

Prof. Thomas Austenfeld  
American Literature, University of Fribourg

## Approaches to writing a term paper, BA thesis or MA thesis

The length of your text (graduate paper = approx. 4000 words; BA= approx. 30pp; MA=approx. 70pp) indicates the breadth and depth of your engagement, but the methods of critical thinking and writing are the same in all cases.

The central idea of a research paper or thesis **is to add your voice to the ongoing critical discussion about a text** or an assembly of texts. You do this by (1) reading the work(s) you propose to examine; (2) performing background research to ensure you understand them in context; (3) reading relevant "secondary" literature to help you assess the state of discussion and to decide which views you want to espouse, reject or modify; (4) formulating a hypothesis which slowly forms into a thesis as you shape your argument. Steps (1) through (4) go hand in hand, are recursive, and influence each other. Steps (3) and (4) will need to be performed repeatedly as your understanding grows and your questions change.

Minimal bibliographic work involves (1) establishing an authoritative text from which to work and (2) performing a detailed critical search in the MLA bibliography covering the past twenty years (or more, as necessary).

RESEARCH PAPER: Obtain my approval for your title, scope, and basic argument before you embark in earnest upon the project. Visit my office hours as often as you deem necessary.

THESIS: According to the time plan which we agree upon, send me outlines or sample chapters for review and comment (by email attachment). Visit my office hours as often as you deem necessary. Compose outlines in complete grammatical sentences, not in bulleted fragments.

In good Aristotelian fashion, a research paper or thesis should have a beginning, a middle, and an end.

The introduction should introduce the reader to the topic and situate the thesis in the "ongoing conversation." It should answer these questions: (1) Why are you writing about this topic? (2) Why is this author, this subject, this approach interesting and relevant? (3) What is the current state of the discussion (often, that belongs into individual chapters)? (4) Is there any theoretical supposition or approach that you have to explain at the outset? Is there a set of special terms or critical vocabulary that you will work with? Biographical information about your author should be introduced **as necessary**, never for its own sake alone.

The middle portion (the individual chapters) is devoted to your critical discussion.

The conclusion (end) must do more than summarize your findings. It should describe the relevance of the thesis, assess your own (changed?) viewpoint after having performed the work, and suggest the possible new questions your work has generated which may be of interest to future researchers. It should answer the question: why was this thesis worth your time, and why was reading it worth the reader's time?

Write in an engaging, lively prose style. Avoid the passive wherever possible. Keep your sentences short. I will correct some language problems in your drafts, but the final version needs to present a persuasive argument in beautiful prose, as content and form support each other in a successful thesis.

- Gibaldi, Joseph. MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers. 7<sup>th</sup> ed., 2009. ISBN: 978-1603290241
- Departmental library (reference shelf) and BCU (for books and some journals)
- **MLA bibliography** (through BCU databases): <http://www.fr.ch/bcuf/bases.aspx> > mla
- JSTOR <http://www.jstor.org/>
- Project Muse <http://muse.jhu.edu/journals/>
- Elektronische Zeitschriftenbibliothek <http://rzblx1.uni-regensburg.de/ezeit/>
- Departmental style sheet for literature (Version of spring 2016):  
[http://homeweb.unifr.ch/austenfe/pub/Students/Style\\_sheet\\_Lit\\_ph\\_17..02.2016.pdf](http://homeweb.unifr.ch/austenfe/pub/Students/Style_sheet_Lit_ph_17..02.2016.pdf)
- Austenfeld brief checklist for manuscript preparation:  
<http://homeweb.unifr.ch/austenfe/pub/Students/ChecklistPaperCritique.pdf>