

How to Write a Term Paper in Linguistics (How to Do X in Linguistics 9)

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Writing a term paper requires the same scrutiny as writing an article for a journal. As a result, the techniques which apply when writing term papers are very similar to those which apply when writing a journal article, and students should feel encouraged to take the task as seriously as a journal article that scientists send off to peer review. In the following, I will briefly introduce major techniques that help to structure one's work when writing a term paper and which also help to interact well with one's supervisor during the writing process.

1 Selecting the Topic

Many people have problems when it comes to selecting the topic they want to investigate in term papers or bachelor and master theses. The major problem seems to me that especially students who write their first term papers often do not know exactly what a scientific paper entails. As a result, they often choose topics which are far too broad to be properly treated within the limited time they have at their disposal, or they choose topics which are difficult to investigate since they are notoriously difficult to solve, and even experienced scientists avoid them for this reason.

As a general rule, which I learned myself as a very young student from a teacher in ancient history classes, every scientific study should aim for completeness, and this includes term papers and undergraduate theses of all kinds. Completeness can refer to multiple things here. In the context of history, it refers to the requirement to read all sources available for a given topic. In historical linguistics, it may refer to the requirement to explicitly limit the scope of an analysis to a representative sample rather than claiming that a language or a language family is investigated as a whole. If

completeness cannot be reached, the scientist should make sure to modify the topic by reducing its scope until completeness can be achieved.

What also helps when searching for a topic is to discuss explicitly what kind of article one wants to write. Of course, students do not write articles which they would send off to peer review, but the major purpose of term papers and bachelor or master theses is to prepare students for a life as a scientist, and in this sense, a term paper can be seen as the simulation of an article. But scientists write different kinds of articles, such as research articles, where they present new models, new methods, or new findings based on new analyses, replication studies, where they investigate how well previous studies can be repeated, review articles, where they summarize a research topic for their peers, data descriptors, in which a new dataset is presented, or opinion articles, where they share new, potentially controversial, views on specific topics. In the same way in which scientists have to ask themselves what kind of paper they want to submit to which journal, students should try to identify the type of article that their term paper could reflect.

When searching for a topic for a scientific study, it has always helped me a lot to decide on a title beforehand. This may not work for all people, but for me, it is always incredibly helpful, and I tend to start all projects in which I am involved by selecting a title for the unwritten article. Once a title has been found, it may furthermore be useful to write an abstract presenting the major aspects of the work. Even if results have still not been obtained, and one does not know exactly where the scientific enterprise should go, it helps to sit down and think of a structured summary in the form of a paper abstract.

While I did not demand abstracts in term papers and theses for a long time, I have now shifted to requiring them from all students who write term papers in my courses, and I recommend all students who have to write term papers in linguistics or other subjects to add an abstract to their work even if it is not required.

2 Structuring the Study

When it comes to the structuring of scientific studies, we can find two extremes. On the one hand, certain journals force their authors to follow an extremely strict sectioning which does not leave a lot of space for individual freedom. On the other hand, many colleagues overdue the sectioning of their studies, writing articles which start with section 1 and end with section 13, or they use apparently endless subsections with more than three levels of depth.

Having written several studies for both the strict and the loose journals so far, I have started to appreciate if scientific articles are structured in a schematic, predictable, and maybe even boring way. Since the creative part of science should lie in the methods, experiments, and models, I see no good reason to make studies with tons of different

sections and deep levels of subsections. What I use now instead in my research — unless the journals require a different division — is a five section scheme which has the advantage that it can be adjusted to almost all topics one may think of. This scheme starts with an introduction (1), followed by a state of the art or a background (2), a section on materials and methods (3), a section on results or examples (4), and finishes with a section presenting an outlook, a discussion, or a conclusion (5).

Structuring articles into five sections has the advantage that it makes it extremely easy for readers to orient themselves in your work when reading it. It makes it also much easier to write the article, since one does not need to waste one's time on the question of how to structure the work, given that the initial skeleton is already there. The schema works for research articles as well as data descriptors, even review articles can be adjusted to the schema (compare, for example, my recent review on evolutionary aspects of language change, List 2021), and this blog post itself is structured into five sections.

3 Writing Tips

When adding flesh to the bones, I recommend to write in bullet point structure for the first time, since it may be tedious to write full text blocks. What is extremely important when writing bullet points is to think as clearly as possible about the logical connections that connect the points with each other. Many students (both undergraduates and doctoral students) commit the error of writing long passages without checking them properly regarding their inner logic. Since they themselves already know what they want to say, they do not see that a reader who reads at text the first time — without all the background information which the authors have at their disposal — might not be able to follow if the flow of thoughts is only alluded to and never spelled. What helps me a lot in my own work is to sit down and make flow charts of my thoughts, or to invest time to come up with some very nice graphics that I later describe in my texts. Since visualizations in this form force us to come out of our comfort zone in so far as they require us to re-think our thoughts and to translate them transparently to another medium of thought, they can also provide a huge help in making our thoughts clearer to other people.

People like me, who write in a language they did not learn as their first language, may have additional problems when writing term papers. Writing in another language may be helpful, as it forces us to express our thoughts much more clearly, since we do not have the luxury to gloss over them with rhetorical skills. But it may also be very tedious, of course, and one may arrive at a point where one gets stuck and feels helpless if one does not find a way to put one's thoughts into a foreign language.

Whenever I feel that I get stuck in writing, I try to change the location in which I currently reside. Taking long walks equipped with paper and pen has been very useful for me in the past. At times, I also deliberately write parts of a text in German first, where

I still feel to have the largest freedom to express my thoughts. When I find concrete wordings for thoughts which I could not bring to paper for a long time, I try to write them down by hand on paper immediately to avoid that I forget them. Students and colleagues who have visited me in my former office in Jena also know well how much I enjoy to stand in front of a whiteboard in order to develop a thought together. While students typically have to write their term papers alone, nothing speaks against exchanging ones topics with each other. Since we tend to overestimate the clearness of our own writing and thinking, it is highly recommended to regularly exchange one's ideas with others in order to make sure that one improves on one's ability to share one's thoughts.

4 Interacting with the Supervisor

Many misunderstandings with students in the past have been due to misunderstandings regarding the role which the supervisor of a term paper or a bachelor or master thesis plays. The problem is that teachers at universities behave in various ways when it comes to the interaction with their students. Some often do not reply promptly and prefer students to figure out things on their own, while others appreciate interaction and explicitly welcome it if students turn to them with concrete questions on their studies.

Even if one has the impression that one's supervisor is one of the former kind who might get annoyed when being asked too many questions, students should not hesitate to contact them if they need their help. From students who write papers with me, I expect specifically that they inform me when they get stuck in writing for several days, so that we can sit down together to find a solution of how to advance. I also expect students to send me writing samples of their studies, that they discuss the title and the structure with me, and that they contact me early enough before they submit their final versions (at the latest one week before).

Obviously, no teacher likes it when students ask them for trivial questions they could easily answer themselves. In fact, I also dislike it when colleagues do this with me, which happens nevertheless from time to time. For young students, it may be difficult to determine what is trivial and what is not. As a rule of thumb, I recommend to use the common search engines on the internet to find answers to questions before contacting university teachers. If answers could not be found after a serious search, and if an answer to the questions cannot be received during classes or official appointments, I find it absolutely legitimate to ask teachers directly by writing an email.

5 Organizing the Time

Many people, scientists and non-scientists, have problems in organizing their time. There are numerous techniques and discussions on how one can improve in self-organization, and this is surely not the place to discuss them. However, there is one advice that I can

give to all those who have to deliver some work at certain deadline: always aim to have the work ready in a form that can be submitted one week before the actual deadline. I have seen quite a few term papers with high potential which suffered from various forms of sloppiness that are usually introduced under time pressure. Time pressure is an enemy of accuracy and no article should be finished under time pressure.

References

List, Johann-Mattis (2021): Evolutionary aspects of language change. Humanities Commons 0.0. 1-20. [Preprint, under review, not peer-reviewed] <https://doi.org/10.17613/ebas-hj26>