

Tips and Guidelines for Writing a Term Paper in American and English Literature / Cultural Studies

Institute of English and American Studies, University of Hamburg

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1. Expectations for a Scholarly Term Paper

A term paper shows that you can investigate a research topic systematically. This means that you should be able to research, record, select and categorize relevant literature on your research topic. In this context, the term paper should document that you are able to present your position consistently through the development of a thesis, or overarching argument. Your thesis should address the primary material in an analytical and precise manner, include existing research positions in a critical but respectful manner and be written with a comprehensible structure.

2. Steps for Writing a Term Paper

2.1 Selecting a Topic

- **BRAINSTORMING:** To find a topic for your term paper, ask yourself the following questions: What sparked your interest in the seminar you attended? What particularly struck you about one of the texts discussed in the seminar? Which session and discussion did you particularly remember? What questions do you still have after the seminar? In addition, do some reading about the seminar topic and its sub-topics and allow yourself to be inspired by research articles.
- **NARROWING DOWN A RESEARCH TOPIC:** Think about which terms, theories or research discourses you can organize your interest around. Use libraries and databases to further explore and hone this interest. Then organize your ideas with the help of newly acquired information (also in visualized form).
- **RESEARCH QUESTION (AND PRELIMINARY THESIS STATEMENT FORMULATION):** You should now formulate your interest as a question that can be transformed into a thesis statement. A (preliminary) thesis statement is the answer to the central research question of your paper, condensed into a single or a few sentences. A final thesis statement, which must then also be presented in the introduction, can often not yet be concretized at this point in the work process. However, it is possible and helpful to attempt to formulate a preliminary overarching argument. Your thesis statement should include the content and formal aspects of your primary material.
- If necessary (and depending on the seminar arrangements), consult with the lecturer in an office hour. Keep in mind that the research question (and your preliminary thesis statement) must meet the following criteria:
 - a clear interest in deepening your knowledge of a topic
 - precision regarding a specific question/statement
 - realistic scope (regarding the limited number of characters/pages)
 - relevance to the subject area

2.2 Approaching your Topic

- Once you have formulated your research question (with a preliminary thesis statement), you must identify the methods and strategies that will enable you to work on the research question. Which area(s) do you need to analyse in order to work on your research question?
- Document your reflection with an initial (preliminary) outline. This outline will result in sub-items that you can use to proceed, step by step.
- Examine your primary sources thoroughly and make notes on the observations that arise here in the context of your question.
- Get an initial overview of which secondary sources deal with your specific topic. Use comprehensive specialist bibliographies such as the MLA International Bibliography, which you can access via the Hamburg State and University Library, or “Staats- und Universitätsbibliothek”, which is abbreviated SUB ([DBIS - Search](#)).
- Create a bibliography, in which the relevant titles you have researched are listed, and start working on these sources with the most recent and most relevant works for your thesis. Document results and source information directly and carefully. A reference management program such as *Citavi* ([Citavi for Windows Campus License : RRZ : University of Hamburg](#)) or *Endnote* ([Endnote and Reference Manager : RRZ : University of Hamburg](#)), which are provided by the university, can help you to document and organize your sources. Alternatively, you could make use of the open-source software *Zotero* ([Zotero | Your personal research assistant](#)).

2.3 (Further) Research

- CAMPUS: Search for other relevant works that are available at the university, for example by starting a search query on the website of the campus catalogue, called “Katalogplus” ([Search Katalogplus](#)). Visit the relevant faculty libraries to locate, read or borrow media using the shelf marks indicated in the campus catalogue. It may be necessary to reserve material by following instructions provided by the campus catalogue. If particular scholarly sources are not available in Hamburg libraries, these materials can be requested from other libraries through the SUB via interlibrary loan ([Interlibrary Loan | SUB Hamburg](#)).
- (UNIVERSITY) WEB: Other important sources are articles from magazines and academic journals that can be viewed online. You can locate such articles via search engines such as Google Scholar ([Google Scholar](#)) or use all databases accessible to the University of Hamburg, such as JSTOR ([JSTOR Home](#)) or Project MUSE ([Project MUSE](#)).

Please note:

- If you are on the University network, you have free access to numerous materials that require a license. To set up access to the university network, follow the instructions on the website of the University of Hamburg's computer center ([WLAN : RRZ : Universität Hamburg](#)). You can also use the university's free

access to numerous articles from locations other than the campus if you set up a so-called VPN client on your end device. To set this up, please follow the instructions of the University of Hamburg Computer Center ([VPN : RRZ : Universität Hamburg](#)).

- Caution is advised when dealing with information from the internet, social media or AI, as its reliability is difficult to verify. In your term paper, you should only work with specialist, scholarly secondary sources. Websites should only be cited if the information they contain is irreplaceable. An information sheet on dealing with generative AI (gKI) in the SLM II department can be found [here](#) (in German). Due to the dynamic development in this area, we recommend that you regularly inform yourself about the status of the AI policy of the department or the university.

2.4 The Writing Process

- Never just start writing. Instead, try to orientate yourself on a preliminary outline that you have already created or are about to create. This will also help you to achieve a balance between the individual sections and sub-sections and to be able to estimate the scope of the paper at the beginning.
- A term paper does not have to be written chronologically (from introduction to main body to conclusion). It can be productive and motivating to start with a (sub)section for which you have already developed a clear argument.
- Remember that paragraphs within (sub)sections should give further structure to your argument and follow the following structure: assertion, explanation and analysis, illustration (examples and quotations from primary and secondary sources), reference back to the assertion.
- Remember to always refer back to your question or (preliminary) thesis at the beginning of sections.
- If you notice in the course of your work that some points of your outline have become irrelevant or that your outline and preliminary thesis have changed, have the courage to accept these changes developed in the work process and adapt the outline and thesis statement accordingly. Changes are natural and possible and, as a rule, should not cause you to doubt the overall concept of your term paper.
- Pay attention to a consistent, academically appropriate writing style. Your writing style may have personal nuances. AI-generated texts are often conspicuously generic, in addition to the ethical questions they invite.
- Regardless of whether you start with the introduction in the writing process or only sketch it out and formulate it later, make sure that your introduction presents your final thesis statement and introduces the topic you are working on appropriately. (Details in section 3.4).

- At the end of the writing process, especially since changes in the structure are likely to ensue, check whether a common thread is recognizable in your work and whether there are repeated references back to the research question and thesis.
- Round off your work with a conclusion that briefly and succinctly reiterates your research interest and highlights key findings. (Details in section 3.7).

2.5 Integration of Primary Sources

- The focus of your assignments should be the examination of the selected primary source(s). This should be examined not only in terms of content, but also formally – for example, with regard to the narrative perspective, the style of language, the camera angle or the image composition. The aim is to explain the connection between the form and content of a primary work.
- Quoting from primary material is never self-explanatory. Every quotation, whether a sentence excerpt or a longer text passage, must be introduced and analytically described and commented on.
- A detailed analysis of the content and form of the primary source is the central achievement of your work. However, this performance should also be supported by the inclusion of secondary sources, whereby the analyses of other scholars can be brought into dialog with your own analysis. Secondary sources should help you discuss terms and concepts introduced in the theory section.

2.6 Integration of Secondary Sources

- Including secondary literature in your work is not about simply reproducing what other researchers have said about a topic. Instead, the readers of your work want to know: Why do you include this quote here? How does it fit into the context of your argument?
- It is important to introduce and evaluate quotations. This is your own contribution, which is decisive for the persuasiveness and ultimately also for the quality of your work.

Examples:

- ...This is also Lakoff's judgment in his study of X: "QUOTATION" / Similarly, Lakoff proposes in his study X: "QUOTATION"
- Greenberg evaluates this finding quite differently when she writes: "QUOTATION" / Greenberg comes to a different conclusion when she writes: "QUOTATION"
- Hamlet is described by many literary scholars as the archetypal melancholic: "QUOTE". This judgment is understandable when one considers that . . . / Many literary critics read Hamlet as the archetype of the melancholic man: "QUOTATION". This assessment is reasonable in view of...

2.7 Submission of Your Term Paper

- Always allow yourself enough time for a diligent final editing process, in which you examine both language and formal aspects. Also check the consistency of the bibliography and citations in the text. Check that you can recognize a common thread and a thesis, which you should adapt to your research results at this point, at the latest.
- When submitting your thesis, bear in mind that not all lecturers have the same requirements. Some agree to an electronic submission, others insist on an (additional) paper submission.
- Stick to agreed-upon submission deadlines and consider the possibility of technical difficulties with digital submissions when planning your schedule.

2.8 Tips: Dos & Don'ts for Term Papers

- Dos:
 - explicit naming of the topic in the form of a thesis statement in the introduction
 - reader guidance through references back to the thesis
 - reader guidance through supportive paragraphing, topic sentences and well-structured paragraphs
 - courage to modify the structure and thesis over the course of working on the research topic
 - good balance between your own interpretation and embedded, always evaluated secondary sources
 - framing through a corresponding introduction and conclusion
 - short and precise recapitulation of the argumentation in the conclusion
- Don'ts:
 - extensive introduction
 - no presentation of a thesis statement in the introduction
 - detailed presentation of the biographical, historical, political, social, psychological or genre-specific background of the topic or the content of the primary text – unless explicitly requested, it should be assumed that the reader is familiar with the primary text
 - general summary of perspectives on the research question, as offered by generative AI, for example
 - isolated presentation of secondary literature
 - use of a greatly reduced or alternatively a disproportionately extensive collection of secondary sources

- announcement of the following steps at the end of each section/subsection
- introduction of new arguments or new secondary sources in the conclusion

2.9 Support Services

The [Writing Center](#) at the “Hamburger Zentrum für Universitäres Lehren und Lernen” (HUL) offers a wide range of support for writing term papers.

3. Formal Layout of the Term Paper

3.1 Cover Page

- title of the paper (without: term paper, seminar paper . . ., etc.)
- seminar information: university, department, title and number of the course, course instructor, semester
- personal information: name, matriculation number, degree program, subject/subjects with number of semesters, student e-mail address
- submission date
- As a rule: Avoid over-formatting and do not use a mix of styles (bold + italics + double underlining), e.g. do not use **1. introduction**.

Example:

<p>Universität Hamburg Institut für Anglistik und Amerikanistik 53-542: Nationhood in 19th-Century U.S. Literature Instructor: Professor Dr. Paige Turner Sommersemester 2014</p> <p style="text-align: center;">Exclusive Ideals of Nationhood in Walt Whitman's Poetry</p> <p>Ally Gory 213221230 MA British and American Cultures (4) ally.gory@studium.uni-hamburg.de 30.09.2014</p>

3.2 Table of Contents

- The table of contents must include: section number, section heading, page number. The table of contents should always be placed at the beginning (on a separate page). Sections and, if applicable, subsections are numbered according to a standardized system. The bibliography (“Works Cited”) is listed in the table of contents but is not assigned a section number.
- Section headings in the table of contents must be reproduced unchanged in the following pages.
- The cover page and table of contents are not listed in the table of contents; they do not have a page number, i.e. the introduction begins on page 1.

Example:

Table of Contents	
1. Introduction	1
2. 19th-Century U.S. Nationhood	2
3. Visions of Ideal Citizenship in “Song of Myself”	6
4. Fractured Homogeneity in “I Hear America Singing”	
4.1 Gender Restrictions	8
4.2 Class Restrictions	10
4.3 Race Restrictions	12
5. Conclusion	14
Works Cited	15
Eidesstattliche Erklärung	

3.3 Formatting the Text

Unless explicitly requested otherwise, please follow these formatting guidelines:

- Font: Times New Roman
- Font size: 12 pt
- Line spacing: 1.5
- Formatting: Justified with automatic hyphenation
Margins: left 3 cm and right 3 cm
- Page numbering: bottom right; counting and numbering is continuous from the first page of text after the table of contents to the last page

3.4 Introduction

An introduction must always provide a precise definition of the topic and should answer the following questions:

- (i) What is the subject of the study?
- (ii) What is the problem?
- (iii) What is the resulting question?
- (iv) As an alternative to (ii) and (iii): From which perspective is the subject of the investigation viewed?

An introduction should also contain the following additional elements:

- clearly formulated thesis statement
- explanation of the methodological approach, e.g. ecocritical reading, etc.
- brief overview of existing research on the chosen topic
- brief presentation of the structure (sections) and the argumentation of the thesis

3.5 Sections

- Use a section numbering system with Arabic numerals according to the pattern 1., 1.2, 1.2.1, etc., starting with 1. (not 0.). Always pay attention to the correct orthography (1.2 not 1.2.).
- Do not use colons at the end of headings.
- Sections and subsections begin in the text with a new paragraph, not on a new page. Exception: The preceding text ends at the bottom of the page.
- While “Introduction” and “Conclusion” are valid as section headings, the main part of the paper must not be titled as “Main Part”, or similar. Rather, you should create a content-specific title.
- Section and sub-section headings should be concise:

Example: 1. The United States of America: A Historical Background

Not: 1. How the United States was founded, how it developed and what it is today

3.6 Quotations

3.6.1 Working with the Ideas of Others / Plagiarism

- All sources of word-for-word or even content-related formulations must be marked as such and precisely indicated.
- A literal quotation and an indirect paraphrase must be clearly distinguishable: A literal quotation is indicated in quotation marks and with a reference in brackets. An indirect paraphrase is indicated by a corresponding reference in brackets. Unless explicitly required otherwise, the corresponding citation rules of the current version of the Modern Language Association (MLA) apply.
- When quoting verbatim, make sure that this corresponds to the original; omissions or changes must be clearly marked. Errors in the original should be included in the literal quotation and noted with [sic].
- The ideas of others (including those of artificial intelligence) and your own must always be clearly recognizable as such and distinguishable from each other.
- The logical development of ideas and arguments must be your own and not simply taken from your sources.
- As an assurance that you have labeled the ideas of others (including those of artificial intelligence) as such and have not simply incorporated them without comment, attach the affidavit currently valid for your institute at the end of your work.

Important: These rules are principles of science, including humanities scholarship. Disregarding them leads to charges of plagiarism, regardless of the author's intention

3.6.2 Purpose of Quotations

- Quotations should present new and not generally established knowledge. ("Edgar Allan Poe was a U.S. author." does not need to be cited.)
- Using quotations means critically examining an author's argument to support your own argument. Quotations never automatically speak for themselves. They must be embedded in your argument by introducing them appropriately and commenting on them below.

3.6.3 Form of Quotations

- Citations that you insert in the body text of your work are called in-text citations. Citations must be marked as such in the text and listed alphabetically at the end of the paper in a bibliography (Works Cited), possibly divided into primary and secondary sources.
- Please follow the rules of the current MLA Handbook for citation in literary and cultural studies. A summary of the 9th edition of the MLA Handbook (2021) can be found here, for example: [MLA Formatting and Style Guide - Purdue OWL® - Purdue University](#). (Here you will also find specific citation examples).

- Note that, in English, titles of books and articles as well as all words with a general meaning (nouns, verbs, adjectives, adverbs) are often capitalized. You can adopt this, but you should do so consistently.
- You can also find citation styles for common media in the following:
 - **monograph** (print and ebook):

In-Text-Citation	Works Cited List
(Author's Last Name Page) in the case that the author's name is mentioned in the body of the paper: (page)	Author's Last Name, First Name. <i>Title of Book</i> . Publisher, Publication Date.
(Gleick 79) in the case that the author's name is mentioned in the body of the paper: (79)	Gleick, James. <i>Chaos: Making a New Science</i> . Penguin, 1987.
(Author's Last Name Page) in the case that the author's name is mentioned in the body of the paper: (Page)	Author's Last Name, First Name. <i>Title of Book</i> . E-Book, Publisher, Publication Date.
(Silva 22) in the case that the author's name is mentioned in the body of the paper: (22)	Silva, Paul J. <i>How to Write a Lot: A Practical Guide to Productive Academic Writing</i> . E-book, American Psychological Association, 2007.

- **chapter/essay in an edited collection:**

In-Text-Citation	Works Cited List
(Chapter/Essay Author's Last Name Page) in the case that the author's name is mentioned in the body of the paper: (Page)	Author's Last Name, First Name. "Title of Essay/Chapter." <i>Title of Collection</i> , edited by Editor's Name(s), Publisher, Year, pp. #-#.
(Harris 26) in the case that the author's name is mentioned in the body of the paper: (26)	Harris, Muriel. "Talk to Me: Engaging Reluctant Writers." <i>A Tutor's Guide: Helping Writers One to One</i> , edited by Ben Rafteroth, Heinemann, 2000, pp. 24-34.

- **journal article (print and online):**

In-Text-Citation	Works Cited List
(Author's Last Name Page) in the case that the author's name is mentioned in the body of the paper: (Page)	Author's Last Name, First Name. "Article Title." <i>Publication Title</i> , vol. #, no. #, Date, pp. #-#.
(Moore 213) in the case that the author's name is mentioned in the body of the paper: (213)	Moore, Josiah. "Writing and Performance as Path." <i>Social Action</i> , vol. 3, no. 14, Apr. 2020, pp. 213-25.
(Author's Last Name Page) in the case that the author's name is mentioned in the body of the paper: (Page)	Author's Last Name, First Name. "Article Title." <i>Publication Title</i> , vol. #, no. #, Date, pp. #-#. <i>Database</i> , URL or DOI.
(Phillips 124) in the case that the author's name is mentioned in the body of the paper: (124)	Phillips, Ezra B. "Penmanship and Calligraphy Samples." <i>Elife</i> , vol. 19, no. 5, Apr. 2020, pp. 124-35. <i>WorldCat</i> , www.worldcat.org/oclc/8288666345623 .

- **web page:**

In-Text Citation	Works Cited List
(Author's Last) in the case that no author is given: ("Website Name")	Author's Last Name, First Name. "Webpage Title." <i>Website Name</i> , Publisher [omit if same as website name], Date, URL. Accessed Date.
(Lundman)	Lundman, Susan. "How to Make Vegetarian Chili." <i>eHow</i> , www.ehow.com/how_10727_make-vegetarian-chili.html . Accessed 6 July 2015.

- The bibliography attached to your term paper, which MLA calls "Works Cited", must contain all literature cited over the course of the paper and be organized alphabetically, possibly divided into primary and secondary sources.
- According to the MLA specifications, the second, third, etc., line of a listed source is indented in a Works Cited List ('hanging indent'). If several sources of an author are cited, the name is not repeated but indicated by em dashes

The Works Cited list should not contain the following elements:

- chapter numbers
- literature that was consulted but not used (= directly or indirectly cited in the work)

Example:

Works Cited

Gleick, James. *Chaos: Making a New Science*. Penguin, 1987.

Harris, Muriel. "Talk to Me: Engaging Reluctant Writers." *A Tutor's Guide: Helping Writers One to One*, edited by Ben Rafoth, Heinemann, 2000, pp. 24-34.

Lundman, Susan. "How to Make Vegetarian Chili." *eHow*, www.ehow.com/how_10727_make-vegetarian-chili.html. Accessed 6 July 2015.

Moore, Josiah. "Writing and Performance as Path." *Social Action*, vol. 3, no. 14, Apr. 2020, pp. 213-25.

Phillips, Ezra B. "Penmanship and Calligraphy Samples." *Elife*, vol. 19, no. 5, Apr. 2020, pp. 124-35. *WorldCat*, www.worldcat.org/oclc/8288666345623.

Silva, Paul J. *How to Write a Lot: A Practical Guide to Productive Academic Writing*. E-book, American Psychological Association, 2007.

3.7 Conclusion

- The paper should be rounded off with a conclusion. The conclusion should do the following:
 - frame the thesis; refer back to the thesis statement in the introduction
 - provide a brief, recapitulation of the course of the argumentation
 - mention and reinforce the organizing thesis
 - present a concluding, possibly forward-thinking thought or implication
- The following is not permitted in a conclusion:
 - introducing a new argument
 - continuing the argument with further citation from primary and secondary sources
 - negating or weakening the thesis presented in the introduction

3.8 Other Conventions

- Notes (≠ references) in footnotes are increasingly uncommon for shorter scholarly papers / term papers in Anglophone academic practice and should also be used

sparingly. If necessary, however, they are numbered consecutively for the entire paper (not section by section).

- Appendices with graphics, illustrations or copies of text are not necessary in term papers (unless explicitly required). If the term paper is to be supplemented by graphics, illustrations or copies of text in an appendix, follow the relevant MLA guidelines and pay attention to the following:
 - correct indication of the source and attention in the title of the graphic, illustration or text copy
 - numbering of the graphics, illustrations or text copies and creation of a list of illustrations (to be inserted before the bibliography), which is presented in addition to the outline
- Remember: In your term paper, illustrations are possible in accordance with the fair use rule without the acquisition of image rights; in the case of publication, however, copyright regulations must be strictly observed.