



Writing a Term Paper

This handout contains tips for organising your ideas and actually writing a term paper (Hausarbeit). Although it was written for students of English writing a term paper on Area Studies, Literature or Linguistics, it is addressed to students of all Departments and subjects who need to write a term paper in English.

- (1) Information on the structure of a term paper.
- (2) Tips for planning your term paper
- (3) More information on paragraphs
- (4) Using clear English
- (5) Some more useful language
- (6) More tips for your written paper
- (7) Information on how to acknowledge your sources
- (8) How to write your bibliography
- (9) A final word

(1) The structure of a term paper

There are different ideas about what a term paper is and what an essay is.

By essay I mean the kind of text students of English at the University of Constance learn to write in Writing classes and have to produce in the Final Exam (Staatsexamen): personal opinion on a topic, pretty spontaneous, at least 400 words. See also the handout on Essay Writing in the Course Materials section of FindYourFeet.

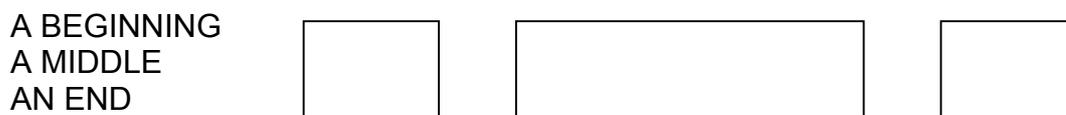
By term paper I mean a lengthier piece of writing done at the end of a seminar, which involves reading, thinking and acknowledging sources. (Sometimes the word “essay” is used at British universities and by writers of textbooks in the sense of “term paper”. There is, for example, a book in the library called “How to write essays. A practical guide for students”, which is actually about writing term papers and answering exam questions.)

Despite these differences both types of text have some very important things in common. So, students of English, if you have learned how to write an essay it is not difficult to write a good term paper in English.

An essay or term paper, no matter what your topic, is a piece of writing in which you try to put your ideas across to your reader(s) **clearly**. In a conversation or discussion the listener can interrupt you and ask “What do you mean?” but they can’t do that with your writing.

One way of reaching your aim to put your ideas across clearly is to structure your text well.

An essay / term paper has



Why this structure?

- The beginning is where you introduce your argument, i.e. you tell your reader what you are going to write about
- The middle is the main body of your writing where you present and develop your ideas
- The end is the conclusion where you sum up your ideas

The beginning and the end may consist of one paragraph each; the middle has several.

What is a paragraph?

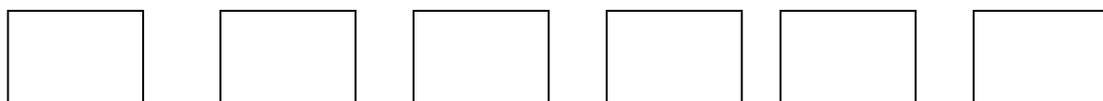
It is usually a set of sentences which present a **coherent idea**. It does not usually consist of only one sentence. See also Part (3) of this handout.

Why write in paragraphs?

Paragraphs are a **visual** way of signalling to a reader how your ideas are organised. Usually each new paragraph signals a new idea or aspect. (Logical link words are the **language** way of signalling to a reader how your ideas are organised.)

See also the handout on Logical Links in the Course Materials section of FindYourFeet.

So your essay / term paper structure really looks like this:



(2) Planning your term paper

Some people are gifted writers. Most of us are not. Students of English: when writing a term paper you are not expected to be artistic, or literary, or tremendously creative. You are not competing for a literary prize. Your job is to put your ideas across to the reader(s) clearly.

The key to writing a good term paper is forcing yourself to decide what your point, argument, thesis is before you start writing. Another way of saying this is: you should organise your thoughts before you start to write.

Here are some ideas for working step-by-step towards a good clear text:

Step 1: Read the question carefully.

Sample question from Literature: “In her novels A and B, author X portrays men and women as being incapable of communicating with each other. Do you agree with this reading of her novels? Give reasons.”

Step 2: Read the books (in the original language!) carefully.

In this example, focus on any interaction or lack of it between men and women.

Step 3: Think carefully about how you understand and interpret what you read.

Step 4: Decide whether you agree with the interpretation in the question above or not.

Step 5: Decide what your opinion is, and what reasons, supporting arguments you are going to give.

Step 6: Write an outline (structure) for your paper

Step 7: Write your paper

Here are some more tips:

- If you are given a clear question as above (“In her novels A and B, author X portrays men and women as being incapable of communicating with each other. Do you agree with this reading of her novels? Give reasons.”) then make sure you answer it. Be relevant, and be honest.

Given that you are asked to write about non-communication between men and women in X’s novels A and B, there isn’t any point in writing pages about non-communication between adults and children in Z’s novels. Similarly, if you are asked to give your interpretation there is no point in quoting someone else’s – unless you want to compare it with yours.

A sample clear question from another field: “In the last ten years the United Nations has proved itself an effective force for peace in the world. Would you agree? Give reasons to support your opinion.”

If you are given a question or task which is not immediately clear, then you really have to stop and think before you do the background reading and certainly before you put pen to paper. For example:

“**Consider** X’s treatment of scene and setting in novel A or B.”

“**Discuss** the role of the United Nations with reference to peace-keeping.”

My advice: check with your lecturer what they expect you to do.

- Before you actually start writing you have to be absolutely sure that you know what your argument is. Be clear in your own mind what you are writing about and what your argument is.

What is my argument? What do I want to put across to the reader?

The most important thing to do is to find an organising principle, your “thesis”, argument, the point you want to make, so that you do not produce a kind of “shopping list” of information.

It is a very good idea to write your idea, topic, argument, thesis on a file card and keep it in front of you when you are writing. That way you won’t lose the thread of your argument.

This helps you to organise your ideas or supporting arguments into bundles.

Once you have bundled your ideas you can see if any of them are not relevant.

Which of my ideas are not relevant for this paper? Cut out the irrelevant ideas. Save them up for another paper.

Which of these do I not really know anything about, or do not really have anything to say about? If the point is really important, then go back and read your source materials carefully.

See also part (3) of this handout.

At this stage you could number your ideas.

Which idea / aspect / reason etc am I going to present first, second and so on?

- Decide how you are going to introduce your topic clearly and how you are going to conclude. That is not difficult if your argument is clear to yourself.

Of course you do not have to follow all these steps, or follow the order given. Everyone thinks in a different way.

The important thing is that you learn to **organise your ideas before you write**. It is well worthwhile. It pays off. If you take time to write notes and organise your thoughts you shouldn’t have much trouble actually writing the paragraphs. Even when you are under time pressure. Even in exams.

(3) More information on paragraphs

Below are some **would-be paragraphs**. They are interesting ideas, but they are not paragraphs.

“A and B’s last meeting at the end of novel X is a good example of non-communication. They seem to be talking more to themselves than to each other.”

“By using the language of the Bible when describing the first meeting of A and B, writer X conveys a powerful impression of spiritual communion. The word “rejoice” is a good example of this.”

The above are suitable for the preparation notes but not for the final paper. What has happened is that some very general statements have been made and presented as complete paragraphs, but with no back-up material. They signal to the reader that you have interesting ideas, but have not thought them through. I would write in the margin: “Tell me more!”

(4) Using clear English

Keep the language clear and uncomplicated, e.g.

I would like to consider / take a look at
I would like to give an overview of
I would like to give an analysis of
I would like to argue that

Firstly,
Secondly,
Finally,
In conclusion

(5) Some more useful language

This is a collection of words and expressions which a lot of students have difficulty with. The words “topic” and “point”, for example, are usually misused and overused. If you are not sure about any of them, check them in the Cobuild, and note more examples of how to use them correctly.

- Issue / topic / aspect / discussion etc.
An issue is an important subject that people are arguing about or discussing:
Is it right for the Church to express opinions on political issues?
Whether to introduce tuition fees or not is a key issue in Germany at the moment.

A chat / a gossip / a conversation / a talk / a discussion / a debate – these all have a different meaning.

e.g.

I think I need to have a talk with a couple of students about their work.
That was a good discussion – I think we covered most of the issues.
There was a heated debate on TV last night about (...). There were politicians, journalists, and teachers present.

This is a really controversial issue. There are so many interesting aspects to consider, so many different points of view. I would like to discuss this from the point of view of a student.

When people argue that (.....) I think they are making a good point.
That's a good point.

Motivation is an important factor in a person's success.
As far as introducing tuition fees is concerned I am totally against it.

Geography, History, Biology etc are all school subjects.
Welcome to History class. This morning our topic is working with source texts.

- arguing
Advocates of equal rights claim that it would (....)
Opponents claim that (.....)

Some of the arguments for are that it would (.....)
Some of the arguments against are that it would (.....)

I think that education at all levels should be free for all citizens irrespective of their age and origins / regardless of their age and origins.

- State / say / claim etc

President X made a press statement yesterday.
The statement made by the military denied any involvement in yesterday's attack.
Officials clearly stated that they felt unhappy with the decision.

According to critic X the early novels of Charlotte Bronte are (.....)

Critic X claimed that / argued that / maintained that Jane Austen's last novel was (.....)

- "Concerning" is a preposition (formal) with the meaning of "about". "For further information concerning registration for the course please contact (.....)"
- mere(ly) / just / sole(ly): have different meanings.

Some stars are so rich. For them, spending a couple of thousand euros is a mere trifle!
She isn't really arrogant – she's just shy and reserved.
That is precisely the problem: his sole aim is to occupy a position of power.

- Surely / certainly:
SURELY you know the difference between these two words?!

(6) More tips for your written paper

I expect it to be clear from the written paper that you actually attended the course and read the books, i.e. the conclusions you draw should relate to the knowledge you have gained during the whole course.

You should be able to draw your own conclusions, not just write a shopping-list summary of some secondary literature.

Be careful with your sources. The writer's name under the title of a newspaper article should remind you that this is one individual's opinion. With web sources you have to be particularly careful. Nowadays people like to quote them. It's trendy. But do you know who is behind these www pages? A civil servant? A government department? A political party? A private person? A writer? A journalist? Don't just take anything you find on the Internet and present it as TheTruth.

I expect students to write a Table of Contents when they do a term paper for Area Studies Scotland. Check with your lecturer whether it is expected of you or not.

There should always be a bibliography.

Check with your lecturer about their expectations on length. I personally look for relevance and clarity of argument, rather than quantity. There is no point in covering sheets and sheets of paper with chaotic or irrelevant thoughts.

I ask students to use one and a half line spacing, which gives me room for language corrections, and to leave a margin for me to write comments on the content.

I also ask students to come to me with an outline of the written paper and their bibliography before they actually write it.

(7) Acknowledging your sources

You must always acknowledge your sources. This has to be done in your text. It is not enough just to write a bibliography.

- If you wrote (approximately) in a term paper for Area Studies Scotland:
Most people in Scotland today drink tea with whisky in it.
I would ask: How do you know? Did you interview everyone in Scotland?
No, obviously not, so you have to name your source.

Like this:

Most people in Scotland today drink tea with whisky in it. (Robertson, 1998)

or

According to Robertson, 1998, most people in Scotland today drink tea with whisky in it.

You might find another source with a very different opinion :-)

- If you wrote:

Scotland, shorn of its nationhood yet knowing it was somehow not simply a part of England, in casting around for a new identity found the Tartan and all it represented.

I would say: That is obviously not an opinion you could form yourself, and it is terribly obviously not your English. It is obviously a direct quote so you have to put it in inverted commas and name your source.

Like this:

“Scotland, shorn of its nationhood yet knowing it was somehow not simply a part of England, in casting around for a new identity found the Tartan and all it represented.” (Macdonald, 2000, p. 248)

You can not just copy out whole sections of books/articles and make it look as if it is your own ideas and words. That counts as plagiarism.

(8) How to write your bibliography

You should be consistent in the way you write your bibliography. For all books you should give the title, author, publisher, place of publication and date.

Example:

Robertson, D. (1998). Haggis for Foreigners. Wildduck Books, Hongkong.

Or

Robertson, D. Haggis for Foreigners. Wildduck Books, Hongkong, 1998.

There are many different ways of giving the publication details. Check with your Department to see if they have any rules or guidelines.

(9) A final word

If you have read carefully this far, you will probably be feeling a bit uneasy about the combination of tips and words like “Check with your Department”. The reason for this is:

Firstly, there are different conventions in different parts of the English-speaking world.

Secondly, even though you have to write a term paper in English you are still working within the German conventions which operate at the University of Constance and have to respect them. On the website of “Anglistische und Amerikanistische Literaturwissenschaft”, for example, you will find a “Merkblatt zum Schreiben von Hausarbeiten” and a “Zitier-Guide”.

I have tried to show what I see as the most important characteristics of a term paper anywhere in the English-speaking world (namely: clarity of message, clear structure, clear English – no mystification).

I think you will find the same message in:

Seely, J. (1998). The Oxford Guide to Writing and Speaking. fse 485/s26. It is in my Semesterapparat. See Chapters 9, 23 – 26.

If you want more information on technicalities then consult the standard work, the “*MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*”. The fourth edition (1995) and fifth edition (1999) are available in the library. To quote from the fourth edition: “The *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers* is designed to introduce you to the customs of a community of writers who greatly value scrupulous scholarship and the careful documentation, or recording, of research.”

March 2006