Freie Universität Berlin

Institute of Sociology Master of Arts "Sociology – European Societies"

Term Paper and Presentation Guidelines

During your studies, you will be confronted with a series of tasks, such as writing a term paper (or essay) or a presentation. This document is intended to provide you with guidance in accomplishing these tasks. Important: If the lecturer makes different specifications, these apply and must be followed accordingly. The document should therefore primarily serve as a more general guideline on how to write a term paper/essay (first part of document) and how to give a presentation (see end of document).

1. Term Paper Guidelines

With the term paper, you provide evidence that you are able to independently develop a narrower research question from the topic covered and to answer it in a systematic way. This means that you independently think about a research question and work on it with the help of relevant specialist scientific literature. As a starting point for the question, you can either choose the topic on which you will present or have already presented, or you can freely choose a topic from the topic area of the seminar. It is therefore expected from you to include the relevant compulsory reading of the seminar - where appropriate - and to search for further relevant scientific literature. The more scientific sources you use to draw your argumentation, the better the work is typically.

1.1. Topic and Research Question

Here are a few recommendations to develop a research question that is scientifically relevant and sufficiently narrow to be answered within a term paper.

First, chose a topic that relate to the seminar. Try to **choose a topic that interest you.** If you're interested in your topic, chances are that others will be, too. Additionally, researching will be a lot more fun! Make also sure to discuss the paper topic with your course lecturer.

You may not know right away what your research question is. Gather information on the broader topic to explore new possibilities and to help narrow your topic to be able to develop a research question. **Reference sources such as literature review articles** (see for instance Annual Review of Sociology) are a great place to begin your research. They provide:

- A way to identify potential research topics.
- A starting point to gather information on your topic.
- An introduction to major works and key issues related to your topic.
- Key authors in your area of research.

Look also at **General Reference Sources**. Dictionaries and encyclopedias provide general information about a variety of subjects. They also include definitions that may help you break down and better understand your topic. Ask yourself: What subtopics relate to the broader topic? What questions do these sources raise? What do you find interesting about the topic?

From Topic to Research Question – After choosing a topic and gathering background information, you should develop a specific research question. When developing your research question, take also into account the availability of data/feasibility of the data collection and analysis necessary to answer your research question: is it possible to provide a sound answer to your research question with the data you want to analyse?

Explore questions:
- Ask open-ended "how" and "why" questions about your general topic.
- Consider the "so what" of your topic. Why does this topic matter to you? Why should it matter to others?
- Reflect on the questions you have considered. Identify one or two questions you find engaging and which could be explored further through research.

Determine and evaluate your research question:
- What aspect of the more general topic you will explore?
- Is your research question clear?
- Is your research question focused? (Research questions must be specific enough to be well covered in the space and time available.)
- Is your research question complex? (Questions shouldn't have a simple yes/no answer and should require research and analysis.)

Hypothesize – After you've come up with a question, consider the path your answer might take.
- If you are making an argument, what will you say?
- Why does your argument matter?
- How might others challenge your argument?
- What kind of sources will you need to support your argument?

	Sample Research Questions	
Clarity	**Focused**	**Simple vs. Complex**
Unclear: Why are social networking sites harmful?	**Unfocused:** What is the effect on the environment from global warming?	**Too simple:** How are doctors addressing diabetes in the U.S.?
Clear: How are online users experiencing or addressing privacy issues on social networking sites like MySpace and Facebook?	**Focused:** How is glacial melting affecting penguins in Antarctica?	**Appropriately complex:** What are common traits of those suffering from diabetes in America, and how can these commonalities be used to aid the medical community in prevention of the disease?

Adapted from: George Mason University Writing Center. (2008). How to write a research question. Retrieved from http://writingcenter.gmu.edu/?p=307

Before deciding on a research question for your paper, ask yourself the following questions:

- Does your research question refer to a topic discussed in the seminar?
- Is the research question clear and made explicit?
- Is it a sensible question, i.e. precise, focused, scholarly relevant, and is it possible to answer it in the framework of a term paper?
- Can you provide a clear and precise definition of the main concepts?
- Will your own contribution be clearly recognizable once you have answered to your research question (i.e. are you not only reproducing and summarizing existing texts; do you provide an original and innovative idea with respect to theory, methods, or empirical analysis)?
- Is your research question analytical rather than purely descriptive?

1.2. Choice of literature and scientific reading

There are basically two types of sources: 1) those sources that you quoted directly and indirectly because you adopt their statements (social science literature) and 2) those sources that you use as material that you further interpret in order to support your theses within the framework of an analysis. Sources that you can use as material for analysis may also include media reports. However, you need to interpret and contextualize these non-scientific sources because, unlike social science literature, they are not subject to quality control and peer review, are not always edited and more strongly reflect the opinion of journalists. You can for instance cite media reports in the introduction or conclusion of your paper in order to shed light on the political relevance of a topic. However, you have to avoid developing a scientific argumentation based on such non-scientific sources. The exception to this rule is when you use media reports as primary data source that you analyze in the empirical part of your paper, such as when conducting a discourse analysis or media content analysis.

Therefore, always use social science literature from specialist journals, anthologies and monographs as well as data from scientifically recognized databases to substantiate statements in your text. On the one hand, the literature review of your paper needs to encompass the state-of-the-art literature, on the other hand you should also review central original texts, which are always to be quoted in original. Social science literature can be researched using appropriate databases (SUB, JSTOR, etc.).

Particular caution is required with freely accessible texts and Internet sources. You have to assess the extent to which the sources can be quoted. Books and articles in anthologies that have been published by well-known scientific publishers, are subjected by the editors and reviewers to a quality assurance process. This does not apply to pdf documents of any kind that you can find on the Internet. Contributions from foundations and other interest groups should be treated with particular caution, as they represent often political interest groups. If you are asked to donate on the homepage, this is a clear signal that this organization is not independent.

A variety of reading techniques can help you greatly in researching which scientific texts are relevant to your paper. In the context of a literature review and with the purpose of going more in-depth into selected literature, you can make use of:

- **Skim Reading** – The reading goal is to overview the literature on a topic and useful as a first approach to the body of texts. Read only a selection of text elements, such as: Author, year of publication, Title, Table of contents, Abstract, Introduction, Conclusion, Bibliography etc.

- **Scan** – The reading goal is to check if the text is useful for a topic. Define your topic in keywords and then scan the text for these keywords.

- **Thorough Reading** – The goal is to understand the text or excerpts in detail (including structure and argumentation) and to arrive at a critical assessment of the content. This is the most intensive and slowest form of reading. The purpose is to read the text in its entirety and make sure that you understand it completely. This is particularly important if you are engaging with the work of an author(s) or a specific theory in more detail.

- **Selective Reading** – The goal is to read only the passages of a text that are relevant to the topic. You have to know exactly what you are looking for in the text. First scan/skim and mark relevant passages. Then read relevant passages thoroughly.

- **Analytical Reading** – The goal is to examine text under certain aspects (e.g. method of analysis, concepts applied, structure of argumentation). Select a pair of aspects and then read the text under these aspects.

1.3. Citing correctly

Although you should make use of a recognized style of citation (e.g. MLA, APA, etc.), the specific choice of style is not as important as is the accurate and consistent citing according to the selected style. Therefore, always make sure to use only one style of citation in the same paper and provide all information according to the selected style of criteria. You can make use of [Citation-Management Software](). However, they are susceptible to error if the entries are not made correctly. Therefore, you should always manually cross-check citations made using such software.

All scientific work (essays, term papers, theses) are written according to the rules of scientific work:

- They are free of spelling and grammatical errors.
- Use a scientific (not journalistic and/or normative) argumentation style.
- Are logically and clearly structured.
- Direct and indirect quotations are identified as such and references are correctly indicated.
- Use several scientific sources (monographs, book chapters in edited volumes and articles in specialist journals).
- Follow the formal requirements (citation style, formatting, etc.).

When citing and referencing correctly, you have to distinguish between different types of citations such as paraphrasing or direct quotation; select and use a formal style; format the in-text citations, format the reference list. If you are not familiar with any of these styles, then it is

highly advisable to [read a full guide](#) on the major styles, such as APA and Harvard. A very useful style for the purpose of writing a sociological paper is the [American Sociological Association (ASA) guide](#). Of course, citations also apply to statistic and other data sources, as well as to media reports and other non-scientific literature used as material in the paper.

1.4. Argumentation

A central component of scientific work is the structured development of a logical scientific argumentation. This argumentation (both theoretical and empirical) can be developed by making use of primary texts, secondary analyses and sometimes own data generated for the purpose of the study. The aim is to address a precise research question, which you seek to answer throughout your paper, and to substantiate it through reference to related debates in the sociological literature. For the purpose of developing an insightful scientific argumentation, ask yourself the following questions:

- Do you explain and justify how you go about to answer the research question?
- Does the structure of the paper make sense in view of the research question, or is there better ways to deal with it?
- Is the aim of each section clearly defined, and does it contribute to answering the research question?
- Is the structure of the paper coherent, i.e. are the sections logically connected and is there a clear and explicit theme running through the paper?

For the purpose of developing a sound argumentation of your paper, keep the following structure always in mind:

- Introduction: Introduce the reader to the topic.
- Develop a relevant and clear research question.
- Define main concepts.
- Discuss shortly the structure of the paper.
- Main part: Present your argument in relevant and clearly structured subsections.
- Conclusion: Summarize your findings
- Limitations: discuss the limitation of your research, as well as questions that could not be answered and would be relevant to future research.

1.5. Summarizing and answering your research question

After reviewing the relevant literature and reflecting on your arguments, your aim should be to answer the research question you have posed as directly as possible. For this purpose, you should ask yourself the following overarching questions:

- Do you present clear reasoning underpinning your arguments?
- Do your arguments link to the research question?
- Are they deductive (i.e. following from what was previously said), concise (i.e. no unnecessary digressions) and logically consistent (without contradictions)?
- Is your argument based on the state of the art in scholarly literature?
- Have you conducted a systematic literature review?
- Do you refer to relevant scholarly literature that refers to the topic?

- Do you use a sufficient amount of scientific contributions (**about 10 scientific sources**)?
- Do you report and interpret the references correctly?
- Do you critically reflect on your arguments? Do you mention potential criticism regarding the weaknesses of your own argument?
- Is your argumentation grammatically and linguistically correct? Is the spelling correct?
- Is your writing style clear and precise?
- Is the writing style adequate, i.e. neutral, free of polemics and normative judgment?
- Do you answer the research question in the final chapter?

1.6. Formal Criteria

Your paper needs to meet the following set criteria:

- It must have a title page (incl. author, title, submission date)
- It must have a table of contents
- It must have a list of references
- It must include references to all in-text citations
- It must comply with institute standards (1.5 lines, times new roman)
- It must be roughly 3.000 words long

1.7. General structure of the term paper

In any case, the paper should contain a cover sheet, a table of contents, an introduction, a main part (theory, analysis), a conclusion and a bibliography. Of course, you may adapt the headings thematically:

- *Cover sheet*: contains your name, enrollment number, address, e-mail address, title of the course, name of the lecturer, semester, title of the term paper.

- *Introduction*: serves to outline the central research question; describe the initial question/problem and explain why your question is important/relevant/interesting. The introduction should do more than familiarize the reader with the topic; it also functions like the trailer of a movie: it should provide a preview of the entire project and evoke the reader's interest. Often, the best scenes are already anticipated (e.g. the most interesting arguments and research ideas).

- *Theory*: this part contains the main premises, introduces the reader to analytical concepts and elaborates on competing hypotheses/expectations.

- *Analysis*: The analysis is the main part which consists of a systematic and focused examination of the central question by presenting and discussing scientific literature and empirical findings.

- *Conclusion*: Summary of the main findings (with reference to the initial question!). Consists of conclusion, reflection, possibly outlook. The first section of the conclusion repeats and summarizes the central question and the arguments used to answer it. In

addition, the conclusion should include a paragraph or two on the limits of the term paper. Which questions could not be answered and which problems could not be solved? However, this is not the end of the concluding section. The last part should build a bridge to the introduction by describing how the written elaboration has deepened or changed our understanding of the topic. For instance, you can relate your main findings and arguments to the "major questions" of sociology (e.g. why does social inequality exist? Why do people demonstrate?) and embed the written elaboration in its sociohistorical and geographical context.

- ***Bibliography***

1.8. General recommendations and suggestions for the term paper

- ***Text flow***: Even if the structure of the text is given and the matter is rather technical, you should still formulate a well readable text with a good flow. Try to take the readers on a journey in the course of which you want to convince them of your concern. Try to capture the readers with the first paragraph and guide them from section to section in order to not lose them.

- ***Frequent summaries and outlooks***: You should begin (sub)sections by announcing what follows and how the section is structured. This helps to ensure that readers don't lose the thread and know what comes next. In addition, you should include a brief summary at the end of each section to ensure that readers understand the main points and have them in mind in the next sections.

- ***Levels***: Do not use more than three levels of headings. There should only be sections (e.g. "Theoretical Background"), subsections (e.g. "Dependent Variables") and the lowest level of sub-subsections.

- ***Paragraphs***: Besides sub-subsections, paragraphs are your most important tool for structuring your text! You should use them consciously and in a structured way. The general rule is: one idea, one paragraph. Insert a paragraph when you start a new idea. It is best to also start the paragraph with the formulation of this idea. Outline and explain that idea further on. Paragraphs should consist of more than one sentence.

- ***Finish on time***: Finish writing your term paper at least two days before submission and print out the finished text. Leave it for a day before you start proofreading. You will be surprised how many things there are to correct. Keep improving your written paper until you are satisfied with it.

- ***Reading group***: Find fellow students with whom you can exchange ideas in the process of writing. Also, exchange the term papers and give each other suggestions for improvement before you hand them in.

2. Paper presentations

Besides preparing a paper on your own, you may be asked to present a published text from the syllabus of your course to fellow students. When preparing a text presentation, you should consider the following three points:

- Content
- Structure
- Presentation

Content:

- At the beginning, give some information about the authors and the context in which the study came about. What type of text is it? Why is it relevant?
- Work out the essentials, i.e. explain the most important terms, strands of theory and statements of the text.
- Consider the context of the seminar/class in which you are presenting.
- Try to make references to the other topics covered in the class.
- Provide examples to illustrate. At this point at the latest, you should go beyond the basic text and consult additional literature and sources.
- Try to use arguments to develop your own (critical) conclusion. Make it known where and how you link to the text.

Structure:

- Develop a common thread (introduction, main part and conclusion). Think about how you want to start, what you want to say about the text, what examples you give and how you want to end. Present the structure at the beginning of the presentation—preferably on one slide.
- Try to initiate a discussion with the help of discussion questions/examples and respond to the questions of your fellow students.
- The use of slides (PowerPoint, etc.) is conducive to a clear and recognizable structure.
- The last slide should contain the sources you used for the presentation.

Presentation:

- A presentation should correspond to the given time frame. It is considered an achievement in itself to work on a complex topic in the allocated time.
- Try to speak clearly and freely (appropriate volume, clear pronunciation, as little reading as possible). If you speak through what has been prepared aloud several times in advance, this is conducive to speaking freely, adhering to the time limits and the logic of the argument.
- Media such as PowerPoint should not be used for their own sake, but should always support what is said. The slides should be built up gradually. Try to keep it as "simple" as possible (not too much text).

3. Plagiarism

Plagiarism represents a serious violation of property rights and the rules of good scientific practice. Plagiarism is presenting words and thoughts as your own which have actually been created by somebody else. These words and thoughts are the original author's property and using them for one's own purpose without acknowledging the source is punishable. If a delivered paper is found to contain plagiarism, it is automatically sanctioned with a 5.0 (fail). To understand more about plagiarism, please read the paper on plagiarism written specifically for students of the Sociology – European Societies program.

3.1. Use of AI-based Systems

AI-based tools have been permitted to be used as an aiding tool in the writing of scientific papers, given that this usage abides to established scientific principles. If you plan to use AI-based tools for your term paper, please remain critical regarding the risks of AI-based tools and reflect on the ethical and methodological implications of AI-based tools. You should particularly keep in mind the following points:

- What is the scientific quality of the content generated by AI-based tools? On the basis of which material is which type of content generated and using which technological tool? Where are the substantive and/or qualitative limits of the generated content? To what extent can discriminatory biases arise?

- The use of AI-based tools must not violate the principles of good scientific practice, in particular transparency as a key requirement of scientific honesty.

- AI-based tools cannot be considered authors of the results they generate in accordance with the regulations of German copyright law and related rights (UrhG). If you use content generated by AI-based tools for writing parts of your thesis, you are directly responsible for any incorrect or distorted (biased) content, incorrect references, copyright violations or plagiarism that may be generated by the AI-based tool. Uploading copyrighted materials into AI-based tools can also constitute a copyright-relevant act and legal regulations must also be adhered to in this respect.

- When dealing with personal data from third parties in connection with AI-based tools, compliance with data protection laws, in particular the General Data Protection Regulation (GDPR), the Federal Data Protection Act (BDSG) and the Berlin Data Protection Act (BlnDSG), must be ensured. This applies to both the upload of information into AI-based tools and the content generated by them.

Further, please keep in mind the following more general shortcomings of AI-based tools when writing a term paper:

- Content generated with AI-based tools may not always provide accurate or up-to-date information. It is essential to fact-check and verify any information generated by these tools before including it in your MA thesis.

- Content generated with AI-based tools may inadvertently incorporate biases present in the data it uses.

- Content generated with AI-based tools may not provide in-depth knowledge of specific academic domains, such as sociology, and these tools may not have a true understanding of a more extensive academic context.

- Content generated with AI-based tools could unintentionally resemble existing content, leading potentially to plagiarism.

- Content generated with AI-based tools can be inappropriate, biased, or reflects societal prejudices.

As an approved aid, **the use of AI-based tools must be marked and documented accordingly.** Failing to documents the use of such tools constitutes a case of plagiarism. The following needs to be considered when using AI-based tools.

- Specific parts of a term paper that made use of AI-based tools, such as generated text must be identified and the source must be stated.

- Parts of the term paper that are based on the use of AI-based tools with regard to personal competencies relevant to the student must be identified in a footnote and the type of use must be stated. (Example: use for brainstorming, creating an outline, developing/optimizing software sources or texts, linguistic optimization etc.).

- The AI-based tools used in a term paper are to be cited in the bibliography as follows:

  Name of the AI tool, software version, date of retrieval if applicable, URL if applicable, prompt used and result if applicable (transcription or screenshots)

3.2. Declaration of Independence

All students handing in a scientific paper are also required to deliver a signed declaration of independence. The declaration (Eigenständigkeitserklärung) includes also the concerns related to the usage of AI-based tools. Please make sure to use the most recent declaration of consent form when submitting a paper. A copy of this declaration can be found at the end of this document.

Declaration of Independence

concerning the examination in

module _____**on**_____

in Sociology

I hereby confirm

- that the term paper I have submitted is the product of my work and mine alone,
- that I did not use any other resources or aids other than the ones explicitly deemed permissible beforehand or otherwise cited by me in the term paper,
- that I have provided the sources for any portion of my term paper that uses direct quotations or borrowed ideas/concepts/results/etc. from other works, including Internet sources and AI-based tools,
- that I have not submitted the term paper for other examinations.

Furthermore, I am aware

- that if I do not submit my results by the deadline communicated to me in advance, I will fail the assessment,
- that if I am caught attempting to cheat, I will fail the examination,
- and that if my attempt to cheat is particularly severe, I could potentially fail the examination with no opportunity to retake it and not be allowed to continue my studies in this program,
- that, if I used AI-based tools to write this term paper, I bear the responsibility for any false or biased content, erroneous references, violations against data privacy or copyright law, or incidences of plagiarism generated by the AI.

Surname: _____ Name: _____

_____

(Date and Signature)

Freie Universität Berlin

Fachbereich Politik- und Sozialwissenschaft
Prüfungsbüro
Soziologie

Eigenständigkeitserklärung
zur Prüfung im

Modul _____**am** _____

im Fach Soziologie

Hiermit versichere ich,

- dass ich die von mir vorgelegte Hausarbeit selbständig abgefasst habe, und
- dass ich keine weiteren Hilfsmittel verwendet habe als diejenigen, die im Vorfeld explizit zugelassen und von mir angegeben wurden und
- dass ich die Stellen der Arbeit, die dem Wortlaut oder dem Sinn nach anderen Werken (dazu zählen auch Internetquellen und KI-basierte Tools) entnommen sind, unter Angabe der Quelle kenntlich gemacht habe und
- dass ich die vorliegende Arbeit noch nicht für andere Prüfungen eingereicht habe.

Mir ist bewusst,

- dass ich diese Prüfung nicht bestanden habe, wenn ich die mir bekannte Frist für die Einreichung meiner schriftlichen Arbeit versäume und
- dass ich im Falle eines Täuschungsversuchs diese Prüfung nicht bestanden habe und
- dass ich im Falle eines schwerwiegenden Täuschungsversuchs ggf. die Gesamtprüfung endgültig nicht bestanden habe und in diesem Studiengang bzw. Studienangebot nicht mehr weiter studieren darf und
- dass ich, sofern ich zur Erstellung dieser Arbeit KI-basierte Tools verwendet habe, die Verantwortung für eventuell durch die KI generierte fehlerhafte oder verzerrte (bias) Inhalte, fehlerhafte Referenzen, Verstöße gegen das Datenschutz- und Urheberrecht oder Plagiate trage.

Name: _____ Vorname: _____

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