

Guidelines for Academic Writing

This handout gives you some essential pointers regarding the content of research papers/essays/Modulararbeiten/bachelor's or master's theses when submitted at our chair. For formal questions, please consult the corresponding "Style Sheet for Academic Writing." For conceptual and organizational questions, please consult the FAQs on writing a thesis (both can be found at <https://www.uni-potsdam.de/en/iaa-amlc/information-for-students.html>). Content, form, and overall organization all need to be considered in order to write successfully. Pay close attention to both aspects. You may also want to revisit other materials on Academic Skills, e.g., from your Introductory Courses.

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1. 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. Our discipline 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 your research papers/essays/Modulararbeiten/bachelor's or master's theses.

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. While the thesis belongs at the beginning of

your essay, it is most likely not the beginning of your thought process: you can only come up with one once you have done research. In the process of writing and developing your argument, you start with a *tentative thesis* that you may have to revise afterwards.

Good examples

Hermione in J.K. Rowling's *Harry Potter* series is, despite her 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 sprees. (This indicates that you are not sure whether you argue for this statement, or against it.)

2. Introduction

Your introduction consists of your thesis statement and an additional mapping of your line of argument. Again, it is possible that you are writing/revising your introduction last. Check whether you gave an accurate overview over the points you addressed. The length depends on the overall length of your paper.

In a Modulararbeit/bachelor's or master's thesis, in which you give titles to your chapters and subchapters, the introduction is usually labeled 'Introduction'.

Good 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 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 panoptic 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 pointed out the subversive potential of Capote's description of Holly. 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.

3. 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 *Modularbeit*/bachelor's or master's thesis, you bundle arguments with headlines that should clearly refer to the following content, and you need a table of contents. 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 free writing, and some find it easiest to start right with sketching a macro structure.

Good 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. Gender roles in Magical Worlds
3. Traditional Roles in *Harry Potter*: Occupation of Witches
 - 3.1 Female Teachers in Hogwarts
 - 3.2 The Ministry of Magic and Gender Policy
4. Hermione's Gender Role
 - 4.1 Pre-puberty: One of the Three
 - 4.2 Adolescence: One of the Women
5. Conclusion

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

Good Example

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

Mini thesis for point 3: 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 3.1: The teaching staff of Hogwarts has in numbers no gender bias, but the subjects seem to be strictly divided amongst the sexes.

Etc.

4. Argument: Micro Structure

Your writing should follow a repetitive pattern: statement/mini thesis – 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 Modulararbeit/bachelor's or master's thesis, paragraph in an essay) should have the mini-thesis prominently in the beginning. Then, in the middle, expound 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. Despite adhering carefully to an argumentative and clear structure, your writing should be coherent and have a flow to it, and not read too ungainly. The art of academic writing is essentially creating a readable and well-structured text.

5. 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 Modulararbeit/bachelor's or master's thesis, your conclusion is its own short subchapter and usually labeled "Conclusion."

6. Sources

Research means going beyond your first impression of the primary source (the text you are discussing). Instead, understand your writing as a commenting on, and even contributing to, an ongoing conversation about a text/topic/field. That is, you should invoke secondary sources because you react to them. On a very basic level, you are asked to evaluate, agree or disagree with them. You are required to use secondary literature, i.e., academic (i.e. peer reviewed) essays from journals (whether electronic or on paper), from collections, monographs, etc.

Do not be too gullible with your sources – just because someone has written something does not mean that you cannot disagree. This may be because your reading either takes a different theoretic stand, or because you found that the primary source contains contradictory materials. Do not use open resources such as Wikipedia, or other such homepages as your main sources (ideally, do not use them at all). Critical, scholarly sources, which are provided by academic journals, academic monographs, essay collections, etc. should be at the core of your research.

You are required to construct your own argument, but there is nothing wrong with evoking someone else's preparatory work – if properly cited! (see 'Style Sheet')

Good examples

According to Cumming (4), a decisive change took place in Europeans' perceptions of the Atlantic world when the northern and southern voyages of exploration were brought together.

Contrary to Kollin, who concludes that Drop City "offers [...] a critical postfrontier approach" (348), I argue that the connection between the frontier myth and dropping out, as drawn in Boyle's novel, recalls the frontier narrative and thus is rather uncritically paying tribute to a national narrative of the USA.

7. Streamlining

Your audience reads your essay to garner different points of view on the subject. This means that your reader has a general idea of the primary text you are discussing. Do not summarize an entire text, but point out exactly the issues that you are talking about. Unfortunately, not every great thought/not every finding is relevant for the point you are making. Ask yourself: does this information pertain to my thesis?

Bad examples

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 Durdles, he goes to the wizarding school called Hogwarts. He first meets Ron Weasley, who comes from a wizarding family, in the train, and then, quickly after, the super-smart Hermione, who was also raised by 'Muggles' – the word of the Magic community for non-magic people. She knows a lot more about magic already, because she bought a lot of books 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.

Good examples

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 describes in *Discipline and Punish* (1975) a form of surveillance and discipline called Panopticism. Although he initially discusses the layout for a prison, called "panopticon," this is for him just one example for how a feeling of constant surveillance can be used to alter behavior, whether in prison buildings, factories or mental wards.

8. Style

Write simply and convincingly rather than elaborately and ambivalently. Avoid overly complex syntax. Even very advanced English speakers at times create sentences that are partially nonsense. Especially dangling clauses and ambiguous references are typical pitfalls.

Use the correct term. Work with a thesaurus or a dictionary, such as *Merriam Webster* or 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. Adhere to the Oxford rules of punctuation.

Stay away from obvious statements, exclamation marks and vague generalizations. Your personal point of view matters, but, 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 examples:

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

Women are humans too!

America has always gone beyond its limitations.

Good examples:

Hermione provides a figure of identification for overachieving students. Because her knowledge turns the plot more than once in Harry's favor, her studying diligently is frequently rewarded.

Finally, check your writing carefully for spelling mistakes as well as logical inconsistencies. Then, pat yourself on the shoulder for the work you've done.