

Writing a Research Paper

What is a Research Paper?

In school, you probably learned how to write a text on a topic you were assigned by your teacher. In those essays, you had to state your informed but nonetheless personal opinion. An academic research paper is similar in some ways but different in others.

A research paper

- explores an idea, investigates a complex issue, and seeks to solve a problem;
- goes beyond the researcher's personal resources and, thus, is based on a combination of research into primary sources and drawing on secondary texts;
- participates in academic discourse and thus relates its research to what others have written about the same topic;
- cultural studies in particular, is concerned with making claims about how texts work; be sure that your structural emphasis is on your own claim, rather than re-telling what other people have done;
- attempts to generate knowledge and seeks to find out something new.

Finding a Topic

Our first advice is that you try to find a topic that really interests you. You will spend a few weeks researching and writing on that topic, and you need to find something that keeps you going. It is important that you **narrow your topic down**. Many students come up with rather general topics that could fill several books. Instead, focus on a carefully selected aspect of a particular topic. It is better to write a lot about a little than a little about a lot. For example, 'representations of women in visual culture' is too broad, but 'representations of naked women in advertisement in the 1970s' narrows it down enough to be able to write a well-researched paper. You can use methods like **brainstorming**, **mind-mapping**, or **clustering** to collect and structure your ideas.

Finding an Approach: The Research Question

Research usually starts with the researcher **observing a peculiarity, a contradiction, and/or a problem**. Based on their observation, they formulate a **research question**, which will guide them through the process of researching. A good research question is


- focused (geographically, temporally, genre);
- open (meaning you cannot simply answer it with ‘yes’ or ‘no’), but can be answered concretely;
- and contains key words of the research topic.


Consider the following examples:

 How has communication of crisis changed?

 How has the communication of crisis changed in the last five years due to the increasing significance of social media?

 How can WW II be explained?

 How did WW II affect the European economy?

 What is interesting about hamburgers?

 How are notions of tradition and nation connected to hamburgers in the US?

You may have **one leading question** as well as several **sub-questions** for individual sections of your paper.

Shaping Your Research: Staking a Claim

Your research question provides an entry into your research. It helps you to formulate a particular interest and delineates which findings and insights you are interested in. In so doing, it also functions as a first constructional framework for research: as a scaffold, if you like. Throughout your research, you will look for information and evidence that helps you to answer your research question, so that towards the end of it you will be able to formulate some **key claims** concerning your findings and new insights. While your research is guided by the research question, your actual

writing of the term paper is based on your main claim(s). In your paper, you present, discuss, and provide evidence for these claims.

Your claims need to be formulated in such a way that they provide material/angles for discussion. To give you an example: 'Representations of the Orient feature prominently in paintings of the 18th century' is not a good claim, as it leaves little room for discussion. A much better one might be 'The Orient is a European invention, which fosters a euro-centric world view', as was stated by Edward Said. This works well because it needs clarification, discussion, and evidence from European texts that represent the Orient.

Building Arguments

In the body of your research paper, you will provide information and arguments that address your research question and support your claims. It might be helpful to be reminded of the distinction between an argument and an opinion.

Opinion

- expresses a personal point of view
- shows how you subjectively feel about something (Gough 2)
- an opinion is just that: an opinion – it does not explain how you came to a certain belief or view, it gives no reason for your position (Gough 3)

Argument

- makes a statement that can be verified or falsified
- it explains how you arrived at your observation, idea, view
- it provides solid evidence (e.g. facts, figures, reference to scholarly research, numbers, examples)
- makes the evidence transparent so that others can check its validity

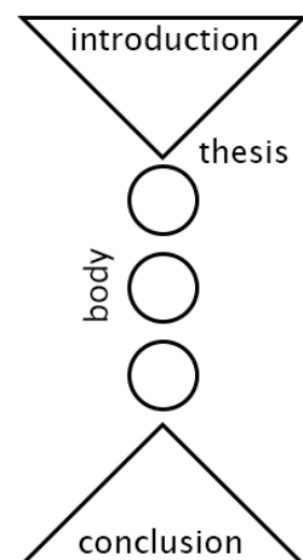
Your arguments will follow a **logical structure** and be ordered accordingly. All arguments should be relevant to your main claims. In so doing, your paper will gain coherence, that is, it will have elements that hold it together (the mysterious 'Red Thread'). Tying all your ideas back to the main claim will help prevent losing yourself in the depths of your topic.

Individual arguments are developed in **paragraphs**. One paragraph explores one idea; if you transition to a new idea, start a new paragraph. Often, a paragraph consists of three parts: the topic sentence, the development, and the conclusion.

- The **topic sentence** states the arguments you are attempting to make in the paragraph. It should contain key words.
- In the **development** you **define, explain, analyse, or modify** your argument and **support or illustrate** it with **evidence/examples** from secondary literature or your analysis of a primary source.
- The **concluding sentence** links your paragraph to the next one and in doing so helps to construct cohesion.

Structure: Introduction, Main Body, Conclusion

A research paper consists of three main parts: the introduction, the main body, and the conclusion. The main body is subdivided into the development of a theoretical/methodological frame and the analysis of one or more primary source(s). If necessary, it may include a historical contextualisation of your topic. How these parts are connected and how they build a coherent line of argument is best understood with the **hourglass model**. The hourglass model shows that you should always start from a broader point, a general topic, which you narrow down in your main body. The conclusion forms the bottom of the hourglass. Starting from your main claims and the arguments and evidence in your paper's body, you now have to return to the larger topic or context.



The Introduction

The introduction leads your reader into the topic of your paper and outlines both its historical/social/cultural/academic contexts and, most importantly, it lays bare your main claims. In so doing, together with the conclusion, the introduction frames your line of argument and helps to hold it all together. Hence the introduction

- starts with a teaser or lead-in;

- identifies a peculiarity, a contradiction, and/or a problem that constitutes your research interest;
- states your main claims;
- provides the historical/cultural/social/academic context of your topic;
- outlines the paper's approach (which may include key terms, method, or theories, see below).

The introduction will be around 10-15% of the whole length of your paper. Often writers return to the introduction after writing the main body, this way they know which main claims, information, and ideas must be outlined: This might be a useful strategy for you, too.

The Main Body

The main body develops your line of argument that helps you support your thesis statement. It consists of a theoretical/methodological part (approx. 1/3 of the main body) and the analysis of a primary source (approx. 2/3 of the main body).

Theoretical/Methodological Part

The theoretical/methodological part outlines the conceptual framework of your analysis and/or your analytical toolkit. Since any one topic can be approached from various perspectives, you have to choose a theory or method that befits your research question and thesis statement and helps to analyse your primary source. You must also consider which methods are appropriate for Cultural Studies, and how well you are able to implement them.

It may help you to think of theory as a pair of glasses through which you look at your primary source. Depending on the type of glasses you put on you will see different things more clearly than others. Theory helps you to focus on one aspect of your research object in particular.

Your theoretical part will rely on researching, reading, and evaluating secondary sources. This is not to say that your theoretical part consists of summaries and paraphrases of what others have written before you. Instead, you should be a critical reader and integrate the insights you have gained from your secondary reading into your line of argument.

You can find secondary literature at the university library, the Electronic Journals Library (EZB), the Database Information System (DBIS), in bibliographies (such as MLA, LRC), online databases (GVK, KVK, JSTOR, MUSE, Project Gutenberg).

Please consider the kinds of texts you are using to frame your ideas! The following criteria can help you to identify academic texts:

- The text should contain information that makes the text identifiable, such as title, the name of the author, the place and time of publication, and the publisher.
- The text should reference its sources and contain a works cited list.
- The text's argumentation is stringent, and its analysis is methodologically correct.
- The text is published in academically verified sources, such as journals or anthologies.

Citation and Plagiarism

Especially (but not exclusively) in the theoretical part of your paper, you will quote and paraphrase from other texts. It is important that you reference **every text** you are quoting or paraphrasing from (including primary and secondary texts). Apart from direct quotes and paraphrases, you also need to give reference whenever you use terms, thoughts and ideas, information, or structures, that are not your own. Please check our style sheet on how to quote according to the MLA.

Plagiarism is a form of intellectual theft. If your submitted work contains plagiarism, you will **automatically fail the assignment**. Plagiarism violates basic principles of academic conduct and in extreme cases may result in expulsion.

Analysis of Primary Sources

Primary sources can be any cultural artefacts you wish to study. This includes, but is not limited to, literature, art, audio-visual materials, historical documents, and cultural practices. In cultural studies, we look at these texts because we assume that they can tell us something about how the people who produced and consumed them understand and make sense of the world. Your analysis will almost invariably be argumentative, which means that you argue for the validity of your main claim. This means rather than summarising your source's contents you should concentrate on developing arguments. Use examples from your primary source to illustrate and support your arguments, but keep in mind that examples alone will never make your point for you. With the help of your theoretical approach, you will contextualise and analyse them. In summary, the analytical part of your paper

- analyses, interprets, and evaluates primary material, and
- applies previously outlined theoretical concepts.

Conclusion

Your conclusion summarises and discusses your most important findings and theses. Using the image of the hourglass model, your conclusion widens your angle by relating your findings to the initial research question and/or thesis statement, as well as to broader cultural/historical/social/academic issues and ideas. It may also give an outlook to further research. You also may wish to include aspects you could not address in the frame of your paper: This is fine, but do not make this the main or final point of your conclusion (also there is no need to state that you ran out of space: we told you how much space you have, we know how much you can write). Emphasise how your claim fits into a larger context of work. Your conclusion will be around 5-10% of the whole length of your paper.

Formal Requirements

Research papers follow some formal requirements. In cultural studies we usually follow the formal guidelines published by the MLA. For more information, please consult our style guide.

Submitting the Term Paper

Term papers must be submitted as one PDF file to the following e-mail address: [iaa.hausarbeiten\(at\)uni-rostock.de](mailto:iaa.hausarbeiten(at)uni-rostock.de). Please name the document according to the following example: Last name-first name, PS/HS Last name lecturer - short seminar title (Mustermann, Max, PS BÖS Social Varieties). Your e-mail subject should be PS/HS Last name lecturer, short seminar title (SS/WS...). Put your lecturer in 'Cc' and submit a printed copy to your lecturer for archiving. The IAA has some [guidelines for the submission of term papers](#), which we ask you to read and abide by. Your paper should include a cover page, a works cited list, and a declaration of academic originality (check our style guide for a template).

A Checklist for Writing a Term Paper

- **Identifying the specific requirements for the task**
 - When is it due? How to submit it? How much buffer time will I need? This is particularly relevant if you are sending it per snail mail and for theses for which you will need printing & binding time.
 - How long is it supposed to be? How long will I need to write it? How much time will I need for proof-reading? Have I left a buffer for emergencies?
 - What format do I need to submit it in?
 - Do I have the technical tools and skills to do this?
 - What kind of research is required? Where can I do this research? What tools (internet, MLA, library access, Interlibrary Loan (Fernleihe), pencils, copy card) / books do I need?
 - Does my (idea for a) term paper fit the class? Have I checked this with the lecturer?
 - Have I submitted all extra information e.g. a declaration that this work is your own; a word count at the end of the conclusion?

- **Constructing an outline and the sections**
 - How does the outline fit in with the argument? Does the outline 'make sense', and reflect the main argument of my paper? Do ideas 'build up' on each other? Can my reader see this in the contents page?
 - How much 'background information' is required? Have I put in some information that is not part of my main argument? For instance, some arguments require some information about the characters or even the author, many arguments do not!
 - Are there too few / too many sections?
 - Does my introduction introduce my reader? Is the main claim, aim, key concepts, structure clear (what, how, why)?
 - Do I have a conclusion (other than a list of aspects I looked at)?
 - Does each of my sections have an argument?
 - Is there a good balance of 'signposting'? Or do I spend too much time telling my reader what I will do instead of actually doing it?

- **Research matters**
 - Does each of my sources have a reason for being there? Are there some points that would work better if I rephrased them in my own words? Do I start or finish with a quote (mostly not recommended)?
 - Do I have a good balance of long quotes? Or does it look like I am letting other people do most of the work?
 - Are all my sources reliable?
 - Do I have the skills necessary to do the kind of paper I want? If you are doing interviews, do you know how to do interviews? If you are using statistics, do you know what they mean?
 - Have I used a good balance of different types of sources?

- Did I choose my sources on the basis of their integrity or on the basis of availability? Aim for integrity!

- **Language matters**
 - Have I been consistent in my spelling? It should be either BE or AE.
 - Have I proof-read my work? Thoroughly? A spell-check will not find everything
 - Does each paragraph have an argument? Have I expanded or re-aligned any one-sentence paragraphs? Have any really long paragraphs been divided into shorter paragraphs? Most paragraphs will be between 150-250 words long. Some will be shorter or longer. Paragraphs under 50 words and over 350 words will need to be revised in most cases.
 - Have I used the best English I can? Does the language register match the task? Is my text too informal? Do I use contractions?
 - Have I been consistent in my choice of vocabulary? Are interchangeable words used for a reason? Do the words I use mean what I hope they mean?

- **Proofing matters**
 - Have I missed out logical steps in the development of ideas? Will it make sense to someone who is not me?
 - Is my bibliography complete? Do I include every text that I refer to? Are there texts in the bibliography that are not in my paper?
 - Is my bibliography formatted correctly? Are all the small things like full-stops and commas where they should be?
 - Do I repeat ideas or quotes? Is this necessary or superfluous?
 - Have I been consistent in my use of fonts, margins, and the inclusion of quotes?
 - Do my quotes 'match' the original sources?
 - Have I been meticulous in referencing the sources of ideas?

Works Cited and Further Reading

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