

Guidelines for writing an academic paper (term papers, BA/MA theses)¹

This leaflet is intended as a general guideline for the preparation of academic papers in the Department of Linguistics at the University of Konstanz. Please clarify with your lecturer whether you should adhere to the guidelines in this leaflet or whether he/she would like to give you other guidelines. Regarding details on citing and rules for your bibliography, please also refer to the leaflet *Guidelines for citing and creating your bibliography* of the Department of Linguistics.

1. Why seminar papers are written at universities

The function of writing seminar papers at universities is not clear at first sight: First, you have to familiarize yourself with a topic. When you have understood the subject, you must put it into written form. At first glance, it may seem that you only do that for your lecturer, who is also familiar with the topic. Why do you have to make this effort?

Writing an academic paper teaches you many skills that are key qualifications and needed in many jobs, namely:

- to work on a topic independently,
- to select the essentials from a large amount of information,
- to understand complex topics and reproduce them in written form,
- to develop (research) questions, strategies and solutions using scientific methods,
- to argue for a chosen solution,
- to express yourself precisely and comprehensibly in written form,
- to research and to create a bibliography,
- to produce visually appealing typewritten texts,
- to use text processing programs.

2. The content of an academic paper

An academic paper has a topic and a research question. Students should usually develop this research question themselves. A mere summary of the relevant literature is normally not sufficient. The research question must be chosen in such a way that the following requirements are met:

- it must be possible to answer the question as part of the seminar paper,
- the available methods must be sufficient for the task,
- it must be possible to complete your work in the given time frame,
- it must lead to an expansion of knowledge and it should be “interesting”.

In academic papers, limiting your topic is very important: you need to differentiate between essential and insignificant information. However, it is not possible to include all the essential aspects of a topic in a seminar paper/thesis, but rather certain prerequisites must be met. This includes determining what level of knowledge the reader can be expected to have. This can be the (presumed) knowledge of other students of linguistics. In the case of more specific topics,

¹ These guidelines trace back to those by Barbara Stiebels and Manfred Pinkal as well as guidelines by Carmen Kelling and Judith Meinschaefer. For further information about the composition of linguistics papers, see *The Generic Style Rules for Linguistics*, <https://www.eva.mpg.de/linguistics/past-research-resources/resources/generic-style-rules.html> (25.02.2020).

you can presume the knowledge of students attending the same seminar, who are not familiar with this specific topic. Depending on the level of knowledge presumed, you determine which facts, background knowledge and technical terms are required and must be made explicit.

Your paper should therefore discuss the essential aspects of a topic in such a way that other students can understand it. The task is to filter out the essential aspects, the core of the topic and to reproduce this in an understandable way.

The question of gaining knowledge and the relevance of the paper usually causes great difficulties for the students. Of course, you should choose a topic that you find interesting. However, it should also be interesting from a linguistic point of view, i.e. it should be about a phenomenon that is somehow unusual and thus calls existing ideas about the language system into question or expands them. Reasons why certain topics are interesting from a linguistic perspective are given in most linguistic texts either explicitly or implicitly. For this reason, sources should be investigated regarding the following questions: Why is the author working on this topic? Is this topic also interesting from my perspective? When writing the paper, it should also become clear which bigger questions stand behind the smaller ones dealt with in the paper.

In any case, the topic of the paper should be discussed with the lecturer, and you should establish a basic agreement with your supervisor on a preliminary research question as well as relevant literature.

3. Structuring the paper

A comprehensible academic paper must be well-structured. The following questions should be considered: Which partial aspects must be considered in connection with the topic? Which points are crucial? Which steps of argumentation are necessary to work them out? What is a sensible order of presentation?

The paper should be subdivided into sections and these sections should be assigned headings that are listed in the table of contents preceding the text. For longer papers, subsections can be used, but longer papers should maximally feature three levels of headings and shorter papers only two. Rule of thumb: a subsection should be at least one page long.

The continuous text within the sections is further divided into paragraphs that are of manageable length and self-contained in terms of content. Paragraphs should be no longer than one page, but no shorter than three or four sentences.

The obligatory first section of a paper is the introduction. In the introduction, the central question and, if possible, its scientific context is explained. Further, you should provide a summary of your line of argument, i.e. the structure of your paper, in the introduction. In addition, comments on the presupposed state of knowledge can be made in this section.

The final section, in which you refer back to the central question, is also obligatory. In the final section, you can summarize your argumentation generally and emphasize the proposed solutions specifically (with regard to improvements to already existing proposals), and you can enumerate open questions or raise further issues.

The structure of the main section is determined by the research question and can vary depending on the linguistic subfield and topic.

4. Form

Each written paper consists of a cover page, a table of contents, an introduction, a main part, a summary and a bibliography. A term paper may also contain an appendix in which the most important results are presented in tabular or list form. If required, the paper may also contain a

list of abbreviations, tables, etc.

Some details

- Cover page: The cover page should contain the title of the term paper, the name of the seminar (title and semester), name and address of the student(s) as well as subjects of study, number of semesters and the submission date of the paper.
- Table of contents: The table of contents contains all first-, second- and third-level section headings as well as the corresponding page numbers. Section headings are customarily numbered by use of the decimal system. If a section contains subsections, there should be at least two:
 - **Not**: 1. Introduction
1.1 Diachronic development
2. Method
 - **But**: 1. Introduction
2. Diachronic development
2.1 Old High German
2.2 Middle High German
3. Method
- The paper begins with the introduction on page 1. Any preceding pages (e.g. the table of contents) are not counted or counted separately.
- List of abbreviations: All abbreviations used in the work are listed alphabetically in a list of abbreviations. Common German or English abbreviations such as "e.g.", "i.e.", "etc.", do not have to be listed. Abbreviations common in linguistic subfields such as "NP" or "DP" in a syntax paper do not have to be listed either.
- In the bibliography, all sources mentioned in the paper are listed alphabetically by author (see information sheet "Guidelines for Citing and Creating your Bibliography").
- Font: Times New Roman (or other plain font with serifs); sans serif fonts like Arial take up much space and are tiresome to read. Only one font should be used.
- Font size: 12 point.
- Line spacing: 1.5.
- Justified text with (verified) hyphenation is optimal.
- Margins: 2.5 - 3 cm.
- Leave a blank line between two passages that make a (larger) mental leap, otherwise indent the first line (1 tab, no blank line in this case). Do not indent after examples, tables, or figures.
- Use highlighting carefully and sparsely in the running text.
- Always place direct quotations in double quotation marks. Observe different conventions e.g. in an English or German text (German: „Quote“, English: "Quote").
- Indent longer quotations on both sides and use single line spacing. You can also use a smaller font (11 point).
- Short sample expressions in the text should be marked in italics. Foreign language examples can also be written in italics and should be followed by the translation in single quotation marks, e.g. *müde* 'tired'.
- Number your examples:
 - (1) a. This is an example.
b. This is another example.
 - (2) This is also an example.

In the running text, refer back to the examples by using the numbers, e.g. *in (1) and (2), the verb is...*

- Foreign language examples should be glossed as in (3):

(3) guyawud ga-yu=gun thanthu wirib
 hungry 3SG-be.PRS =CONTR DEM dog
 ‘It IS hungry, that dog.’ (Jaminjung, Schulze-Berndt 2000:44)

When glossing, align the foreign word and the gloss to the left. Mark morpheme boundaries with “-“, separate complex paraphrases and categories with “.”; put categories in small caps. Mark clitic boundaries with “=”. See the *Leipzig Glossing Rules*² for further details.

- Individual sounds and letters:
 - Letters (graphemes) are put in angle brackets, e.g. the letter <a>
 - Allophones are put into square brackets: the sound [z]
 - Phonemes are set in slashes: the phoneme /a/
 - When it is not entirely clear whether a sound is a phoneme or not, you should use square brackets.
- Footnotes: Unlike in other disciplines, footnotes should be avoided wherever possible in linguistics. The reason is that it is tiresome having to switch between reading the main text and footnotes. The following details should be minded:
 - Use footnotes instead of endnotes.
 - Use automatic footnote-numbering (Arabic numerals).
 - Format: 11 point and single line spacing.
 - The footnote sign is generally placed at the end of a sentence or clause after the punctuation character:
 - Not: “Text¹.” But: “Text.¹”
 - Footnotes end with a period.
 - Larger passages should be avoided in footnotes. If the thought is important, it should be part of the main text.
- Tables and figures must have a caption (below the table/figure). The table/figure must be referred to in the main text.
- Dashes and hyphens are not the same. Hyphens are shorter and without spaces. Dashes are longer and (at least in German) are put between two spaces.

5. Language and style

In addition to the formatting of the term paper, correct spelling is one of the criteria that first catches the eye in a scientific paper. Main issues are punctuation, the correct use of upper and lower case as well as separate and compound spelling. The *Duden* is a good reference dictionary (also available online: www.duden.de). In order to avoid spelling mistakes, an automatic spelling checker should always be used and the paper should be proofread specifically for spelling.

Regarding formulation in academic papers, clear, unambiguous, and comprehensible language has highest priority. Do not try to write in a “scientific” style, but write in a “comprehensible” style. For this purpose, some rules of thumb should be observed:

- Use short sentences; do not construct complicated episodes. Avoid nominal style (i.e. frequent use of nominalizations).
- Avoid ambiguous sentences/structures.
- Do not simply string sentences together but relate them by using connectors (e.g. “for this reason”, “however”, “an example for this” etc.).
- Use of “I”: There is no consensus on the use of “I” in academic papers. Therefore, this point should be clarified with the lecturer. Since linguistics is about objective aspects, you should be careful with phrases like “I think” or “in my opinion”. Usually, the “I” is used when

² See <http://www.eva.mpg.de/lingua/resources/glossing-rules.php> (13.06.2019).

referring to the structure of the paper (e.g. “In Section 5, I show that...” – number following? → proper name, capital letter S). In German, using the first person pronoun is less common than in English. As an alternative, the passive can be used or the sections themselves can be subjectified (e.g. “Paragraph 2.1 discusses...”).

- The use of “we” in a single-authored paper can only be used in as a reader-including we-form, e.g. “We have seen that...”. Again, be careful with this formulation.
- Do not use colloquial expressions. An academic paper should be written in an objective style.
- Avoid repeating words, but not at all costs! In the case of technical terms, the same facts should always be referred to by the same term.
- If different technical terms are used in the literature for the same concepts, this problem should be clarified and the terms defined.
- Do not throw around terms; use terminology only when necessary and understood. Explain what cannot be presupposed. There are generally no synonyms for technical terms. Everyday expressions should not be used as synonyms for technical terms.
- Technical terms in foreign languages might be distorted when translated e.g. into German. If the term is translated and if there is no established translation available, the original expression should be added in brackets after using the translation for the first time. If the translation of a technical term is problematic, the original term should be used and written in italics (e.g. “*Accomplishment-Verben*”).
- Work with examples! A short example is often far more instructive than a long explanation. But never leave example sentences as well as tables and graphs uncommented in the text, but explain exactly what they show.
- Explain abbreviations at the first mention, e.g. “The *obligatory contour principle* (OCP)...”.
- Use gender-inclusive language.

6. Literature research

When writing an academic paper, your lecturer may require that students identify relevant professional literature themselves. Relevant literature can be found with the help of search engines and bibliographies, e.g. the MLA, which is accessible in electronic form via the webpage of the Communication, Information and Media Centre (KIM). It can also be helpful to search for books in the local library catalogue using relevant keywords. Once you have found a book that is relevant to the topic, the references in the book can be used to find more literature. Linguistic dictionaries (e.g. Bußmann’s *Wörterbuch der Sprachwissenschaft* or *Metzler Lexikon Sprache*) as well as handbooks can also be helpful.

When using internet material, you must make precise distinctions: Texts from the internet can be used as primary material e.g. when writing a paper on chat-language. Some corpora are also freely available online, e.g. the British National Corpus (<http://www.natcorp.ox.ac.uk/>), and can be used for research.

When using secondary literature from the internet, you have to differentiate between online publications of journals, publishers, and conferences on the one hand and materials made available by researchers on their webpages and other popular scientific texts on the other. Online journal articles, online-proceedings, and e-books are equivalent to their print-versions so they can be used alternatively.

Many researchers make manuscripts of books or articles available on their websites. These texts may also be used under certain circumstances. It should be noted, however, that these manuscripts have generally not undergone the usual review process for books, journals and conference papers. These manuscripts are often only available for a limited period of time, which is why the bibliography should also include the date on which they were accessed.

Other materials from the internet should not be used, e.g. Wikipedia articles or texts for which the author cannot be identified.

There can be several problems when searching for literature. On the one hand, the literature on a topic in general can be extremely extensive and confusing; on the other hand there can be very little literature on the topic in a narrow sense. The only solution to these difficulties is to be very thorough in your search and to review a large amount of literature in quite a short time in order to identify the greatest part as irrelevant for the seminar paper.

In order to select the most important and relevant texts from the set of perhaps relevant literature, the following criteria may help:

- Year of publication: the more recent the more up to date (but not necessarily better).
- Publisher: Is the article/book published in an important journal or published by an important publishing company?
- Is the author a well-known researcher? Has s/he published other articles/books on similar topics?

7. Citing and paraphrasing literature

In order to be able to correctly refer to a text and reproduce its main ideas, you must read it very thoroughly and understand it in detail! The structure and way of argumentation of the text must also be clear to you. It is therefore necessary to read the text several times. Simply reading through the text once is not sufficient.

The literature referred to and your academic paper do usually not pursue the same purpose. In a term paper, you must show that you understood the literature and can reproduce the most important points. You must always maintain a critical distance to the text. You should become aware of the strengths (innovativeness in the data and analyses) and weaknesses (false assumptions, unproven assertions, unclear line of argument, contradictions, counter-evidence) of the original. Criticism in the professional literature can and should also be considered. Different opinions in the literature on essential points must not be simply omitted. The author's ideas must be presented and other opinions must be contrasted with it and justified.

Generally, it must always be clear where you express your own thoughts and where you adopt others' ideas. When you reproduce parts of a text literally, it is a quotation and you must mark it with quotation marks and identify the source. Not only quotes but also paraphrased passages must be indicated as such by providing the source. This is also the case when giving facts that cannot be part of your own knowledge.

Example: In 1971, Lucania had more than 600,000 inhabitants (Lüdtke 1979: 6).

Critical distance is established by linguistic means during referencing, e.g. "Author/XY executes/emphasizes/deals with/criticizes". It may be sufficient to introduce the first sentence of a paragraph in this form. The subjunctive is another way to distinguish one's own ideas from those of others.

In general, you should try to reproduce as much as possible in your own words, i.e. paraphrase rather than quote, as this shows that you really understood the source.

The following details should be minded in referencing and quoting:

- Do not adopt the author's style and diction but use your own words to reproduce unusual or outdated words or constructions.
- Be careful with deictic expressions as e.g. "current research on..." in older editions may be outdated now.
- Do not adopt terminology without checking. Often, the same expression can mean different things. Explain problematic terminology and maybe replace it with a more common

expression.

- If different authors use different abbreviations for the same subject or category, commit to one use.
- Unusual and/or unsuitable examples can be supplemented or replaced by your own.
- If your term paper is mainly based on one source, do nevertheless start with and proceed from a structure of your own, select relevant parts and omit or shorten irrelevant passages.

For formal details on citation and referencing, please consult the information sheet “Guidelines for Citing and Creating your Bibliography”.

8. Declaration on aids used

Each written paper submitted for evaluation in the Department of Linguistics must be accompanied by a statement of the aids used. This can be found at <https://www.ling.uni-konstanz.de/en/advising-and-services/writing-centre/> → Guidelines and recommendations → Declaration of authorship.

9. Useful tips for text processing

In addition to the usual word processing programs such as MS Word and its free alternatives, the use of the word processing program LaTeX is also a good choice in linguistics.

Regardless of the software you choose, you should be able to handle the following features:

- Document-wide settings for the style sheet.
- Automatic creation of lists (e.g. the list of figures).
- Document outline and section break.
- Table layout.
- Use of footnotes.
- Automatic numbering.
- Integrating and formatting figures (e.g. syntax trees).
- Integration of special fonts to create linguistic symbols.

Writing a scientific paper is much easier if these skills are already present before beginning to write. The KIM offers courses to acquire these skills.

A reference management software is the best tool to create a bibliography (e.g. RefWorks, EndNote, or Citavi). The library provides all members of the University of Konstanz with free versions of these programs and offers introductory courses for their use.

10. Help with questions

The Writing Centre of the Department of Linguistics offers support with questions concerning the writing process, structuring of a term paper, citing, word processing / formatting, how to create your bibliography etc.

Appointments by arrangement

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<https://www.ling.uni-konstanz.de/en/> → Advising and Services → Writing centre