

**Guidelines on Writing
Seminar Papers, Bachelor Theses and Master Theses**

at the
Department of International Management

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1. Procedure of writing academic papers

Basic methodological knowledge and the consideration of the evaluation criteria are decisive prerequisites for the successful writing of academic papers. Although the content of an academic paper is of primary importance, methodological and formal criteria have to be fulfilled as well. These guidelines disclose the main requirements. More detailed information can be found in the literature mentioned at the end of this document. Especially when writing bachelor and master theses, the knowledge and consideration of this literature is expected.

The general procedure of writing an academic paper is similar for bachelor and master theses. A list of topics and the dates of the assignment are announced regularly on StudOn. At first, the student has to choose one of the topics and coordinate any further action with the corresponding advisor. After the topic assignment, the student has to submit an exposé to the advisor. This shall consist of 1-2 pages in the case of bachelor theses and 3-5 pages in the case of master theses. The exposé is a research proposal that should outline the theoretical and practical relevance, research question(s), objective(s), structure, planned methodology and expected contribution(s) to knowledge. This orientation phase is supposed to be completed within two weeks for bachelor theses and within one month for master theses. If the proposal meets the requirements, the department will register the thesis at the examinations office. If any questions come up during the writing phase of the thesis, it is recommended to contact the advisor, especially if these questions cover fundamental aspects of methodology and content.

Authors of a seminar paper, bachelor and master thesis should regularly reflect on the paper and check whether it meets the assessment criteria listed in the following section. If, due to certain reasons, a student is not able to take these criteria into account, the advisor should be contacted.

2. Assessment criteria of academic papers

The evaluation of academic papers is based on specified assessment criteria. These criteria and their weighting can be found in the following table. This form will also be used for the evaluation of the papers. It is therefore strongly recommended that you carefully examine the evaluation criteria, follow them closely and regularly check whether your work meets these criteria.

When assessing a seminar paper, bachelor or master thesis, the first question is whether the author has succeeded in developing a convincing and comprehensible **research question** (what is the problem? why and for whom is this relevant?). In this context two criteria are of major importance, namely the *relevance* and the *topicality* of the subject. In regard to relevance one can distinguish between *practical* and *theoretical* relevance. A research question is of high theoretical relevance if

the author proves that the problem has not or only rarely been addressed in previous studies or that it is discussed very controversially. This is often the case when current developments challenge central assumptions of theories. The practical relevance of a problem is generally high if meaningful managerial and/or policy implications can be derived from its solution.

Evaluation of seminar papers, bachelor and master theses

Evaluation criteria	Weighting	Grade	Comments
1. Research question and objective	20%		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Practical relevance ▪ Theoretical relevance ▪ Topicality ▪ Derivation/explanation of research question ▪ Appropriateness/clarity of objective 			
2. Structure	10%		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Systematics ▪ Balance between chapters ▪ Explanation/Justification of structure 			
3. Content	25%		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Depth of argumentation ▪ Completeness: are important aspects missing? ▪ Reference to research question and objective ▪ Consistency of argumentation ▪ Originality ▪ Contribution to knowledge 			
4. Methodology	20%		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Appropriateness ▪ Transparency ▪ Analytical Rigor ▪ Quality (Representativeness, Validity, Reliability) ▪ Robustness of findings 			
5. Literature analysis	15%		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Specificity (Quality) ▪ Topicality ▪ Depth of analysis ▪ Transparency of references ▪ Critical reflection of references 			
6. Form and style	10%		
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Comprehensibility ▪ Precision ▪ Illustration through meaningful figures and tables ▪ Correctness ▪ Appearance ▪ Uniformity (APA Guide) 			
Weighted average	100%		
Total grade			

After the elaboration of the research question, the **objective** of the paper has to be defined (which problem shall be solved in the paper?), which again can consist of a theoretical and a practical component. Generally, one can distinguish between *descriptive, analytical, prescriptive and normative objectives*. A descriptive objective (what happens?) is usually not demanding enough for an academic paper. In most cases academic papers have analytical objectives and analyze, for example, the impact of several independent on one or more dependent variables (why does it happen?). Prescriptive analytics aim to identify the best course of action (how can we make it happen?), whereas normative objectives are based on moral judgements (why and how should we make it happen?). In the latter two cases, one has to make sure that the recommendations are based on a solid theoretical and/or empirical analysis and not only on the description of the phenomenon or the author's own opinion.

For the table of contents, the argumentation and the choice of adequate research methods, it is very useful to have the formal character of the objective in mind as well as to explicitly illustrate and explain it. The precise phrasing of the objective is of major importance and it serves as a "yardstick" for the evaluation of the content of the paper. A common mistake is to choose a too demanding objective (e.g., "a general and encompassing model shall be derived"), which cannot be fulfilled. Often the objective is phrased so generally and vaguely, that at the end of the paper one cannot judge whether the objective has been achieved (e.g., "foreign direct investment in India shall be analyzed"). Many authors lose sight of the objective they stated in the beginning of their paper and in the end provide an answer that does not match the question raised in the beginning. It is highly emphasized that a statement such as e.g., "the objective lies in displaying the existing approaches" does not stand for a proper objective, because its generalized wording does not imply a viable research question and therefore cannot yield progress in knowledge (the systematic presentation and critical discussion of existing approaches relating to a certain topic can, however, be a reasonable objective if the author proves that this would make a significant contribution to current state of knowledge).

The **table of contents** derived from the research question and objective should be balanced and systematic. The individual chapters have to exclude each other logically (mutual exclusiveness) and cover the entire superior segment (collective exhaustiveness) (*MECE principle*). The table of contents and structure of the paper should not only be presented, but it should also be justified why the chapters are relevant to answer the research question and how they are related one another. The reproduction of general textbook knowledge should usually be reduced to the aspects that are required to understand the specific topic. In contrast, the focus should be on new aspects and the author's original contributions to the state of the knowledge, such as critical reflections on the current literature.

The **content**, which in most cases is the most extensive part of the thesis, is especially assessed in terms of its relevance to the solution of the research objective, as well as its theoretical width (are all relevant aspects mentioned?) and depth (does the author make valid and verifiable statements with a high explanatory value?). Other criteria are the reference to the research question and objective as well as the consistency (is the line of thought structured clearly or are there many gaps and repetitions?) and originality of the argumentation (does the author reveal new and surprising findings or are largely known facts simply repeated?). The last criterion is especially important if the topic has already been dealt with in literature often and extensively.

Academic papers are particularly useful if they are based on a solid **theoretical framework** (“stand on the shoulder of giants”). A theory (e.g., transaction cost theory, learning theory, institutional theory) goes beyond the mere systematics of concepts, constructs and variables by offering explanations for relationships and causal effects. A theory focuses on the arrows (and not the boxes) of conceptual diagrams and explains *how* and *why* variables influence each other (Thomas, Cuervo-Cazurra & Brannen, 2011). In this sense, ‘theory’ is not the opposite of ‘practice’, but should be understood as the systematic reduction of complexity that allows generalizations and the rigorous derivation of practical knowledge. “There is nothing as practical as a good theory” (Lewin, 1945).

Especially bachelor and master theses are usually not limited to the discussion of existing research, but rather contain own empirical studies (surveys, experiments, case studies, etc.). In order to be intersubjectively verifiable, the **methods of data collection, preparation and analysis** shall be justified and explained (not only described) in detail. The author should reflect on the basic quality criteria of scientific research (validity, reliability, representativeness, etc.) and demonstrate how they were taken into consideration (analytical rigor). The approach should be comprehensible for readers. This includes interview documentation in an appendix, the explanation of codification, concrete information on the applied analyses and operationalization of variables, etc. The fabrication and manipulation of data is a serious offense that is usually uncovered by the advisor and severely sanctioned.

Besides this, it is important that the author takes a **critical stance** towards the research topic (a critical stance is not just a subjective opinion!). This is especially valid for papers with practical reference. Science and practice follow different logics. “Science should collect and systemize all existing empirical practices, test them for their methodical stability and, if necessary, develop new methods, apply the logic of practitioners and its implicit assumptions on verifiable theories or create such and eventually reveal the practical significance (...). Practitioners necessarily follow a different logic of actions. They are supposed to find solutions adjusted to concrete situations while acting

innovative and clever; they are much more under time pressure and have to economically justify their actions in an area that is covered by the imperative of profit realization and protection of liquidity. An exchange, the ‘dialogue’, can be prolific for both sides, if these differing logics of action are considered and ‘consensus’ is not the primary target” (Wächter, 2006, p. 99).

Another important assessment criterion is the question whether the paper comes to a **comprehensive conclusion** which is related to the research objective set in the beginning and **systematically derived from the previous analysis**. As a rule, the conclusion should not contain any completely new aspects (“Outlook”) or present implications that are trivial (e.g., “companies should check their choice of foreign markets thoroughly”) or mainly ‘creeds’ (e.g., “the inclusion of employees in corporate-policy decisions is important”).

The final section should also contain a **critical reflection** of the methodology. This may include, for example, a discussion of whether the results are robust, i.e., how much they depend on the theoretical framework or methodology used in the study, and of the study’s limitations (e.g., whether the findings may be transferred to other contexts, companies, industries or countries).

An academic paper requires a detailed and systematic **analysis of literature**. Extant literature should not only be cited, but critically reflected. This includes the discussion of the findings and methods of extant research as well as their contributions and limitations (Kraus et al., 2022). The following websites may be helpful for literature search:

- EBSCO: <http://web.a.ebscohost.com>
- SCOPUS: <https://www.scopus.com/search/form.uri?display=basic#basic>
- Electronic journal library: <http://rzblx1.uni-regensburg.de/ezeit/search.phtml>
- Springer (publisher): <http://link.springer.com/>
- OPAC: <https://www.opac.uni-erlangen.de>
- Gateway Bavaria: <https://opacplus.bib-bvb.de/>
- VPN client: <https://www.rrze.fau.de/internet-e-mail/internet-zugang/vpn/>

It is essential to not only analyze general basic literature (textbooks) but also *specific literature on the respective topic* (especially in academic journals). A reader’s basic textbook knowledge can be assumed and therefore should not be reproduced. Other criteria are the topicality and range of used literature (analysis of literature published in other languages and in adjacent areas of science where applicable) as well as their quality. Studies published in renowned journals have undergone a rigorous review process and therefore generally have a high level of validity, reliability and robustness. Regarding journal quality, the Jourqual ranking of the German Academic Association for Business Research (VHB) (<https://vhbonline.org/en/vhb4you/vhb-jourqual/vhb-jourqual-3>) and the Chartered

Association of Business Schools' Academic Journal Guide (<https://charteredabs.org/academic-journal-guide-2021/>) may be helpful. It is especially important to not only cite sources, but to adapt and reflect on them critically. The knowledge and reception of publications on the particular subject written by members of the department is regarded as self-evident.

Finally, the **style of writing** is an important assessment criterion. This includes the *scientific presentation* (no journalistic jargon), the *consistent and coherent usage of technical terms and concepts*, a *clear presentation* (e.g., no nested sentences or sentences spanning multiple lines) as well as the *illustration by appropriate examples*. *Clearly arranged figures* do not only help the reader understand the line of argumentation, but – even more importantly – the author to formulate the arguments in a concise and systematic way. It is particularly important to not use any kind of discriminatory or derogatory terms. An elegant and comprehensible language is often a sign for how well-read and informed the author is about the subject. As for the final editing, one should read the paper out loud and check the intonation in order to sort out unnecessary words.

3. Structure of academic papers

In general, the structure, the content and the argumentation of an academic paper should be coherent. The paper should start with a meaningful introduction – comprising the practical and theoretical relevance – from which the research question, the objective of the paper, and the methodology emerge. All subsequent explanations should visibly follow this structure. The chapters should not simply be titled “introduction”, “main part” or “conclusion”, but rather give a good overview of the main contents of the chapters. For example, the title of the final chapter should indicate whether the author wants to summarize the results, give an overview of the hypotheses or depict further perspectives on unsolved problems.

Especially for papers with an empirical focus the following table of contents is suitable, as most academic papers are structured in this way. The author therefore should stick to it unless otherwise agreed upon with the advisor.

- 1 Research question, objective and structure of the paper
- 2 State of research (theoretical foundations and empirical studies)
- 3 Derivation of research hypotheses
- 4 Methodology
 - 4.1 Sample: selection of respondents
 - 4.2 Methods of data collection
 - 4.3 Measures: operationalization of variables (often with reference to former studies)
 - 4.4 Methods of data processing and analysis
- 5 Findings

- 5.1 Description
- 5.2 Analysis and test of hypotheses
- 6 Discussion of the results
- 7 Contributions, limitations and implications
 - 7.1 Contributions to practical and theoretical knowledge
 - 7.2 Limitations: critical reflection of methodology
 - 7.3 Implications for future research

The single bullets should be listed both in the table of contents as well as in the text itself. A subchapter 1.1 has to be followed by 1.2 and so on. Normally subchapters should not be shorter than one page as this can quickly get confusing. In that case a structure within the text using a), b), c), boxes (■) or dashes (-) should be preferred.

The pages of the editorial part have to be **numbered** consecutively in Arabic numerals; “1” has to be assigned to the first editorial page. All other pages, except for the cover sheet, are to be numbered consecutively in Roman numerals, starting with “II” on the first page of the table of contents. After the editorial part – identified with Arabic numerals – the Roman numbering has to be continued (e.g., with “III”).

4. General formal requirements

- DIN A4, justification, proportional script (text: Times New Roman, titles: Arial), font size 12, line spacing: 1.5, paragraphs are to be separated by blank lines.
- Headers and footers: font size 10, single spacing
- Margins: left margin 4 cm, right margin 2 cm, upper margin 3 cm, lower margin 2 cm from the bottom of the footnotes, margin from the header to the top of the page 1 cm
- If several figures, tables or abbreviations are used, special directories are to be created. They should be placed between the table of contents and the editorial part. Well-known abbreviations (e.g., resp., etc.), that are listed in official reference books, do not have to be added to the list of abbreviations.
- A separate cover sheet is needed (cf. exemplary cover sheets in the appendix).

Seminar papers

- Seminar papers have to be stapled, perforated and handed in (without folder) before the deadline. In addition to that, the paper has to be sent to the advisor via e-mail as a word file.
- Length: 15-20 pages (if not mentioned otherwise)

Bachelor and master theses

- Two bounded copies of the bachelor or master thesis have to be handed in at the examinations office before the deadline. Furthermore, a digital copy (Word file format + PDF file format) must be enclosed on a USB stick. This should also include copies of all electronically available documents (journal articles, newspaper articles, company reports, etc.) that are cited in the thesis. If data have been collected during the writing process, the dataset has to be enclosed as an Excel or SPSS file as well.
- Material that has been collected during the course of empirical papers (questionnaires, transcribed interviews, statistical analyses, etc.) has to be summarized and handed in with the paper at the examinations office.
- If not mentioned otherwise, bachelor theses should have a length of 30 pages and master theses of 70 pages (+/- 10%). Deviations should be coordinated with the advisor.
- The last, unnumbered page must contain the following assertion:

Declaration of Originality

I, _____ (Name), student registration number: _____, hereby confirm that I completed the submitted work independently and without the unauthorized assistance of third parties and without the use of undisclosed and, in particular, unauthorized aids. This work has not been previously submitted in its current form or in a similar form to any other examination authorities and has not been accepted as part of an examination by any other examination authority.

Where the wording has been taken from other people's work or ideas, this has been properly acknowledged and referenced. This also applies to drawings, sketches, diagrams and sources from the Internet.

In particular, I am aware that the use of artificial intelligence is forbidden unless its use as an aid has been expressly permitted by the examiner. This applies in particular to such programs that could process the task of the examination or parts thereof instead of me, for example chatbots (especially ChatGPT) and other methods suitable for this purpose.

Furthermore, I am aware that working with others in one room or by means of social or other media represents the unauthorized assistance of third parties within the above meaning, if group work is not expressly permitted. Each exchange of information with others during the examination, with the exception of examiners, persons authorized by them and invigilators, about the structure or contents of the examination or any other information such as sources is not permitted. The same applies to attempts to do so. Proofreading of the work by third parties with the aim of correcting linguistic deficiencies is permitted.

Any infringements of the above rules constitute fraud or attempted fraud and shall lead to the examination being graded "fail" ("nicht bestanden"). In the event of multiple or particularly drastic breaches of the rules, further sanctions may be imposed by the Examination Board (Prüfungsausschuss).

Place, Date

Signature

5. Citation style and formal composition

In an academic paper, other people's work or ideas have to be properly acknowledged and referenced. If the author presents the thoughts of others as their own (e.g., adoptions from websites, books, papers, etc.), they are committing **plagiarism**. Plagiarism is theft of intellectual property which is sanctioned due to legal and ethical reasons. Experienced advisors recognize plagiarism at first glance and regularly use special programs designed for plagiarism checks.

Regarding **citation style** and formal composition, aside from the specifications here, the rules of the American Psychological Association (**APA rules**) are to be followed (<https://apastyle.apa.org/style-grammar-guidelines>). Questions regarding formal composition and citation style are generally not answered by the advisor. In cases that are not covered by the APA rules, please use a way of citing that comes closest to their philosophy.

When writing academic papers, the use of **literature management software** is recommended. Next to efficiency, the advantage lies in not having to learn every single detail of a citation style. In fact, the APA guide is implemented automatically. The programs Citavi and Mendeley are available as freeware. FAU students can download these programs from the StudiSoft server (<https://www.studisoft.de/shibboleth/shibdwayf>). The FAU university library offers various tutorials for Citavi (<https://ub.fau.de/lernen/schulung/publizieren/literatur-zitieren-und-verwalten/citavi/>) and for using the library and the online catalogue (<https://ub.fau.de/lernen/schulung/>).

6. References

- Kraus, S. et al. (2022). Literature reviews as independent studies: guidelines for academic practice. *Review of Managerial Science*, 16, 2577-2595.
- Lewin, K. (1945). The research center for group dynamics at Massachusetts Institute of Technology. *Sociometry*, 8, 126-135.
- Thomas, D., Cuervo-Cazurra, A. & Brannen, M. (2011). From the Editors: Explaining theoretical relationships in international business research: Focusing on the arrows, NOT the boxes. *Journal of International Business Studies*, 42, 1073–1078. <https://doi.org/10.1057/jibs.2011.44>.
- Wächter, H. (2006). Stellungnahme zur PIX-Diskussion. *Zeitschrift für Personalforschung*, 20(2), 99-101.

7. Additional literature

The following literature provides detailed and further information about writing academic papers:

American Psychological Association (2019). *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*. 7th ed., Washington, D.C.: American Psychological Association.

Bailey, S. (2020). *Academic Writing for International Students of Business and Economics*. 3rd ed., London: Routledge.

Blumberg, B., Cooper, D.R. & Schindler, P.S. (2014). *Business Research Methods*. 4th Edition, Boston, Mass. et al.: McGraw-Hill.

Decker, C. & Werner, R. (2016). *Academic research and writing: A concise introduction*. Frankfurt a.M.: iCADEMICUS.

Gournelos, T., Hammonds, J. R. & Wilson, M.A. (2019). *Doing Academic Research: A Practical Guide to Research Methods and Analysis*. London: Routledge.

Huff, A.S. (2009). *Designing Research for Publication*. Los Angeles et al.: Sage

Mohrman, S.A., Lawler, E.E. & Associates (2011). *Useful Research: Advancing Theory and Practice*. San Francisco: Berrett-Koehler.

Sword, H. (2017). *Air & Light & Time & Space. How Successful Academics Write*. Cambridge, MA-London: Harvard University Press.

Appendix: Exemplary cover sheets

Seminar papers

..... (Title)

Seminar paper

Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg
School of Business, Economics and Society
Department of International Management

Seminar: (Course title)
(Lecturer)
(e.g., SS 2023 or WS 2023/2024)

Author: (First name, last name)
(Matriculation number)
(Phone, e-mail)
(Program, semester)

Nürnberg, (Date of submission)

Bachelor and master theses

..... (Title)

Bachelor thesis/Master thesis

Friedrich-Alexander-Universität Erlangen-Nürnberg
School of Business, Economics and Society
Department of International Management

Professor: Prof. Dr. Dirk Holtbrügge

Advisor: (Name)

Author: (First name, last name)

(Matriculation number)

(Phone, e-mail)

(Program, semester)

Nürnberg, (Date of submission)