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Guidelines for Academic Writing

This handout freshens up your skills for writing Hausarbeiten/research papers and essays by giving you some pointers. It is concerned with the *content* of your writing; for *formal* questions, please consult the corresponding *Style Sheet for Academic Writing*. Form and content both need to be considered in order to write successfully, so pay close attention to both aspects.

This handout will give you brief advice on your thesis statement, introduction, arguments, and your conclusion, as well as on the use of sources and general stylistic choices.

Thesis and thesis statement

A thesis is a particular claim which you make about a text/topic. It is your 'take', your specific perspective and interpretation. A thesis can refute other peoples' claims, combine earlier claims, or build on and extend other claims. A thesis is always an argumentative statement; academic writing requires you to argue, and never to just compile or retell. Your entire work, from introduction to conclusion, thus strives to substantiate this claim. Any piece of academic writing without a clear thesis already suffers from a crucial flaw! The thesis statement should be placed prominently in the first section of you essay/Hausarbeit.

Good examples:

Despite the established differentiation between 'race' and 'ethnicity', the Race and Ethnicity sections of the USA census still reveal a preference of the concept of 'race', and a disregard for 'ethnicities', a sign for the 'othering' of immigration cultures especially from South America.

The architectural features of many high schools suggest a discipline of control and surveillance akin to a panopticon, increasingly so since the first killing spree in an American high school in Littleton in 1999.

Hermione of J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series is, despite her repeatedly stressed extraordinary intelligence, a character that is subjected to the traditional gender roles within the wizarding world.

While Holly Golightly crosses boundaries of gender and subverts standards of morality in the book, the film presents us with a domesticated version and finally makes her into a model housewife.

Bad examples:

America's culture is still infested with a racial bias that many writers subconsciously reinforce. (too unspecific and general)

Barack Obama was the first president to address the improvement of gay rights as a priority when he mentioned them in his inauguration speech of 2013. (not argumentative)

I will look at the family structures of Native American families in the book *Monkey Beach* by Eden Robinson. (not argumentative)

It is worth discussing whether the architectural features of many high schools suggest a discipline of control and surveillance, increasingly so since the first killing spree. (This indicates that you are not sure whether you argue for this statement, or against it.)

Your thesis statement is the indicator of where you are going with your work. Give a clear outlook on what you want to say in your essay. Be as specific as possible, and, once you know what you want to say, do not lose track of it while writing!

Introduction

Your introduction consists of your thesis statement and an additional mapping of your line of argument. Once you are done writing your paper, check whether you gave an accurate overview over the points you addressed. The length depends on the overall length of your paper.

In a **Hausarbeit**, in which you give titles to your chapters and subchapters, the introduction is usually labeled 'Introduction'.

Examples:

Although the traditional architectural designs of American classrooms do at first glance not resemble a panopticon, the architectural features of many high schools suggest a shift towards a discipline of control and surveillance. These characteristics seem only to have increased since the first high school killing sprees of high-school students in Littleton 1999. In this essay, I will examine the features of surveillance and control in American high-school architecture by looking at the archetypical design of Shadow Ridge High School in Las Vegas, a high school built in 2003. Referring to Foucault's analysis of panoptical institutions, this essay will provide an investigation of the set-up of the school yard, the dean's office, the security checkpoints and the bathroom facilities, to point out how a practice of surveillance and categorization is employed to not only prevent harm to the students and personnel, but also to further a segregation of desirable and undesirable behavior in general.

While Holly Golightly crosses boundaries of gender and subverts standards of morality in the book, the 1961 movie *Breakfast at Tiffany's* presents us with a domesticated version and finally makes her into a model housewife. Some critics have seen Holly's subversive potential. Yet her film persona, which caters more to mainstream moral standards, has been much more famous. There is not yet an extensive critique of this transformation of the subversive young woman into a fairly acceptable domesticated girlfriend.

Argument: Macro Structure

Before writing, structure your arguments in a logical order, for example by characters, by motives, by acts, chronologically or by argumentative strength. Make sure that each sub-point relates to and supports your thesis! In a **Hausarbeit**, you bundle arguments with headlines that should clearly refer to the following content. While you do not use titles in an **essay**, it is often helpful to imagine each paragraph with a headline to not lose focus from the point you are trying to make. Some people get their structure by making mind maps/ concept maps, some by associative writing, and some find it easiest to start right with sketching a macro structure.

Example:

Thesis: Hermione of J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series is, despite her repeatedly stressed extraordinary intelligence, a character that is subject to traditional gender roles within the wizarding world.

Structure:

1. Introduction
2. Traditional Roles in *Harry Potter*: Occupation of Witches
 - 2.1. Female Teachers in Hogwarts
 - 2.2. The Ministry of Magic and Gender Policy
3. Hermione's Gender Role
 - 3.1. Pre-puberty: One of the Three
 - 3.2. Adolescence: One of the Women
4. Conclusion

Every section that you form should essentially draw on a smaller thesis that supports your main thesis.

Example

Thesis: Hermione of J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series is, despite her repeatedly stressed extraordinary intelligence, a character that is subjected to traditional gender roles within the wizarding world.

Mini thesis for point 2: Many witches in the novels have occupations that seem to originate from a traditional division between the sexes: they are housewives, teachers, barmaids etc, while the men teach more dangerous subjects, hold more powerful positions in the ministry, and support their families financially.

Mini thesis for point 2.1: The teaching staff of Hogwarts has in numbers no gender bias, but the subjects seem to be strictly divided amongst the sexes.

Etc.

Argument: Micro-structure

You want to follow a pattern of statement – support and examples – importance for overall thesis. Every section in your paper should serve to argue a mini-thesis. The section (chapter/subchapter in a Hausarbeit, paragraph in an essay) should have the mini-thesis prominently in the beginning. Then work out why you think so, give quotations if necessary and possible, and finally tie your mini thesis to the thesis statement before ending the section. In the right spots, conjunctive phrases and additional information improve the readability and help the reader to follow your line of thought.

Conclusion

The conclusion serves to draw a line under your arguments. Sum up your findings once more, and/or point to other aspects that still might be considered. Evaluate your thesis (also in regard to existing scholarship), hint upon further topics, or simply mention what you have knowingly omitted due to the scope of the essay. In a **Hausarbeit**, your conclusion is usually labeled “Conclusion.”

Sources

You are required to use additional sources, and not only to revise what has been used in your course. Such sources include: essays (whether electronic or on paper), books, articles, etc. Do not be too gullible with your sources – just because someone has written something does not mean that you cannot disagree. Be especially vigilant when using online resources. Do not use open resources such as Wikipedia, or other such homepages as your main sources (rather do not use them at all). Critical, scholarly sources, which are provided by academic journals, academic monographies, essay collections, etc. should be at the core of your research!

You are required to find your own argument. If you replicate the idea of someone else without proper quotation and citation, it will be considered plagiarism.

Style

1. The reader that you should have in mind is as educated, or better educated, than you. This means that you do not summarize an entire text for your reader, but that you only need to point out exactly the issues that you are talking about.

Bad example: In *Harry Potter and the Sorcerer's Stone*, a boy named Harry discovers that he is a wizard. After a guy named Hagrid, who is a half-giant, tells him about his heritage and takes him from his foster family, the Duddleys, he goes to the wizarding school called Hogwarts. He first meets Ron Weasley, a wizard, in the train, and then, quickly after, the super-smart Hermione, who is also Muggle-raised, but knows a lot more about magic already, because she bought a lot of books in Diagon Alley and memorized everything in them.

Michel Foucault was supposed to study medicine, but decided against it. He wrote vehemently against the subject of psychiatry, and grouped it with other disciplinary discourses which he criticizes. In his work *Discipline and Punish*, which was published in 1975, he also investigates an architectural structure, the panopticon, which helps to reinforce and internalize a constant feeling of surveillance. This structure, however, does not necessarily need to be a building, but can also be created through cameras, or through the imaginary.

Good example: When Harry meets Hermione, she has already dealt with the new situation and has begun to explore her identity as a witch by acquiring book knowledge (Rowling 49).

Michel Foucault's observations on *Panopticism* extend to disciplinary structures created in society, even if they are mental, and not physically observable.

2. Avoid overly complex syntax! Even very advanced English speakers create sentences that are partially nonsense. Especially dangling clauses and ambiguous references are typical pitfalls.
3. Use the correct term! Work with a thesaurus or a dictionary, such as the Oxford English Dictionary, to make sure that you use a word correctly. Try to avoid too complex words that you do not understand. Neither should you overuse auxiliary verbs like 'get', 'have to', 'must' etc., nor use colloquialisms.
4. Stay away from overly obvious statements, exclamation marks and vague generalizations, such as "Women are humans too!", "America has played out its imperial interest whenever it could." "Slavery is bad."
5. Your personal point of view matters, but your personal experience does not. At this point in your academic career, you should not write about whether you like something or not, or whether you felt something to be a certain way; instead you should argue your special approach.

Bad example:

"Hermione is very nerdy, and I can relate to that."

Good example:

"Hermione provides a figure of identification for overachieving students, as her diligent accumulation of knowledge turns the plot more than once in Harry's favor. Her focus on schoolwork is rewarded not only by teachers, but also by her friends."

6. Rather write simply and convincingly than elaborately and ambivalently!
7. Unfortunately, not every great thought/ not every finding you wrote down has to do with the thesis. Censor yourself!
8. Check your essay carefully for spelling mistakes as well as logical inconsistencies.

Enjoy writing your essay!