

TIPS FOR WRITING SUCCESSFUL TERM PAPERS/ASSIGNMENTS/THESES¹

The writing of term papers, assignments and theses is a core element of any university education. In academic circles, discussions and debates are often conducted in the written rather than the spoken word – term papers are a stepping-stone towards the more advanced discussion papers and articles which are intended to be published and thus contribute to and enrich academic discourse. The basic rules are very similar to those which also apply to the preparation of reports or to conference contributions. For this reason, you are advised to pay particular attention to these rules and conventions.

TYPES OF ASSIGNMENT

Basically, there are two types of term paper/assignment, theoretical papers and empirical papers.

Theoretical papers describe and analyze models, the assumptions behind them and the foundations of one or more theoretical approaches in the relevant field of study. (Examples: “The Role of Money in Neoclassical and Keynesian Theory” or “The Link between Free Trade and Growth in Growth Theory”).

Empirical papers describe and analyze real world events and case studies based upon the foundation of a particular methodological strategy/approach. (Example of an empirical paper: “The Convergence of Living Standards in the course of European Integration”). Here, theory also plays a crucial role – through a particular theory or theoretical framework, the author sets out and defines their perspective on the material. In doing so, however, the author is not required to personally agree with the theory employed. A particularly worthwhile paper could involve a confrontation between theory and practice, leading the author to the conclusion that the theory actually points in the wrong direction. There is a wide variety of empirical papers – with differing emphases placed on real world findings and individual case studies. The author’s own opinions are naturally also acceptable and indeed desirable, however they must be supported by theoretical foundations and valid/sound arguments.

Please note, your assignment is in the field of economics. Therefore, regardless of whether your term paper/thesis is theoretical or empirical, it is expected that your work will feature numerical data in some form! This means that on correcting your assignment the examiner will expect to find tables, figures, graphs, equations, etc. in your work (for more information, see below). As you are a university student, the examiner will also expect a list of high-quality references/literature/sources which are commensurate with your level of educational attainment.

THE STRUCTURE OF AN ASSIGNMENT

Every term paper/assignment must contain four elements:

- 1) Introduction – in which the problem which is to be analyzed is formulated
- 2) Main body – in which the discussion and analysis of the problem is carried out
- 3) Conclusion – which summarizes the findings obtained

¹ Based upon the work of SCHUMANN (2006): RATSCHLÄGE FÜR DEN VERFASSER EINER HAUSARBEIT; http://welfens.wiwi.uni-wuppertal.de/fileadmin/welfens/daten/Aktuelles/Regeln_f_r_Hausarbeiten_01.pdf ; accessed 17.11.2016

4) Formal components (Title page, table of contents, list of tables and figures, appendices/annex, literature/bibliography)

These elements will be described in more detail subsequently. However, it must be stressed that the term paper is intended to be read. The reader should be aware, at all times, what the paper as a whole is about and how the individual elements are connected to this theme. Therefore, at no point should the reader be confused, rather it should be made very clear by the author what they are doing and why they are doing it. The goal of the assignment and the route towards that goal should always be apparent while reading the work.

INTRODUCTION

In the introduction, the central focus of the work should be described. The key issue/problem which is to be dealt with in the work should be concisely formulated, but it should also be made clear what motivated you, as the author, to choose the topic. The reader should want to continue to read your work, and they do that when they find the subject matter to be interesting and informative. Remember, that your work is targeted towards an anonymous reader, who you do not know and vice versa. Thus, you should not describe why you personally find the subject matter interesting, but rather why the subject matter is/should be of general interest. When you are able to create a connection between the reader and the topic of your paper, then the impact of your paper will certainly be greater than if the reader only gets the impression that the paper was motivated purely by the author's personal interest or that the author was forced to complete the work solely to comply with examination requirements.

Please bear in mind that the assignment is not intended to explain everything, but should only concern itself with a specific theme. Limiting the topic and the exact formulation of the core issue are not easy tasks, but are nevertheless extremely important. If the parameters are not limited, then it will be extremely difficult for the reader to follow the author's line of reasoning/argument through the paper. Thus, you should try to seek out quite a specific topic as the key theme of your work – therefore, do not write about “Economic Growth”, rather about “Economic Growth in Ireland during the 1990s – Extent and Causes”. Do not be afraid of choosing what perhaps seems to be a cumbersome title. Your paper is not a newspaper article, which needs to attract readers with bold, eye-catching headings. It is more important that it is clear to the reader what your assignment is about – and, conversely, what it is *not* about. Do not promise too much, as it will be seen as more of a shortcoming if you set too high a thematic bar and fail to reach it, than if you were to choose a more precise topic and explore it fully. It is better to choose a topic with manageable time and/or geographic dimensions, or in the case of a theoretical paper – with a clear body of literature to support it.

It should also be noted that one should also be capable of summarizing the results of a work in relatively few words. In an ideal case, the author should formulate a hypothesis which is examined within the framework of the work. This hypothesis is then either accepted or rejected. For example, in relation to the previous example, a hypothesis could be “Yes, there is a convergence of living standards” (accepting the hypothesis) or “No, there is no convergence of living standards” (rejecting the hypothesis). If one can draw such a conclusion from the work, and the reasons for the conclusion reached is theoretically supported and based on reliable empirical facts, then the reader is better able to comprehend the overall work, than if the results of the work were not capable of being condensed into a few sentences.

MAIN BODY

This part of your work contains the discursive element and the analysis of the issue you have chosen as the key topic of your paper. Firstly, a solid bases for your analysis needs to be established. There is no guaranteed recipe for success here, as this foundation varies greatly from topic to topic. In the aforementioned example, one would begin with a definition of what is understood by the term ‘convergence of living standards’. How that convergence can be measured, what figures, statistics and indicators are relevant? Then it should be examined why one could expect a convergence. Here, the author needs to do the research to find the relevant books and academic articles. There are limits to how newspaper articles can be used as a source, as they are not intended for an academic readership, but are aimed at a different kind of public and readership. Newspaper articles apply different styles and different forms of expression etc. The relevant theoretical literature is to be found in academic and scientific books and journals. These are often published in the English language. Using the previous example, there is a rich body of research on growth theory – more precisely, on the neoclassical growth theory, which predicts a convergence of economic strength and of living standards, as the potential for growth in highly developed countries is lower than that in less developed countries. One should thus carefully examine and analyze the most important model of neoclassical growth theory. How does the model work, which assumptions does it make and how does it arrive at the forecast above.

Many models and schools of thought could be relevant to the topic of your paper. Then you should either describe them all, lay out the logical and transparent grounds why you only describe some of them, or retrospectively impose limits on your topic such that leaving some of the models/schools of thought out of your analysis becomes justified.

At this point, the most important groundwork for your paper has been completed. This can be compared to laying the foundations upon which to build a house.

In the second part of the main body of your assignment comes the examination of the specific central issue of your paper. Depending on the type of work your paper is, this can either be primarily comprised of academic discourse (argumentative) or of a description of facts (descriptive). Keep in mind that you need to stick to the topic at hand and not be tempted to veer off into discussing irrelevant offshoots in thought and sideshows. It must be clear to both you, as author, and the reader why you have chosen to use the arguments, models, concepts, legislative texts or statistics you have in order to explain your work. In the aforementioned example, it is recommended that you collect relevant data on the living conditions of European countries, present them in your work and analyze them with the methodology described in the model.

Under no circumstances should you write everything you know on the topic! Take a targeted and selective approach which is transparent and reasonable. It can happen, that in completing your paper, you choose to remove sections you have written. This is certainly not an easy decision, but sometimes it is a necessary one. It is a sign of meticulous work when you collect all the facts on a particular topic, but it is a sign of an even greater conceptual work if you present only those facts, arguments and processes which contribute directly to the solution of your key question.

CONCLUSION

In the conclusion, the findings/results contained in your work are summarized. It should once again be made clear to the reader what you have done in your work. This recap should be brief. The conclusion should be approximately the same length as the introduction – recommended is 1 to a maximum of 2 pages. In terms of content, a link should be established between the introduction and the conclusions. Have the problems outlined in the introduction been examined, have the questions raised been answered? The key to these answers must, however, naturally be found in the main body of your paper. In no circumstances are new facts or definitions to be introduced, described and/or examined etc. in the conclusion. The conclusion first and foremost should be a summary of the knowledge attained as a result of your work and the acceptance or rejection of the formulated hypothesis.

Upon completion of your paper, carefully compare again your introduction and your conclusion! Have the questions and problems identified really been answered? Has a question been answered which was not actually raised in the introduction? If the latter is the case, either the introduction or the main body of the work (or both!) must be rewritten.

Towards the end of the conclusion, it is recommended that you inform the reader of how he/she could do more research or work on the same topic in order to progress the academic discourse further. Your findings are based specifically upon the foundations you, as the author, have laid. It is possible that another basis for the same topic could lead to different findings. Key assumptions made by you could also be called into question. Tell the reader how he/she should approach your work, in order to find broad agreement with your findings. It is then up to the reader, to follow the thought process further. The reader could, on the basis of their own further research or analysis, reject your findings. You should nevertheless be able to point the reader in the right direction where more and/or better findings could be possible.

Staying with the previous example, it could be that in applying the theory and comparing certain chosen indicators you arrive at the finding that a convergence of living standards has indeed taken place. That could, however, be due to the time frame which you have chosen. Or due to the fact that the theory used made assumptions of free trade and free movement of capital but not of migration. Do not hesitate to indicate these possible weaknesses to the reader, if they are interested in the topic then they can always check if the same analysis under different conditions would result in other findings or not.

Formal Components

Title page, table of contents, list of tables and figures, appendices/attachments and literature/bibliography, citations in the text, further requirements

Title Page: Every assignment/term paper begins with a title page. The title page should clearly present the following information: The title of the work, the author's name, matriculation number, the semester of study of the author, the name of the lecture/seminar etc. for which the work has been completed, the semester it has been submitted and the examiner.

Table of Contents: Chapter headings and subheadings with page number.

List of Tables: All tables which appear in the work, in numbered sequence, with title and page number.

List of Figures: All figures, diagrams, graphics etc. which appear in the work in numbered sequence, with title and page number.

Appendix/Annex: For example large data tables, large number of numerical figures, mathematical derivations or lists of laws or other similar items which would interrupt the flow of the text for the reader.

Literature/Bibliography: At the end of a paper comes a list with all sources used in preparing the assignment. That includes books, journal articles even internet sites. They must be referenced in alphabetical order and in such a way, that there would be no difficulty for the reader to find your sources at a later date. There are various ways of preparing the bibliography depending on the type of assignment. Usual methods include:

Books:

Author (Year): Title; Publisher: Place of publication

Example:

WELFENS (2013): Social Security and Economic Globalization; Springer: Heidelberg

Journal Articles:

Author(s) (Year): Title; Journal; Volume (Issue); Page numbers

Example:

DE LA FUENTE, Angel; DOMENECH, Rafael (2001): Schooling data, technological diffusion and the neoclassical model; *American Economic Review*; 91(2), 323-327

Internet Site/Website:

Author/Publisher/Organization (Year): Title, Internet site/address, Date accessed

Example:

OECD (2016): Panama joins international efforts against tax evasion and avoidance; <https://www.oecd.org/tax/panama-joins-international-efforts-against-tax-evasion-and-avoidance.htm>; 17.11.2016.

If an electronic link (e.g. DOI) is available, please USE it!

It is important that only the sources used and cited in the text appear in the bibliography. **No more, no less!**

That means that you should not include any title in the list of literature sources which you have not read. However, every source which appears in your text must also be included in your bibliography. No incomplete references! The year of publication must be provided for all books, along with exact page numbers in the case of referring to particular chapters or excerpts.

When including chapters from edited volumes in the bibliography, they should be referenced as follows:

BENDER, Dieter; GABISCH, Günther (2003): Wachstum und Entwicklung; in: BENDER ET AL. (Hg.) (2003): Vahlens Kompendium der Wirtschaftstheorie und Wirtschaftspolitik; Band 1; 8. Auflage; Verlag Vahlen: München; 397-474.

Note: Bender and the other authors (14 in total!) need not be named individually for the edited volume. Thus the shortened version: BENDER ET AL.

Citation Format

There are also conventions concerning how one should cite a source in the body of the text. These citations allow the reader to easily find the source material which the author of the assignment has drawn ideas from or indeed quoted directly. Basically, one can choose to use either the short (American) form of citation, i.e. citation in parentheses within the body of the text, or to provide the information via footnotes.

The citation format with parentheses is always inserted at the end of the sentence and includes the name of the author, the year of publication and the page number on which the cited thought/quote appears in the original work.

Example:

“In an economy with a competitive banking system, one should expect that real interest rates are important signals for households and investors, respectively; in the presence of a stable banking system, this could raise the savings rate.” (WELFENS, 2013, 44)

In the case of two authors, both are named – as in the bibliography – (DE LA FUENTE/DOMENECH, 2001, 326).

When using footnotes to cite source literature, at least the same information must be provided, however footnote citations often go further and give the title of the work being cited.

Example:

“In an economy with a competitive banking system, one should expect that real interest rates are important signals for households and investors, respectively; in the presence of a stable banking system, this could raise the savings rate.”²

There are many different ways to cite sources in your text. There are many publications which provide examples of the various acceptable methods. Please review these examples and choose the method you are most comfortable with. However, it is important that once you have chosen one method – you stick to that one method throughout your work and that you do not go back and forth employing differing citation methods in the same paper. The citations should always contain the same information, in the same order of appearance!

Not only direct quotes need to be cited, but also the substantive concepts and ideas contained in the works of others need to be adequately credited! If you write a passage of text without providing information regarding sources, then this will be interpreted as your own personal work. If, however, the thoughts contained within have in fact been taken from other works, then your paper will be less highly regarded. Your authorship of the entire paper could be in doubt and your contribution to the academic discourse deemed worthless. This should be avoided at all costs! Naturally, one must not provide sources continually and for every minor detail. One can simply write, for example, that Japan has a large economy without having to provide a source, as facts like this are deemed general or ‘common knowledge’. On the other hand, the possible finding that Japan’s productivity is due to the high efficiency of

² WELFENS (2013): Social Security and Economic Globalization; p. 44

organizational processes within Japanese firms, must either be a conclusion drawn from the findings of your own paper, or a source must be cited.

Tables, Figures, Graphs etc.

Tables used should appear in your text. However, overly large tables and tables provided as additional, but not critical information, can be added in the appendix.

The title of your table (numbered) should appear above the table itself.

The source should appear beneath the table.

Every table in your work should be referred to at least once in the body of your text.

Further Requirements

Term (semester) papers are usually expected to be 15 pages in length. The formatting assumed in arriving at this estimate, includes the use of the font "Times New Roman", font size 12, line spacing 1.5. Other fonts, such as Arial or Calibri, can also be used - but only one font should be used throughout your work. The text should be fully justified. The page count begins with the first page of the introduction and ends with the last page of the conclusion. Naturally, other pages must also be numbered and included in the table of contents. However, these other pages do not count towards the required 15 pages. A project, which is written over the course of two semesters, is expected to be in the range of 20-25 pages with the same formatting. A Bachelor Thesis should be 40-50 pages of text, while a Master Thesis is expected to feature 80-90 pages of text. The side margin on each page should be 2.5 cm (as is the case with this text).

The assignments must be submitted on or before the agreed deadline. Assignments which are submitted late will be awarded a lower grade. A deduction of marks is also possible and usual in the case of non-compliance/a breach of the other formal criteria.

If it is discovered that the author has included the words, theories, concepts et cetera of another author/work and has falsely cited, or indeed not cited at all, the source author/material, the entire paper can as a result be refused as an examinable work for the purposes of your course of studies.