Guidelines for Academic Writing

Seminar papers, bachelor and master thesis

Chair of Applied Microeconomics

Viadrina European University

January 8, 2026

Introductory notes

▶ These guidelines shall help you to set up your own research question, find and read academic literature and write up a properly formatted seminar paper or thesis at the Chair of Applied Microeconomics.

▶ If it is your first time writing an academic paper we additionally recommend to go to the library and study a handbook for academic writing!

▶ We urgently suggest to participate in courses, workshops and take up other offers from Viadrina's Writing Centre https://www.europa-uni.de/de/universitaet/einrichtungen/serviceeinrichtungen/zentrum-lehre-lernen/schreibzentrum/index.html.

Outline

Guidelines

Chair of Applied
Microeconomics

First steps
Topic
Research Question
Title
Literature Search
Academic sources
How to read empirical
papers
Writing
Page numbers
Structure
Title page
Abstract
Introduction
Main
Conclusion
Design and Layout
Figures and Tables
References and
Bibliography
Plagiarism
AI tools
DeepL
ChatGPT
Software
Statement of authorship

Topic

We expect that you choose and suggest a topic and a research question.

▶ Your topic should be related to one of the core areas:
   ▶ Applied Microeconomics
   ▶ Applied Econometrics
   ▶ International Economics
   ▶ Labour Economics

Research Question

Guidelines

Chair of Applied
Microeconomics

First steps
Topic
Research Question
Title

Literature Search
Academic sources
How to read empirical
papers

Writing
Page numbers
Structure
Title page
Abstract
Introduction
Main
Conclusion
Design and Layout
Figures and Tables

References and
Bibliography

Plagiarism

AI tools
DeepL
ChatGPT

Software
Statement of authorship

The initial objective is to formulate a research question![1]

▶ A research question is not simply your title or topic.

▶ Usually a profound literature search is needed before a research question can be formulated.

▶ Afterwards you should be able to identify a specific issue that you can analyse based on existing literature or even going beyond existing literature.

▶ The research question may be narrowed down extremely.

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[1]Check Developing strong research questions and Research question examples on Scribbr.

How to Develop a Research Question

Guidelines

Chair of Applied
Microeconomics

First steps
Topic
Research Question
Title

Literature Search
Academic sources
How to read empirical
papers

Writing
Page numbers
Structure
Title page
Abstract
Introduction
Main
Conclusion
Design and Layout
Figures and Tables

References and
Bibliography

Plagiarism

AI tools
DeepL
ChatGPT

Software
Statement of authorship

A good research question is essential to guide your research paper
or thesis. It pinpoints exactly what you want to find out and gives
your work a clear focus and purpose. All research questions should
be:[2]

▶ **Focused** on a single problem or issue.

▶ **Researchable** using primary and/or secondary sources.

▶ **Feasible** to answer within the time frame and practical
constraints.

▶ **Specific** enough to answer thoroughly.

▶ **Complex** enough to develop the answer over the space of a
paper.

▶ **Relevant** to your field of study and/or society more broadly.

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[2]Sourced from
https://www.scribbr.com/research-process/research-questions/

Some steps on the Way to a Research Question

- ▶ Understand the topic!
  - ▶ What are the definitions of the key terms in the field of research? Which links exist between these terms? In which ways can the topic be interpreted?

- ▶ What would be interesting to investigate?
  - ▶ Formulate several questions that come to your mind. Think about who would benefit from an answer to these questions. Decide which of these questions would generate most valuable implications.

- ▶ Collect and review literature that deals with your chosen question!
  - ▶ Do not read every paper that seems to fit thoroughly. First try to get an overview of the literature published on this topic. Try to use the most recent publications!

- ▶ Narrow down your research question!
  - ▶ Try to focus on a specific problem of interest. Try to find questions that can be answered by a synthesis of the existing literature.

Different Examples of Research Questions

Guidelines

Chair of Applied
Microeconomics

First steps
Topic
Research Question
Title

Literature Search
Academic sources
How to read empirical
papers

Writing
Page numbers
Structure
Title page
Abstract
Introduction
Main
Conclusion
Design and Layout
Figures and Tables

References and
Bibliography

Plagiarism

AI tools
DeepL
ChatGPT

Software
Statement of authorship

1. Description of an observed situation.

   ▶ Typically involves defining and classifying of known issues.

   ▶ An example is a literature overview.

   ▶ **You are expected to go beyond a mere description of known facts!**

...Different Examples of Research Questions

2. Relationship between observed phenomena.

   ▶ Typically involves the investigation of the relationship between two or more variables.

   ▶ The result can be the finding of a correlation or a trend between the examined variables.

...Different Examples of Research Questions

3. Causality.

   ▶ Typically involves the attempt to discover a causal
     relationship between two or more observed phenomena.

   ▶ Often no causal relationship can be proved. A correlation
     between the examined variables will then be the result.

...Different Examples of Research Questions

Guidelines

Chair of Applied
Microeconomics

First steps
Topic
Research Question
Title

Literature Search
Academic sources
How to read empirical
papers

Writing
Page numbers
Structure
Title page
Abstract
Introduction
Main
Conclusion
Design and Layout
Figures and Tables

References and
Bibliography

Plagiarism

AI tools
DeepL
ChatGPT

Software
Statement of authorship

4. Explanation / Methodology

▶ During your literature search you probably will find
   contradictory results on the same topics. This will often be
   caused by different approaches, the authors used. In this case
   you could examine:

▶ What are the assumptions used?

▶ What are the models used?

▶ Why did the authors use them to tackle the certain issue?

▶ Are there other possible approaches?

Title of a thesis

- You can suggest and discuss a title with your supervisor.[3]

- Typically, the title is not the research question.

- Once fixed in the thesis application form, it cannot be changed.

- Your title will be printed on your certificate.

- Technical details:
  - All words in the title are to be capitalized except definite and indefinite articles, prepositions of all kind and coordinating conjunctions.
  - Example: *German Foreign Direct Investment in Poland: An Investigation into the Regionalisation Pattern and the Role of Special Economic Zones.*

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[3]Not identical with your research question.

Literature Search

The literature search is essential for you to succeed!

▶ Focus on recent papers published in scientific economic journals (or so called discussion or working papers)!

▶ We recommend https://scholar.google.de for identifying relevant papers.

▶ You can expand your body of relevant literature by
  ▶ Examining the bibliography of a paper at hand (*"Which literature was interesting for the authors of the article you are reading?"*).

  ▶ Using the "cited-by" function at https://scholar.google.de. (*"Which authors cited the article you are reading?"*).

Academic sources

- ▶ Typical academic sources are:
  - ▶ Journal articles (e.g. *American Economic Review*, *Journal of International Economics*)[4]
  - ▶ Working papers (use final paper instead when available!)
  - ▶ Reports (from organizations, e.g. WTO)
  - ▶ Books and collected volumes
  - ▶ Textbooks (concerning methods)

- ▶ Online encyclopedias (Wikipedia, Gabler, etc.) and news articles are **no valid academic source**!
  - ▶ Still, the sources mentioned on Wikipedia can be useful.
  - ▶ You may occasionally refer to such sources, e.g. an Economist article to motivate a scientific question or to put it in context.

- ⇒ You have access to most journals via Campus Network.[5]

[4]https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_economics_journals
[5]Use VPN from outside: https://www.ikmz.europa-uni.de/de/it-dienste/
netz_server_dienste/internetzugang/vpn/index.html

How to read empirical papers

- You will certainly read a lot of empirical papers.

- Although this can be challenging, a good understanding of the logic and the main arguments of the paper does not depend on a deep understanding of the technical details.

- We recommend amongst others:
  - Prof. Matt Masten (2015) "How to Read Empirical Papers" https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ZlAKPtPZqyI
  - Morgan Kenneth (2010) "How to Read an Empirical Research Article" https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=legYfGC46y4
  - Chow & Lewis (2011) "How to read an empirical paper" https://tinyurl.com/y9yhey9d (PDF)

The number of pages question

"How many pages do I need to write?"

$\Rightarrow$ Not the right question to ask!

$\Rightarrow$ Better: How many pages do you need to sufficiently motivate, explore and discuss your topic and research question!?

▶ The following numbers refer to **text pages**:[6]
  ▶ Seminar paper: 10 pages
  ▶ Bachelor thesis: 20 pages
  ▶ Master thesis: 30 pages

▶ Discuss the scope and extent of your paper with your supervisor.

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[6]Title page, lists, figures, bibliography etc. do not count as a text page.

Structure

Ingredients of a (scientific) paper:

- ▶ Titlepage
- ▶ Table of Contents
- ▶ List of Figures, Tables, Abbreviations, Symbols
- ▶ Abstract
- ▶ Text
  - ▶ Introduction
  - ▶ Main Part
  - ▶ Conclusion
- ▶ List of References
- ▶ Appendix
- ▶ Statement of authorship

Title page

The title page contains:

▶ Title of the paper
▶ Author's full name
▶ Author's matriculation number
▶ Handover date
▶ Name of supervisor/s
▶ Name of the Chair of Applied Microeconomics

You may include the Logo of Viadrina European University.

Abstract

- ▶ All academic papers contain an abstract.

- ▶ The abstract is written in English (even if your work is German).

- ▶ The abstract comes right before your first text page starts (probably the introduction) and right after all lists (of figures, tables, abbreviations).

- ▶ Use a pagebreak after the abstract.

Introduction

▶ Motivate your **topic**: include descriptive statistics or graphs (*"at least one number"*).

▶ State your **research question** clearly.

▶ Name **methods**, **theories** or **data** used to meet this objective.

▶ Outline the **structure** of the remaining paper (you may briefly summarize your findings).

⇒ *Finalize the introduction at the end.*

Main text

► Embed your work in the current state of research
  (**literature review**)

► Give clear **definitions** to avoid ambiguity of terminology

► Explain **methodology** and **results**

► Refer to the **research question**:
  Was it possible to answer it? If not, why?

► **Discussion** of results

Conclusion

Guidelines

Chair of Applied
Microeconomics

First steps
Topic
Research Question
Title

Literature Search
Academic sources
How to read empirical
papers

Writing
Page numbers
Structure
Title page
Abstract
Introduction
Main
Conclusion
Design and Layout
Figures and Tables

References and
Bibliography

Plagiarism

AI tools
DeepL
ChatGPT

Software
Statement of authorship

▶ Slighty more than a **summary**.

▶ Refer to the research question once more.

▶ Implications for **future research** or potential **policy implications** (if applicable).

⇒ Do not introduce new strings of reasoning!

Design and Layout

▶ Font type: Use a standard font type (e.g. Times New Roman, Calibri, Computer Modern)

▶ Font size: 12pt (1.5 line spacing)

▶ Margins: 2cm left, 2.5cm top, 2cm right, 3cm bottom

▶ Don't use indentation

▶ Use justification of text

▶ Page numbering:
  ▶ Title page: none
  ▶ TOC (and all lists): Roman numerals (I, II, III, ...)
  ▶ Text (beginning from Abstract): Arabic numerals (1,2,3,...)

Figures and Tables

▶ Give the audience the greatest number of ideas in the shortest time with the least ink, in the smallest space → **Data-Ink-Ratio**.

▶ Avoid chartjunk (weird fonts, 3D, shading, underlines).

▶ Substance over Design!

▶ Provide high quality (high resolution) graphs if possible!

▶ Create your own table, bar chart, scatter plot if possible.[7]

▶ Only copy graphs when they are complex, important to your work and you don't have access to original data (give full source in the description).

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[7]Why you shouldn't use pie charts - Tips for better data visualization

...Figures and tables

▶ Always explain and discuss tables and figures in main text.

▶ Place tables and figures in the main text! Only in case they are very long and not feasible for the main text put them into an appendix.

▶ Center and number tables and figures.

▶ Give meaningful and self-explaining captions to tables and figures.

▶ Captions should be concise but comprehensive. Additional information (e. g. source of data) should be given as a description below the figure or table!

  ▶ Find more information on figures and tables: https: //writingcenter.unc.edu/tips-and-tools/figures-and-charts/

References and Bibliography

Guidelines

Chair of Applied
Microeconomics

First steps
Topic
Research Question
Title

Literature Search
Academic sources
How to read empirical
papers

Writing
Page numbers
Structure
Title page
Abstract
Introduction
Main
Conclusion
Design and Layout
Figures and Tables

References and
Bibliography

Plagiarism

AI tools
DeepL
ChatGPT

Software
Statement of authorship

▶ Use primary literature sources!
  ▶ An exception can be made in case when the original source is not available. In this situation a secondary source can be used.

▶ Mostly avoid direct quotations!

Very Important Citation Rules

- ▶ Only use **explicit in-text** citation, i.e. avoid citing in footnotes and parentheses!

- ▶ Strictly use the following in text citation style: Author (Year, **page number** where the statement can be found)!

- ▶ Example:
  Al Harahsheh et al. (2025, p. 1473) carry out a survey among English language and translation students and claim that about 39% of students depend heavily on ChatGPT in their academic writing.

- ▶ Do **not** cite this way for example:
  As popular as ChatGPT is among students, there is evidence for a significant decline in students' creative writing ability as a result of using ChatGPT (Niloy, 2024, p. 927).

Bibliography

Guidelines

Chair of Applied
Microeconomics

First steps
Topic
Research Question
Title

Literature Search
Academic sources
How to read empirical
papers

Writing
Page numbers
Structure
Title page
Abstract
Introduction
Main
Conclusion
Design and Layout
Figures and Tables

References and
Bibliography

Plagiarism

AI tools
DeepL
ChatGPT

Software

Statement of authorship

Check out the exemplary bibliography!
Bibliography

Al-Harahsheh, A., Almahasees, Z., and Al Rousan, R. (2025). The use of ChatGPT in academic writing by university students in Jordan. International Journal of Information and Education Technology, 15(7), pp. 1468–1476, doi:10.18178/ijiet.2025.15.7.2348.

Niloy, A. C., Akter, S., Sultana, N., Sultana, J., and Rahman, S. I. U. (2024). Is ChatGPT a menace for creative writing ability? An experiment. Journal of computer assisted learning, 40(2), pp. 919–930, doi:10.1111/jcal.12929.

Bibliography in Latex

Should you use LATEX you can use the `biblatex` package with this configuration

`\usepackage[natbib,backend=biber,style=authoryear,sorting=nyt]{biblatex}`

Then add your bibliography file:

`\addbibresource{yourbibfile.bib}`

and use `\cite` and `\citep` in the main text. If the entries in your `.bib` file include the DOI it will be reported in the bibliography as well.

...Bibliography

► **List only cited references and cite only listed references**.

► Alphabetic order by surname of first author.

► Starts on a new page.

► Slightly different features for journal articles, books, working paper, book chapters, reports, internet resources , ...

► **Always** state the **Digitial Object Identifier** (DOI) if available

⇒ Software can control for consistent citation style and bibliography.

► Always double check your bibliography!.

Electronic Supplement

Guidelines

Chair of Applied
Microeconomics

First steps
Topic
Research Question
Title

Literature Search
Academic sources
How to read empirical
papers

Writing
Page numbers
Structure
Title page
Abstract
Introduction
Main
Conclusion
Design and Layout
Figures and Tables

References and
Bibliography

Plagiarism

AI tools
DeepL
ChatGPT

Software
Statement of authorship

▶ All bibliographic sources must be included in an electronic supplement submitted together with your thesis or seminar paper.

▶ The corresponding files (e.g., PDFs of articles) must be named exactly as they are cited in the main text (e.g., AlHarahsheh-etal2025).

▶ The purpose is to facilitate comparison between your statements based on the cited sources and the original sources, in order to detect fabricated references and avoid misinterpretations.

▶ You may submit the electronic supplement together with the electronic copy of your thesis as a compressed file (ZIP or RAR) via email or on a USB flash drive.

Plagiarism

Guidelines

Chair of Applied
Microeconomics

First steps
Topic
Research Question
Title

Literature Search
Academic sources
How to read empirical
papers

Writing
Page numbers
Structure
Title page
Abstract
Introduction
Main
Conclusion
Design and Layout
Figures and Tables

References and
Bibliography

Plagiarism

AI tools
DeepL
ChatGPT

Software
Statement of authorship

Plagiarism:

▶ Copying a series of words or sentences (or graphs, tables, etc.) without giving reference where they come from.

▶ Using concepts, ideas or facts from different origin without giving reference where they come from.

▶ **Especially**: Paraphrasing another source (although citing it) and only changing a few words / substitute with synonyms!

Plagiarism

How to avoid it?

- ▶ If you cannot summarize an "idea" in your own words and copy it from another source, use quotation marks and refer to the source!

- ⇒ "Anti-plagiarism" through many direct quotations does not improve the quality of your paper!

- ▶ If you draw on the findings, opinions or any information from a source, cite and reference the source according to the guidelines!

Plagiarism is easier to detect than one might think, and results in a guaranteed fail!

How to use/not use AI

Artificial Intelligence based services such as DeepL or ChatGPT
have developed into powerful tools that can be very helpful in
crafting a text in good English or German. When using these tools
please note that there is a thin line between adhering to good
academic standards and plagiarism.

DeepL, for instance, can produce very accurate translations
from/into English of long text passages or whole documents. In
any case, the original source in its original language still has to be
cited properly and we strongly discourage you from any attempt to
pass off someone else's text as your own. A word by word quote
has to be indicated and properly referenced, independent of
whether the quote has been translated or not. Moreover, word for
word quotes should be used sparsely.

How to use/not use AI

ChatGPT and related tools, on the other hand, can produce long texts in response to user prompts. The quality of the generated text strongly depends on the quality and specificity of user prompts. Please note that albeit the quality of the language generated by ChatGPT and related tools is outstanding, the actual generated content is not necessarily facts based. Or in plain words, may by completely fictional and wrong. Notoriously, ChatGPT and the like will make up content such as bogus academic references or fake descriptions of academic studies. When using ChatGPT and related tools, you will have to check EVERY fact and identify and read proper academic references that you base your argumentation on.

...How to use/not use AI

Guidelines

Chair of Applied
Microeconomics

First steps
Topic
Research Question
Title

Literature Search
Academic sources
How to read empirical
papers

Writing
Page numbers
Structure
Title page
Abstract
Introduction
Main
Conclusion
Design and Layout
Figures and Tables

References and
Bibliography

Plagiarism

AI tools
DeepL
ChatGPT

Software
Statement of authorship

Furthermore, when simply copying text generated by ChatGPT or related tools and passing it off as your own you certainly have crossed the line and plagiarise. Copying ChatGPT output while citing ChatGPT by stating the prompt and access date in principle does not qualify as plagiarism but still is bad academic practice and will not improve the quality of your work as you still would need proper academic references, facts and data. Needless to say, ChatGPT and related tools are not appropriate academic sources. Furthermore, bogus academic sources or fake descriptions of sources' content will result in a fail. Nevertheless, ChatGPT can be an inspiring tool to help improve the quality of language as well as structure and stringency of your text.

Software

A **reference management software** is highly recommended.[8]

- ▶ e.g. Microsoft Word + Zotero / Citavi

- ▶ e.g. LaTeX + Biblatex

- ⇒ Ease of citing and referencing

- ⇒ Instantly update all references

- ⇒ Instantly create a bibliography

- ⇒ Takes control of the citation style

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[8]See different examples and explanations at
https://www.ub.europa-uni.de/de/hilfe/bibliothek-von-a-z/
Literaturverwaltung-und-Wissensorganisation-_allgemein_/index.html

Statement of authorship

Guidelines

Chair of Applied
Microeconomics

First steps
Topic
Research Question
Title

Literature Search
Academic sources
How to read empirical
papers

Writing
Page numbers
Structure
Title page
Abstract
Introduction
Main
Conclusion
Design and Layout
Figures and Tables

References and
Bibliography

Plagiarism

AI tools
DeepL
ChatGPT

Software
Statement of authorship

Personally signed statement of authorship on the last page:
*"I guarantee that this seminar paper/thesis was written by myself
and that I have used no other sources than those mentioned. All
sentences or passages quoted or paraphrased in this paper from
other people's work have been specifically acknowledged by clear
cross-referencing to author, work and page(s). This holds also for
drawings, sketches, graphic images, and for sources from the
Internet."*

*"Hiermit erkläre ich, dass ich die vorliegende
Seminararbeit/Abschlussarbeit selbständig verfasst und keine
anderen als die angegebenen Hilfsmittel benutzt habe. Die Stellen
der Seminararbeit, die anderen Quellen im Wortlaut oder dem Sinn
nach entnommen wurden, sind durch Angaben der Herkunft
kenntlich gemacht. Dies gilt auch fürr Zeichnungen, Skizzen,
bildliche Darstellungen sowie für Quellen aus dem Internet."*