

What Is a Term Paper?

On the following pages you will find information on what defines a term paper and general advice regarding the process of writing. For information on what format you should adhere to, you should consult the “Style Sheet – Literary Studies.” The guidelines apply to Literary Studies term papers written in our department at all levels (B.A., M.A. and J.M.).

Do not underestimate the time it takes to research and select literature, develop your argument and thesis, proofread your paper, etc. A term paper cannot be written in three days! Researching and surveying literature alone will take a considerable amount of time. While writing your term paper, you may need to go back to researching literature if what you have found earlier is not helpful for your topic. You may have to reconsider your general take on your subject or revise your argument. For Literary Studies term papers at our institute, you should always adhere as closely as possible to the guidelines laid out for your use on the following pages:

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1. What Is a Term Paper and How Do You Write One?

Most of the Literary Studies seminars at the Department of English and American Studies will require you to submit a term paper for your final grade. A term paper is ideally a well-researched, well-written academic text that features a critical analysis and interpretation of a selected subject matter.

Knowing how to write a term paper is in itself an important qualification and an essential part of your academic career. In a term paper you can show:

- a) that you can formulate a research question as well as, subsequently, a thesis,
- b) and that you are able to analyze and interpret a text;
- c) that you know how to research a subject and that you have read as well as understood academic publications on your subject matter;
- d) that you have a firm grasp of the English language and that you can employ an academic writing style.

In a term paper you need to show that you are able to formulate a coherent text with a concise argumentation in which you validate the thesis underlying your term paper. For more information on this point, see the second chapter of the style sheet. On the following pages you will find a short step-by-step guide to how to fulfill the above-mentioned requirements:

- a) The topic for a term paper can be anything that may serve to increase the knowledge and understanding of a literary phenomenon, like a text, specific elements of a text, a theory, the process of reading, the act of understanding, the empirical reception, the sociology of writing or reading, etc. (this list is not complete and the items are not ordered according to their significance). At the core of the paper, there should be an idea, and that idea should be yours. Most often this idea is, in short, some aspect you have noticed while reading the text (an important motif, a recurring element, a significant feature, etc.) and which you feel deserves particular attention because it contributes to the overall meaning of the text or favors a particular interpretation. Once you have found a topic you need to discuss it with the instructor or supervisor. This is necessary because occasionally the topic is ultimately too difficult or for other reasons unsuitable – once in a while, instructors have to save the students from eccentric ideas.
- b) The paper then consists of an analysis in which the chosen aspect is shown as being relevant, followed by an interpretation that argues what this relevant aspect contributes to the meaning of the text. Analysis is originally derived from Greek *analýsis* (‘dissolution’) and in the humanities literally means the division of a larger entity (i. e. a text or a problem) into its single elements. When you analyze a literary text, you should focus on the single aspects that constitute its meaning and their relation to each other. These aspects can be recurring themes, symbols, motifs, metaphors, narrative techniques, setting, characters, etc. The interpretation, on the other hand, draws larger conclusions from the results of your analysis, i.e. placing them in a broader context and discussing how they contribute to your reading of the text as a whole. Note: Analysis and interpretation are intertwined processes. Throughout your paper you constantly move from one to the other. They should not be divided into two sub-chapters.

The interpretation of your chosen text should be interesting and go beyond the very surface of the text: Arguing that Lady de Winter in *The Three Musketeers* is

beautiful and seductive and this explains why many men fall in love with her is not very enlightening; however, explaining what exactly the animal imagery in the description of Alisaun in Chaucer's "The Miller's Tale" means in the medieval context and what concept of feminine beauty is revealed by it is a very suitable and fruitful topic. A text often offers more than one possible interpretation. You should always be aware that your interpretation of the text is just one way to read it. Therefore, interpretations are not true but they have to be plausible, i.e., they have to make sense as possible or even probable readings, which take account of the text as a whole in relation to the chosen element. Readings which ignore most of the text to argue a detail are usually problematic and often faulty.

- c) While thinking about the topic and then writing the paper you will have to take into account that other people have already worked on the text and maybe on your topic as well. If you work on well-known and, in particular, canonical older texts, you will hardly be able to avoid this because they usually have been well-researched. But this is no impediment to the work on your paper because students may well have their own ideas about texts and then find out that, indeed, previous researchers had the same ideas as well. The secondary literature then serves as support for your theory or – and this is equally important – as arguments that you should discuss and possibly strive to invalidate. So you need to read secondary literature critically with the following questions in mind:
- Is it relevant for my argument?
 - Does it support my argument and/or thesis?
 - Does it force me to change my mind?
 - Does it support a reading that is compatible with mine?
 - Does it offer a contradictory interpretation but nevertheless allow me to maintain my own idea and reading?
 - Is the argument and/or thesis faulty or improbable so that I can try to falsify it?

If the secondary literature convinces you that your idea was not really valid, this is also a suitable result. In that case, disproving an idea does not necessarily mean that your whole argumentation is faulty; instead, you can now reconsider your argument and point out either what the shortcomings of the secondary texts you used are, or how they contribute to and help validate your revised thesis.

- d) Your term paper is to be written in English and you should strive for accuracy, clarity, and veracity. You should write objectively and in a matter-of-fact way, difficult as that may be. However enthusiastic you feel about your subject, refrain from any urges to express your excitement or any person-related issues (to give an extreme example: “Since I am a great fan of psychoanalysis, I will analyze ‘Young Goodman Brown’ as a conflict between the Ego, Super-Ego, and Id.”). This does not mean that you should never use the pronoun “I” (such as when you explain what you are going to do in your term paper). On the contrary the usage of “I” is encouraged where it makes sense and as long as it does not include emotional or personal statements. At the end of the writing process, re-read your paper again critically, paying close attention to the logical structure, presentation of the argument, spelling, general format, etc. If necessary, ask someone (ideally a native speaker) to read it. Do not construct logical connections where they do not exist. Only use words like “thus,” “therefore,” “it follows,” “in consequence,” “so” etc. if there is a logical link. *Non sequitur* are arguments where there is a mismatch between the link suggested by signal words such as those mentioned above and the internal coherent (logical) link between two sentences.

2. Structure and Content of a Term Paper

A term paper has a very specific structure:

- cover sheet
- table of contents
- introduction
- main body (divided into sub-chapters)
- conclusion
- bibliography
- declaration of academic integrity

The cover sheet and table of contents state your topic and show the structure of your paper. The cover sheet should give the following information: name of university and department, your name, matriculation number, address and e-mail address, the subjects you are studying, the degree you are aiming for (L.A., B.A., M.A.), the number of semesters you have been enrolled, and the date of submission. The cover sheet further contains the full title of your paper, the type of course (B.A., M.A., Aufbaumodul I, II+III) or type and name of

module, the title of the course for which you are writing the term paper, the year, and the name of the course instructor. You can find an example in the appendix of the style sheet. The table of contents should give an overview of how the paper is organized, showing the page numbers at which the various sections begin (make sure that the page numbers are correct in the final editing process of your paper). Headings should always be capitalized throughout the entire paper (for more information see page two of the style sheet). All headings and sub-headings used in the paper should be listed on the contents page, preferably using Arabic numerals. You can find an example of this in the appendix of the style sheet. Note: Your introduction and conclusion should be called “Introduction” and “Conclusion” respectively and nothing else! Your main body should not be called “Main Body” but should be given appropriate headings and sub-headings!

The introduction states the aim and purpose of your paper, reveals your general topic area and your research question, and also reflects your methodological and/or theoretical approach. It contains your thesis statement (often placed towards the end of the introduction), usually followed by a short overview of how you will proceed on the subsequent pages. When introducing your research question and thesis, make sure that you move from the unspecific to the specific and that you properly “introduce” your topic, stating what makes it relevant and interesting to be dealt with in an academic research paper in the first place. Keep in mind that one of the functions of your introduction is to engage your reader’s interest. Avoid starting your introduction with sentences like “This term paper is about ...” Introductions are usually written as a last step, but do not necessarily need to be. Note: Biographical information about the author and a plot summary do not belong into an introduction, nor do they belong into any other part of your paper unless they are absolutely essential for your argument!

The written text of a term paper always ends with a conclusion in which you summarize your findings. “Summarizing your findings” however does not mean that you just list your results and repeat what you mentioned in the individual chapters, instead you should bring your arguments from your (sub)chapters together to formulate a final, connected, and coherent answer to your research question and validation of your thesis. The best conclusions are those that also give some further outlook (e.g., questions and problems that remain unresolved, perspectives for further research, points that could not be dealt with within the scope of your paper etc.). However you should not introduce new ideas in your conclusion! Make sure that your conclusion corresponds to your introduction and your individual chapters, that it resumes the thesis and argument you developed there, and that it does not contradict what you said before.

The conclusion is followed by the bibliography, which lists all the works you cited and the declaration of academic integrity. The bibliography should follow the guidelines listed in the style sheet. The hard copy of your paper must be appended by a signed and dated declaration of academic integrity which must have the following wording:

Hiermit erkläre ich, dass ich die vorliegende Arbeit selbst angefertigt und alle von mir benutzten Hilfsmittel und Quellen angegeben habe; alle wörtlichen Zitate und Entlehnungen sind als solche gekennzeichnet.

Situated between the introduction and conclusion, the main body of your term paper features the analysis of your text, attempts to answer your research question(s), and offers evidence which supports your main thesis. It is advisable to divide this main body into at least two sub-chapters (the division into sub-chapters should also be indicated within your text by sub-headings). This will make constructing a coherent argument easier. It is helpful to have at least a rough outline of your term paper before you start writing and to show this structure to your instructor early on! Mind-mapping or similar methods of cognitive organization can help you arrive at a structure, and it may also prove helpful to take down your major arguments and then sort them. This will allow you to develop a more coherent argumentation.

In the written text, each paragraph should be treated as a specific argument. It should begin with a proposition and then elaborate on this proposition and/or offer evidence that supports it. Make sure that your paragraphs build upon each other logically and that the arguments proposed within them are coherent. Also, avoid redundancy in your argumentation and citations! Unless it is absolutely necessary, do not use the same quotation twice and do not present the same arguments repeatedly. See to it that in your argumentation you always stick to the thesis and research question which is laid out in your introduction. Your thesis should run through your whole term paper like a golden thread, and all your ideas, chapters, sub-chapters and paragraphs must relate to it and support it. This does not mean that you need to explicitly state over and over again what your term paper is about (that is redundant). Rather, your whole term paper, and all of your ideas, chapters, sub-chapters and paragraphs, must relate to and support your thesis.