

Guide for preparing a seminar paper

This guide was developed by Service Centre Self-Study (SCS) at the Faculty of Educational Science.

One of the challenges in your studies is learning to work with academic work formats, for example writing seminar papers. If a seminar paper is to be successful, this implies a certain amount of prior knowledge, e.g., about structure, organisation of the content, and formal matters. This guide is intended to provide orientation and to inform you about the internal and external structure of seminar papers.

It discusses the following questions:

1. *What is a seminar paper?*
2. *What are the necessary preliminary steps for writing a seminar paper?*
3. *How do I write a seminar paper, and which formal matters are to be observed?*
4. *Where can I find more information?*

You will find a checklist for reviewing and improving your approach, as appropriate, at the end of the guide.

1. What is a seminar paper?

A seminar paper is an 'independently prepared written treatment of a problem' (Höge 2006, p. 21). The content of the seminar paper should be related to the topic of the seminar, and it should include the state of research, i.e., the theories, concepts, and opinions which are to be found in the literature (cf. *ibid.*). During the process of preparing a seminar paper, you will perform the following three steps, broadly speaking: 1.) Getting acquainted with the academic topic, 2.) Structuring insights and findings, and 3.) Presenting them appropriately in terms of language and formal matters (cf. Kruse 2007, p. 86).

2. What are the necessary preliminary steps for writing a seminar paper?

Of course, it is impossible to write a seminar paper without preparation. Preliminary steps exist that are necessary and helpful for writing the final text. First and foremost, you should work out what your concrete research question is. To this end, try to get an overview over the topic of the course and the corresponding literature in the library. You may already find some aspects particularly interesting, or you may identify some during your

Goals of the guide

Contents of the guide

Checklist

Definition of a seminar paper

Finding a research question

research that you can well imagine elaborating on in a seminar paper (cf. Kruse 2007, p. 87 ff.). Try to make your project clearer by formulating it as a question (What? How? Why?). (cf. Karmasin & Ribing 2009, p. 21).

Helpful hint: You can find more information on this topic below in the bibliography with English-language literature on academic writing.

When you begin to access the academic literature, you may encounter terminology that you are unfamiliar with. In this case, it is advisable to work with tools such as specialised dictionaries to improve your understanding of the texts and to help you grasp the key contents (cf. Kruse 2007, p. 90 ff. and Fromm & Paschelke 2006, p. 25 ff.). Since academic texts are often difficult to understand at first reading, more easily readable comprehension aids and secondary literature are available for many concepts and approaches. You can find them in the library.

As you read, when you find things that match the topic of your seminar paper as you have defined it, you should take notes and prepare relevant excerpts. 'Preparing excerpts' means identifying what is most important to you in a text and writing it down. In a next step, you should then evaluate the excerpts you made and order them according to the various dimensions of your topic (cf. Kruse 2007, p. 93 ff.). One suitable procedure for this step is mind mapping, a well-known 'graphical procedure for ordering and structuring that permits users to group many pieces of information and relate them to one another' (ibid., p. 97). You can use mind mapping to develop a structure for your seminar paper, that is, a framework for presenting your findings and research results. In addition, preparing an exposé can be helpful for laying out your own approach in a structured fashion – for yourself and also for the faculty member teaching the course.

Helpful hint: You can find more information on this topic below in the bibliography with English-language literature on academic writing.

3. How do I write a seminar paper, and which formal matters are to be observed?

When you have completed the preliminary steps, you can begin to write the draft. For this step, you should be aware of the basic structure of an academic paper: the outline includes the introduction, the main section, and the conclusion. Each of these sections has a particular function.

The introduction should clarify

- which topic will be presented and place it in a context,
- what the concrete research question is, and

Further
information

Understanding
texts

Structure:
Excerpts and
mind mapping

Further
information

Draft

Outline

Introduction

- what the structure of the paper is.

Helpful hint: It is best to write the introduction at the end. Then you will have the best overview over the entire paper and can tailor the introduction to it.

The main section includes

- the actual treatment of the research question, using the literature and other materials,
- a logical order of the individual steps towards gaining insights, the arguments, and the conclusions.

Main section

The conclusion includes

- a summary of the work you did,
- (your own) conclusions,
- identification of the limits of this paper within the overall research context.

Conclusion

(cf. Frank, Haacke & Lahm 2007, p. 138 f.)

It is important to consider that roughly dividing the entire text into three parts does not mean dividing your seminar paper into three chapters! Take care that you break down your main section in individual chapters and subchapters in a reasonable way.

Chapters and subchapters

Helpful hint: Don't be too perfectionist when you prepare the draft. Understand that it is an initial version that you can use as the foundation for the further steps.

Foundation for further steps

You must clearly indicate the direct and indirect quotations from the specialist literature you used for your seminar paper as other people's work!

Citations

When you have completed the draft, you have done the lion's share of writing. The remaining tasks are the final editing and corrections as well as observing some formal standards to round out your seminar paper according to the requirements. When you edit and correct your seminar paper, you should critically review the line of argument: Is the text comprehensible and structured in a logical way? Is the outline coherent, and did I treat my research question in a rigorous way? In addition, you should review the text to ensure it is linguistically appropriate. It is helpful to ask another person to proofread the text.

Final editing and corrections

Helpful hint: You can find more information on this topic below in the bibliography with English-language literature on academic writing.

Further information

Preparing a bibliography is essential in order to fulfil academic standards. Information about proper preparation of a bibliography is also included in the APP's fact sheet.

Finally, your seminar paper must have a cover sheet with information about the university, the course, the faculty member teaching the course, reference number, and information about you. It is important to indicate the date when you submitted the seminar paper. For one thing, this makes it possible to review compliance with the deadline for assessment of the seminar paper. For another, it can facilitate processing of matters in relation to Bafög (state financial assistance for education). On the day of submission, the date should be signed and thereby confirmed by the secretary or the faculty member teaching the course.

Cover sheet

Helpful hint: A template for preparing the cover sheet is available on the website: <http://www.uni-bielefeld.de/soz/studium/international/pdf/template-for-cover-sheet.pdf> [current as at: 5 February 2018]

This is the order in which you arrange the seminar paper: The cover sheet is followed by the table of contents, then the text of the seminar paper itself, and finally the bibliography (cf. Kruse 2007, p. 114 f.). You must also provide a declaration of originality that states the following for your seminar paper and for all individual achievements in writing:

Declaration of Originality

I hereby declare that I have prepared the present paper myself and that I have prepared data sets, drawings, sketches, and graphical representations myself. I have used no other sources than those mentioned and have identified those parts of the paper which were taken from other works – including tables and figures used – as such in every individual case, providing the source.

Bielefeld, date: _____ (signature)

Declaration of Originality

The faculty member teaching the course has the right to demand your seminar paper in electronic form so that the authorship of your seminar paper can be reviewed, as appropriate. You can submit this electronic version in anonymised form.

If you have prepared the seminar paper as a group, each person involved should provide a declaration of originality for the part he/she prepared. It should also be made clear who prepared each part of a group seminar paper. This can be done as follows:

Declaration of Individual Contributions

Declaration of Individual Contributions

The present seminar paper was prepared by Max Mustermann and Maxima Mustermann as follows:

Max Mustermann prepared pages ... to and to ... /chapters ..., ..., etc.

Maxima Mustermann prepared pages ... to and to ... /chapters ..., ..., etc.

Bielefeld, date: _____ (signature)

Bielefeld, date: _____ (signature)

Helpful hint: To provide a better overview, indicate the author of each chapter in the seminar paper itself, e.g., 1.1 Introduction (Max Mustermann).

You must provide a declaration of originality and a declaration of individual contributions for all individual achievements in writing (except written examinations).

Information on individual achievements

4. Where can I find more information?

Frank, Andrea et al. 2007. Schlüsselkompetenzen. Schreiben in Studium und Beruf. Stuttgart: J.B. Metzler.

Sources and further reading

Fromm, Martin and Paschelke, Sarah. 2006. Wissenschaftliches Denken und Arbeiten. Münster: Waxmann.

Höge, Holger. 2006. Schriftliche Arbeiten in Studium und Beruf. Ein Leitfaden. 3rd ed. Stuttgart: Kohlhammer.

Karmasin, Matthias and Ribing, Rainer. 2009. Die Gestaltung wissenschaftlicher Arbeiten. 4th ed. Vienna: Facultas.

Kruse, Otto 2007. Keine Angst vor dem leeren Blatt. Ohne Schreibblockaden durchs Studium. 12th ed. Frankfurt: Campus.

Bibliography of English-language literature on academic writing

American Sociological Association. 2010. American Sociological Association style guide. 4th ed. Washington, DC: American Sociological Association.

Becker, Howard and Richards, Pamela. 2007. Writing for social scientists. How to start and finish your thesis, book, or article. 2nd ed. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press.

Billig, Michael. 2013. Learn to write badly. How to succeed in the social sciences. Cambridge: Univ. Press.

Bloomberg, Linda and Volpe, Marie. 2016. Completing your qualitative dissertation. A road map from beginning to end. 3rd ed. Los Angeles: Sage.

Booth, Andrew et al. 2012. Systematic approaches to a successful literature review. Los Angeles: Sage.

Burnett, Judith. 2009. Doing your social science dissertation. London: Sage.

Edwards, Mark. 2012. Writing in sociology. Thousand Oaks: Sage.

Friedman, Sharon and Steinberg, Stephen. 1989. Writing and thinking in the social sciences. Englewood Cliffs: Prentice Hall.

Giarrusso, Roseann et al. 2013. A guide to writing sociology papers. 7th ed.

New York: Worth Publishers.

Graff, Gerald and Birkenstein, Cathy. 2010. "They say, I say". The moves that matter in academic writing. 2nd ed. New York: Norton.

Harris, Angelique and Tyner-Mullings, Alia. 2013. Writing for emerging sociologists. Los Angeles: Sage.

Johnson, Andrew. 2003. A short guide to academic writing. Lanham: University Press of America.

Levin, Peter. 2009. Writing great essays! 2nd ed. New York: Open University Press.

Machi, Lawrence and McEvoy, Brenda. 2012. The literature review. Six steps to success. 2nd ed. Thousand Oaks: Corwin.

Merriam, Sharan and Tisdell, Elizabeth. 2015. Qualitative Research: A Guide to Design and Implementation, 4th ed: John Wiley & Sons.

Mullins, Carolyn. 1983. A guide to writing and publishing in the social and behavioral sciences. Reprint ed. Malabar: Krieger.

Nelson, John et al. 1987. The Rhetoric of the human sciences. Language and argument in scholarship and public affairs. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press.

Richardson, Laurel. 1998. Writing strategies. Reaching diverse audiences, Bd. 21. Newbury Park: Sage.

Rocco, Tonette and Hatcher, Tim. 2011. The Handbook of Scholarly Writing and Publishing. San Francisco: Jossey-Bass.

Schmidt, Judy et al. 2003. 6 steps to effective writing in sociology. Australia: Wadsworth Thomson Learning.

Sharp, John et al. 2002. The management of a student research project. 3rd ed. Aldershot, Hants, England, Burlington, VT: Gower.

Siepmann, Dirk et al. 2011. Writing in English: a guide for advanced learners. 2nd, revised and extended ed. Tübingen: A. Francke Verlag.

Silverman, David. 2014. Interpreting qualitative data. David Silverman. 5th ed. London: Sage.

Turabian, Kate. 2013. A manual for writers of research papers, theses, and dissertations.

Chicago style for students and researchers. 8th ed. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press.

Wallwork, Adrian. 2013. English for research. Usage, style, and grammar.

New York: Springer.

Wolcott, Harry. 2009. Writing up qualitative research. 3rd ed. Los Angeles: Sage.

Checklist for preparing a seminar paper

Helpful hint: Photocopy the checklist before you fill it in. Then you can use it again for seminar papers in the future.

Photocopy of the checklist

Did you obtain an overview of the topic, e.g., by reviewing the course materials and going to the library?	<input type="checkbox"/>
Did you state your research question precisely enough? Can you state it as a simple question?	<input type="checkbox"/>
Did you look up important concepts in specialised dictionaries to improve your understanding of the texts?	<input type="checkbox"/>
Did you take notes and prepare excerpts while reading?	<input type="checkbox"/>
Can you represent your materials in the form of a mind map, thereby developing a framework for your writing project?	<input type="checkbox"/>
Is your seminar paper structured clearly with an introduction, main section, and conclusion?	<input type="checkbox"/>
Does each section of the text fulfil its specific function with respect to content?	<input type="checkbox"/>
Did you define key concepts and terms when introducing them?	<input type="checkbox"/>
Did you indicate all quotations as such?	<input type="checkbox"/>
Are the individual presentation steps interlinked in a logical way?	<input type="checkbox"/>
Is the writing of your seminar paper correct and appropriately academic?	<input type="checkbox"/>
Can a line of argument be discerned from beginning to end?	<input type="checkbox"/>
Were you able to answer your research question?	<input type="checkbox"/>
Did you prepare a cover sheet and a bibliography?	<input type="checkbox"/>
Did you have another person check through the text?	<input type="checkbox"/>

If you have completed all the items on the checklist, you can consider the following questions:

1. Did you master the individual steps well?
2. What can you improve the next time you prepare a term paper or a presentation?
3. Were your aspirations for your paper appropriate, or did you find that they were too high or too low in the end?

Reflection