

A note on seminar papers – some dos and don'ts

Prof. Dr. Ingo Berensmeyer

2020

Hand in your paper by the specified deadline as a PDF via your LMU email account to ingo.berensmeyer@anglistik.uni-muenchen.de. Do not use a private account. Do not forget to include the signed and scanned plagiarism declaration (statement of authorship). You can include both in one document or send the declaration as a separate file. The first word in the file name of your paper PDF should be your last name. Do not miss the deadline, as late submissions will not be accepted.

Length: This differs. For **BA students** in the old system (2010), a seminar paper should have between 15,000 and 18,000 characters, and in the 'Fortgeschrittenenseminar' between 22,500 and 30,000 characters. For **BA students** in the **new** system (2020), these are specified as 3,000 to 4,500 words (regular seminar) and 4,500 to 6,000 words (advanced seminar). For **MA students**, the length is specified as between 30,000 and 37,500 characters. For **Lehramt** students, a regular seminar demands between 15,000 and 18,000 characters, a 'Hauptseminar' between 34,000 and 51,000 characters. Essays (e.g. in a course that you take as 'Übung') are shorter, usually between 1,500 and 2,000 words. (As they say in the lottery, I cannot take any responsibility for the accuracy of these figures. Please always check your 'Studien- und Prüfungsordnung' which length applies to your specific class.) **All papers and essays with me are to be written in English** (or Latin, if you prefer).

Quality is more important than quantity. As a rough guideline, a seminar paper should draw on no less than seven (in the MA or advanced seminar, no less than ten) scholarly sources (monographs or articles published in scholarly journals). Websites do not usually count as scholarly sources (though of course journal articles etc. that you access online do count). In exceptional cases, fewer sources may also be acceptable; please consult me beforehand. (There is no fixed requirement for the number of sources in essays.) Only cite sources you mention in your paper, not sources you have read but are not using – the bibliography at the end is a list of works *cited*, not 'works read'.

Do the research. A seminar paper should show your engagement with existing scholarship on the topic. That's why the first thing to do is to search the **MLA database** for articles or books on your topic (via the university library databases: DBIS). Many will be available as PDFs for direct download or via interlibrary loan ('Fernleihe'). Searching the library's OPAC is not enough as it may not reflect the state of the discipline. Try to find as

many sources as possible that are up to date – articles from before 2000 may still be worth reading, but in many cases will no longer reflect current views on the topic.

Follow the stylesheet. You can find the English department **stylesheet** here: https://www.anglistik.uni-muenchen.de/service_downloads/allgemeine_handouts/style_sheet_english_version.pdf.

When in doubt, adapt from the MLA guidelines as presented here: https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/research_and_citation/mla_style/mla_formatting_and_style_guide/mla_formatting_and_style_guide.html. If this is (one of) your first paper(s), consider signing up for a workshop (‘wissenschaftliches Recherchieren’ etc.) at the *Schreibzentrum*: <https://www.schreibzentrum.fak13.uni-muenchen.de/>

Formatting: Follow the instructions on the stylesheet. Be friendly to your reader’s eyes. Always indent your paragraphs and indent consecutive lines in a list of works cited (‘hängender Einzug’) by 0.5 cm. Avoid footnotes wherever possible. **Proofread** your own work! Sometimes it helps to print your text and read it on paper to spot mistakes or make improvements.

Sources: For literary texts, use reliable **editions** (scholarly editions or Oxford or Penguin Classics) wherever possible. Avoid old or cheap editions or online texts that may be unreliable. When quoting plays, refer to act, scene and line numbers like this: 4.1.25–27 (meaning: act four, scene 1, lines 25 to 27) so that readers using a different edition will still be able to find the lines you’re referring to.

What is a seminar paper? Ideally, it is an academic paper that could be published. Although this may not be a realistic expectation, it is the format that your paper should emulate. The goal of such work is to increase knowledge and foster the understanding of a particular phenomenon, such as a literary text, specific elements of a text, a theoretical approach, etc. It should aim to be objective, accurate, clear and truthful. Because your paper will be short, your topic needs to fit this format – you can’t write about Shakespeare in general, or even *Twelfth Night* in general, in this kind of paper.

Finding your topic is part of your task. The central idea at the core of the paper should be yours. This could be, for instance, some aspect or problem you’ve noticed while reading the text (a theme, a motif, recurring element, notable feature etc.) that you think deserves attention because it contributes to the overall meaning of the text or to a particular interpretation of it. This interpretation should be interesting and go beyond the text’s mere surface: for example, arguing that Petruchio in *The Taming of the Shrew* ‘tames’ his wife by depriving her of food and sleep is not very interesting; however, explaining exactly how the

animal imagery of hawking or falconry that he employs verbally in doing so reveals an underlying attitude towards gender roles and relationships might count as a suitable topic.

Once you have found your topic, you should send your instructor an **email** with your proposed paper title and, possibly, a brief outline to comment on.

In the course of thinking and writing about your topic, your task is also to take into account what other people have already written about it; but you should always come to your own conclusions. Use the **secondary literature** as support for your argument or (even more importantly) as arguments that you have to discuss and perhaps invalidate. If it turns out that the secondary literature convinces you that your initial idea was wrong or needs to be modified, that's perfectly OK. You should then adapt your argument accordingly. (This is why, usually, you write the introduction last, or change it at the end so that it fits the paper.)

Be transparent about your theory and method.

Avoid redundancy; aim for clarity. Use quotations sparingly, i.e. only if necessary, and use your own words as much as possible (but also make sure to add sources whenever necessary to avoid plagiarism). Always frame a quotation in your own words and make clear what purpose the quotation serves for your argument – avoid presenting merely a montage of quotations rather than your own argument. Do not end a section with a quotation but in your own words. Do not cut and paste quotations together like a patchwork.

Speaking of **quotations**: When quoting only part of a sentence, there is no need to indicate that there is text before and after the part you are quoting. Don't do this: “[...] quote quote quote [...]” – the quotation marks themselves are all that is needed. The only time you use square brackets in a quotation is when you are skipping a part of the quote somewhere in the middle, or you need to add a word so that the quotation makes sense in the context of your sentence. **Use English quotation marks** (“sixes and nines”). Mind the difference between dashes (–) and hyphens (-). Remember the basics about commas in English – most importantly: there is no comma before ‘that’ in sentences like ‘She reminded him that there was no comma before “that”’. Your punctuation needs to follow English usage, not German.

Avoid: one-sentence paragraphs: content summaries or potted author biographies; autobiographical writing (telling your reader about yourself). **Do not suggest logical connections where none exist**; words like “thus”, “therefore”, “it follows” etc. should only be used when there is indeed a logical link. Use formal, not colloquial English; **avoid** phrases like ‘pretty much’, ‘kind of’, ‘somehow’ and contractions (‘can’t’ or ‘didn’t’ should be ‘cannot’ and ‘did not’). Write complete sentences! Writing is different from speaking. Say ‘film’, not ‘movie’. Aim for precision. Don't start a sentence with ‘so’ or ‘also’. **Avoid** the

expression ‘a piece of literature (or poetry etc.)’ or, worse, ‘a piece of work’. It’s a work of literature, or a poem, novel etc. **Don’t** say ‘in the following essay’ if you mean your essay – which is ‘this essay’.

You can use the **first person** in your essay in phrases like “In this paper, I will argue that ...” – this is not autobiography, just a functional marker and perfectly good English. Avoid tortuous Teutonic passive constructions just to appear ‘objective’ (e.g. “In this paper, it will be argued that ...”). **Avoid obscure jargon** (yes, even in literary studies – I know it’s hard) and express yourself clearly, but also avoid platitudes or stating the obvious (e.g. “Change is when something becomes different”, “History is a thing of the past”). Humour is fine but it should not be involuntary. Aim for a matter-of-fact tone.

Do not use **abbreviations** in the body of your essay. Never abbreviate character names or book titles. Instead of, for example, writing “Section two of TTL is called ‘Time Passes’”, it should be “Section two of *To the Lighthouse* is called ‘Time Passes’”.

Regarding **gender**: Unlike German, English uses one word for male or female genders, e.g. ‘actor’ for men and women actors (the word ‘actress’ is now considered at best old-fashioned or derogatory, like ‘poetess’). **Don’t say** ‘he’ when it could be ‘he or she’. In English, we often now use the plural ‘they’ instead, sometimes even when referring to a single person. This usage is becoming increasingly accepted.

As a general guideline for writing good English expository prose, **follow George Orwell’s rules** (in “Politics and the English Language”, 1946). The most important ones are:

- Never use a long word where a short one will do.
- If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out.
- Never use the passive where you can use the active.
- Never use a foreign phrase or a jargon word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.

If you use German, French, Latin or other languages, provide an English **translation**. If you have made the translation yourself, then you state as much in the reference to the quote: (Beckett, *The Unnamable*; my translation). Please also include the original text (German, French, or Latin etc.) as a footnote.

If you encounter problems writing your paper, once again the *Schreibzentrum* can help. They also offer personal counselling both in German and English.

Further reading

Richard Aczel, *How to Write an Essay* (Klett Uni-Wissen, 2014)

Simone Broders, *Academic Skills: An Introduction for English and American Studies* (UTB, 2020)