



COMMON MISTAKES IN ACADEMIC PAPERS

(Before you hand it in, check that there is nothing of the following in your paper.)

- **Plagiarism:** You must not use the ideas or words of others without giving the exact source; doing that contradicts what the university stands for: an honest and serious intellectual effort and a fair and open discussion.

Consequently, if you are found to have committed plagiarism, your paper will be rejected, and the case will be reported to the so-called “Prüfungssekretariat”. The worst kind of plagiarism at the moment is the cutting and pasting of (mostly bad or inappropriate) passages from the internet. It is just as bad to simply type off passages from published essays or books without listing the authors whose texts you are using. In order to learn more about the cardinal sin of plagiarism, you can for instance consult: Joseph Gibaldi’s *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers* (7th ed. New York: MLA Publications, 2009).

On the front page of your paper, you must sign (personally, not digitally) the following statement:

„Ich versichere hiermit, dass ich die vorliegende Arbeit selbstständig verfasst und keine anderen als die angegebenen Hilfsmittel benutzt habe. Sämtliche Stellen der Arbeit, die benutzten Werken im Wortlaut oder dem Sinn nach entnommen sind, habe ich durch Quellenangaben kenntlich gemacht. Dies gilt auch für Zeichnungen, Skizzen, bildliche Darstellungen und dergleichen sowie für Quellen aus dem Internet.“

[Datum] [Unterschrift]

- **Things that do not belong to your topic:** From beginning to end, your paper must deal with the chosen topic. Our paper is only a few pages long, so you have no space to waste by writing about anything that has no direct connection to your chosen topic. You discuss a specific topic in order to focus your thoughts, so do subject your primary text(s) to the questions arising from that topic. The close reading of the text from the point of view of your topic is by far your most important analytical and interpretive activity.

Among the things that do not belong to your topic are superfluous “handbook entries”: Far-reaching and vaguely ‘contextual’ information is of no interest to your topic. Here are three examples of this kind of *absolutely superfluous* information which everybody can look up in a handbook any time:

1) “In order to discuss John Donne’s *Holy Sonnets*, I will first outline John Donne’s biography. John Donne was born in...”. Why should you do that? If there is biographical information you want to use for your interpretations, it must be specific, and the connection to your topic must be obvious. The functionless two-page author-biography is one of the worst ways of filling a page – with textual rubbish.

2) “In order to discuss Charles Dickens’s *David Copperfield*, I will first outline the Victorian Age...”. There is no reason at all why you should try (on, say, 2 to 5 pages) to outline an entire historical period (and there are thousands of full-length books which try to do that). If there are historical/cultural contexts which you want to use for your interpretation, you must choose them carefully and make the connection to your topic clear. A mini-essay on “the Victorian Age in general” is a waste of precious space for the close reading of the text itself, or for a good discussion of meaningful contextual issues.

3) “In order to discuss Charles Dickens’s *David Copperfield*, I will first give a summary of it...”. *Never ever* do that. If your academic readers (who have read *David Copperfield*) wanted to read a summary of the chosen text, they could look it up in *The Oxford Companion to English Literature* or the *Kindler Literaturlexikon* or in about 50 other handbooks readily available in any university library. Similarly, if you write about short poems, do not include copies of your primary texts in your paper (what will you do if you write a paper about *David Copperfield*?).

- This point bears repetition: **Do not paraphrase/summarize the text(s)** and mistake this for an analysis or an interpretation. Just rephrasing what is obvious to any reader of the text (first, the hero has to leave his home, and then..., and then...) is, surprisingly, risky (because you easily leave out important details due to lack of space) and – you guessed it – superfluous. You are not at university to do what ten-year-olds can do.

- **Do not paraphrase your list of contents in your introduction.** Your reader, who is usually not a complete idiot, has seen your list of contents, so an introduction that spells out that list of contents does not add a thing to the reader’s knowledge. Here are some examples: “This paper deals with [X].” This is the first thing your reader saw when he looked at your paper, so why repeat it? // “First, I will discuss [Y].” This is what your list of contents has plainly stated, so why say it again? // “Next, I will discuss [Z], and then I will...”. Your task is to develop a truly introductory line of thought, not to put your list of contents into prose.

- **Paragraphs:** The **bad habit of “signposting”** sometimes pervades a whole paper, so that the author of the paper feels the need to state at the end of almost every paragraph what he/she will write about next: “Next, I will turn to...” – and then the headline of the next chapter says exactly that. Do not signpost your way through your own paper; if you have once made clear what you are about to do, it is quite sufficient.
- Be careful not to make your **paragraphs** only one or two sentences long. There is a nice German phrase which puts it succinctly: “Ein Satz ist kein Absatz.” Paragraphs are roughly 4 to 8 sentences long, and they form a coherent argument, a unit of thought within the larger argument.
- **Formatting:** Sometimes students use a particular font (say, “Arial, 12pt”) because it fills more page-space than more reader-friendly fonts like Times New Roman. A larger font and one-sentence paragraphs fill the pages quickly. However, university lecturers were not born yesterday, and they know all these tricks. To people who read hundreds of papers every semester, these tricks are desperate measures of people who have got nothing to say about the topic they are supposed to write about. Avoid making this kind of impression.
- Make sure that there are **logical connections between your sentences**. You should not simply switch from one topic to another by beginning a new paragraph.¹ The logical “micro-structures” of a paper are very important, for the plausibility of the overall-argument depends on them. For instance, “However, ...” must introduce something different from what you have just said, and “because/hence/thus/for the reason that” must indicate a causal connection.
- **Do not produce analyses/interpretations which have got nothing to do with your topic.** Do not formally analyse a text for the sake of the analysis itself. If there is no direction in your analysis, it will not produce any results. Here is an example: “Shakespeare’s Sonnet 130. This sonnet consists of four quatrains and a couplet, so it is a Shakespearean sonnet, which is sometimes also termed an English sonnet. The rhyme scheme is abab cdcd efef gg.”) This is not wrong, BUT the question one should always ask oneself is: “So what?” What are the *results* of the analysis? What does it mean? What is the point?
- Do not insert **footnotes** which have no recognizable connection to the main text.
- A quotation must have a function, e.g., prove the point you want to make or, even better, serve as the piece of text which you skilfully analyze. Do not use too many or too long quotations, i.e., in a paper which is only about 12 pages long, do not use thirty short quotations or three quotations which are each one page long. In a short paper, you do not have the space for long quotations – and your readers might think that you are just trying to fill the pages.
- **Do not use “I” all the time: “I think...”, “In my opinion...”.** As scholars, we do not primarily write about ourselves, but about the texts and the topics we are dealing with. By no means make your criticism a purely personal one: “This poem reminds me of my childhood, and of the apple tree behind our house under which I used to play.” The other side of this coin would be the “you”-style, the constant direct address of the reader. (Never use the awful phrase “from this you can see”.) This is unacademic discourse; it is alright to use it in kinds of texts like this one, but not in an academic paper.
- Check your style for **“Germanisms”**, i.e., words or expressions which exist in German, but not in English (or are very bad English). The same is true for the syntax. Some examples of this kind of mistake: “Hereto one can say...”; “It is written that...”; “Also one must say”. It must be your aim to write idiomatic academic English, which is not easy as a non-native speaker. In order to realize the difficulty of the task ahead of you, read academic English as you find it in journals or in books.
- **Do not mix English and German** in awful ways. For example: “We cannot say the same about Richard III because ‘er ein Schurke ist.’” There is no definitive rule here, but if you can see that the preceding sentence is awful, you have an idea of what to avoid.

¹ Interrupting a continuous argument can, though, produce a nice effect sometimes. It should be your aim to learn both how to stick to the rules and how to occasionally break them to make a point. Before you can skilfully break the rules, however, you must first know them and learn to obey them.