

Guidelines for structuring seminar papers and MA theses

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Introduction

You say what you are going to do + why and how you are going to do it

- What is your empirical case? Topic, time-frame, geographic focus
- What is your guiding question or hypothesis? A topic is not a research question, because you are not going to simply narrate or describe your case. Please make explicit what your overarching interest (Erkenntnisinteresse) is; this should be formulated in response to the existing research literature (filling a gap, taking a position in an ongoing debate, re-interpreting source material etc.) and/or certain theoretical debates and concepts (e.g. how helpful the concept of subalternity is in analyzing peasant protest; what actor network theory can contribute to our understanding of environmental knowledge etc.)
- Explain how you are going to proceed in order to answer your question. For shorter papers, you might rely mostly on research literature; for longer papers and especially for MA theses, make sure to briefly discuss your sources, their strengths and weaknesses.
- Use the Introduction to indicate what your main argument/results will be ("I argue that sharecropping arrangements in the US south differed greatly from those in South Africa because ...")
- State of the art/discussion of research literature (IMPORTANT): Issues to discuss are e.g. strengths, weaknesses, lacunae of the existing literature, bringing different debates together, re-visiting certain arguments and/or sources etc.

This does not mean dealing with *all* the literature connected to your topic; rather, make sure the discussion is geared towards your specific research question. Your literature discussion is hence selective, not exhaustive.

- Briefly explain the structure of your paper, that is, how you are going to proceed in order to approach your research question

Main part

You do what you just said you would do

- Structure the main part into clearly visible thematic sections, each presenting one step towards answering your guiding question. Your structure can be chronological and/or thematic. The overall style should be argumentative. Don't use too much scaffolding; max. two levels (i.e. one level of sub-sections, such as part 2.1) should do.
- Each paragraph is a (small) thematic unit; it consists of a main statement, which is further elaborated, illustrated, differentiated, substantiated etc. in the remaining part of the paragraph.
- In 99.9 percent of all cases, it is NOT advisable to start with a "context chapter". Rather, sketch the relevant historical context in broad strokes in the introduction and then go into detail in your thematic chapters, in conjunction with your analysis. Separating context and analysis usually leads to repetitions and weak results. The same holds true of theory and concepts. Aim for an integrated discussion rather than separate chapters.

Conclusion

You say what you did

- Summarize the findings resulting from the main part and state what larger conclusion you draw out of them. It may be a good idea to come back to the existing literature once again and point out how your paper has contributed to it. You can also use the conclusion to extend the scope of your paper (Ausblick), i.e. pointing to further research questions, but you certainly don't have to.

References

All statements that are not your own have to be referenced, except for established facts (e.g. dates when a certain president came into office; end of WWII etc.). References should be precise; if they only refer to one part of the sentence, insert the reference after that part. Also, for both direct and indirect quotations, provide the exact page number in the text you refer to.

Here are two ways of referencing:

- a) Footnotes: All references are included as footnotes. You can provide the full title upon first reference and use short forms (e.g. author name and abbreviated title) in subsequent references. Alternatively, you can use short forms throughout, if you provide a full bibliography in the end.
- b) Harvard style: You include the reference in the main text in the following format: (author's family name + publication year + page number): "The introduction of cash crops often interfered with food production (Isaacman 2013, 5-6)." Following this model, footnotes are only used for additional information that you don't want to include in the main text and for referencing archival material.

Bibliography

Please include a full bibliography in the end. You are not obliged to, however, if you already provided full references in the footnotes.

Please list all publications that you have referenced in your paper. If you read a publication in preparation of your paper but did not reference it in your text, do not include it in the bibliography.

I am okay with any form of referencing you come up with, as long as it's consistent and all the essentials are included. A reference must contain:

- Author name (family + initial(s))
- full title, including sub-title
- year of publication
- *if applicable*: title of journal including volume and issue number
- *if applicable*: title and editors of edited volume
- place of publication (not for journals)
- publisher name and place
- page numbers (for articles and chapters)

Examples:

Schneider, G. (2010) *Kommerzialisierung in Ghana. Kakau und so weiter*. New York: Geschichteverlag.

Schmidt, O. (2012) „Umweltschutz im kolonialen Ghana“, *Zeitschrift für Geschichte in Afrika* 13/2, pp. 3-15.

Meier, N. (1999) „Agrarmodernisierung und Staatsbildung in Tansania“, in: Müller, H. (ed.) *Die Modernisierung der Landwirtschaft nach dem Zweiten Weltkrieg*. New York: Geschichteverlag, pp. 5-17.

Some general remarks

- don't write about the past in the present tense – use the **past tense**!
- be restrictive with the use of direct quotations, but rather **use your own words**. This is particularly the case for quotations from research literature (less for original sources)
- do not conflate “**sources**” (= primary data) and research literature
- make sure your **paragraphs have a decent length** – short paragraphs make your thoughts seem unconnected (at least 2, but better 3-4 sentences to a paragraph)
- **plagiarism** often occurs out of negligence or lack of awareness, but nevertheless constitutes a serious offence.
- please consult the “**Toolkit for Students**” / “**Werkzeugkasten**” of the Department of History, which provides extremely useful information on all matters of writing a seminar paper! <https://dg.philhist.unibas.ch/en/studium/history-a-toolkit-for-students/>