragrana* 7.1 (1998). 15-29.

Internet sources:

State the author or editor if available; if not, provide a title etc. of the site you are quoting from. If you are quoting from digital media found in one of the many databases (JStor, MLA,...), use the DOI. If this is not an option, give the URL (omitting 'http://') and the date of retrieval. It is advisable to maintain a personal copy of the data used.

Always list authors and works alphabetically, starting with the most recent publications. If there are several texts by the same author, use an em-dash (—) from the second text onwards. If you use several texts by the same author published in the same year, use a,b,c,... to indicate the different texts. Always give the names of all authors if there are more than one; with more than three authors, however, you can simply insert 'et al.' after the first name.

5. Statement of Authorship

Please provide the following statement at the end of your paper (extra page) and do not forget to sign it:

“Ich versichere, dass ich die vorliegende Hausarbeit selbständig verfasst und keine anderen als die angegebenen Quellen und Hilfsmittel benutzt habe. Alle Stellen der Arbeit, die dem Wortlaut oder dem Sinn nach anderen Werken entnommen sind, habe ich in jedem Fall unter Angabe der Quellen als Entlehnung deutlich gemacht.

Date Name”