

How to write a term paper

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In writing a term paper, your job is present a coherent **analysis** of and **argument** about one or more 'primary text(s)', either treated in class or connected to the topic of the seminar. Depending on the type of seminar, these primary texts can be anything from literary texts (poems, plays, narrative texts), essays, newspaper articles to visual 'texts' like illustrations, caricatures, paintings or films.

Coming up with a topic

I want you to write about something that interests **you** – that is why I don't hand out lists of possible paper topics. What aspects did you find interesting or annoying or disturbing or funny or strange in the text you read for the seminar? This might be a good starting point for deciding on the topic of your paper. Typically, you will examine the treatment of a specific motif or theme in the primary text (or texts). Examples of such motifs, themes or 'topics' could be

- gender roles / manliness / womanliness
- heroism
- race / racism / otherness
- class / social relationships
- parody / intertextuality / adaptation
- interpersonal relationships (love, kinship, generations...)
- power structures, political systems
- education / knowledge / science
- generating / manipulating the reader's sympathy
- truth / truths / irony
- ...

Important: It is your job to **analyse** the primary text, not only to describe it!

- ➔ What are the politics of representing the given topic, its implications? What function does the topic serve for the text? What does the text 'say' about the given topic? Does it present a clear position or is it ambiguous? How does that position compare to 'mainstream views' of the time?

Example:

You want to examine female gender roles in a given text.

➔ Things you might want to look at include:

- How important are female characters for the plot development?
- How does the narrator talk about the female characters?
- How do other characters (m/f) talk about female characters?
- What character traits do female characters share?
- Are there distinct differences between some female characters?
- What aims do female characters pursue?
- ...

➔ You might then want to look for patterns, for example:

- What happens to female characters who conform to gender norms? Are they 'punished' or 'rewarded' in the text?
- What happens to female characters who do not conform to gender norms? Are they 'punished' or 'rewarded' in the text?

➔ You will then draw conclusions on the 'politics' of the text with regard to gender roles, i.e. the position it presents. Ideally, you will discuss these politics in the context of the social norms (the 'mainstream attitude') current at the time the text was written. Generally speaking, the politics of the text could be:

- Conservative: The text generally upholds gender stereotypes current at the time of its writing.
- Critical/Emancipatory: The text generally undercuts/subverts gender stereotypes current at the time of its writing and supports different gender roles (typically, these will be more liberal, but in a very liberal society a critical position could also propose more 'traditional' gender roles!)
- Ambiguous: The text upholds contradictory values.

When you write your paper, I expect you to **have an explicit thesis**. A thesis is a declarative statement about your primary text(s) that presents the conclusion of your analysis in a nutshell. To formulate your thesis, try completing a sentence that starts "**In my paper I will argue ...**".

Example:

In my paper I will argue that the representation of Robina in "Robina Crusoe" supports female emancipation, particularly in the field of education; however, the ending reinforces Victorian gender norms, suggesting an uneasy attempt to contain the story's radical politics.

Secondary Sources

Your argument has to be supported by your analysis of the **primary text(s)**; however, in an academic paper you are expected to use **secondary sources** for three reasons:

1. Clarifying terms and/or your theoretical approach

You need to introduce the terms or theoretical concepts you want to use in your analysis. You obviously cannot deduce this from your primary text and hence you will need secondary sources.

In our example, you would need to introduce the concept of gender roles, and in order to do that you will need essays/books on gender theory that provide you with the background to the concept.

2. Providing historical/cultural context

If you want to talk about the historical or cultural context of your primary text(s) in relationship to your topic, you cannot deduce this context from your primary text. Hence, you will need secondary sources that provide you with this context.

As a general rule, whenever you make general or specific claims about the world outside your primary texts you will need to support these claims with secondary sources. You don't need sources for facts that can be taken to form 'general knowledge' for an educated audience, but this is obviously a 'grey area' and it is safer to provide too much documentation than too little. (For example, if you don't need a source to claim that the First World War lasted from 1914 to 1918, but if you're talking about details about the war you would need sources.)

In our example, you would need essays/books that analyse Victorian concepts of gender roles, and since the thesis talks about "female emancipation" you would need sources for the development of female emancipation during the Victorian period. When you talk about the Victorian education system you would also need sources on this topic.

3. Providing academic context

The analysis of your primary text(s) has to be based on the primary text(s). Hence, you do not need secondary sources for your analysis in the same way as you need them for clarifying terms or providing historical/cultural context. However, in an academic paper you are supposed to acknowledge the fact that other people may have written about your topic, and to enter a kind of dialogue with them. This is particularly fruitful if you disagree with an analysis, but you should also acknowledge if other scholars have put forward a position that mirrors yours.

Bear in mind: Quoting a secondary source is no 'proof' for a claim you make about the primary text! You need to support all major claims about the primary text by quoting from or referring to the primary text!

Finding Secondary Sources

University Library Catalogue (Regensburger Katalog plus)

An obvious choice for a first search. Make sure you use " " around a phrase if you want to search for exactly this phrase, and not for all texts containing any one of the words included in the phrase. In our example, the phrase "Robina Crusoe" produces two references under "Regensburger Katalog" and five under "Artikel & mehr".

MLA Bibliography (via Datenbank-Infosystem DBIS)

The most comprehensive specialized bibliography in the field of American studies / British studies, but with a bias towards American publications and publications in English. With the help of "advanced search" functions, you can combine various search terms to limit your search (particularly useful if you are dealing with large subjects). While the MLA is comprehensive, it does not list any references for "Robina Crusoe".

Google Scholar (<https://scholar.google.de/>)

Particularly useful with 'obscure' topics like "Robina Crusoe", since it also searches for references to the search phrase in footnotes etc. There are 30 references to "Robina Crusoe", but many of them point to the same articles.

Companions / Sourcebooks / Norton Critical Editions

You will find Companions or Sourcebooks (Cambridge UP, Oxford UP, Twain) or Norton Critical Editions for many influential primary texts. They either present a collection of essays or, in the case of Norton Critical Editions, the primary text and a selection of (sometimes abridged) essays, contemporary responses, etc. They tend to be a good starting point for a more detailed search.

Wikipedia

Wikipedia is not a bad place to start your search on a topic, since the articles usually provide you with references which you can then follow up and use yourself. I would **not** recommend using Wikipedia as your only (or your major) source, but there is no law against using Wikipedia.

Using the Sources in Your Text

Primary Sources

All claims you make about the primary text need to be supported by quotes from or references to the text. When integrating quotes into your paper, make sure to 'work' with them, i.e. to specify what point you are trying to make. Don't expect your reader to draw your conclusions for you!

Example:

Of her own formal education, Robina tells us very little, and the little she tells is not very favourable to it, but she praises her intrinsically motivated desire for knowledge of the natural world. Shortly after stranding on the island, she reminds herself (and tells her readers) that the life of a cast-away is what she had secretly dreamed of, and had prepared herself for, from her early childhood:

Nay, might I not say that my education, that part of it which was self-imposed, had been such as would train me to turn my energies to account? What books of travel and adventure had I not perused, what names of trees, fruits, and roots, suitable for shipwrecked travellers, had I not stored in my mind! I had learned much of the elements of geology, chemistry, and botany; cookery and medicine even I had not neglected. True, I had not penetrated farther than the first principles of these sciences, and my studies in them had been carried on in such hours when, thankful to escape from the confinement of the schoolroom, I hid myself with a favourite book in my imaginary desert isle. (244)

Significantly, Robina stresses that she had the practical application of her self-education in mind from the very start, and she stresses that popular books like travel accounts and adventure stories form suitable reading for this kind of education. What becomes similarly clear is that Robina disliked her formal education, since she emphasizes the "confines of the schoolroom", and this is an indication that the subjects treated did not interest her.

Secondary Sources

When situating your discussion in a given historical context, you will need to acknowledge the sources you are using. You can either quote sources directly, or you can paraphrase them – but the important thing is that you acknowledge them! If you actually name your sources this tends to make reading easier (although you don't have to do this in every sentence).

Example:

Particularly among the middle class, June Purvis concludes that "the content of education [...] tended to stress ornamental knowledge that might attract and impress a suitor" (64), and she points out that education was mainly conducted at home or at "a small private school managed by middle-class ladies" (Purvis, 65; cf. also Borer, 260). However, a reform movement had begun in the late 1840s, gathering momentum in the

1850s and 60s (cf. Purvis, 73; Borer, 260-271), but while "provision for the education of children of the working classes was increasing, [...] for girls of the middle classes there were still hardly any schools offering an education worth having" (Borer, 271). Admittedly, after the Endowed School Act of 1869 a number of new 'high schools' for middle-class girls were established – but the vast majority of them still went to 'traditional' private schools (cf. Purvis, 76). Of these schools, Joyce Senders Pedersen concludes that teachers tended to be "amateur[s]" (129) and that "the diversity of subject matter and the superficial way in which all topics were treated" was primarily suited "to prepare a lady for the drawing room, where she might [...] converse fleetingly upon a variety of topics" (128).

How many secondary sources do you need?

There is no general answer to this question – it depends very much on your topic, and on the scope of your paper. The following remarks are with a Proseminar paper in mind, I would obviously expect more thorough research for a Hauptseminar paper, or a BA thesis / Zulassungsarbeit.

Theoretical approach: If you are utilizing a specific theoretical approach (e.g., 'feminism', 'gender studies', 'postcolonial studies', etc.) and its terminology, you should have at least two to three different sources.

Historical / cultural context: For each specific topic there should be at least two to three different sources. In the example given above (Robina Crusoe), talking about Victorian gender norms and the Victorian education system, one would need (at least) two sources on Victorian gender norms and two sources on the Victorian education system.

Academic context: This obviously depends very much on your primary texts and the scope of your argument. In the Robina Crusoe example, there are very few scholarly articles (etc.) on the primary text itself and I would expect you to try to follow up (most of) those few references – but if we don't have the sources in Regensburg, I don't expect you to use inter library loan (Fernleihe) for a Proseminar paper (but certainly for a BA thesis or "Zulassungsarbeit"). I would also expect you to check for articles on 'female robinsonades' and follow up at least some of the leads (there aren't that many, either). But with many texts/topics, there is simply too much material to try to read it all for a Proseminar paper – anything related to Shakespeare would be a prime example. In this case, I would expect you to engage with at least three to four more recent articles closely related to your topic.

The form of your paper

There is a style sheet (mainly based on an older version of the MLA style sheet) on my website and I encourage you to use it – but you can, of course, also follow the most recent MLA style.

Be aware that we use **1,5 line spacing** for academic papers, not double spacing as in the UK / US!