

## Academic research and writing – Guidelines

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Requirements for earning credit points in my seminars are usually listed in the course outline. Please go there for details on your options. The following guidelines are intended for participants who need to write a research essay ('wissenschaftliche Hausarbeit'). However, the same basic rules also apply for Bachelor and Master theses.

While focussing on a specific topic (reign it in as much as possible!) and set of questions, a good research essay (or BA/MA thesis) should always display a well-reflected awareness of the lines of discussion pursued in the respective seminar throughout the entire course of the semester.

Students suggest a topic for their work by submitting a proposal (i.e. a short outline of the intended topic and approach; please see details below!).

Your work has to conform to the usual standards for academic writing as delineated in the style sheet for English/British literary and cultural studies. See below for the respective links and further resources.

This handout offers advice and suggestions on writing a research essay (or BA/MA thesis).

**Please study carefully before you begin to work on your proposals and essays!**

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## 1 Basic resources

All academic texts have to **conform to the usual standards for academic writing as delineated in the style sheet for students of English/British literary and cultural studies**:

- [LINK](#) (Stilblatt Englische Literaturwissenschaft / Amerikanistik)
- See also [LINK](#) (Hinweise zur Abfassung literaturwissenschaftlicher Hausarbeiten)

For more detailed/special **questions of referencing**, please consult the following resources:

- **Purdue Online Writing Lab** (web: <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/>).  
→ A large and helpful collection of (generally valuable) advice on all aspects of the research and writing process.
- **MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers**. New York: The Modern Language Association (new editions appear regularly; it is not absolutely necessary to use the newest edition).  
→ Answers *all* questions, even rather special ones, on correct referencing.

## 2 What is a research essay?

[The information in this section focuses on the genre of the **wissenschaftliche Hausarbeit** (= '**research essay**' or '**academic essays**'). Research theses (in German: BA-Thesis or Master-Thesis) are not usually regarded as 'essays'. However, the gist of the information below still applies also to those grander instances of academic writing.]

Generally speaking, an **essay** is a comprehensive (this means: a relatively short) piece of writing that deals with a specific topic. In doing so, an essay is driven by the intention of contributing to a proper understanding of its topic.

Ideally, an essay manages to show its topic in a new light and thus to produce new insights in relation to it.

A note on the history of the word 'essay' is instructive. The *Online Etymology Dictionary* (<http://www.etymonline.com/>) has the following entry for the noun 'essay':

1590s, "trial, attempt, endeavor," also "short, discursive literary composition" (first attested in writings of Francis Bacon, probably in imitation of Montaigne), from Middle French *essai* "trial, attempt, essay" (in Old French from 12c.), from Late Latin *exagium* "a weighing, a weight," from Latin *exigere* "drive out; require, exact; examine, try, test."

This shows that the notion of an 'essay' comprises two different impulses:

- On the one hand, the idea of an 'attempt' signals that chances need to be taken in order to arrive at new insights. Indeed, although there are many different kinds of essays, the term always expresses one common expectation: that an essay ought to be original. Accordingly, the term 'essay' is often used for a piece of writing in which certain 'freedoms' are taken in order to express an original standpoint.
- On the other hand, the Latin words *exagium* and *exigere* imply a close examination of a topic. If we interpret the etymology of the term from this perspective, an essay is not so much about taking freedoms as about performing a rigorous testing and weighing of arguments.

In relation to **academic essays or research essays ('wissenschaftliche Hausarbeiten')**, the second of these two notions – i.e. the idea of a rigorous testing and weighing of arguments – is particularly important. As it is put in one of the sections of the *Purdue Online Writing Lab* (Web), the "essence of the academic essay" is "to encourage students to test or examine their ideas concerning a particular topic."

However, in testing ideas and examining arguments we should not completely forget about the first sense of 'essay' either: academic/research essays should not only be rigorous but also original; and while there are many conventions that govern the adequate style and strategy of an academic essay, it definitely should be more than merely a formulaic exercise.

### 3 What makes a good research essay (or BA/MA thesis)?

Writing a research essay (or a BA/MA thesis) is *not* comparable to cooking a meal. There is no 'recipe' that you can simply 'follow' in 'cooking up' a good text. To a certain extent and within a certain framework (!) you have the freedom – and the task – of establishing your own manner of working and writing.

However, no matter what individual solutions you arrive at, your work should certainly show the following characteristics and answer the following questions:

- ✓ **a clearly stated topic**
  - What are you writing about?
- ✓ **a clearly motivated topic**
  - Why is your topic interesting/important/significant?
- ✓ **clear questions**
  - What are you trying to find out?
- ✓ **and a clear hypothesis**
  - What do you think you will be able to show in response to your questions?
- ✓ **being based on adequate research**
  - Use the library!
- ✓ **closely considering – i.e. analysing and interpreting – a well-selected and clearly documented set of 'primary sources'**
  - What documents, images, texts etc. are you discussing?
  - Why have these documents, images and texts been selected? What is remarkable about them?
  - From which contexts did these documents emerge?
- ✓ **closely considering and clearly relating to a well-selected set of 'secondary sources'**
  - How have other scholars approached your topic?
  - Which points in their arguments are useful for you?

- Where do you (dis-)agree and why?
- What new questions would you like to pose?
- ✓ a **good introduction**, which puts the topic into a general context, explains why it is significant, poses clear questions and indicates your hypothesis/-es (see above)
- ✓ clear and **logical transitions** between the various subchapters or sections of your text
  - What have we learned so far? And what is coming next?
- ✓ a **convincing conclusion**
  - Ideally, the conclusion does not simply repeat what has already been said but re-addresses the topic in light of your previous findings. It may also indicate potential further research that should be undertaken in light of your work.

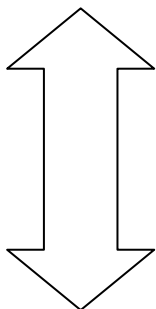
## 4 Finding a topic

Rather than providing a selection of ready-made topics, I follow the academic tradition of asking students to find and formulate topics for their research essays or BA/MA theses.

Finding a good topic is an achievement in its own right; it is an important part of the task of producing an essay or a BA/MA thesis.

Here are some 'rules' for finding a good topic. However, the trick is to allow for the 'contradictions' or tensions between the individual 'rules':

### (1) Be general!



It is good to be able to locate one's topic and one's theses within the big discussions in literary and/or cultural studies. So try to be clear about and try to express clearly which 'big issues and questions' you are addressing.

- Theorize your approach!
- Don't be afraid to 'think big'!

### (2) Be specific / Rein it in!

While it is essential to be aware of larger *issues* (see 'rule' 1), beware of general *topics*.

Indeed, successful work usually manages to ponder big questions by projecting them onto a manageable field, asking clear and specific questions about a limited series of well-selected – and carefully contextualized – examples.

You will not be able to decide the big questions! You will only be able to illuminate the big questions by pondering small questions (which, however, can and should be meaningfully related to the big questions).

- Write about a (very) limited number of examples! Be clear about which specific texts/films you want to write about!

### (3) Conceptualize your topic, approach and analysis!

→ Transform vague notions into clear questions and hypotheses!

→ Find out what certain terms and concepts (terms like 'parody' or 'negotiation', for example) can do for you – not only as vehicles of expression but also as tools for thinking.

### (4) Develop your topic 'hermeneutically'!

Finding and formulating a good topic will be easiest if you start out from both ends 'simultaneously'. →

a) Start out from the big questions (= deductive approach):

What are the big questions I am interested in?

=> What might be good examples for studying these questions? How might I break down the big questions into manageable questions?

b) Start out from your specific examples (= inductive approach)

What are the specific examples (the specific cultural or literary texts or documents or practices) I am interested in?

=> Why am I interested in them? What questions do they make me ask?

## 5 The proposal (and the introduction)

- A good proposal should be about 1/2 to 1 page long.
- It provides a well-considered and suggestive topic formulation (title).
- Furthermore, it serves to clearly point out:
  - why this topic is important or promising;
  - how you will focus your topic (approach);
  - which specific questions you will ask
  - what you will try to show (thesis/es);
  - which texts or documents or phenomena will be in the foreground of your discussion/analysis.

I will offer a short comment on your proposal (accepting it or asking you to revise it; offering advice on your research and writing; etc.).

Later, the introduction to your essay (or BA/MA thesis) should also clearly address the questions listed above. Of course, the introduction has additional tasks, such as finding a starting point from which you can 'lead' the reader to your topic and addressing the state of research on your topic more systematically.

## 6 Doing research

- ✓ **Do not forget to use your own mind!**

- Start out from an inventory of your own ideas. – A mind map may be a good way of doing so.
- Contrast and combine your own ideas with ideas and knowledge that you find in the work of others.

- ✓ **Always conceptualize!**

- Try to boil down ideas and observations to clear-cut concepts (ideally single terms, especially those discussed in the seminar). Establish relations between the terms found.

- ✓ **Make decisions!**

In the course of your work it will become apparent that your topic cannot be fully exhausted within the confines of a short essay (and also BA or MA theses are still relatively short texts). Make decisions to sacrifice certain aspects of your topic and to concentrate on others. Do not indulge in the illusion that you will eventually be able to express everything that you know!

- ✓ **Use the library !!!**

Doing everything online is a good way of going crazy. It is also a good way of producing mediocre work. => Feel free to use the library. Look around what you find on the shelves. Look to the right and left of useful books that you have already located.

- ✓ **Browse before reading, read before xeroxing!**

It is always good to first establish an overview. => Look around first. Allow yourself the freedom to thumb through several books before you decide that one of them is essential and that passages of it are worth the trouble of reading or even of xeroxing.

- ✓ **Combine research (reading) and writing!**

While reading, good ideas may suddenly come to your mind. Keep track of them. Write either short notes or (if you already can) full sentences or even paragraphs.

- ✓ **Look for models!**

Browse (recently published) scholarly journals for articles whose form, language and style of argument appeal to you. Try to emulate these examples in your own work.

## 7 The format of the research essay or BA/MA thesis

Your text has to conform to the usual standards for academic writing as delineated in the style sheet for English/British literary and cultural studies:

[LINK](#) (Stilblatt Englische Literaturwissenschaft / Amerikanistik)

For more detailed/special questions of referencing, please see the resources mentioned above under 'Basic resources.'

Your work must of course include a list of works cited (simply headed 'Works Cited', *not* 'Bibliography').

! Please make sure to adequately reference also online sources!

→ See 'Stilblatt', MLA and OWL for advice and examples! Here is a useful link:

<https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/747/08/>