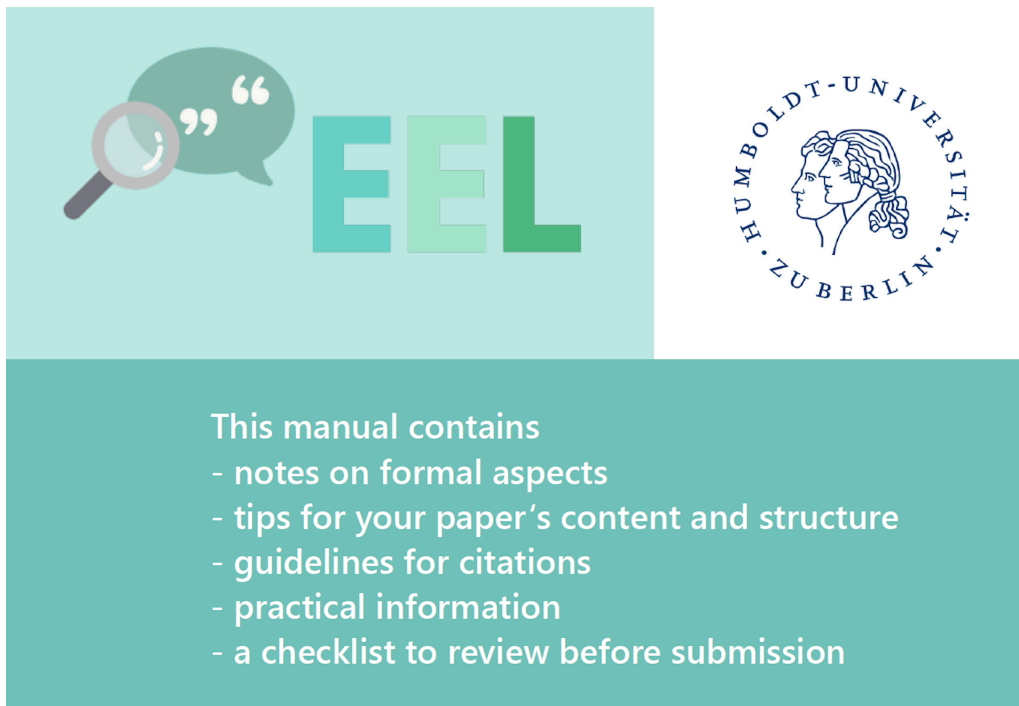


Term Papers and Theses in Linguistics: Guidelines and Recommendations*

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Abstract

These guidelines offer a concise yet thorough resource tailored to students preparing linguistics term papers and theses. Emphasising the formal aspects of scholarly writing, they meticulously cover facets such as the presentation of evidence, adherence to proper citation practices, and the maintenance of a consistent writing style. Within the content section, students receive guidance on defining research topics, formulating precise questions, and ensuring cohesive paper organisation. The document also outlines practical steps for both term papers and theses, including essential deadlines and a streamlined inquiry process. With a dedicated focus on clarity and strict adherence to guidelines, these recommendations strive to enhance the overall quality of students' academic writing.

For continuous improvement of this document, comments are more than welcome!

*I would like to thank Johanna David for her support in creating the first version of the document, as well as many other students for sharing their experience with writing their BA theses.

Important note

Compose your term paper or thesis in accordance with the specifications of your study programme in the examination regulations (Prüfungsordnung) and the conventions of the subject area. In the following, we offer guidelines and recommendations for term papers or theses in linguistics.

1 Formal aspects

Consistency is crucial in academic writing, so it is important to maintain uniform formatting. Please adhere to the following formal requirements.

1.1 General formatting

- margins: 2.5 cm on all sides
- font and font size: Times New Roman (12 pt.), Arial (11 pt.), Calibri (11 pt.)
- font size in footnotes: 10 pt.
- line spacing: 1.5 for the main text, 1.0 for footnotes
- alignment: justified (Blocksatz)

1.2 Title page

Every term paper or thesis should include a title page with the following details:

- university and institute name
- seminar title and semester
- instructor's name
- title and subtitle of the paper
- author's name, address, and email
- student ID (Matrikelnummer)
- submission date

1.3 Table of contents

Each bachelor's or master's thesis should have a table of contents, listing the section headings with page numbers (e.g., 1, 1.1, 1.2, etc.); a table of contents is optional for a term paper. Page numbering starts with the first text page.

It is, moreover, important to note that the discovery of plagiarism in an academic paper will result in a negative evaluation. You also need to include a declaration of authenticity ('Eidesstattliche Erklärung') when handing in your paper, see this template.

2 Content

2.1 Research topics, questions, methods

Creating a **research question** is a critical first step in your term paper or thesis. Follow these steps:

1. Review literature: Start with a thorough review of existing literature in your field of interest. A seminar in higher modules provides an ideal opportunity to gain an overview of the literature on a specific topic or research area, and thus, can be used for term papers and as inspiration for finding a thesis topic.
2. Identify gaps or puzzles: Find unanswered questions in the literature for your research question. As linguists work with data, these questions can target old data that are still under debate or new data that are puzzling. Note: We do not expect undergraduate or graduate students to fully address research gaps or puzzles at this stage. Rather, the goal is to systematically present and discuss these issues based on the literature.
3. Focused question: Narrow down your research focus to 1-2 precise and focused research questions. If you are unsure about which question to choose, feel free to seek guidance during your instructor/supervisor's office hours.

Thesis example 1: Johanna's BA thesis

"In my BA thesis (David 2022), I conducted a theoretical examination of multiple modals in Jamaican Creole (e.g., *mait(a) kyan* 'may/might can'). I established my theoretical framework by drawing on semantic work and concepts related to language contact. I explored the general features of Jamaican Creole modals and delved into the function of multiple modals. Additionally, I analysed modals in source languages, which included varieties of English and Kwa languages, with a focus on select semantic features and clausal structures in multiple modal constructions. In the conclusion, I consolidated my findings and highlighted areas for further research within this context. In essence, my thesis is theoretical rather than corpus-based or experimental, involving a survey of pertinent linguistic research."

In the context of term papers, your method will most likely be theoretical, i.e. a survey of an area or phenomenon using linguistic theory; with BA and MA/MEd theses, you can choose between a survey (i.e., systematic and critical reviews of a specific field, see David 2022; Meyer 2024; Choma 2025), a corpus-based (see Krüger 2026; Neustädt 2025) or experimental (see Rohloff 2025) study and other options. Make sure to consider how much time your chosen methods will take and assess whether it is a feasible endeavour with your instructor/supervisor.

Thesis example 2: Nicole's BA thesis

“In my BA thesis (Meyer 2024), I conducted a cross-linguistic survey study on the first language acquisition of polarity-sensitive items (PSIs), focusing primarily on the acquisition of negative polarity items (NPIs, e.g. ‘any’ in ‘There are not any pens left’). To address the research question ‘How do children with diverse language backgrounds acquire polarity items and specifically their distributional restrictions in their first language?’, I compared and analysed four studies examining children’s acquisition processes of PSIs in English, Dutch, Mandarin and German. These findings were then used to discuss the feasibility of potential solutions to the learnability problem that the existence of PSIs poses. I concluded the thesis by answering the research question and emphasising the key findings.”

Thesis example 3: Jules' BA thesis

“In my BA thesis (Rohloff 2025), I conducted an experimental study in English on a pragmatic phenomenon called ‘conditional perfection’ (CP) where a bare conditional statement (‘if p, q’) receives a bi-conditional interpretation (‘if and only if p, q’). I examined whether different types of conditional promises depending on whether or not the hearer has control over the condition (e.g., ‘If you mow the lawn/If I have cash, I’ll give you 5 dollars’) generate different rates of CP. Alongside this, a semantic influence on CP was tested, as previous research had shown that conditionals using ‘only if’ favour CP readings. The findings show that promises with hearer control generate more CP, but this effect is weaker than the lexical factor of ‘only’. Overall, the study shows how comprehenders process conditionals and how this can be subject to different influences.”

Thesis example 4: Zuzanna's BA thesis

“In my BA thesis (Choma 2025), I explored Negative Concord (NC, e.g., *I don't know nothing* ‘I don't know anything’) from both grammatical and sociolinguistic perspectives in English and cross-linguistically. I established my framework by distinguishing between double negation (DN) and NC systems, analyzing typological variation across strict NC languages (e.g., Polish), non-strict NC languages (e.g. French), and DN languages (e.g. German), while also showing how these systems can coexist within a single language (e.g., English). Furthermore, I analyzed the sociolinguistic status of NC in English varieties, drawing on experimental evidence on perception and production patterns. Finally, I explored pedagogical implications for teaching English negation to learners from different L1 backgrounds, examining potential transfer effects and proposing classroom strategies that integrate linguistic variation. The thesis combines grammatical analysis with sociolinguistic perspectives and demonstrates how these insights can inform language pedagogy in multilingual contexts.”

Thesis example 5: Linus's BA thesis

“In my BA thesis (Krüger 2026), I conducted a qualitative corpus-based study on the modal verb *will* in U.S. presidential inaugural addresses from 1789 to 2025. The study examined occurrences of *will* in a corpus of inaugural speeches to analyse its semantic and pragmatic functions, with particular attention to epistemic, volitional, and deontic interpretations. Drawing on established linguistic frameworks, I investigated how modal meaning interacts with subject type, predicate semantics, and discourse context. The analysis showed that *will* is used predominantly as an epistemic modal expressing confident expectation, while volitional readings are closely associated with first-person subjects and deontic interpretations remain rare and arise through pragmatic implicature. By working with authentic political speeches, the study was able to trace patterns in the use of modal verbs and examine their rhetorical significance. The conclusion consolidates these findings and suggests that modal meaning emerges from the interaction of grammatical and contextual factors, offering directions for further research on modality in political language.”

Thesis example 6: Nic's MEd thesis

“In my MEd thesis (Neustädt 2025), I studied grammatical and register errors made by Russian L1 learners of English. I used data from the Russian Error-Annotated Learner English Corpus (REALEC) to identify and classify recurring error patterns in learner writing across different proficiency levels. I combined quantitative frequency analysis with qualitative examination of selected examples to investigate how cross-linguistic differences between Russian and English shape learner interlanguage. I focused on article use as a morphosyntactic domain and register variation as an aspect of pragmatic and sociolinguistic competence. The analysis was informed by theoretical frameworks from contrastive linguistics, error analysis, and second language acquisition research. The corpus-based approach enabled a systematic investigation of real learner data, revealing both transfer-related and developmental sources of error. The thesis concludes by discussing the pedagogical implications of these findings and by outlining directions for future research on learner language and instructional practice.”

2.2 Structure

Your thesis/term paper should consist of the following parts:

- introduction
 - highlights the relevance to the linguistic research field
 - derives the research question logically
 - provides a roadmap of the paper
- theoretical background
 - clearly describes theoretical notions relevant to the topic
 - formulates the research question and hypothesis precisely, derived from existing research and theory
- main content
 - describes linguistic methods (e.g. experimental, theoretical) applied to the topic
 - applies chosen methods appropriately to analyse the research question

- reports the main findings (i.e. those relevant for the research question) and possible secondary findings

- general discussion

- interprets main results in relation to the research question (confirms/rejects the hypothesis)
- discusses secondary findings
- identifies the limitations and scope of the study

- conclusion

- draws conclusions and integrates them back into the theoretical framework

The C-C-C (Context-Content-Conclusion) rule offers valuable guidance for structuring your paper at every level, from paragraphs or sections to chapters and even the entire document, see the work of Mensh and Kording (2017) for details.

2.3 Citations

First and foremost, avoid predatory publications: use the scientific literature from the courses you have taken, and what the lecturers recommended. Regarding the use of internet sources, it should be noted that pages without identifiable authors, such as Wikipedia etc., must be strictly avoided. Typically, there are enough scientifically recognised and verified publications available on a given topic. Check with the lecturers and supervisors if you are unsure.

In linguistics, we typically employ the American or online citation style, which involves placing the source reference directly after a quotation or evidence. Unlike other fields, we do not use footnotes or citation styles like MLA (English Language & Literature). Instead, linguists use citation styles such as APA (American Psychological Association), for which instructions are provided in the following sections.¹

2.3.1 Direct quotation

If you use verbatim quotes containing 3 or more words, you have to indicate this as follows:

Citation example 1: direct quotation

A creole is “a restructured variety of its lexifier” (Mufwene 2001: 28).

Note: Longer verbatim quotations (more than three lines) are set apart from the main text (indentation,

¹There are alternative citation styles such as the Generic Style Rules for Linguistics of the MPI for Evolutionary Anthropology, or the Unified Style Sheet for Linguistics Journals of the Linguistic Society of America. Both documents contain guidelines for citation as well as formatting.

smaller font size). Avoid using too many direct quotations; aim for paraphrasing in your own words as often as possible!

2.3.2 Providing evidence

You have to indicate publication(s) and sometimes also page number(s) when you paraphrase information taken from a reliable source (see section 2.3 for how to identify reliable sources).

Strictly avoid expressions such as “some researchers hold that...” without specifying where you found that piece of information!

Citation example 2: providing evidence

An essential factor distinguishing between the minds of humans and other animals lies in “our uniquely human ability to ‘bootstrap’.” (Carey 2004: 59).

Additionally, ensure the consistent numbering of your linguistic examples and provide a precise source for each. If you undertake translations or make any modifications, indicate this in a footnote.

2.3.3 How to structure your references list

In the context of academic writing, it is crucial to correctly compile your bibliography. As part of this process, you are required to alphabetically arrange it based on the family names of authors/editors, and present it as demonstrated below. This task can be demanding, but it is fundamental for upholding academic integrity and ensuring transparency. Refer to Table 1 and the list of references on the next pages for examples.

As HU students, you have access to helpful programmes such as Citavi, which can assist you in this task and ensure the accuracy in the bibliography.

2.3.4 A brief note on using AI

If pre-trained generative transformers, such as ChatGPT, are permitted by the examiner, it is important to know how to use them. Here are a few rules to bear in mind:

- When using IT/AI-based tools, you have to transparently list them, including the product name, source (e.g., URL), details of the functions used, and the extent of their use.
- Do not write a whole term paper or thesis using AI; we will be able to tell by the lack of depth and there is, moreover, software to check if a large chunk of a given text is AI-generated.

²Prepare your term paper or thesis using software such as Word or a similar tool, and submit the final document in PDF format. Alternatively, if you prefer LaTeX, contact me for access to templates at mingya.liu@hu-berlin.de.

- Overall, you should see AI more as a starting point to help you brainstorm, rather than the writer of your term paper.

2.3.5 Glossing conventions

When it comes to glossing conventions in English-language papers, you have to accurately present linguistic examples from varieties of English or other languages including German. Ensure there is adequate spacing between individual words so that readers can easily match glosses with specific words or morphemes. Use standard abbreviations such as ‘3SG’ for third-person singular or ‘MOD’ for modal. To format these abbreviations correctly (in Word), press CTRL+D and select the ‘small caps’ or ‘Kapitälchen’ option. The key here is to maintain consistency in your usage of abbreviations throughout your paper and avoid switching between different ones. Please refer to the Leipzig Glossing Rules for details.

Glossing examples

- (1) þæt he scolde beieton him
COMP he.NOM should obtain him.DAT
þone mynstre of
DET.ACC monastery.ACC of
Burch.
peterborough
‘That he should obtain for him the
monastery of Peterborough.’
(Old English, De Bastiani and Hinterhölzl 2020: 2)
- (2) An gen Bier yiyang gao.
Ann as Bill same tall
‘Ann is as tall as Bill.’
(Mandarin Chinese, Sun 2022: 3)

3 Practical information: timeline and steps

General remark: Make sure to consult your **Prüfungsordnung**. If you would like to write either a term paper or a thesis under my supervision, it is recommended to follow these guidelines.²

3.1 Term papers

If you are taking a course with me and consider writing a term paper on a related topic, you should schedule meetings with me during the teaching period. These meetings aim to align our understanding of your research interests and offer guidance if needed. I kindly recommend the following timeline:

type of source	example
monographs	Chomsky, N. (1965). <i>Aspects of the Theory of Syntax</i> . Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press.
edited volumes/collections	Csipak, E., Eckardt, R., Liu, M. and Sailer, M. (Eds.) (2013). <i>Beyond ‘Any’ and ‘Ever’: New Explorations in Negative Polarity Sensitivity</i> . Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter Mouton.
journal articles	Smith, J. (2002). Negative concord in the old and new world: evidence from Scotland. <i>Language Variation and Change</i> , 13(2), 109-134.
chapters in edited volumes/collections	Ameka, F. K. & Kropp Dakubu, M. E. (2008). Introduction. In Ameka, F. K. & Kropp Dakubu, M. E. (Eds.). <i>Aspect and Modality in Kwa Languages</i> . Amsterdam; Philadelphia: John Benjamins, 1-8.
online publications (e.g., corpora, tools of data analysis)	Leipzig Corpora Collection (2008). English newspaper corpus based on material from 2008. Leipzig Corpora Collection. Dataset. https://corpora.uni-leipzig.de?corpusId=eng_news_2008 . Retrieved 07 January 2024. R Core Team (2021). R: A language and environment for statistical computing. R Foundation for Statistical Computing, Vienna, Austria. https://www.R-project.org/ .

Table 1: Types of sources and how to reference them

Winter term:

- express your interest in writing a term paper with me by mid-December
- schedule a meeting by the end of January so that we can talk about specifics

Summer term:

- express your interest by late May
- schedule a meeting by the end of June

- what linguistic courses you have taken so far and what linguistic courses in which semester you have taken under my instruction,
- 1-2 possible topics in order of preference, each with a short reference list of 1-2 papers, and
- a preliminary time plan (i.e., when you will have all the requirements fulfilled, when you plan to start, write, and submit the thesis, and when you will need the grade).

3.2 Theses

If you are looking for a topic and supervisor for your bachelor’s or master’s thesis, the first step is to check the essential information available on our department’s website, including a list of potential supervisors.

If you are considering the possibility of pursuing your thesis under my supervision, please submit an inquiry via email with the subject line “**inquiry for thesis supervision - your full name**” and the following details:

- what subjects you study and in which semester,

3.3 Checklist

The following checklist is designed to assist you in evaluating the readiness of your paper for submission.

- make sure your structure adheres to the one given in section 2.2
- correct bibliography and citation style
- consistency in font size and style
- linguistic examples are numbered consistently
- check your grammar and spelling (have your paper or thesis proofread by a friend or a native speaker!)
- Eidesstattliche Erklärung

References

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