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Arts / Philosophy

Handout for the preparation of your coursework/ seminar paper

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The following hints apply to short written papers ("Hausarbeiten", "Seminararbeiten"), which are required for passing a seminar or a lecture. The instructions are only partially applicable to more extensive theses (Diplom, B.A., M.A.); if you are looking for information on this, you will find it in a paper written by Mirjam Schaub a few years ago:

https://www.burg-halle.de/media/documents/Kunst/Wissenschaften/Handout_fu%CC%88r_Abschlussarbeiten_mit_philosophischem_Schwerpunkt_2017.pdf

Finding a topic

In the area of philosophy, topics for written papers are not assigned; rather, part of your job is to independently find a subject of inquiry and develop a research question. Your paper should be recognizably related to the topic of the seminar/lecture you attended and should tie in with the discussions that took place there. Beyond that, there are no restrictions on your choice of subject matter; whether you choose an "obvious" topic or one that may initially seem "out-of-the-way" is entirely up to you. The most important thing is that your subject seems "interesting" to you in some way, so interesting that you want to look into it more closely and find out something about it.

Formulating a question

In order to actually get writing, you should not only have a topic, but also a research question or problem that you want to solve. Ideally, this question will emerge as if by magic, for example, because something about the subject matter strikes you at first glance as puzzling, as unclear, or as contradictory. Starting from the question "what the devil is going on" (1), you can immediately begin to solve the puzzle.

Of course, it may also happen that your subject does not immediately ask you a question. In that case, don't give up right away. Engaging with a new research topic is similar to talking to a chance acquaintance on a train or in a queue: at first, the conversation is rather formal and reserved; the more exciting questions and answers arise once you've gotten to know each other a bit. So first get a little closer to the subject, find out what others have found out about it, what questions have already been asked of it, and how they have been discussed. In this way you will almost certainly hit upon a point that captures your attention, a question you want to pursue. (2)

Good questions, bad questions

It is not possible to say here what your research question should be, because this depends entirely on your topic and your specific interest. However, a few clues can be given as to how to arrive at a research question that will guide you effectively through your work:

(1) Above all, a good research question is one that you have developed yourself. This does not mean that you have to tap into an unexplored area, find a question that has never been asked before (which would be very difficult in most cases). It does mean, however, that you do not let your question be dictated to you from outside, that your research springs from your own curiosity and your own will to know.

(2) This means at the same time that vague and general, trivial and tautological questions are unsuitable as research questions: If you are seriously interested in something, you will ask specific, precise, and factual questions, those through which you can actually find out something about your subject.

(3) The question should be answerable within the context of the particular format (term paper/thesis). If you have a "big" question that is of burning interest to you but that you cannot address in the context of a term paper, think about how you can limit it, for example, by focusing on a work, an area, or an era, or perhaps by focusing on a particular aspect, a particular train of thought, in which the problem is particularly evident. You do not, therefore, have to abandon the overarching question; you can take it up again on another occasion.

The research

Once you know what you want to find out, you can do targeted research on your subject. Depending on the topic you are covering, you will draw on very different information and materials. Traditional philosophy term papers usually refer to philosophical classics and draw exclusively on philosophical literature; however, if you want to demonstrate a philosophical problem using a novel, a film, a work of visual art, or an everyday occurrence, other sources and other types of secondary literature will come into play. To avoid getting bogged down in your research, be guided by your research question throughout. When evaluating sources and reading secondary literature, it is wise not to become too intrigued by new items that emerge, but to keep asking yourself how the materials and thought patterns you have found can contribute to the solution of your research question.

The "written paper" format

The written paper can essentially be thought of as an explanation and answer to the research question(s) you have raised. In written form, you present the results of your research and the reasoning behind it. It is pleasant for your reader(s) if this is done reasonably clearly. There is an unofficial, internationally accepted

standard division for term papers that can be very useful for you as well, because it helps you to organize your thoughts:

Introduction (15-20% of the content):

Presentation of the topic, description of the subject of the paper

Formulation of the research question(s) or outline of the "problem" that the paper is to deal with.

Possibly a short overview of the "state of research" or the state of the discussion on the problem raised.

Formulation of a working hypothesis for the solution of the research question(s).

Possibly explanation of the methods used for this purpose

Main part (70-80 %)

Answering the research question(s) in discussion with the existing state of research (scientific literature), development of theses or interpretations in individual, comprehensible steps, systematic, not too detailed structuring of the argumentation in individual chapters or sections.

Concluding section (5-10%):

Review of the research questions and working hypotheses raised in the introduction.

Summarizing presentation of the insights gained in the main part.

Possibly outlook on possible further research.

What does "scientific" mean?

The written term paper is a "scientific" paper. This does not mean that you should express yourself in a particularly complicated and sophisticated way. Rather, the expectation is that you present your reasoning clearly and understandably so that others can do something with it and work on it. Writing scientifically also does not have to mean that you draw on a lot of scientific literature to support your argument. But it is important that you deal with the material you use in a transparent and comprehensible way.

This transparent handling includes, in particular, making it clear what comes from you and what you have taken from others. For all findings that do not originate from your own experience or thinking, there must be an "indication of origin", i.e. the place (text, film, radio report, etc.) where you found the corresponding information or train of thought must be named. Direct quotations are to be

marked as such by quotation marks and should be accounted for. Summarized representations or paraphrases of content found elsewhere ("indirect" quotations) must also be marked. The origin should be indicated in such a way that your readers can look up the corresponding content themselves. Summarized references such as "Wikipedia" or "Meyers Konversationslexikon" are useless; only if you name the exact place with page number or internet address, the passage can be found. Which citation method you use and which format your literature references have is not decisive; however, you should consistently adhere to a once chosen citation method and always provide complete bibliographical information.

(1) Clifford Geertz: The interpretation of cultures. Selected essays, New York: Basic Books, 1973, p. 27.

(2) If not, then perhaps it really is too boring a subject (for you). In that case, you can always choose another topic.