



How to Write a Term Paper

A Guideline for Term Papers and Theses in English Linguistics

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Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik
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How to Write a Term Paper

Manual for Linguistics

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Jun. 2008, updated Nov. 2012, Jan. 2016, Nov. 2016, Aug. 2020

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1 Introduction

In this seminar, you may write a term paper. Unlike in literature, term papers in linguistics conform to a standard structure. This guideline aims at explaining this structure and will help you organize your ideas. This guideline is written for term papers that report data from an experimental or a corpus study. If you write a term paper exclusively based on a literature review, you need to adapt the advice below accordingly.

2 Manual of Style

For detailed information concerning the sections

- Title Page
- References
- Quotations
- References in Text
- Examples and Data
- Orthographic and Formal Convention

refer to the “Manual of Style” (see departmental website). It has additional important information that complements this guideline.

3 Research Proposal

In preparation for *any* term paper, you have to write a thoroughly worked-out research proposal. You will find a guideline on how to write a research proposal on our departmental website. Before starting to write a term paper, you are required to submit a research proposal that conforms to this guideline.

4 Structure

In essence, your term paper is a spelling out of your research proposal, and it is very similar in structure. It will typically contain the following sections:

- Title page
- Table of Contents
- Abstract
- Introduction
- Review of Previous Research
- Research Question / Hypothesis
- Study
 - Participants (or Corpus, Data)
 - Materials
 - Procedure and Analysis
- Results
- Discussion
- Conclusion and Outlook
- References
- Appendices of materials, etc.
- Statement of non-plagiarism

In the following, you find information about some of the sections listed above.

4.1 Title Page

Make sure you choose an appropriate title for your term paper. The title should summarize the main idea of the paper and be sufficiently precise. A good idea is to include the main independent and dependent variables in the title. Alternatively, you can use the research question or the main finding in the title. Avoid lengthy and uninformative titles. For details about how to design the title page, consult the “Manual of Style”.

4.2 Abstract

The purpose of the abstract is to give the reader a brief overview and summary of the term paper. The abstract should not be longer than 200 words. It should address the following questions:

- What is the topic of research?
- What is the research question?
- What did you study?
- What are the results?
- What are the main conclusions?

Write the abstract after you have completed the term paper. Get inspired by looking at abstracts in original research papers.

4.3 Introduction

The introduction has two parts. First, a thematic introduction and second an overview of the paper. Leave writing the introduction until after you have written the rest of the term paper.

In the thematic introduction, you present the area of investigation, the research question and the framework of analysis. Start out broad, though focussed, and become more specific. You may also define some key terms in the introduction, and explicitly state the purpose of your study (e.g., “The present study is designed to investigate”).

In the overview, you give an overview of the structure of the paper, that means you tell the reader how many sections there are and what each section deals with.

4.4 Review of Previous Research

The aim of this section is to put your study in context; it is **not** to give exhaustive overviews of previous research; rather, you use previous research in your argumentation and for your purposes. In other words, you write this section in a goal-directed manner. Hence, the review is not just a summary of previous research; rather, you provide a comparative and concise review of previous work that is directly relevant for your research question. Make sure you do not go off on tangents and always ask yourself whether your review is clearly related to your research.

It may be useful to find ways to group and compare previous research, studies and other types of literature (reviews, theoretical articles, etc.): for example, experiments vs. survey studies, theoretical frameworks, languages, participants, methods, findings, etc. Use informative (i.e., topic-related) headings for subsections. Note that when you summarize studies or articles, the more space you attribute to a study, the more relevant or important it should be. Make sure you structure this section well: Provide the reader with pointers and short summaries throughout, so that it is always clear as to WHY you are writing about a particular study. Make sure that a reader who is not familiar with these studies or papers can understand what they were about.

Use present tense to report opinions, past tense to report findings by others. For example: “X and Y (year) *argue* that semantic priming affects word recognition. They *designed* an experiment in which the participants *had* to...”

4.5 Research Question and Hypothesis

In this section, you formulate your research and your hypothesis or hypotheses. See “How to Write a Research Proposal” for details.

4.6 Study

Describe in detail how you conducted your study/research. This section should cover the following subsections: Participants (or Corpus, Data), Materials, Procedure, and Analysis. Keep it clear and transparent, so that somebody who wants to replicate your study/research should be able to do so.

4.7 Results

In the results section, you present the findings of your study/research. Do not discuss the implications of the results or your interpretation in this section – you do that in the discussion. Be methodical and report and explain all relevant results. Try to visualize the results whenever appropriate in tables or figures. When presenting the results of statistical tests, give descriptive statistics before inferential statistics. Use past tense when talking about the procedure and details of previous studies, but present tense when referring to the results. For example: “Although not all participants *completed* Experiments 1 and 2, the results *converge*. A comparison of the results from Experiment 1 and Experiment 2 *shows* that ...”

4.8 Discussion

Begin the discussion with a short summary of the main findings. Subsequently, you evaluate and interpret the results, one by one, in relation to the hypotheses and the original research question. Discuss possible alternative explanations of the findings and put them into the context of previous research. At this point, you may bring up additional evidence, similar or converging findings from previous studies that you mentioned in the Review Section. In addition to interpreting your results and putting them into context, you can also mention some limitations of your study.

Use past tense to summarize your findings but present tense for generalizations. For example: “The findings from Experiment 1 did not *confirm* our hypothesis. Based on this finding, it *seems* likely that priming *can* only be successful if”

Conclusion and Outlook

In the conclusion, you readdress the research question laid out in the introduction. State briefly how your study approached this question, and answer it by way of a brief, non-technical summary of the results. Make a final summary statement of the conclusions you have drawn. When appropriate, comment on the importance and relevance of your findings and give an outlook and suggestions for further research.

4.10 References

Make sure you list all references in accordance with the conventions laid down in the “Manual of Style”.

4.11 Appendices

Appendices are for including materials which you cannot put into the main sections. Typically, you put information about the participants, the instructions for the experiment(s), the full set of materials and, if applicable, more detailed results or statistical comparisons of the results into appendices. The bottom-line for deciding what to put into appendices is whether it is needed if someone intends to replicate your study.

You should put the most important appendices into the printed version. You can also add additional appendices on a CD-ROM which you append to your term paper. This CD should

contain all appendices as well as the term paper itself. Make sure you include the appendices in your Table of Contents of the term paper.

5 General Advice

5.1 Audience

When writing a term paper, always keep in mind the target audience. You should write your term paper for a hypothetical audience of fellow students who have basic knowledge of linguistics, yet no specialist knowledge of the subject matter at issue. In other words, you can assume knowledge of basic concepts in linguistics, but you still need to explain the particular terms, concepts, approaches, theories and previous studies relevant for the topic of your paper.

5.2 Style

The writing style in linguistics is straightforward, that means clarity is its priority. It is perfectly acceptable to use first-person pronouns ('I, we'), active verbs and have short sentences. Clarity always wins over verbosity! Avoid expressing your personal or emotional involvement with the topic. Stay on topic!

5.3 References and Quotations

Papers in linguistics do generally not contain quotations; rather, ideas taken from other sources are paraphrased. This means you need to find your own words for expressing these ideas. As a guideline, do not have any or one or two quotations maximum in the term paper. Only quote verbatim if it is virtually impossible to say the same thing in your own words. When referring to previous work, only cite the name of the author(s) and the year of publication (e.g., White, 2003). For details, see the "Manual of Style".

5.4 Consult Research Papers

Consult published research papers for inspiration. Do not copy from them (see following section), but learn from them about structure, organization and style of your term paper.

5.5 Plagiarism

In your term paper, you must absolutely avoid any form of plagiarism. Consult the guideline 'How to Avoid Plagiarism' for details and examples. You are required to append the following statement of non-plagiarism at the end of your term paper: "Hiermit erkläre ich, dass ich die vorliegende Arbeit selbständig verfasst, alle wörtlichen und sinngemäßen Übernahmen als solche gekennzeichnet und keine anderen als die angegebenen Quellen und Hilfsmittel benutzt habe."

Add date, place and your signature.

5.6 Final Words of Advice

You cannot write a good term paper in one go – you *re*-write a good term paper. In other words, do not attempt to produce a polished version from the start; rather, you will write, rewrite and rewrite your paper, until you produce a final version.

Read through what you have written after a break (ideally on a different day), looking at it as if someone else had written it. Keep in mind that if what you have written seems unclear to you now, it is unlikely your readers will understand it later. Rewrite these sections.

6 Submission

Before you submit the term paper, make sure you go through the checklist for submitting written work in the department. You will need to submit the checklist along with your term paper.

7 Selected References

This is a non-exhaustive list of references with more information on how to write term papers or theses.

Franck, N. (2002). *Fit fürs Studium: Erfolgreich reden, lesen, schreiben*. DTV.

Michael, M., & Felicity, O. D. (2008). *Academic vocabulary in use*. CUP.

Kruse, O. (2000). *Keine Angst vor dem leeren Blatt: Ohne Schreibblockaden durchs Studium*. Campus.

Siepmann, D., Gallagher, J. D., Hannay, M., & Mackenzie, L. (2011). *Writing in English: A guide for advanced learners* (2nd ed.). UTB / Francke.