

Guidelines for Academic Writing

Seminar papers, bachelor and master thesis

Chair of Applied Microeconomics

Viadrina European University

September 16, 2025

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- ▶ 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>.

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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

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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.

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

How to Develop a Research Question

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.

²Sourced from

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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.

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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.

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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.

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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?

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- ▶ 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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³Not identical with your research question. 

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?”*).

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- ▶ 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

⁴https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/List_of_economics_journals

⁵Use VPN from outside: https://www.ikmz.europa-uni.de/de/it-dienste/netz_server_dienste/internetzugang/vpn/index.html

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- ▶ 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=ZIAKPtPZqyl>
 - ▶ 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)

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The number of pages question

“How many pages do I need to write?”

⇒ Not the right question to ask!

⇒ 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.

⁶Title page, lists, figures, bibliography etc. do not count as a text page. ↻ 🔍 ↺

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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

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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.

- ▶ 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.

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- ▶ 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.*

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- ▶ 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

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- ▶ Slightly 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!

- ▶ 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,...)

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- ▶ 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).

⁷Why 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/>

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- ▶ 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).

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Check out the exemplary bibliography!

Bibliography

Al-Harashseh, 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.

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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.

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- ▶ **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 **Digital Object Identifier (DOI)** if available
- ⇒ Software can control for consistent citation style and bibliography.
- ▶ Always double check your bibliography!.

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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!

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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!

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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.

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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 be 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.

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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.

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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

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

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