

English Department – Linguistics Division

Writing a **term paper** in linguistics

length **12 – 15 pages**

For a term paper in advanced courses in linguistics, you are expected to

- search three or four papers that analyze and make a claim about a specific grammatical construction, phenomenon or hypothesis; start with the reading list of our course
- consider the evidence (= data, i.e. grammatical and ungrammatical sentences) that is put forward in support of the analysis
- discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the authors' arguments
- write a critical paper that summarizes and evaluates the authors' claims.

A well-written paper should:

- concisely summarize the main thesis/claim of the papers you refer to,
- describe the key evidence that is presented in support of the claim,
- evaluate whether the evidence confirms the researchers' claim, or
- whether there might be other possible interpretations of their findings.

How to organize your paper

- A term paper should normally contain the sections listed below. They should be numbered, except for the *Table of contents*, the *References* (and the Appendix).
- Note that the section titles which follow are generic (not: author names) and may be adapted to your topic.

Table of contents

Indicate sections and subsections (in short papers) or chapters and subchapters (in longer papers) and page references. The structure of the paper reflects your particular way of dealing with the topic, specifically your line of argumentation. Therefore, structure your paper in a sensible way, and make sure that the internal structure of larger sections reflects how you weight the different aspects of your research question.

Page numbering starts on the first page of the text, not with the table of contents. Avoid listing studies you refer to, better create a new content-based structure that reflects your line of argumentation. Do not make authors' names the title of a chapter; better find a telling name that characterizes his or her approach.

1. Introduction

First state your aim and indicate why the subject of your paper is worth writing about. Tell the reader **what** aspects you intend to investigate as well as what will be left out. Then sketch **why** this question is relevant and **how** you will proceed. Make sure that the title of your paper reflects its aim and scope.

2. Introduction to the topic

You can never cover an entire topic area in your paper; you always need to narrow a potential topic down to a specific research question, i.e. a particular problem within the topic area that you deal with. Therefore, probably the most important conceptual step is to distinguish between a **topic area** that you are interested in, and a very specific **goal/research question** that you pursue in your paper. In this chapter of your paper you should position the specific topic into the frame of the broader topic area; put the specific question into a larger debate or discussion.

Then present examples (collected from the literature, taken from a corpus or generated yourself) and give a first general description of the construction or phenomenon you will work on. In this section you have to define the **relevant terms and concepts** (usually the central terms of the paper's title). Line out what is interesting, unclear or controversial and form a research question. In finding an answer to this question your paper is a relevant contribution to the scientific discussion.

3. Theoretical framework and previous work

You have to embed your own discussion into a theoretical framework and previous studies. That is, never start your discussion of a topic in a 'theoretical vacuum.

4. Data analysis / empirical evidence

- presentation of data and analysis/analyses
- provide minimal pairs of grammatical and ungrammatical sentences
- if the evidence is ambiguous or insufficient to confirm the analysis or claim, discuss what type of data would be helpful in order to distinguish between competing hypotheses or interpretation
- if the evidence actually seems to support a different interpretation than the one that is advanced in the article, provide an argument for a different conclusion from what the researcher(s) advocate
- you can also present studies you read about in the literature

5. Discussion (some of the points below can also be incorporated into the conclusion section)

1. Discuss your analysis with reference to alternative approaches or analyses and try to describe the strengths and weaknesses of the approaches.

2. Can you propose a classification as a result of your analysis? Can you present the result of your analysis in form of a table?

3. Theoretical implications: If possible consider your analysis from a broader theoretical perspective and mention implications of your study for related questions.

4. Future direction of research: Mention open questions: What should be done in the next step? Ideas for an experimental study etc.

6. Conclusion

Give a general summary of your results and state the conclusions you can draw on the basis of them. If part of your results is inconclusive, say so.

Refer back to the beginning part of your paper and the aims or questions of your paper – you can tell the reader which questions you could answer and which are still open.

Also indicate what aspects or areas demand further study.

References/Works cited

text formatting: 1 1/2 lines, font size 12 pt

MLA and **APA** are two of the most commonly used **citation styles**:

The *MLA Handbook* (published by the Modern Language Association)

https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/research_and_citation/mla_style/mla_formatting_and_style_guide/

The APA manual (published by the American Psychological Association)

<https://www.scribbr.com/category/apa-style/6th-edition/>