

**Public Economics Unit**  
(Prof. Dr. Ivo Bischoff)

## **Guidelines for Term Papers and Final Theses<sup>1</sup>**

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See also:

Guidelines for the formal design of seminar, bachelor or master theses  
at the Institute of Economics

<https://www.uni-kassel.de/fb07/en/ivwl/information-desk/guidelines-for-the-formal-design-of-seminar-bachelor-or-master-theses>

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<sup>1</sup> The text is based on a draft which has first and foremost been compiled by Max Albert and is provided by colleagues from Gießen University in 2010. We cordially thank our colleagues for the original draft.

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## 1. Introductory remarks

In a thesis or term paper, students are expected to develop and demonstrate their capability of conducting an academic study on their own. For theses written with the Public Economics Unit, we expect students to take a distinctly economic approach to their topic. This requires them to make use of and present theoretical models and/or econometric studies in a sophisticated way. Even for topics that do not seem to be economic in nature, students are expected to analyse them from a specifically economic perspective. Students who conduct their own piece of empirical research are expected to apply adequate methods.

These guidelines describe the criteria that the Public Economics Unit applies when evaluating and grading a term paper or thesis. The guidelines also refer to further readings, e.g., on how to develop an outline and on the process of academic writing.

**For the formal requirements (e.g. regarding citations, formatting etc.) as well as for guidance on the search and use of literature and other sources of information, students must refer to the Guidelines for the formal design of seminar, bachelor or master theses at the Institute of Economics (see homepage of the institute <https://www.uni-kassel.de/fb07/en/ivwl/information-desk/guidelines-for-the-formal-design-of-seminar-bachelor-or-master-theses> ).**

Unless stated otherwise in specific documents issued by the Public Economics unit (e.g. outlines of seminars), the guidelines of the Institute of Economics apply to all papers and theses supervised at the Public Economics Unit.

## 2. Evaluation Criteria

This chapter describes essential criteria used to evaluate term papers and theses. We suggest to use it as checklist to assess the quality of your paper/thesis and identify possible shortcomings.

A (very) good paper must convince in the following categories:

1. It is based on a rich body of literature . Without such a basis, it is not possible to write a good paper (“Garbage in, garbage out”).
2. It follows a clear, comprehensible and coherent outline appropriate for the chosen topic. Especially for non-empirical papers or theses, its structure is a central criterion.
3. It demonstrates that the author understands the relevant concepts of economics and, if applicable, of neighboring disciplines and can apply them to the problem addressed in the paper. Evidence is provided by presenting the central concepts (theories/empirical analyses) accurately and in scientifically sophisticated manner. The main arguments are presented in sophisticated lines of reasoning that center on the behavior and/or interaction of agents („Show, don’t tell“).
4. It is written in a style appropriate for a scientific paper. The language is precise, differentiated and factual. The chains of argumentation are comprehensible and economically substantial. This includes an appropriate delineation of paragraphs (Rule: one thought – one paragraph).
5. Empirical studies are conducted and documented in appropriate form. They apply appropriate methods and discuss their limitations.

Weaknesses in the above categories affect the grade negatively. A paper that has significant shortcomings in one or more of the above categories cannot be graded good or very good. Serious deficiencies – especially in category 3 – will result in the grade 5.0 (failed).

Furthermore, the following applies:

- Compliance with formal rules regarding front size, line spacing, formatting of tables and bibliography, design of the cover page, etc. does not make a good term paper/thesis. At the same time, students cannot receive a good grade if there are significant deficiencies in this regard.
- Significant violations of the rules of good scientific conduct will result in a grade of 5.0 – regardless of the quality of the work in other categories. This applies in particular to plagiarism (see section 3.2).
- The overall grade does not result additively from the degree of fulfillment of the above criteria. Rather, the quality of the paper or thesis as a whole also plays a role.

- If the paper or thesis deals with a very challenging/complex topic, the evaluation will be lenient with minor deficiencies in the passages that deal with particularly complicated concepts.
- Additional evaluation criteria may arise in some cases from the nature of the topic chosen and from the assignments agreed upon with the supervisor.
- Creativity (in terms of presentation, analysis, hypothesis, etc.) is appreciated. This is especially true for the final thesis (Bachelor/Master). Here we honor the attempt to make one's own contribution to the scientific literature (e.g., through an empirical study, experiment etc.).

## **2.1 The use of literature and data sources**

- The paper is based on a sufficiently large number of scientifically sophisticated sources relevant to the subject matter.<sup>2</sup>
- The paper covers all relevant threads of literature.
- Each section is based on several sources.
- All main statements, ideas and facts are backed by adequate sources. This does not apply to the author's (i.e. student's) own ideas and conclusions.
- The paper does not only rely on data described in the secondary literature but also utilizes data from primary sources (e.g. official statistical bureaus, OECD, IMF, World Bank,....).

## **2.2 Structure and outline**

- The paper has a clear structure. This becomes visible when looking at the outline.
- The paper follows an independent conceptual design rather than just lining up pieces of information taken from the literature.
- The introduction states one clear research question (in exceptional cases, it may be more than one) and motivates it. The question is narrowed down to a degree that is manageable within the paper or thesis.
- The introduction describes the further proceeding in an understandable way.
- The paper uses paragraphs and (sub-)sections in a meaningful way.
  - The main body consists of several sections and subsections arranged in a meaningful order. Important guidance for creating an outline is provided by the Purdue Online Writing Lab (full bibliography, see Section 4).

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<sup>2</sup> What is considered a sufficient number of sources depends on the topic of the paper and its scope.

- If subsections are used, there must be at least two subsections within the subdivided section (i.e., a section 1.1 also implies a section 1.2).
- Structure the text using paragraphs. The rule of thumb for forming a paragraph is: *one thought = one paragraph*. Each paragraph consists of a so-called topic sentence followed by several supporting sentences. Gilett et al. (2009, pp. 99-110) and Macgilchrist (2014, pp. 13-15) provide helpful guidelines on writing paragraphs.
- At the end of the paper (and only there), the author presents his/her conclusion. This conclusion is backed by arguments laid out in the preceding sections .

### 2.3 Content

- All main aspects relevant to the topic are covered.
- The paper covers the relevant (theoretical) concepts in sufficient clarity and depth.
- Wherever adequate, formal expressions, figures, tables etc. (from the literature) are used to back the arguments.
- All main arguments/conclusions made in the paper are developed carefully rather than just stated (Show, don't tell!).
- Whenever different approaches and/or contradictory arguments or results occur, these are discussed carefully, in detail and in a fair/neutral way.
- Tables, figures etc. presented in the main text are also discussed there.
- If necessary, the author develops new graphs or tables to illustrate important points more clearly than this can be done in a purely verbal account.
- The text introduces the reader to the institutional background necessary to understand the analysis. This background is presented in a concise and precise way.
- The same applies to the empirical background of the paper or thesis.
- The paper or thesis sticks to the main course of argumentation. It does not contain superfluous or irrelevant passages.
- The main technical terms are defined.
- The paper or thesis satisfies the following rule of thumb regarding the question what background knowledge the author can expect the typical reader to have: *A good student - having the same academic level as the author yet lacking specific knowledge on the topic of the paper - must be able to understand the paper without referring to other sources.*

## **2.4 Use of language**

- The paper uses factual language.
- Normative positions and opinions are clearly marked. This applies to views of the authors as well as views found in the literature.
- Language is used as a precise tool. Chains of cause and effect and lines of argumentation are presented correctly and with precision.
- The author develops his/her own style. Disruptions in style are an indication that the paraphrases are too close to the text in the original sources.
- The paper is fluent to read.

## **2.5 Formal aspects**

- The paper complies with the formal guidelines of the Institute of Economics and the supplementary rules below.
- Tables, figures etc. from literature and own research are reproduced individually and adapted to their specific purpose in the paper whenever possible.
- Mistakes in grammar, spelling, and the use of vocabulary are rare.
- References in the text and the list of references are presented in a uniform style that follow scientific standards.

### **3. Formal regulation – supplement to the guidelines of the Institute of Economics**

#### **3.1 Length of the main text**

- Bachelor theses should typically cover 8.000 words, Master theses 10.000 words. A tolerance of  $\pm 10\%$  is acceptable.
- The appropriate length of term papers may differ from seminar to seminar. Please see the material provided in class.
- Figures and tables presented in the text are not subject to the word limit above, nor are the title page, the table of contents, the list of references, the appendix and affidavit. The above word limit applies only to the passages of text in the main body of the paper.

#### **3.2 Good scientific conduct and plagiarism**

Papers and theses must comply with the rules of good scientific conduct. We strongly advise to make yourself familiar with these rules (in case you have not done so yet).

Throughout the entire paper, you must indicate and mark any thoughts, paraphrases and quotations in your academic paper or thesis taken from other sources with a reference to those sources. It will be regarded as an attempt to defraud, if you use thoughts, parts of sentences or even whole sentences by other authors without referring to the original source. Translations must be treated as quotations or paraphrases. We particularly advise you against using internet sources without marking them as quotations. We frequently use specialized software to detect violations of the rules of good scientific conduct – especially plagiarism.



## 4. The process of writing

Writing a term paper or a thesis requires time and considerable effort. The process of writing is an evolutionary process in which the final paper develops over time. Students are strongly advised to start writing very early. Only then will they have enough time for a sufficient number of rounds of critical revision necessary to write a good paper.

Understanding the process of writing and its pitfalls is essential to write good papers and theses. Students are strongly advised to consult literature on or take courses in academic writing before they write their first term paper.

Among many others, the following publications are helpful:

Gillett, A., Hammond, A., and Martala, M. (2009). *Successful Academic Writing*. Edinburgh: Pearson Education.

Macgilchrist, F. (2014). *Academic writing*. Paderborn: UTB Ferdinand Schöningh.

Purdue Online Writing Lab. (n.d.). Developing an outline Purdue Online Writing Lab. [https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general\\_writing/the\\_writing\\_process/developing\\_an\\_outline](https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/general_writing/the_writing_process/developing_an_outline) [last accessed September 1, 2022]

The supervisor serves as contact person and helps with questions with regard to the content of your paper/thesis. Students preparing a Bachelor or Master thesis are advised to discuss the preliminary outline of their thesis once one third of the processing time has passed.