

WRITING A TERM PAPER IN LITERARY STUDIES

This document is intended to help you on your way to successfully writing a term paper. The focus of this document is the conception of your term paper. For formal guidelines, consult the *ABCs of Style*. Study both thoroughly before beginning to work on your paper – and whilst working on it!

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THE STAGES OF WRITING A TERM PAPER

The following is a rough outline; there is no ultimate guide on how to proceed. In practice, these stages often overlap.

I. Thinking about a topic / brainstorming

Flick through the primary text(s) and select relevant passages. It can be useful to conduct first research at this point. Try to formulate a possible thesis statement.

II. Consult your instructor

Discuss your topic (and preliminary thesis statement) with your instructor. They can also help you if you have difficulties coming up with or narrowing down your topic.

III. Find suitable research literature and re-read your primary text(s)

Take notes of both secondary literature and your own thoughts pertaining to the text. Decide on the passages that you want to discuss. Organize your notes in the next step.

IV. (Preliminary) thesis statement and table of contents

You should by now know what you are writing about and what you will be arguing. Some writers need a detailed roadmap; others are better at organizing their thoughts while writing (note that the second approach will probably require more revision). It may be tempting to skip planning, but a detailed, thorough plan/expose/outline leads to a well-organized, focused paper.

V. Writing

Adjust your thesis statement and table of contents while writing if necessary.

VI. Revision

Thoroughly proof-read your paper and revise sections lacking in structure or coherence. Check if your paper adheres to the formal guidelines given in the *ABCs of Style* and correct all

mistakes. Be sure to give yourself enough time to take a break and read your paper from the reader's perspective.

VII. Submission

Include certificates of the Study Skills tutorials (*Proseminar*-level only) as well as the signed statement of non-plagiarism.

HOW TO FIND A TOPIC

The first thing to do when writing a term paper is to determine your topic. When searching for a topic for your term paper, consider the following aspects:

Useful Constraint

While it seems obvious that a term paper should deal with one (or more) primary texts and a specific topic for analysis (e.g. "Race in Toni Morrison's *Beloved*" or "Gender in C.P. Gilman's 'The Yellow Wallpaper'"), this linear approach (i.e. A = Text to B = Topic) is usually too broad in scope and tends to lead to very general research questions. Yes, race is an important aspect in the novels of Toni Morrison, and Gilman's short story "The Yellow Wallpaper" undoubtedly deals with issues of gender, but these are premises, not topics.

Scope and Scale

Often the most difficult aspect in finding a topic is not the selection of the primary materials in combination with a theory or theme, but to introduce an element of useful constraint into the topic that will both limit the scope of investigation while also allowing for a complex analysis. On average, term papers have a length of 12-20 pages. You can write entire book-length dissertations on the representation of race in the novels of Morrison and would still need to streamline your argument.

Be specific

It is therefore vital for a term paper to find a topic that is both open enough to actually invite investigation and granular enough to be adequately covered within the parameters of a term

paper (including introduction, theoretical section, analysis, and conclusion). Usually, this means: go smaller, not bigger. You are supposed to deal with a concrete textual example, while also reaching a high level of abstraction in your arguments. Abstraction is not the same as generalization.

Rather than claiming that “The Yellow Wallpaper” allows you to understand the situation of women in the late nineteenth century, consider the specific modalities of the text: the short story uses gothic tropes; is initially presented as a diary; revolves around secret and hidden texts; and is about a woman who “gets out,” but also ends up crawling around her bedroom. These specific instances are unique to the story and should be the primary focus of your analysis. To argue that the story is about misogyny or the disenfranchisement of women in a patriarchal society is certainly true, but also so glaringly obvious that it does not require further analysis. Instead, the analysis should focus on how *exactly* this *specific* text represents and deals with issues of sexism, power, agency, and resistance.

Form matters

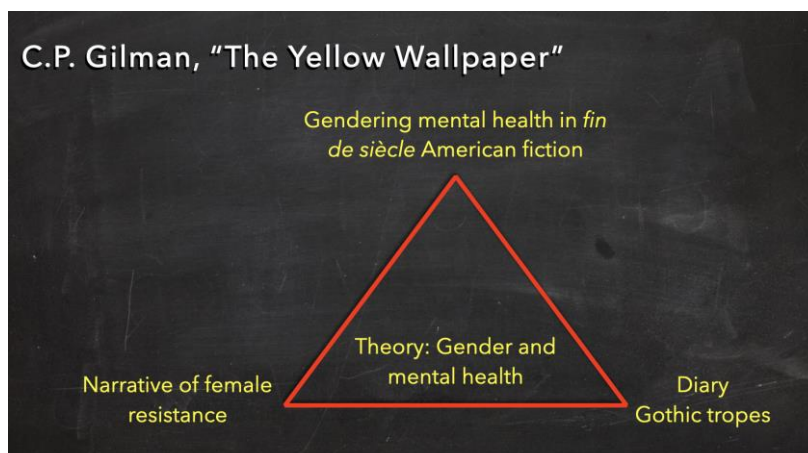
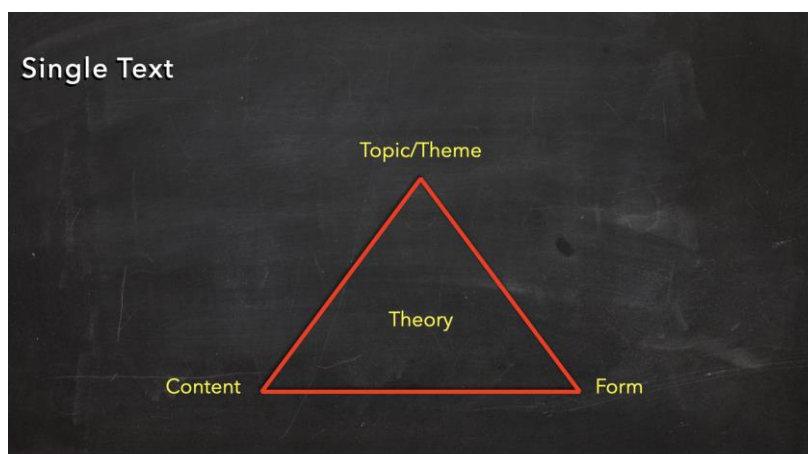
In this context, the form of the primary text (style, mode of narration, focalization etc.) is especially important for the particularity of the work in question. A literary analysis should never only focus on plot or characterization, but on form and context as well.

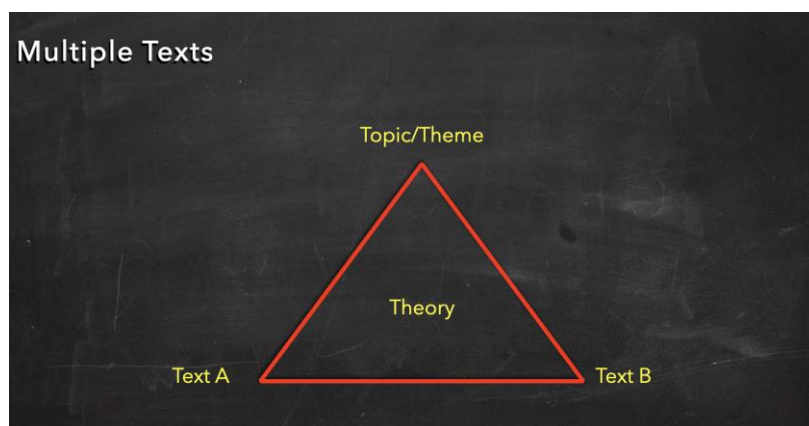
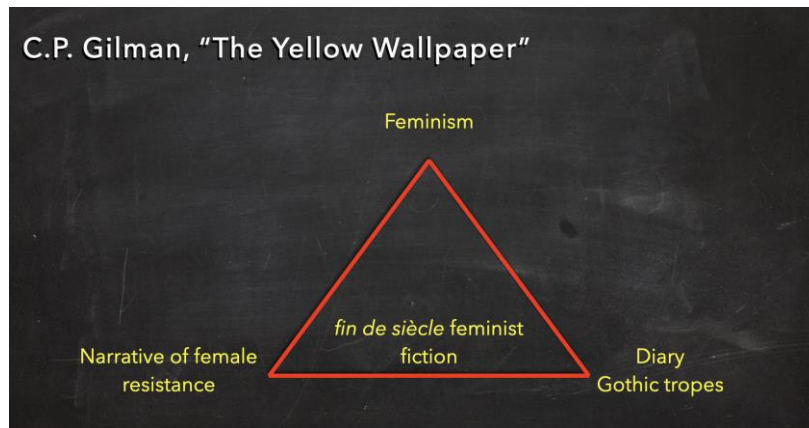
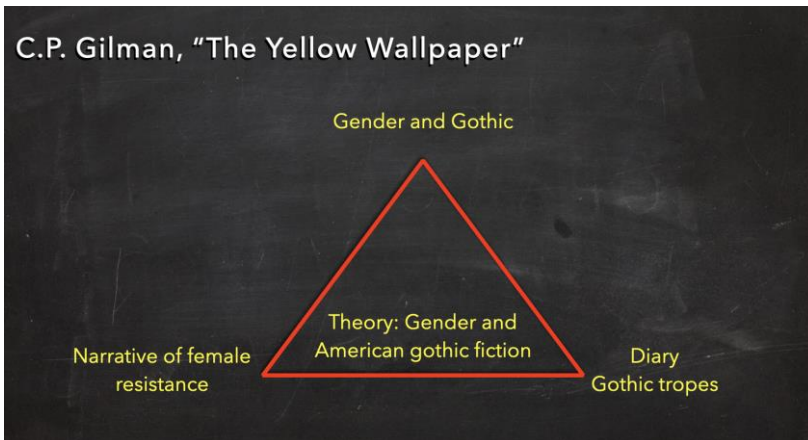
A good way to achieve a balance between abstraction and specificity is to think of your topic not in terms of a straight line (primary text - theme) but in terms of a triangle (e.g. primary text A - primary text B - theme; or: primary text A - theme A - theme B).

Triangulation

In the context of a term paper, triangulation means including a third component of analysis that will limit the scope of investigation *and* increase the complexity of the argument. Instead of deciding on a broad — and ultimately self-evident and uninteresting — topic like “Gender in ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’”, introduce a third (or even a fourth) element in your research. Such as: “Gender Norms and Gothic Tropes in ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’”, “Gendering Mental Health in ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’”, “Gender, Sentimentalism, and Female Resistance in ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’”, “Gender, Diary Writing, and Resistance in ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’” etc.

By triangulating your topic, you will also be able to research very specific secondary and theoretical materials and establish a much more relevant framework for your analysis. If, for example, the term paper is about “Gendering Mental Health in ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’” instead of “Gender in ‘The Yellow Wallpaper’”, you can research concrete academic literature on discourses of gender, mental health, and patriarchal medical practices in the late nineteenth century (i.e. the time in which the story was first published) rather than having to start by defining “gender” in general on 3-4 pages and then trying to make such a broad definition the basis of the analysis of the short story. Here are some examples for triangulating a topic:





HOW TO WRITE A THESIS STATEMENT

A good thesis statement is the foundation of a good research paper as well as of a successful oral exam. It informs the readers about how you will interpret the given material and it tells them what to expect from your paper. It already answers the questions that are raised in the paper and thus provides an interpretation of the text. While thesis statements can reference relevant theories, they should primarily reflect your position, evaluation, and interpretation of the sources. Note that the thesis statement is not the same as your topic. It is intended to be precise and informative, yet also as concise as possible. It is usually not longer than one or two sentences.

Criteria for a convincing thesis statement

The thesis statement should focus on one main argument which justifies discussion. It is not descriptive of the primary text(s) but considers the topic from an abstract, analytical point of view. Thesis statements are contestable; they cannot be answered with a simple yes or no. Your thesis statement should be tailored to reflect the scope of the paper. The thesis statement uses direct language and a focused, logical style. In your thesis statement, you take a stand and clearly assert your position. Therefore, it is always phrased as a statement, not as a question.

How to come up with a thesis

Writing a thesis statement is a process that requires a lot of work and thinking. Before you develop an argument on any topic, you need to work through the material thoroughly, collect and organize evidence, and consult secondary literature. Doing this work will help you to develop a “working thesis” that includes your basic idea and argument, but which will probably need adjustment during the writing process.

While it is necessary and helpful to write a thesis statement before you begin writing your paper, don't forget that your thesis might change during the course of working on your paper. Therefore, revisit the statement and reflect if it still matches the argument put forth in your paper.

Common problems and possible improvements

I. The non-thesis thesis

A thesis statement takes a position on an issue. It is different from simply stating your topic in that a thesis statement is not neutral. Besides the topic, it announces your argument.

Insufficient Thesis Statement: This paper is going to examine if Jane Eyre is a modern woman or not.

Better Thesis Statement: Despite its seemingly radical outline Charlotte Brontë's *Jane Eyre* reaffirms traditional gender roles by promoting the Victorian ideal of the Angel in the House while at the same time punishing female characters who step out of line.

II. The overly broad thesis

The thesis statement should be as precise as possible, and it should fit the scope of the paper. Besides selecting a smaller topic, you can narrow down your thesis by specifying the method or perspective, and by clearly delineating certain limits.

Insufficient Thesis Statement: The construction of space is important in literature dealing with immigration.

Better Thesis Statement: In Monica Ali's *Brick Lane*, the construction of space illustrates the personal development of the protagonist from a dependent, insecure immigrant to an independent woman.

III. The incontestable thesis

The thesis statement must be worthy of discussion and arguable. Therefore, it should represent a view that might be contested. Sometimes, however, thesis statements present arguments that are tautological or so universally accepted that there is no need for further discussion.

Insufficient Thesis Statement: Shakespeare's Hamlet hesitates.

Better Thesis Statement: Shakespeare's Hamlet hesitates because of an intellectual insecurity caused by the incompatibility of his Protestant education and the Catholic concept of purgatory.

THE SECTIONS OF A TERM PAPER

Your running text consists of 1) an introduction, (usually,) 2) a more theoretical section delineating central concepts or the framework upon which the analysis is based, 3) the analysis, and 4) a conclusion. Note that a separate theoretical section is not always required; usually, the further advanced a paper is, the more advisable such a section becomes. Adhere to guidelines and requirements based on your course and instructor.

The most conventional structure of a term paper follows the above order: 1) introduction; 2) theory chapter(s); 3) analysis, and 4) conclusion. In some cases, a less rigid structure merging especially sections 2 and 3 is advisable – consult your supervisor when in doubt.

Usually, your introduction and conclusion are listed as said; they are not given titles. However, choose thematic, conclusive titles for the chapters in your theory section and your analysis (instead of “theory” and “analysis”).

Exemplary chapters of a term paper:

1. Introduction
2. Black British Literature: Development and Concerns
 - 2.1 Black Britain in Perspective
 - 2.2 Black British Literature and Englishness Retold
3. Revising History: World War II and the Windrush Myth in *Small Island*
4. Remapping the Nation: Centre and Periphery in *Small Island*
5. Conclusion

Please note: the number of chapters for sections 2) and 3) may vary. You can divide your chapters into subchapters, but only include a sub-chapter (e.g. 2.1) if you have at least one further sub-chapter (e.g. 2.2). Matching aspects should be subsumed under one (sub-)chapter. Use chapters and sub-chapters to create structure and clarity, but refrain from an excessive number of sub-chapters as well as from too many hierarchical levels (for a regular term paper, one sub-level usually suffices). In general, a sub-chapter should comprise at least half a page. Do not start a sub-chapter immediately below the general chapter heading (e.g. 2), but insert at least one paragraph introducing the wider chapter. Make sure that your chapters follow logically upon one another and make your writing reflect this through smooth transitions between the different sections of your paper.

Your paper will profit substantially from being based on a good **thesis statement**. Like other academic papers, your term paper should present an argument to the academic community. Thus, the goal of your paper is to substantiate the thesis statement. Structuring your paper around the thesis statement will automatically enhance the **coherence** and **consistency** of your writing: all sections should make a point and contribute to the overall argument. Keep focused on your topic and thesis statement and do not digress into aspects marginally related but not relevant to your argument. Avoid redundancies (i.e. stating the same thing again and again), and do not contradict yourself in the course of your paper; in particular, do not deviate from your initial thesis statement in the course of your paper. This does not mean that you should glimpse over possible contradictions or controversial positions in the secondary and primary literature: instead, write in a differentiated manner and reflect on these.

The sections of your paper should comprise:

I. Introduction:

- Present the topic, thesis statement, approach, and argument. Refrain from simply listing both topic and thesis statement – “my thesis statement is: ...” – and weave them into the text instead, ideally pointing out the relevance of the topic and approach to the text(s).
- It can be useful to contextualize your topic (e.g. by situating it within academic discourse; through reference to current cultural, political, etc. issues; a pertinent quote or question; or historical contextualization).

- You may introduce central questions that will guide your writing.
- Briefly introduce the primary text(s) with regard to its overall themes and the topic of your paper.
- Provide an outline of your structure – show how you will approach your argument and which theory you will use to do so (i.e., rather than listing the chapter titles you should present your line of argumentation and the role of each chapter for this argumentation).
- An advanced paper can include a brief overview of the relevant research literature and prevailing positions within the field.

II. Theory Section

- All concepts and approaches you introduce should be relevant for your analysis.
- You should demonstrate a thorough understanding of the theoretical texts you consult; i.e., explain their core ideas in your own words, and do not rely on quotes to make a point for you, but analyze and discuss them (this means that paraphrases are often preferable over direct quotes; use the latter if the wording is particularly to the point).
- Engage critically with the research you consult, i.e. contextualize given positions and, if pertinent, point out inconsistencies or outdated assumptions.
- Make clear how your selected theory connects to your argument.

III. Analysis

- Provide a close reading of the primary text(s); i.e. *analyze* selected text passages (this begins with a detailed description of what is depicted and how it is depicted, using the adequate terminology) and *interpret* them (draw conclusions pertaining to the wider text and to your argument).
- A term paper does not require extensive plot summaries; a short contextualization of specific characters and scenes is absolutely sufficient (assume that your reader is familiar with the work(s) but has not read them recently).
- Provide sufficient quotes from the text(s) to illustrate your findings and analyze and interpret especially longer quotes thoroughly.
- Proceed in an analytical instead of descriptive manner: avoid reproduction of plot and consider the text(s) from an abstract angle instead (i.e., ask *how* and *why* rather than *what*).

- Use the concepts and approaches introduced in the theory section; this will also enhance the level of abstraction of your analysis.
- Consult and quote secondary literature either to support your argumentation or to invalidate claims through your own line of argument.
- Do not rely on biographical details of the author as evidence for your interpretation. (In general, such information is rarely relevant.)
- Generate coherence by basing the structure of your analysis upon your thesis statement, i.e. build up a larger argument instead of analyzing isolated aspects of the text without making the connection to your argument clear.
- Do not conduct an analysis (e.g. of formal features) if it is irrelevant to your argument!
- The analysis should make up the largest part of your paper.

IV. Conclusion

- Return to your thesis statement.
- Synthesize your main findings and consider them within a larger frame rather than summarizing them.
- In order to arrive at this level of abstraction, reflect on your findings. Ask yourself: what are their implications?; where in the field does this position my work and how have I contributed to the existing research?; how do my topic and findings resonate with a wider context (social, political, cultural, etc.)?
- It can be useful to consider the findings in the context of the primary text(s) and its concerns as a whole.
- You can point to areas for further inquiry or to other literary works marked by similar concerns.
- You can equally return to questions or concerns raised in your introduction.

TIPS FOR ACADEMIC WRITING

As mentioned above, a term paper or other academic writing is intended to present and defend a claim within an academic community. Your writing entails positioning your claim within an existing academic context or even an ongoing academic debate. In order to successfully engage

in this context, you must pay careful attention to both academic **conventions** and **register**, as well as **structure** and **style**.

Academic Writing Conventions

Engaging in academic discourse via writing requires that you follow the prescribed conventions. These are treated thoroughly in the *ABCs of Style: Manual of Style for Linguistics and Literary Studies*, and papers in literary studies are expected to adhere to the modified MLA formatting guidelines presented there.

In general, formatting and citation conventions vary depending on the type of work you are writing and your audience – this means that you may need to follow different conventions for different assignments. Always review and follow the specific guidelines for your course or provided by your instructor.

Academic Register

Academic writing is formal writing. This may differ significantly from other writing you may have done or texts you may have read during your studies or elsewhere.

In general, writing in an academic register necessitates avoiding:

- Slang and emotive language.
- Contractions (e.g. *don't/can't/won't* should be spelled out *do not/cannot/will not*).
- Inconsistent verb tenses and language use. Stick to either General American or British English.
- Pronouns like *I, you, we*, etc. – keep writing impersonal. Depending on your instructor, the first person pronoun may be used to avoid artificial and overly-complicated phrasing.
- Sweeping generalizations – use references to support your points and be aware that your claim may be the subject of some debate.
- Overreliance on quotations or sources – don't copy huge chunks of text or expect the quotes you do use to speak for themselves.
- Charged language – academic writing should be emotionally neutral. Refrain from personal value judgments or evaluations.

The following can be helpful:

- Use present tense throughout when discussing a literary text.
- When writing in English, active constructions are preferable over passive constructions.
- Keep your writing clear and concise: avoid overly complex phrasing and obscure vocabulary.
- Observations should be formulated to the point and be pertinent to the topic and text. Avoid vague phrasing such as *in many ways...*, *it is very important...*, etc. Refrain from universalizing reflections on the human condition.
- If you reproduce discriminatory discourse for the purpose of analysis, be sure to mark it as quoted material. Be sensitive towards marginalized groups and the impact of your language choices.
- Make sure you're applying correct and adequate terminology.
- Provide clear support and evidence for your claims. Avoid tautological phrasing and argumentation, such as supporting a claim by re-stating it.

Structure & Style

Within the overarching organization of your paper, presented above, the structure and style of your writing influence how effectively you can develop and support your thesis. In an effective academic paper, the writing flows smoothly from one idea to the next, from paragraph to paragraph, allowing the reader to understand and hopefully be persuaded by your argument.

Structure generally refers to the organization of writing at a smaller scale, such as within sections or chapters, or more specifically, at the paragraph level. Some general tips for effective paragraph structure are:

- Each paragraph should be centered around one point/sub-point, which should be stated at the beginning in some kind of topic sentence.
- While there are no hard and fast rules for how long a paragraph should be, they should never be one sentence or longer than one full page.
- Use some evidence from an outside source, such as a quote or paraphrase, to support your point, but this should be a small percentage of the paragraph. Most of the text should be your own writing and ideas.
- Explain any source evidence you provide and why or how it supports your argument.

- End with a sentence that restates the point(s) you've just made and/or provides a connection to what comes next.

There are several templates or guides to paragraph structure which you may find helpful when starting out writing. They can be utilized to ensure that you are not forgetting an important structural component or to help check paragraphs which seem too long or too short. Over time, however, you will develop your own strategies for structuring paragraphs, and they do not have to follow a specific formula as long as all the necessary elements are there.

One such template is the PIES model for paragraphs. PIES stands for Point, Information, Example + Explanation, and Summary. Effective paragraphs should include each of these, generally in this order.

- Point – each paragraph should begin with your analysis of an idea (sub-point of your thesis) stated through a clear topic sentence.
- Information – a group of follow-up sentences which explain the idea and show its importance or relevance should follow; you may also provide any necessary information needed to better understand the point being made.
- Example + Explanation – use a specific example, quote, or paraphrase to support your point and 'show' the reader what you mean; do not forget to explain how and why this example or illustration supports the point presented at the beginning of the paragraph.
- Summary – summarize the point you've just made and connect it back to a larger point within the whole section or chapter and/or your central claim (thesis statement).

The term *style* represents the linguistic choices you make as a writer in order to develop the **coherence** and consistency of your argument. Coherence or cohesion in writing means that the ideas flow smoothly from one to the next, with clear connections and little confusion of the reader. This can be achieved through the use of specific grammatical structures and guiding language.

Guiding language, or signposting, is used to help readers follow ideas and remember the points you have made as well as how they are connected. These can be full sentences or single words

or phrases. While these are helpful in connecting your argument and building cohesion, be careful not to overuse them.

Conjunctions, linking expressions, and transitional phrases are one type of guiding language, and can be used both within and between paragraphs to develop coherence. These words and phrases are introduced in detail in the coursebook for ANG 201 Foundation Course, MyGrammarLab Advanced Unit 13, pp. 254-269. They are also reviewed and practiced regularly within the essay writing and academic writing courses.