Essays in Social Theory and Philosophy:
A Survival Guide

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Term papers in the field of theory—whether it is political theory, social theory or philosophy—are difficult to write even for those already have experienced, and they differ significantly from term papers written in the empirical branch of social sciences. The following advice cannot change this. Yet it might show you what to pay attention to, how to find or improve a research question, and what makes a good essay from the lecturer's point of view.

You will presumably have already heard all of this advice in one form or another, but that does not mean that it will be heeded, at least if you take submitted term papers as evidence. For illustration purposes, I have included a few sentences from older essays available to me. This is not intended to embarrass anyone—the errors or problems in these sentences document understandable and common difficulties. Being confronted with the task of writing a term paper in philosophy or social or political theory for the first time can challenge or even overwhelm anyone.

However, there are very simple ways to avoid some common mistakes (I), and you can take hints from the other suggestions (II–IV) on how to work on your own writing and argumentative skills. With a little persistence, you will find that writing an essay can be a satisfying, even enjoyable activity—if you take the time to look at your text from a distance every now and again, and allow yourself to look for elegant, controversial, or witty formulations. Nobody said that academic writing should not be fun—your lecturers will thank you for it!

Two notes on my own behalf: I originally wrote this "Survival Guide" for the Political Theory module in the Political Science program at the University of Bremen, but it is not limited to that. And since then, many new impressions from teaching philosophy and sociology at the Goethe University Frankfurt and the University of Freiburg have been incorporated as well. In its current version, it is addressed directly to students in the program of Liberal Arts and Sciences at the Albert-Ludwigs-Universität Freiburg. This results in a few contextual dependencies, which you will have to reinterpret generously if you are doing a different degree program, for example with regard to formalities. Nevertheless, you can benefit from the general ideas, especially those on structure and content issues.

Secondly, while the "Survival Guide" is intended to help you, it also relies on your help. If you notice something that you find incomprehensible, if something is missing or if you have any other suggestions or ideas for improvement—please do send them to me!

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I. The Fundamentals: Advice that you will deem superfluous

Formal rules

There are three basic principles, the first of which is: Follow the official regulations of your study program, if they exist.[1] Secondly: if, despite extensive search of the relevant university websites, you cannot find such regulations, use the ones you are already familiar with or follow a set of rules that you are comfortable with. But above all, make sure that you produce a legible paper with a consistent citation style. This includes a consistent typeface, sufficient white space (i.e. margins and space between lines). A standard setting would be 12pt Times New Roman, one-and-a-half lines with 2.5cm margins all around.

Finally, the third principle: if you encounter ambiguities in the formal guidelines or in the seminar syllabus, or if your question is not answered there, talk to your instructors. They will be happy to answer your questions—*if* you have actually checked beforehand whether the question has not already been dealt with. Imagine what would happen if, in a seminar with 100 participants, each person sent only one unnecessary question by e-mail at the end of the semester.

Cover sheet

If there is a prescribed cover sheet for essays (as in Bremen[2]), use it, no matter whether you write a short essay or a long term paper. And please fill out the cover sheet as well… your name, an address and/or e-mail address, and a matriculation number should always be indicated, so that you can get credit for your work.

Spell check

It is absolutely necessary to run a spell check before the last printout! You won't find all errors, but you will find simple misspellings etc. Furthermore, the grammar check gives you an opportunity to think about your use of commas. Where must, where can or should and where should not be a comma?

It is even better to exchange essays with your fellow students. They will not just be able to point out spelling mistakes to you, but also unclear or incomplete sentences, arguments that are difficult to understand, or forgotten half-sentences that have been left behind during changes. Another simple test is to read your own text aloud—if you notice that you have difficulty with the correct intonation or a sentence is so long that you have difficulty breathing, you should rephrase it.

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[1]For the degree program in Political Science at the University of Bremen, almost all formalities are specified in the so-called Kompendium: see ‹http://www.politik.uni-bremen.de/downloads/kompendium_wiss_arb.pdf›.
[2]Here: ‹https://www.politik.uni-bremen.de/downloads/deckblatt_hausarbeiten/›

Bibliography programs

Use bibliography programs and save yourself and your lecturers from incorrectly formatted/incomplete bibliographies. Most universities offer programs like Citavi, RefWorks, EndNote and similar programs[3] that you can use free of charge as a student; the relevant library catalogs and subject databases allow you to import the references directly into these programs, so that you save time typing it out—and, of course, with every reuse of already imported literature references. Start with this early in your studies—you will be happy about an already existing database with many of the frequently used titles, at the latest when you write your BA or MA thesis.

Yet be careful: Even literature management programs do not save you from having to check the correctness of the information, since the mere downloading from the catalog of the library catalog, for example, does not always guarantee that all the information is in the right fields. Above all, check that the author has not been confused with the editors or translators.

References should, by the way, be sorted alphabetically, should not be formatted completely in italics and not as in bullet point—but of course you already know that if you have read the formal guidelines...

Schedule

Start on time—you should have at least one day before the submission to read through the paper again at your leisure and correct any mistakes (see above) or ambiguities. Are you responding to the research question? Have you filled out the cover sheet correctly? Are the page numbers? Is the bibliography complete?

II. Research question

If you have found a good research question, you have already done half of the work. This is because a research question provides you with the common thread for your essay. A question does not have a fixed format in social theory or philosophy but describes the task you want to solve in the essay. You can for example

(1) prove or disprove a thesis,

(2) identify an interpretive problem and suggest solutions,

(3) explore a term,

(4) use a theory as a perspective on current or historical situations,

(5) compare different theories in terms of a common thesis, concept, or a figure of argument,

[3]You can find these on the university websites, e.g. ‹https://www.suub.uni-bremen.de/service-beratung/literaturverwaltung/› (Bremen), ‹https://www.ub.uni-frankfurt.de/literaturverwaltung/› (Frankfurt) oder ‹https://www.ub.uni-freiburg.de/unterstuetzung/literaturverwaltung/› (Freiburg).

(6) and do many other things.

As you can see, theoretical essays cannot be reduced to testing hypotheses, not even the term "research question" used here is always correct. Perhaps you want to prove a bold thesis! It should therefore not worry you if your term paper doesn't fit into an established format—there is no need for that. What is important, however, is that your paper has an argumentative structure, i.e. that the individual parts, sections, and even sentences are connected in a comprehensible manner and provide a clear argumentation overall: Why do you answer (and ask!) your question in this way? Why do you make a comparison this way and not another way? Which reasons support your thesis and how do you refute objections against it?

How do you find a good research question?

Actually, you already know the most important requirement: read a lot! Nothing can replace reading about a topic for which you want to find a research question. For example, if you are looking for a suitable question in the seminar "Theories of Power", it will help to go through the seminar literature again, to look up what particularly interested or confused you in the seminar and to search for further literature on that. Often, the seminar syllabi already contain additional texts.

However, you should read purposefully: not just newspaper articles or blogs, not even just non-fiction books or mainstream magazines, but specialized literature. To get started with a topic that is new to you, there are a few simple rules of thumb. First, you should always start with the text that sparked your interest in a topic. If you found Hobbes fascinating in the seminar and would like to write a term paper based on this, read Hobbes first. Look up the book from which the excerpts you read in the seminar are and read more of it. Often, books by older authors also have an introduction by the editors which provides useful information about interpretations, scholarly debates and suggestions for further reading.[4] (You are reading an edition of Hobbes that has no identifiable editors? Then you have probably obtained a non-citable electronic version. Put it away quickly and get a proper edition that is suitable for scientific work: see below, section "Citability").

Second, introductory scholarly literature will help you understand the primary text and get a sense of the scholarly debates connected to it. This is exactly what introductions and handbooks are for: they provide orientation and pointers to important interpretations and disputes. Since, third, they will often not be completely up to date, you should additionally use library catalogs or the search possibilities in specialized databases (and no, Google Scholar or even Google without Scholar cannot replace these). If you do not know how to do this, ask the librarians for advice or at least look up the homepage of the library for more information.

[4]Sometimes additional reading is also indicated in the syllabus.

Let's assume that after your initial reading impressions, you decided that you would like to write something on Thomas Hobbes' concept or theory of power. What next? While there is no recipe that you can execute mechanically, trying to answer the following generic questions can help you develop a research question and avoid common pitfalls:

(1) Can you explain Hobbes' concept of power in one paragraph?

(2) Can you name some features that distinguish Hobbes' concept of power from others?

(3) Can you list some theses from the secondary literature in which this concept of power plays an important role? Scholarly controversies are especially helpful: What is argued about in the texts you have read? Which terms, claims or interpretations invite objections and criticisms?

(4) Is there anything that bothers you about this concept of power or that seems unclear? Do you have objections that you would like to spell out? Or, on the contrary, is there a critique of Hobbes' concept of power that you find particularly wrong, unfair, or misleading?

If you plan to write a term paper on Hobbes' concept of power, you'll need to be able to answer the first question anyway—so feel free to start early by writing such a paragraph (or a page, or three...). Often, when you try to explain a central concept in writing, you will find that some of it is still unclear to you. The second question can help you characterize the concept in a more abstract way and thus move a little further away from the perspective of the primary author. The third question can help you examine the extent of your knowledge on what other scholars find worthy of discussion, while the fourth question is aimed directly at possible research questions for your paper.

How do you recognize unsuitable questions?

Let's continue with our example and look at some research questions. Think about *why* one of each of the following questions is clearly worse:

(1) prove or disprove a thesis

(a) Hobbes' concept of power is to help understand freedom in strictly individualistic terms.

(b) Hobbes' concept of power is still effective in today's political theories.

(2) point out an interpretive problem and suggest solutions

(a) Why must the power of the sovereign be absolute?

(b) What are the arguments for the specific limits of the sovereign's power?

(3) explore a concept

(a) What does Hobbes mean by power?

(b) How does Hobbes justify his conception of power?

(4) use a theory as a perspective on current or historical situations

(a) Does Hobbes' theory of power apply to the way power is exercised today?

(b) Hobbes's description of the relationship of power to the dynamics of honor and dishonor is

relevant to international relations.

(5) compare different theories in terms of a common thesis, concept, or a figure of argumentation

(a) Hobbes' concept of power is what Foucault criticizes as a "theory of sovereignty"—but this criticism is inaccurate.

(b) Can Hobbes' concept of power be compared to Locke's concept of power?

You probably recognized the bad questions right away—but how? And how do you transfer this from my simple and schematic examples to the question that you are considering for your essay? The following criteria can be helpful:

(1) Can the question even be answered at all?

For example, take questions (1b) and (4a)—how could you ever give an answer to them? For (1b), after explaining Hobbes's concept of power, you would have to survey the whole field of political theory and its historical development, summarize and then assess whether Hobbes' concept of power played a role in this development. This, of course, cannot be done in a term paper. But perhaps you could save the question by narrowing it down and making it more precise: the question of whether Hobbes's concept of power plays a role in Weber's definition of domination is still a challenging one, but with enough reading you can find an answer.

The question (4a) suffers from the fact that "the contemporary way of exercising power" is hopelessly vague. What kind of power is it - political, economic, social? Who exercises power over whom and when? In this case you should rather look for an entirely different question.

(2) Is the answer trivial?

The clearest example of a question that leads to a trivial answer is (5b) because the answer is simply "yes". We can compare anything to anything—but why should we? What do we expect from it? In which respect might a comparison be interesting?[5]

Questions (2a) and (3a) run the risk of having trite answers, too. The latter (3a) amounts to little more than a summary of Hobbes—which is a good start for a term paper, but it is not enough. At a minimum, you should move on to (3b). For this, too, you need a reconstruction of what power is for Hobbes, but now you are asking about the reasons Hobbes chooses this concept of power—because it supports his later argumentation (which

[5]What this example also show is the importance of exact formulations. It may be that you meant something other than what your readers understood. Yet it is above all your job as an author to make sure that you write as understandably as possible. As you will see, this is often more difficult than you would think. Yet do not let yourself be discouraged by this: on the contrary, see it as a challenge! What interpretation, that you have not thought about yourself, could you assign to your own text? Which ones should you rule out? Lots of questions for the phase of revision...

one?)? because this is determined by Hobbes' novel concept of freedom? (What is so new about it?)—, which will automatically plunge you into exciting discussions.

Question (2a) has essentially the same problem: The power of the sovereign must be absolute because otherwise the state of nature cannot be overcome. And what now? Again, (2b) is a way out because this question forces you to deal with the details of what Hobbes considers to be the necessary power of the Sovereign. And this brings you up against, for example, the question of how the limits of this power are to be understood—for instance, in cases where the sovereign's command impermissibly endangers one's own life. Is there then a right to resist the sovereign?

(3) Does the question give you any clues about what you need to do to answer it?

Consider questions (4b) and (5a). While (4b) is definitely better than (4a), it gives limited guidance on what to do: first, you must reconstruct how Hobbes describes the recognition processes of honorific declarations or honorary refusals and what this has to do with the power of individuals. Yet how you subsequently make the transition to the relations between states remains open in the question. This is not a big problem, but if you look at question (5a), you will notice that this thesis already contains the program and outline of the term paper: You have to explain Hobbes' concept of power, reconstruct Foucault's critique of theories of sovereignty, and show in the third and last part of the thesis, why Hobbes' concept of power escapes this criticism, even though it is aimed at Hobbes.

III. Outline

This already brings us to the question of the structure of a term paper. As you can see, it ideally results from the question you want to answer, at least roughly. Of course, in the previous example, you still need to consider how to structure the individual sections in a meaningful way, for example in which order you should discuss the individual elements of Hobbes' concept of power, or how you will present Foucault's critique of sovereignty. There are no patent recipes here, only some rules of thumb: first, and most important, the structure should be comprehensible for the reader—either because you have explained it or because it follows so obviously from the content of the discussion that any explanation is superfluous. (However, what is obvious to whom and when? To explain something once more never hurts because what may be obvious to you after a few days or weeks of reflection is not necessarily immediately comprehensible to your readers). Secondly, in longer works, you should make it clear to your readers from time to time where you are in your argumentation: what claims have been made so far, how have they been justified, and what is still to be done? This is already the keyword for the third rule of thumb: The outline should be in the service of the argument of the paper.

These rules of thumb still leave open many details. If you do not know how to structure your paper even after long reflection, reread the texts that are important for your paper—especially journal articles—to see how their authors have structured them. You can also try to write down different outlines or briefly sketch out the argument to see which one seems more appropriate to you.

When finding a question, I have already pointed out that it can help to be guided by the scientific controversies. This also applies to the outline: if you are discussing different interpretations of terms or texts, it can be helpful to use these disputes as a guide for the structure of the paper. Two questions you should ask yourself are: what about this controversy is important to my work? How much of this controversy and its background do I need to reconstruct in order for this important aspect to become understandable?

IV. Text

Social theory and philosophy thrive on texts. Since they do not (or at least not primarily) handle empirical data, this is even more true here than for the sciences in general. For in theory, it comes solely down to the persuasiveness of arguments, of descriptions of theoretical issues, and of the interpretation of other texts. Therefore, you must take special care when writing: does a term, a sentence or a paragraph really say exactly what you want to express—and what else might it be saying? Have you substantiated all your claims with arguments? Can you possibly simplify overly complex sentences or argumentations?

You should not be discouraged if you are not immediately satisfied with your formulations the first time you write them down, because you always have the possibility to record a difficult issue somehow and then to reformulate it afterwards. In fact, it can sometimes be very helpful to switch off the internal censor for the time being in order to get rid of writing inhibitions. You just should not forget the subsequent revision.

Writing is also a matter of practice. Therefore, there is no better advice than to write a lot. Excerpts—that is, short summaries of the argumentation of texts that you have read—are in this respect not only a useful tool for thoroughly comprehending a text, but they also train your writing. This is especially true if you get into the habit of writing down complete sentences and not just bullet points, and of not following too closely the style of the respective text, i.e. not only paraphrasing. The following advice cannot replace practice; it can only give you a few ideas on what you can keep in mind the next time you write a term paper or an essay.

Writing what you want to say

Remember: The function of a scientific text is to communicate something to its readers so that they can agree or disagree. Therefore, it is important above all to make it as clear as possible what you

want to communicate. A sensibly structured text is the first step, but of course it is the text itself that matters in the end. Don't try to sound scientific by making your sentences as long and complicated as possible, riddled with foreign words. You should use technical terms where they are necessary, but not because you are proud of knowing them.

The following questions are meant to be used as a check when you reread the text you have written:

(1) Does each sentence have a verb? Which one? And who is acting?

You'll laugh, but sentence fragments are often left standing in the text because, for example, you only do half a rewrite or because the grammar is too complex. But it's not only important that you use verbs, it's which ones you use. Try to make your texts more lively by not only using auxiliary verbs and not just general verbs. That something "leads" to something, or someone "does" something can often be specified with a well-chosen verb, making the sentence as a whole more understandable. Often you can then also do without awkward constructions that would previously have had to do the work of this specification.

Another important consideration is whether the subject to whom you are attributing an action with a verb can actually perform it. "This work intends to show that..." is strictly speaking wrong, because your work is not a subject who can speak. *You* intend to show something in this work—so feel free to say it that way (on the subject of "saying I", see the section on the passive voice below).

(2) Let's eat grandpa!

Incorrect or missing commas quickly mislead your readers, as the following example for a term paper demonstrates:

"According to political scientists such as, Wolfgang Kerstin, political calculation is only one side of Machiavelli and in current research, most political scientists are not aware that Machiavelli is a person who reflects the tensions of the Renaissance period of upheaval."

(3) Can I work with fragments and colloquialisms?

As a stylistic device, the fragment is more appropriate for journalistic texts, so you should use it sparingly, if at all. The same applies to all other colloquial expressions. You need to be aware of the rhetorical effect: the written language level is briefly abandoned and thus draws attention to the sentence or fragment. For formulations such as "I don't believe so," "It's complicated," or "Probably not." have no place in a (scientific) text. Of course, linguistic rules also only exist to be broken, but that presupposes that the rest of the text leaves no doubt that you know exactly what you are doing and that you *could* follow the rules you are breaking. As soon as doubts about this arise, colloquial formulations seem helpless and overwhelmed.

(4) How are sentences connected?

There are two main pitfalls that you must avoid with regard to connections between sentences. On the one hand, there is the danger of simply adding sentence to sentence: “Hobbes writes that... Furthermore, he considers power to be... After this, he argues that...” Such series of sentences shows that you either did not understand or are not willing/able to reproduce Hobbes’ arguments. There is, after all, a reason why Hobbes first states one thing and then the other. Only if you are sure that there is no reasoned sequence, you can do without it yourself.

On the other hand, you need to think carefully about the way you link sentences, because it expresses what logical relations you see between the individual assertions. “Because”, “therefore”, or “this is why”, for example, suggest that the following sentence gives a reason for the preceding sentence—and it is a mistake if this is not the case. Likewise, “but,” “nevertheless,” “although,” or “however” indicate a contradiction, so what you write should also indeed contrast with what came before.

(5) How long can, may or must a sentence be?

As you can already guess, this question is misguided. The right question, however, is to ask yourself, at the latest when proofreading each sentence, whether the sentence is understandable, whether it conveys what you want to say, and whether it maybe says too much. An example of a nearly incomprehensible sentence that can easily be rephrased and made understandable is the following quote:

"To which it must be added that Locke likewise assumes that if, in consequence of the violation of the law of nature that applies to all, the criminal also injures another person and causes him damage, then the injured party, in addition to the right to punishment applicable to all, also has the separate right to demand compensation from the one who has caused him this damage (Locke 1690: 9).”

(6) Do I mean what I’m saying?

A classic case of saying something other than what you actually want to say consists in the use of only half-known foreign words. There is nothing wrong with using technical terms (see below, section “Technical language”)—but only if you know their meaning and they actually help you to express yourself more precisely. Bragging about foreign words is usually not worthwhile, because very few of your readers will be impressed by them.

If sentences say too much, it may be because you used a connector that suggests a causal relationship, or that the pronouns used are ambiguous. Of course, there are countless sources

of ambiguity, and sometimes you will want to play with the fact that a sentence has different meanings, but in general you should make an effort to avoid ambiguities to get your point across.

(7) How many passive constructions are you using?

Passive constructions are a normal part of language and are therefore not fundamentally bad (even if Microsoft Word thinks it is). However, they are by definition vague, because they leave open which subject is performing the activity described by the passively used verb. You should consider carefully whether this is desirable, especially since passive constructions do not necessarily correspond to the typical ideals of beauty for texts.

One context in which the question of passive constructions arises again and again, is the use of the personal pronoun "I". Although it is generally true that your text should in the first place not be about yourself but about your topic, this does not mean that you are forbidden to say "I". Especially monstrous passive constructions like "It will be shown in the following that..." are easy to avoid, since it is actually you yourself who wants to show something with the help of the argumentation you develop. At this point, you should therefore write boldly "I will show in the following that…". The "I" is not problematic where only you can be meant (because who else could "show" something in this text?). The "I" becomes problematic only when you start to equip it with an argumentative function:

"The motivation to choose the topic of 'justice' comes predominantly from the fact, that I consider many of the sentences that lawbreakers such as criminals, murderers, felons and rapists get far too light and unjust to those who have been harmed."

Such and similar remarks along the lines of "X applies because I am of the opinion that..." really do not belong in a term paper, if you have not previously justified why you are of this opinion. Then, it is clear that there are understandable reasons for everyone to be of this opinion. Of course, in this case you can refrain from using "I" all together.

Argumentation

This brings us back to the keyword "argumentation". Term papers are meant to teach scientific work, and in social science theory and philosophy this essentially means dealing with arguments. It follows, that your text should be "argumentative". Put yourself in your reader's place and think about how you can convince them of what you want to say. What is definitely helpful is:

(1) A clear train of thought

Indicate the reasons for transitions from one thought to the next in each case as precisely as

possible. Before, but also during the writing process, try every now and then to briefly sketch the central idea in its development and ask yourself to what extent the individual sections of your paper support this idea, which ones are unnecessary and for which ones you might have to make clearer, what their contribution is.

(2) An awareness of objections

An idea also becomes convincing by discussing and rebutting possible objections. In this way you can also show that you know the alternatives and counterarguments to your argument and that you are not blindly following just one opinion. This also means that you should search the literature for the most important contributions invalidating your thesis, casting doubt on your interpretation, or raising objections to your comparison.

(3) A clear distinction between the argumentation you reconstruct in theorists and the arguments you yourself consider valid.

Even to reject the thoughts of discussed theorists you have to reconstruct their arguments first—what else could you object to? Yet it is important in such passages to be clear whether you only reconstruct what others are saying or whether you also agree with them. This, by the way, is a common problem in reading philosophical texts. Quite often, students mistakenly attribute views to the writers that they were only reporting to set up their counterarguments. So distinguishing different voices in the text is necessary for understanding them, and distinguishing them as clear as you can in your own texts helps readers to do so.

(4) A consistent use of terminology

Even if they are used in a similar way, different terms usually actually mean different things. For example, if you use power, influence and domination in the same way, this will at minimum cause irritation in your readers. Depending on the context, it might cause mistakes, too. If you are writing about Weber, for example, you must mind his sharp distinction between power and domination.

By the way: sloppy use of terminology by the authors you write about does not excuse joining them in their bad habit!

Scientific language

Writing scientifically does not mean writing as complicated as possible. No one has ever failed because they wrote “too simply”. However, you should not confuse simplicity with using colloquial language. In the same way, a paper isn’t good simply due to the fact that it sounds complicated

because it uses a lot of foreign words and complicated sentences. Particularly in social theory and philosophy, there is a great temptation to follow the jargon of the respective authors without restraint and to throw around expressions such as “non-intentional strategy” or “equiprimordially”.

This is not to say that it is always wrong to use such technical vocabulary—but always ask yourself whether you really know what you are saying with it, whether it will help your argument, and whether you need to clarify beforehand what you mean by the term.

Citability

While the formal guidelines usually go into detail about what rules to follow for citation and the creation of bibliographies, you should additionally think about which texts you are actually using. Two rules are to be followed in any case: first, you must cite primary literature. You cannot write a paper on Hobbes’s concept of power or Locke’s division of power, on Beginning in Arendt, or the drama of women in Beauvoir, without citing the works in which the authors develop their thoughts. Term papers that rely only on secondary literature fail for this purely formal reason.

Especially in the case of older texts, you should pay attention to which editions are citable. Versions compiled online by random people are useless for scholarly purposes. Rather, check the syllabus to see which edition your instructors are using or stick to the editions you find in the library. Reclam editions are also acceptable for term papers. For BA and at the latest for MA theses you should trouble yourself to check whether critical editions for the authors in question exist, i.e. editions whose texts have been compiled according to the rules of philology and have been checked and annotated.

Secondly, you should first and foremost cite research literature: not Wikipedia, not just any institutional homepages, student texts, or newspaper articles. On the one hand, you are on the safe side this way, because you can rely on the established quality control within science. (That it is not infallible is forgiven). On the other hand, you are also supposed to learn to navigate the professional discourse; if you bypass this, you will miss the pedagogical goal of term papers. Therefore, it is best to ditch search engines in the first place and start your research in the library catalog, in the specialized databases that you can access through the library, and in specialized encyclopedias or introductory volumes, which you can also find in the library and which always contain further literature references.[6]

One final note: Journal articles available on the Internet are also cited with the references to the articles and not just with the web address. In any case, you can specify the DOI (Digital Object

[6] For example for Political Science in Bremen: (‹http://suub.uni-bremen.de/fachinformationen/politikwissenschaft/›) or Sociology in Frankfurt (‹https://dbis.ur.de/dbliste.php?bib_id=ubfm&colors=511&ocolors=40&lett=f&gebiete=18›). You can find specialized as well as general databases in the university library of Freiburg here: ‹https://dbis.uni-regensburg.de//fachliste.php?bib_id=ubfre&lett=l&colors=&ocolors=›.

Identifier) which is more permanent than the fast-changing web addresses. (Remember that scientific discourse has different notions of time. Social theory and philosophy treat texts from at least the last 50 years as contemporary. So you can imagine what else counts as rapid change).

Gender-sensitive and anti-racist language[7]

English genders much less rigidly than German but you should still be aware of classical pitfalls like presupposing that "the philosopher" that you introduced in an example is immediately marked as a "he" in the next paragraph. Language shapes our perception of the world and our interpretation of situations, and that it is therefore important to treat it with care. In science this is even more true, because it claims to produce authoritative knowledge about our common reality and to be able to communicate it. The power relationships that endow scientific knowledge with its particular strength, obligate scientists in return to formulate precisely and inclusively.

In terms of gender-inclusive language, there are many simple ways to avoid the problems of the generic masculine and the assumption of a gender-binary in one's own language. The important thing is not to slavishly adhere to a cure-all rule, but to be clear about what you are doing when you are writing, and why you are writing this way and not another. The same is true for the effort to write in an anti-racist way. Here the central rule of thumb is to use self-identifiers rather than identifiers by others.

Three remarks are important to me on this point: first, especially when it comes to self-identifiers, there is no absolute consensus and no standstill—to question one's own use of language and to be ready to correct oneself or to be corrected is part of it. Secondly, the effort to use gender-sensitive and anti-racist language is not censorship or "political correctness". These right-wing polemical terms serve primarily to distract from racism and sexism. However, third, while language is significant (especially for us prolific writers), it is not the only thing that matters. So consider, especially in public statements or if, for example, you cannot address everything due to time constraints, what you want to address. Sometimes it is more important to fight for material resources than to argue about terminology—and sometimes it is just the other way around. In the end, it all comes down to judgment: to be generous where it is possible, critical where it is necessary, and willing to correct oneself in the exchange with others.

V. Conclusion

The advice in this "Survival Guide" is intended to make writing term papers easier for you, not to overwhelm you with expectations and make writing even more difficult than it may already be. On

[7]Thanks to Katharina Hoppe for the important pointers and examples!

that note, three pieces of advice in conclusion:

(1) Go ahead and just write—just don’t hand in the result in this form!

(2) Read!—and not just a lot of literature on the topic (that too) but observe how the authors of these articles and books write themselves. Are there style elements that you can adopt? Or are there, on the contrary, mannerisms that you want to avoid because they get on your nerves? Are there texts you find elegant and from which you can learn something about the structure of a good text?

(3) Discuss your work! Form study groups with your fellow students and exchange term papers to give and receive feedback. Few things are more helpful to seeing if a text is working or if there are still issues. And lastly: Accept the offers of your instructors to talk about the work again after the grading.