

Writing a Research Paper in Literary Studies¹

The most important aspect to bear in mind is that you are writing a *research paper* and **not** an *essay*! This means that you are arguing a thesis with reference to secondary literature – it is essential that you conduct relevant research and that you integrate your findings into your paper.

Things to keep in mind:

- Your paper should have a well-defined topic and a precisely formulated argument.
- Your approach should be recognizably systematic.
- Your argument should remain relevant and clear-cut, consistent and coherent throughout.
- Your secondary material should be discussed critically and documented accurately.
- Writing is a **process**; you should constantly revisit and revise.

DON'T FORGET TO PRINT, SIGN AND ATTACH THE "PLAGIATSHINWEIS"!

First steps

Many students neglect the preliminary work of the writing process, but if you give it sufficient attention the actual writing of your paper will be faster and more organized than if you just start writing. The most important thing is to be systematic in your approach.

1. Finding a topic

Perhaps the most difficult part of any research paper is finding an adequate topic, formulating a title and making a coherent argument. Once you have decided on a topic or a title, which in literary studies will most likely involve a certain text, rephrase it as a question to guide your research. You should also think about the methodology you intend to apply to your analysis.

- **Start by reading your primary text closely.**
If you have access to an annotated edition of your chosen text, make good use of the materials this offers you. Read both the text itself and the additional material carefully whilst taking notes. This will be the basis for your subsequent research.
- **Try to summarize and organize your findings systematically.**
Figure out which aspects belong together, find contradictions and correspondences. A good place to start is your own questions – don't be afraid of the questions you have about the text, more likely than not they are the ideal starting point for your study.
- **Write a thesis statement.**
Once you have settled on a topic and perhaps even come up with a title, you need to develop a thesis statement. A thesis statement is a succinct formulation of your topic in terms of argument, i.e. your thesis statement must be arguable, you are stating an opinion that will be proven in the course of your paper with the help of sources. A good way to come up with a thesis is to generate questions surrounding your chosen topic. (e.g. "In Shakespeare's tragedy *Romeo and Juliet* love is less an emotional state than a framework for the construction of social struggle.")
- **Draft an introduction.**
Although writing an introduction may seem intimidating this early on, it will force you to focus your research process and prevent unnecessary diversions. Try to explain your topic,

¹ Overall, the following is based on:
Joseph Gibaldi, *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*, 6th ed. (New York: MLA, 2003).
Michael Myer, *English and American Literatures*, 2nd ed. (Tübingen: Francke, 2005).
All examples are from these sources.

legitimate its importance and introduce the approach you intend to take. Regard this as the rough draft of an introduction, a working product.

2. Writing an Outline

What you are trying to do when writing an outline is to come up with a systematic classification of the elements of your argument. You need to develop categories and relationships between and within these categories that will give your paper structure. Ideally, your outline will derive from your topic and will help guide your research. It is also a preliminary table of contents.

Outlines can be structured in a *temporal order* (beginning, climax, end), a *logical order* (a fact and its causes and consequences), or a *rhetorical order* (from the general to the specific, from the specific to the general, from the simple to the complex, etc.). Which structure is best will depend on your specific paper.

Important: Regard your outline as a work in progress, return to it repeatedly to a) make sure you are still on the right track and b) to change it when your research or your own thought process requires it.

Example:

Title: "Love in Shakespeare's tragedy *Romeo and Juliet*"

1. Introduction
2. Love and gender in Shakespeare's age
3. Love in *Romeo and Juliet*
 - 3.1 Contradictory constructions of love due to gender, generation and class
 - 3.2 Love and dramatic conflicts
 - 3.2.1 The comedy of love
 - 3.2.2 The tragedy of love
 - 3.2.2.1 Fate or chance
 - 3.2.2.2 Love and death
4. Conclusion
5. Works Cited / Bibliography

3. Conducting Research

Again, the key is to be systematic. A good place to start research is the aforementioned annotated editions of works. But sometimes these will not be available. Here are some other options:

- **Encyclopedias, Literary Histories, *Kindler*:** More general reference works can often give new impulses to your research and offer a general starting point. They are also absolutely necessary for the correct use of critical terminology.
- **Bibliographies:** Both *current* and *retrospective bibliographies* offer the most systematic and reliable information on secondary sources.
- **MLA:** This online resource, which is also a bibliography, can be accessed via the library and is a very valuable up to date collection of essays, some of which are made immediately available.
- **Library catalogues:** Key word searches in library catalogues can give you an impression of what is available at your home institution.
- **Snowballing:** When you are ready to read your first piece of secondary material, don't forget to look at the works cited. Here you will often find valuable sources that are very close to your topic.
- **Internet:** Be wary of internet sources. Although a lot can be found online and some sites qualify as good sources, you should be careful and always double check the source. Most importantly, do not limit yourself to online sources, they will not give you the research overview that you need to write a critical paper!

Keep an *annotated bibliography*. This means that you write a sentence or two about every source you consult: What are its main tenets? What approach does it take? Was it helpful? Keeping track of your readings like this will help you remember the sources better later when you are writing your paper. It

might also prove very valuable for future research. Out of this annotated working bibliography your works cited list will develop.

Be careful of information overkill, i.e. be selective in the choice of your secondary material. Your criteria should be relevance, don't lose valuable time by reading irrelevant texts or by reading texts that repeat very similar standpoints. Do not be afraid to discard sources – trust your own judgment.

When you are searching for secondary material, keep in mind that you also need to be able to access it. So you might want to start with the monographs and journals that are available at your institution's libraries and/or online (e-journals, e-books, etc.). Interlibrary loans can take a long time, so place them on time and be sure that the ordered source is really relevant.

Writing Your Paper

1. Taking Notes

Collect and organize your notes systematically. There is no all-for-one-solution available when it comes to organizing your thoughts, so take the time and experiment with different systems until you find or develop one that works best for you. You might try:

- **Note cards:** Write one thought per note card in a full sentence. Write the source in the upper right hand corner to keep track of your citations. Be very precise in noting whether you are taking down a direct quote or whether you are paraphrasing an idea. Whenever possible, paraphrase ideas and save direct quotations for remarks that are absolutely essential.²
- **Computer:** If you have a laptop computer, you can save a lot of time by typing your citations into the computer and organizing them virtually. This way you don't have to type up your handwritten note cards. And of course, typed text is already flexible and can be moved around according to your needs.
- Depending on the scope of your paper, you may want to consider keeping a **notebook** where you can jot down your ideas. If you get a small one then you can carry it around and keep track of your ideas even when you're on the train, etc.

There are three main types of taking notes: *summarizing*, *paraphrasing*, and *quoting*. Always think about the appropriate method for the task at hand. Be sure to be precise in your note taking and to document your sources accurately! Don't take too many notes – there comes a time where you will have to start writing!

2. Writing the Paper

If you spent a good amount of time on the preliminary steps, then the actual writing of the research paper will turn out to be the quickest and least demanding part!

General aspects to consider:

- Don't be afraid to discard!
- Write at least two drafts!
- Beware of plagiarism!

Content

- Avoid lengthy biographical tangents and plot summaries.
- If your argument does require a plot summary, write it in the present tense.
- Your argument should be supported by quotations (cf. below).

² For a more detailed discussion of paraphrasing and quoting consult the online sources at the end of this paper or Gibaldi (2003).

- Your introduction should not only describe your topic and its importance, it can include a **thesis statement** and indicate the **method** you will be applying. You may also include a brief analysis of the main **sources** relevant to your topic.

Style

- Observe the general conventions for expository writing.
- Present your ideas precisely and effectively in the formal style appropriate for a research paper.
- Observe coherence and readability of your presentation.

Form

- **Conventions:** type your paper; format: DIN A4 paper, font: Times New Roman/Arial/Courier/Calibri, font size: 12 pt, line spacing: double, sufficient margins (left: 4 cm, right: 2 cm)
- **Pagination:** includes the cover page which is not given a page number
- **Title page:** indicates the title of the research paper, the name of the author, the title of the seminar and the name of the lecturer, the date of submission
- **Table of contents:** gives headlines which will reappear throughout your paper and give it structure. Your table of contents will usually develop out of your outline and should reflect the organizational principles you have chosen for it. Avoid too many subdivisions which may distort the overall coherence of your argument.

THE FOLLOWING IS A SUMMARY OF THE GUIDELINES GIVEN IN THE MLA HANDBOOK (2003). IF YOU HAVE ACCESS TO THIS OR KNOW THESE GUIDELINES, YOU NEEDN'T CONTINUE READING.

Works Cited/Bibliography

1. The works cited list at the end of the research paper gives a detailed synopsis of all primary and secondary sources you have consulted. Note that the works cited section should give a complete list of the works referred to in the text, including readings in the field which do not appear in quotations and footnotes.
2. Alphabetize entries in the list of works cited by the author's last name, using the letter-by-letter system. Alphabetical listing helps your reader to find full publication information of works referred to in the text. In cases of anonymous authorship list the first noun of the title.
3. Differentiate between a works cited list and a bibliography. Whereas the former references only those sources referred to in your paper, the latter gives additional relevant sources.
4. You should include the following information about each source:
 - Author's name
 - Title of the book
 - Name of the editor, translator, or compiler
 - Edition used
 - Numbers of the volumes used
 - Name of series
 - Place of publication, name of the publisher, and date of publication
 - Page numbers (if it is an essay or a chapter)

The author's name appears first. The title of the book appears in italics. Subtitles follow after a colon. The year of original publication (for all primary texts and for secondary texts that were initially published more than thirty years ago) and the edition follow the title. Place of publication is followed by a colon, then the publisher and date of publication are separated by a comma. If the book is part of a series, this piece of information should appear after the title of the book.

An article from a scholarly journal appears within double quotation marks. The name of the periodical is italicized and immediately followed by the volume number. The date of publication is written in parentheses followed by a colon and the page numbers

(cf. the *MLA Handbook* for details – newspaper; magazine; scholarly journal with/without continuous pagination).

Chapters in books or contributions in scholarly volumes also appear in double quotation marks (as do short stories and poems); in everything else they follow the format for books.

Always italicize the titles of works published independently (monographs, volumes, periodicals, etc.). Place other titles (articles, chapters, etc.) in quotation marks. Don't forget to format titles correctly even when they are part of another title.

If an entry in the works cited/bibliography runs longer than one line, indent all subsequent lines.

Patterns:

Surname, First Name. *Title: Subtitle*. Edition. Series. Place: Publisher, Year.

Surname, First Name. "Title of Article." *Name of Periodical* Volume number (Year):
Page numbers.

5. Examples Works Cited

Addison, Joseph, and Richard Steele. *The Spectator*. Ed. Donald Bond. 5 vols.
Oxford: Clarendon, 1965.

Bhabha, Homi. "Articulating the Archaic: Notes on Colonial Nonsense." *Literary Theory Today*. Ed. Peter Collier and Helga Geyer-Ryan. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1990. 203-18.

——— "The World and the Home." *Social Text* 31-32 (1992): 141-53.

Cixous, Hélène. "Fiction and Its Phantoms: A Reading of Freud's 'Das Unheimliche.'" *New Literary History* 7 (1976): 525-48.

Frye, Northrop. *Anatomy of Criticism: Four Essays*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1957.

Levine, Joseph. *The Battle of the Books: History and Literature in the Augustan Age*. Ithaca: Cornell UP, 1991.

Woolf, Virginia. *Mrs Dalloway*. 1925. Ed. Stella McNichol. London: Penguin, 1992.

6. Appearance of a work in the works cited list does not give you license to omit parenthetical documentation whenever your own statements depend upon its content.

Quotations

1. Use quotations selectively to support or illustrate your statements. They clarify your acceptance or rejection of another critic's point of view. Be aware of the fact that over-quotation may distort the clarity and coherence of your own argument.
2. Incorporate your quotations into the text and the argument, i.e. always formulate an interpretation of the quotations you have selected.
3. Quotations should not be tampered with: The overall argumentative context of the statement within the source should not be neglected or even falsified (through incomplete quotation). Sometimes a brief summary of the line of argument of your source can be helpful.
4. Each quotation should retain the precise words, phrases, orthography, and interior punctuation of the source. All additions to the quoted text should appear in square

brackets. Example: "Milton's Satan speaks of his study [pursuit] of revenge."
Alterations of the original must be pointed out. This includes the indication of modernized spelling in a footnote. Mark ellipses by three spaced periods in the middle of a sentence [. . .] and four at the end.

5. All quotes should be clearly indicated as such. Observe the following conventions:
 - If they are short, quotations appear in the body of the text with double quotation marks and are usually preceded by a comma or a colon. You may incorporate verse quotations of up to three lines into your text, separating the lines by a slash. Note the space on each side (/).
 - Prose quotations that are longer than three lines and verses should be set off from the text: indent 10 spaces from the left margin (~ 1.5 cm) and reduce the line spacing to single spacing. Be careful to retain the precise spatial arrangement (lines/spaces) of the poem you quote. No quotation marks are required.

6. Provide parenthetical documentation both for all of your citations as well as for all of your paraphrases. Statements made in the research paper must be verifiable: Document all important and essential statements developed from other sources with parenthetical references. The parenthetical references must clearly point to a specific work from your works cited list. The reference should follow the information you have taken immediately. Keep overall readability in mind, i.e. try to keep both the number and the length of parenthetical references limited – but be accurate at all times!

The format of the parenthetical documentation is (Surname page number):

Medieval Europe was a place both of "raids, pillages, slavery and extortion" and of "traveling merchants, monetary exchange, towns if not cities, and active markets in grain" (Townsend 10).

Notice that the full stop comes after the reference if you are not quoting a full sentence.

The parenthetical reference corresponds to the following works cited entry:

Townsend, Robert M. *The Medieval Village Economy*. Princeton: Princeton UP, 1993.

If you are using more than one work by the same author, include the first word of the respective title in your reference, i.e. (Hutcheon *Politics* 12) and (Hutcheon *Poetics* 35) correspond to the following works cited entries:

Hutcheon, Linda. *A Poetics of Postmodernism: History, Theory, Fiction*. London and New York: Routledge, 1988.

———. *The Politics of Postmodernism*. London and New York: Routledge, 1989.

Footnotes

In certain cases you may use footnotes for explanations or annotations of related interest to a point in your discussion, which is important enough not to be omitted from your text entirely but which would distort the overall coherence of your own line of argument. However: Never use footnotes for information that can be given in the main text!

IMPORTANT: If you will be quoting primarily from one literary text, then you should announce this and give the edition you will be using in a footnote the first time you cite. This way, you can reduce the parenthetical documentation to page numbers and increase readability:

Another formal aspect

- Italicise or underline foreign words in an English/German text. (e.g.: "The term *écriture féminine* was developed in the context of French feminist theory", "Das englische Wort *image* wird im Deutschen oft benutzt"; Exception: clearly anglicized words, such as cliché).

General Remark

You may find that, depending upon style sheets and publishers, bibliographic conventions differ slightly. When in doubt, consult the most recent edition of the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*. Its guidelines are generally accepted.

For more details, examples and exercises please consult:

<http://owl.english.purdue.edu>

For a detailed explanation and examples of plagiarism please consult:

<http://www.indiana.edu/~wts/pamphlets/plagiarism.shtml>