How to write a *Hausarbeit* (research paper) – some guidelines

1. Preparations

1.1 Finding a topic

Usually, a research paper is based on a seminar (Proseminar / seminar for B.A. *Aufbaumodul*, B.A. seminar in *Vertiefungsmodul*, *Hauptseminar* / M.A. seminar). While such seminars cover a *variety* of different aspects of a certain topic, a research paper examines *one* of those aspects (or another aspect *not* covered in the seminar, but nonetheless *related* to the seminar's topic) in detail.
The contents of the seminar (texts studied, class discussions, factual background information, course bibliography, *Semesterapparat* etc.) provide initial information about your topic, and thus a starting-point for your work on your research paper.
The topic of your research paper should be clearly related to the overall topic of the seminar!

1.2 Researching sources

In addition to using the bibliographical information provided through course bibliographies and *Semester-apparate*, you should start your research by using bibliographical databases – e.g. MLA and Web of Science (Arts and Humanities Index) – and the catalogues of large research libraries (e.g. British Library and Library of Congress). Check if these databases or library catalogues contain entries on names, concepts and expressions which are central to the topic of your research paper – e.g. the name of a novelist you focus on; or a certain concept of literary criticism (such as 'postcolonialism', 'hybridity', 'transculturalism'); or a certain thematic aspect (such as 'family', 'nationalism' etc.).
Textbooks and specialist reference works on your subject can also provide a good starting point.
Other particularly useful resources include research reports and bibliographies in current academic publications. Here, you can find overviews of existing academic research on your subject (i.e. main aspects covered, who said what; other aspects which have not yet been covered etc.). Moreover, you can use these bibliographies for your own research.

Document your bibliographical findings in a working bibliography. Essays, journal and newspaper articles, essay collections and monographs which seem relevant to your own topic can be ordered at local libraries or via interlibrary loan (*Fernleihe*). Some journals and newspapers can also be accessed online (if a subscription is needed, try accessing them from a university computer – the university might have a subscription).

Researching sources is an important part of your research project. Thus, it is also important for your final grade. Thus, do this with care and some diligence.

Once you have done your initial research, consult your teacher (see 1.4). Afterwards, continue your research.

1.3 Examining and selecting sources

Once you have done your initial research, get hold of your sources and examine them to check their usefulness and relevance to your own research topic. Usually, the table of contents and the index give useful clues. It might also be helpful to quickly scan-read the introduction, the conclusion, or parts of those chapters/pages which seem most relevant to your subject (e.g. judging from the page references in the index, or from the chapter headings). Thus, it is not always necessary to read the entire book. However, those sources/chapters which *have* turned out to be especially relevant to your topic should of course be re-read in more detail.

1.4 Consulting the course teacher

After thinking about your choice of topic, and doing your initial research, you should discuss your ideas and plans with your course teacher – if you have not already done so at an earlier stage. Consultation with the teacher is necessary to make sure that your chosen topic suits the overall course topic and course level, that your chosen methodologies suit the topic, that the scope of your topic is neither too wide nor too limited etc. If necessary, your teacher can provide advice, help you to limit/extend your scope, or assist you in modifying your topic/methodological approach.

Come to this meeting well prepared! The better your preparations, the more you will benefit from this consultation. Bring your notes and bibliography with you. If you have any specific questions or problems, note them down on paper before you meet your teacher. Bring these notes along as well, make sure you address all the points you wish to discuss, and also take notes on your teacher's comments.

What you should *definitely* bring along to the meeting:
1. Thesis statement
2. Working title of your research paper
3. Preliminary structure / table of contents
4. Working bibliography

2. General methodical guidelines

Your paper should <u>not</u> be a mere compilation of statements, arguments, quotations, or summaries of other people's ideas. And it should <u>not</u> be a mere compilation of unconnected ideas or facts.

Instead, your paper <u>should</u> be a *coherent* presentation of your research on a certain topic. You should have a clear sense of the question(s) you'd like to answer in your paper, and what your answers/viewpoints are. Thus, it is important to formulate the gist of your argument / the core statement of your paper *explicitly* (thesis statement). Place this at the beginning of your research paper, preferably at the end of your introduction. Tell your readers what the subject of your paper is, and outline how you will proceed to tackle this subject and to support your argument (e.g. methodologies used – such as postcolonial or feminist approach, or stylistic analysis, etc. –, or the order in which you address different aspects of your topic).

The texts and arguments you cite should basically support your own core argument. However, you should also take note of contrary opinions – for instance: "Opponents of XY argue that [...], but what they overlook is [...]."
This helps to tie your sources into the line of your own argument. Argumentation (rather than mere fact-finding or collecting materials and quotes) is central to a research paper! Only cite information, arguments and sources which are relevant to your special topic.

3. Close reading and forms of textual analysis

Start working on your research paper by doing a very close reading of your primary source(s). Some of the ideas, questions and findings you derive from this close reading can later go into the analysis you present in your research paper. However, you should *not* merely *summarise* your primary source: usually you can assume that you reader(s) have read your primary text themselves. Only in some cases (i.e. less well-known authors, or authors in languages not widely known or widely translated in Europe, e.g. oral literature in the Navajo language) can a summary be useful. However, even in such cases the summary should not take up

your entire research paper; a brief sub-section (or, preferably, a brief appendix) is enough – and you should not include any summaries without prior consultation of your teacher.

Start with a close reading of selected passages of your text (micro-level analysis), paying attention to:

- Style
- Sentence structure
- Choice of words
- Metaphors
- Rhetorical figures
- Further noteworthy features of the text (e.g. ruptures and continuities)

After such a micro-analysis, extend your analysis to the text as a whole (macro-level).
Furthermore, you should pay attention to how the text is positioned within its cultural context (super-macro-level).

An important feature of textual analysis:

First analyse the form of a literary text, and then the contents.

Ask yourself the following questions: 'How is this text constructed & structured? How does it work?'
Only then, proceed to ask yourself: 'What does the text say? How does form structure/affect the contents/meaning of the text?'

Another important feature is the methodological/theoretical approach which you choose in order to guide your analysis. Different approaches give analyses different focal interests, and thus lead to different results. Before you start writing, choose a methodology or theory/theories which are appropriate to your interests and your primary text(s).

Examples of different kinds of textual analysis:

a) **Analysing style / form**: This focuses on stylistic features, e.g.: How does this primary text 'work'? Which specific linguistic means are being used (and to what effect)? This kind of analysis mainly focuses on the micro-level (individual passages of a text).

b) **Analysing structure**: Unlike stylistic analysis (see point a), structural analysis mainly focuses on the macro-level of a primary text (i.e. the text in its entirety).

c) **Analysing a text in relation to its context**: E.g.: 'How is the text related to the social/cultural context in which it was produced?' 'How did the conditions of textual production and reception (e.g. patronage from aristocrats and politicians; or the situation of the publishing industry) influence what kinds of texts were produced, and how is this reflected in this particular text?' 'How does this text intervene in / comment on a certain context?'

d) **Criticising an ideological position**: E.g. criticising the author's position as untrue (for instance as a conscious attempt to manipulate/obscure certain facts in order to serve a certain political interest), or at least as biased.

e) **Thematic analysis**: If a primary text addresses/reflects certain issues (e.g. violence or racism), thematic analysis examines *how* these issues feature in the text, and perhaps also how this is related to the treatment of these subjects in other texts, in the social context etc.

Thematic/content analysis often tends to ignore the literary (e.g. formal) features of a text, since it mainly focuses on content, political ideologies etc. You should not neglect formal features entirely, however, since the treatment of certain ideas in literature can significantly differ from the way in which the same ideas are treated in, say, political pamphlets. Moreover, in both literary and non-literary texts, form always influences the contents, the way a text is read etc.

4. Using secondary sources

Secondary sources (essays, journal articles or monographs about your primary source, about the context of its production/reception, or about the overall subject of your research paper) can be a useful source of extra information or inspiration, and give rise to questions/problems/complexities you didn't think about before.

Moreover, secondary sources can contain opinions you do not share, and which you thus wish to contradict.

Secondary sources can also be used to support your own argument. However, this entails the **danger of plagiarism**!!! When you hand in your research paper, you must formally declare in writing (incl. signature) that you know, understand and comply with the departmental regulations on plagiarism. Without this

declaration, your research paper will not be accepted. Breech of regulations will result in failure (no re-sit!) of the class, and can have additional serious academic and legal consequences.
Also see:

- the English Department's website on "Plagiarism" and the download form

- and on the PTTS page:
  "How to use quotations and paraphrases" on
  http://www.anglistik.uni-muenster.de/en/ptts/Study/quotations.html,
  the information on plagiarism on http://www.anglistik.uni-muenster.de/en/ptts/Study/plagiarism.html
  and
  the link to the download form there.

5. Using electronic media

When using Internet sources, only use *reliable* ones!

For examples:

- The English Department of Münster University does not accept the Internet encyclopaedia **Wikipedia** as a reliable source! Reason: *Wikipedia* is an 'open source', i.e. *anyone* can insert texts and make changes, no matter how qualified he or she is. Although *Wikipedia* also contains many correct and useful entries, there are many other entries which are full of errors and falsifications – and when you are relatively new to a topic, you are not necessarily well qualified to judge how reliable an individual entry is. Thus, in academic research it is always 'safer' not to rely on Wikipedia at all.
  <u>At most</u>*(!!)*, you may use *Wikipedia* as a first orientation on a new topic, but afterwards always use more reliable sources. If you use bits of information you first found on *Wikipedia*, always(!) check every single one of them against more reliable sources afterwards.

- Similar problems of reliability also occur with many **other Internet pages**. Here as well, you must be careful.
  Relatively reliable websites are those of …

  > … universities (can be recognised from their addresses, e.g. "uni-xy.de", "ac.uk" and "edu" – but please note than these can also contain texts written by students, which are sometimes less reliable than, say, texts written by professors)
  >
  > … specialist associations (e.g. Association for Scottish Literary Studies; Association for Commonwealth Literature and Language Studies ACLALS)
  >
  > … respectable newspapers and TV stations (e.g. *Times*, BBC).

  Sites which can be less reliable include those published by private individuals or amateur clubs.

- **Avoid relying *exclusively* on online sources!** Always try to use printed sources as well. Especially in Literary and Cultural Studies, many standard sources of information are still only available in print; and if you *only* work with the web, you will completely overlook many texts and information sources which are vital to your academic subject. Moreover, one of the *transferable skills* you're supposed to learn here in preparation for your career is the ability to use *different* research techniques and information sources – which include not only the web, but also libraries, books and journals. If you fail to familiarise yourself with these multiple resources, your profile will lose some of its versatility and variety.

Whenever you use electronic media (online databases, electronic journals, websites), you must mention them in your **bibliography** – just like printed sources. In addition to author and title (where appropriate), name the medium of publication (online), the network you used (e.g. Internet, name of the database), the date on which you accessed the source, and the electronic address (e.g. http://www.uni-muenster.de).
In your own interest, you should keep a printout of your online sources until you get your marked research paper back from your teacher. This is important because your teacher might want to check some of your sources himself/herself, and some Internet pages might disappear from the web before he/she gets to see them. If this happens, he/she might want to see your printouts.

6. Structuring your research paper

The text of your research paper consists of three interrelated parts:
  I.   Introduction
  II. Main part (give this a heading appropriate to your topic)
  III. Conclusion

6.1 Introduction

The introduction gives a precise explanation of your chosen topic, the problems and questions it entails, and the methods of analysis you use. If you like, you may only give a *brief* explanation of your methods in this section, and give a longer and more detailed description of your method in a separate subsection at the beginning of your main part.

Formulate a question which you wish to answer, or a hypothesis which you wish to prove or disprove (thesis statement), as a focus of your research paper.

In addition to introducing the reader to your project, the introduction also serves as a 'bracket' which gives an overview of (and wider perspective on) all subsequent chapters, and explains how these chapters hang together.

6.2 Main part

The main part discusses/analyses your topic in a coherent, logical manner. In order to structure your argument, it is necessary to divide your main part into several sub-chapters.

In the different sections of the main part, you develop an argument (or several arguments) in order to answer the question (or prove/disprove the hypothesis) you formulated in your introduction. Each sub-chapter of your main part discusses a separate aspect. You may also include opinions which differ from yours (or from each other), and comment on them (if this fits into your line of argument).

At the beginning of each sub-chapter/section, you should briefly summarise the topic of this sub-chapter/section. Moreover, each subchapter must be clearly linked to your main topic and thesis statement.

Paragraphs and sections/sub-chapters should follow each other in a logical manner and must be linked through 'signposting' statements, such as: "This *[i.e. the paragraph you've just written]* shows that …. However, another aspect which must be considered in this context is … *[i.e. the stuff you'll write about in the following paragraph]*. *[If the next paragraph is in a different (sub-)chapter, you may also add something like:]* This aspect will be explored in the next (sub-)chapter." Links and signposting is very important. There should not be any logical or linguistic incoherencies in your text.

6.3 Conclusion

The conclusion should summarise the most important results of your analysis. Moreover, it should name questions and problems which are still unresolved (e.g. because the evidence/your primary source is contradictory; or because there is not enough evidence available, e.g. due to a lack of historical sources from a certain period etc.). You may also point out additional interesting aspect which are in some way related to your topic and your results, but which you could not explore in detail in your current research paper because it would exceed the limited scope of an undergraduate research paper, so that a detailed exploration of those aspects "will have to be left to future research". Or maybe it has already been explored by someone else, and you can provide your readers with a cross-reference, e.g.:

> "Another important aspect which ties in to the findings of the present paper on political nationalism in X's fiction is the relation between nationhood and gender, e.g. as regards *[… briefly name a few aspects/examples]*. However, a detailed exploration of this topic would unfortunately exceed the scope of the present paper. A useful starting point has been provided by Hannah Miller's study of …. in her essay 'Woman and Nation in African literature.' / *[Or, if it's <u>more</u> than just a starting point:]* Moreover, such a detailed exploration has already been provided by …."

Moreover, your conclusion should also clearly refer to the question/hypothesis which you formulated in your introduction.

7. Formal aspects of research papers

- Write in English.
- Line-spacing 1.5
- Font size 12 pt
- Page numbers

- Leave a margin for corrections and comments
- Your layout should clearly indicate the start of new paragraphs, either by inserting an empty line, or by indenting the first line of a new paragraph (e.g. with a tab stop).

7.1 Length

(Please note: The figures given here do *not* include title page, table of contents and bibliography!)

In a *Proseminar* / seminar for B.A. *Aufbaumodul* / B.A. seminar in *Vertiefungsmodul*:

           c. 3000–3500 words (c. 8–10 pp.; but when in doubt, go by word count!)

In a *Hauptseminar* / M.A. seminar*:* c. 5000–6000 words (c. 12–15 pp.; but when in doubt, go by word count!)

7.2 Parts of a finalised research paper

A finalised research paper should have (in this order):
- **Cover sheet**
- **Table of contents**
- **Introduction**
- **Main part (with subchapters)**
- **Conclusion**
- **Bibliography**

In some cases, it may **also** have an **appendix** (e.g. in which you include textual sources that you used, but which your readers might wish to see entirely – although you already included quotes in your main text – and can't be expected to know / have easy access to). If you think you might need an appendix, ask your teacher if this is necessary.

7.2.1 Cover sheet

The title page should include:

- Title of your research paper
- Course type, course title and the semester in which the course took place (e.g. „Proseminar: Introduction to Postcolonial Theory, SS 2006")
- Name of teacher
- Your name, matriculation number, the semester you're in (e.g. "3. Fachsemester"), your address and e-mail
- Submission date of your paper

7.2.2 Table of contents

The table of contents lists the headings of your chapters (and sub-chapters), along with the page numbers of the first pages of each chapter/sub-chapter. Chapters and sub-chapters should be numbered (e.g. as has been done in this handout). This will give your reader a first overview of your paper. Headings should briefly state the contents of the respective (sub-)chapter.

7.3 Proofreading and stylistic revisions

Once you have finalised your research paper, you should do a painstaking proofreading. It is often best to take a break of a few days between writing and proofreading, so that you come back to your text with some distance and a fresh perspective.

When proofreading, pay attention to spelling, grammar and punctuation (German and English rules differ!). Also again check all quotations against the original sources, to make sure they are absolutely exact.

Also pay attention to logic, precision, coherence and concision. Avoid unnecessary repetition of ideas, information and phrases. Throw out unnecessary information (e.g. authors' biographies are often given in far too much detail by many students).

Moreover, pay attention to style: formulate your ideas clearly, use signposting and don't do any unpremeditated 'jumps' from one idea/aspect to the next. When introducing new ideas/aspects, also start a new paragraph – but don't start a new paragraphs for every sentence! If your sentences are overly long and complicated, divide them up into two or three shorter sentences.