English Department – Linguistics Division

Writing a **BA- or MA thesis** in linguistics

One of the main purposes of academic writing is to communicate academic findings to an academic audience. Basically, you must establish a connection between a linguistic topic, the research on the topic in the linguistic literature and the reader.

Writing a thesis does not mean finding "correct" answers or the "truth" (which does not exist in a scientific sense), but to come to a justified judgment supported by reason and evidence. Therefore, any linguistic paper has to provide a structured argumentation transparent to the reader:

i. Introducing an argument
ii. Providing and describing evidence for the argument (data and sources you find in other scholars' reasoning)
iii. Interpreting the evidence in a theoretical framework: analysis and implications
iv. Concluding the argument

The essential skills entail

- ✓ applying the method of science
- ✓ adhering to academic standards
- ✓ researching a topic in linguistics by arguing properly in linguistic terms
- ✓ writing by structuring a topic in a paper/thesis accordingly

Finding a topic in linguistics

Think about the linguistic courses you attended (advanced courses: 'Hauptseminare' / HS in Syntax or Semantics, Advanced Syntax or Semantics, General Linguistics): what issues have been discussed? Which papers have been read? What analyses have been investigated? Do you recall questions and problems raised in class or in the literature used?

Make a list of these issues! What interests you?

What do you know about the issues and where are your gaps? Gaps may lead to research questions!

Try to organize the list into main points and sub-points! Be open to all ideas and pick up some of them later! Take small steps – Start with a broad subject area at first and narrow it down later!

Possible topics may concern

- Linguistic Controversies (recent debates in a theoretical framework)
- A linguistic phenomenon or a specific construction that might also be addressed from a cross-linguistic perspective
- A comparison of different theoretical approaches or analyses of a certain phenomenon
- An empirical study (for instance, an investigation of the acquisition of a certain linguistic phenomenon)
- The topics may focus on the syntactic, semantic or morphological side of a phenomenon or address their interaction.

In general, you have to discuss previous analyses, discuss advantages and flaws. The theoretical background assists you in your line of argumentation.

You may present a new analysis or modify an existing analysis, or combine different analyses.

Organizing your work

i. Identifying a problem or a question
ii. Collecting literature, making selections, reading and making notes
iii. Writing a draft based on a (preliminary) structure
iv. Finalizing your thesis

Organizing your thesis

The basic structure

Front page

Table of Contents

Main Text consisting of three basic parts:

i. Introduction
ii. Main body (containing the main chapters of the paper)
iii. Conclusion

Reference list

(Appendices)

The parts in detail:

Front page: Title of the thesis, your name, degree, names of your two instructors, date and place

Make sure that **the title** of your paper reflects its aim and scope.

Papers and final theses in linguistics should contain the sections listed below. These should be numbered, except for the Table of contents, the References and the Appendix. Note that the section titles are generic and may be adapted to your topic. Generally, the **topic** is first **contextualized**, i.e. embedded in its theoretical context. It is here that the topic is properly introduced and defined, and that relevant theoretical literature is surveyed. Then you should **narrow down** the scope of the paper to some specific factors to be investigated in particular. You need to formulate research questions which will be answered in the course of your thesis. After providing some important information on the basic issues to be addressed, you should then analyze, discuss, compare or even generate **empirical evidence**, doing or discussing case studies dealing with the specific factors you are interested in. Finally a conclusion section rounds off your paper.

Table of contents

Indicate sections and subsections (in short papers) or chapters and subchapters (in longer papers) and page references. The structure of the paper reflects your particular way of dealing with the topic, specifically your line of argumentation. Therefore, structure your paper in a sensible way, and remember that the internal structure of larger sections reflects how you weight the different aspects of your research question. Page numbering starts on the first page of the text, not with the table of contents. Avoid listing studies you refer to, better create a new content-based structure that reflects your line of argumentation. Do not make authors' names the title of a chapter; better find a telling name that characterizes his or her approach.

Avoid over-fragmentation: introduction and conclusion chapter tend to have no sub-sections as opposed to the main body of the work.

The text

I. Introduction

First state your aim and indicate why the subject of your paper is worth writing about. Tell the reader what aspects you intend to investigate as well as what will be left out.

Then sketch how you will proceed by providing a sensible and precise outline of the structure.

II. Main Chapters

The topic, research questions or research statements are to be developed here. You can never cover an entire topic area in your paper; you always need to narrow a potential topic down to a very specific research question, i.e. a particular problem within the topic area that you deal with. Therefore, probably *the* most important conceptual step is to distinguish between a **topic area** that you are interested in, and a very specific **goal** that you pursue in your paper. In the first section or chapter of your paper you should position the specific topic into the frame of the topic area; put the specific question into a larger debate or discussion.

Then give a general description of the construction or phenomenon you will work on. Define the relevant concepts (usually the central terms of the paper's title. Define the terms and state any abbreviations you use (if they are numerous, they can be listed in an appendix). Line out what is interesting, unclear or controversial and form a research question. In finding an answer to this question your paper is a relevant contribution to the scientific discussion.

Theoretical framework and previous work: You have to embed your own discussion into a theoretical framework and previous research. That is, never start your discussion of a topic in a 'theoretical vacuum', as if you had never attended a course in this area and never bothered to read the foundational literature on the topic. Sometimes it is adequate to give a brief, critical survey of earlier work dealing with your subject. The longer the paper the more relevant it is to give a *state of the art* in order to place your topic in the scientific discussion.

Material: State the nature and limitations of your data: whether you use a corpus, elicited material, etc. Describe your method of collecting data (taken from literature or generated by own experiments) as well as the advantages and/or limitations of your material.

In general, evidence-based reasoning is required in scientific research.

- ✓ Your writing must be supported by evidence such as data, facts, quotations, arguments, statistics, research, and theories.
- ✓ A well-documented coherent and logically structured line of argumentation must be embedded in current research.

The data base can vary:

- ✓ Judgment of native speakers
- ✓ Data (samples of sentences) taken from the literature (source is to make clear!!)
- ✓ Experimental studies
- ✓ Corpora (Corpus of Contemporary American English, British National corpus)

The main chapters contain your line of reasoning. Note that you have to apply the scientific method, be objective and take a critical point of view.

Consider the **checklist** below!

- ✓ Description of the phenomenon illustrated by data
- ✓ Explaining relevant terms and concepts
- ✓ Providing a survey of the previous literature as it relates to your line of argumentation (critical thinking)
- ✓ Categorize, collect and analyze data
- ✓ Depending on your topic: Reporting experiments or doing an empirical study of your own
- ✓ Discuss your major findings and their theoretical implications
- ✓ What could be a future direction in research? Make recommendations for next logical steps that should be taken

III. Conclusion

Give a general summary of your results and state the conclusions you can draw on the basis of them. If part of your results is inconclusive, e.g. because you have not had enough material, say so. Refer back to the beginning part of your paper and the aims or questions of your paper – you can tell the reader which questions you could answer. Also indicate what aspects or areas demand further study.

References

Under this heading you list all the literature you refer to in your text in alphabetical order. Further, if your data consist of published material (e.g. newspapers, dictionaries, films, electronic corpora, websites) these should also be listed here in a separate section.

Referencing concerns

- ✓ Direct quotations
- ✓ Assumptions that are not widely known or that are arguable

- ✓ Judgements, ideas or claims of other scholars you summarized or paraphrased or used in your argumentation

Appendix

If you want to include specimens of your data, etc., you may do so in one or more appendices at the very end of your paper. They should have separate numbering (App. I, App. II, etc.), but continuous page numbers with the rest of the paper.

Plagiarism Do not plagiarize. The rule of thumb is that any idea which is not your own must be referenced. The only exceptions are facts which can be considered general knowledge, e.g. "Saussure was a Swiss linguist". If you are unsure about what can be considered general knowledge, it is better to over-reference. Intellectual honesty is demanded and failure to comply is sanctioned severely. Read and sign the *PLAGIARISM DECLARATION* ("Selbständigkeitserklärung") (available on the English Department homepage and submit this document with every paper).
https://www.uni-goettingen.de/de/plagiarism/199048.html

Specific remarks on empirical studies

Doing or reporting experiments requires a specific documentation process. The main body of a thesis undertaking an empirical study has to contain the following parts:

The setting of the study (methodology and aims)

i. Method, subjects, corpus, and materials

   Explain your method of analysis and mention the advantages and limitations of your approach. Give some information about the subjects taking part in the experiment. Describe the data you investigate. If you conduct an experimental or questionnaire study, characterize your subjects and describe the materials you have used. If you conduct a corpus study, characterize the corpus (e.g. BNC, ICE-GB, SGSWE, size, kind). You may want to include summary tables of your data, but don't present the results of your analysis at this stage.

ii. Procedure

   Describe the way you have collected the data. How did you conduct the experiment? How did you search for particular constructions in the corpus?

iii. Coding

Describe how you have categorized the data. Give an overview of all categories and state how you assigned a particular response (in an experimental study) or a particular instance (in a corpus study) to a particular category.

Results and analysis

First you present your results, and then you analyze them. You will probably want to present your results in the form of tables or lists of examples, or both. Try to make these as clear as possible, and concentrate on one aspect at a time. Support your arguments with references to data. You may wish to divide your results and analysis into two sections. Long and complicated sections should have a short summary at the end.

Descriptive summary of results: In the social sciences (e.g. psychology, sociology) you first present your results and then discuss them. In linguistics, the results and the discussion are often combined in one section, but if you find it appropriate you can separate them.

Present tables and figures to summarize your findings, but don't present your findings twice, i.e. first in a table and then in a figure. Preparing tables and figures can be difficult. Don't give long tables including lots of numbers. The tables and figures in the text serve to provide easy access to your most important findings. The appendix may include a more detailed summary of your results presented in more comprehensive tables. You need to discuss the results presented in tables and figures! The figures/tables alone are not sufficient. Say what the descriptive statistics suggest.

Inferential statistics: Once you have described your data, submit them to statistical analysis. Say what type of test you have used and present the relevant measures (e.g. p-value, F-value, degrees of freedom etc.). If it is not obvious why you used a particular test, explain your decision, but don't describe obvious choices (e.g. I have used a *chi*-square test because the data are frequency data). Say also what the statistical analysis suggests, i.e. how the results should be interpreted.

Discussion

Summarize your findings, address research questions and implication that might follow from your study, embed your findings into the theoretical field you work in!

Length of your paper BA-thesis: 30 - 35 pages / MA-thesis: 60 – 80 pages
Layout a common standard is a word-processed document with an 12pt font size, 2.5cm margins and a 1.5 space between lines.

Use of language & writing style:

Everyday language and personal language is to be avoided because academic writing presents and evaluates complex issues. By using a precise language one arrives at an objective position. Personal feelings and opinions do not contribute to scientific discussions.

Hence, you should end up with a paper that is written in style being

- ✓ **well-structured:** coherent, written in a logical order, relates issues and ideas properly (at the text level and the paragraph-level too)
- ✓ **formal and objective:** avoids colloquial language; is critical (positive and negative) towards the writer's work and others' works
- ✓ **clear, concise, precise and focused:** represents information relevant to a topic, answers questions on a topic and relates research materials by using a clear scientific language wordiness and redundancy can be distracting and writing should be precise and explicit in meaning, avoiding vague expression or ambiguity.
- ✓ **evidenced, correct and consistent:** demonstrates knowledge of a specific field, supports arguments with evidence and references all sources used for the argumentation

I. In text quotation

Quoting from the literature Use inverted commas—double quotes—when quoting from the literature, thus: As Tannen (1991: 143) states, "the dissatisfaction may be mutual," if men do all the talking and women always have to listen.
Longer quotations should be indented and set apart from the text. Notice also that indented quotations should not be surrounded by double quotes.
Introducing concepts If you introduce technical concepts in your text, you can highlight them with double quotes or capitals. Avoid italics for this purpose.
Make it **explicit** each time you refer to other people's ideas by direct quotes or by paraphrasing their arguments (According to X, Based on X, Following X…etc.):

Chomsky (2008:3) introduced the term…
Many syntacticians (e.g. Boeckx 2015: chapter 4) distinguish …
This insight has gained ground in recent years (Epstein, Kitahara, Seely 2014).

II. References

Use a consistent method throughout (MLA or Harvard etc.). References must occur in alphabetical order and must include the following pieces of information: Who. When. What. Where.

Name, first name (initial). year. *book title*. place of publication: publisher.
Name, first name (initial). year. title. In *journal.* Pages.
Name, first name (initial). year. title. In name of editor(s). *book title*. pages. place of publication: publisher.

More than one author:
Name, first name (or: initial) and (or: &) name, first name (or: initial)
Name, first name (or: initial), name, first name (or: initial) and (or: &) name, first name (or: initial)

Books and Journal papers: Use the following format:
Wiltschko, M. & Ritter, E. 2015. Animating the narrow syntax. *The Linguistic Review* 32(4): 869–908.
Wanner, E. & Gleitman, L. (eds.). 1982. *Language Acquisition: The State of the Art*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

For the **second or revised edition** of a book you should give the date of the new edition:
Romaine, S. 1995. *Bilingualism*. Second edition. Malden, MA: Blackwell.

When quoting **reprints** of older works you should indicate both the original and new publication date:

Grice, H.P. 1975. Logic and Conversation. In: Cole, P & Morgan, J. L. (eds.) *Speech Acts.* New York: Academic Press. Reprinted in: Davis, S. (ed.) 1991: 305-315.

Two or more publications by the same author in the same year should be distinguished by adding a, b, c, etc.

Unpublished work: below is an example of a reference for an unpublished doctoral thesis (note: no italics).

Mohr, S. 2004. Clausal architecture and subject positions: Impersonal constructions in the Germanic languages. Unpublished doctoral thesis**.** Institut für Linguistik/Anglistik, University of Stuttgart.

Online references

If you quote an online source, the reference can look like this:
Hauben, M. & Hauben. R. 1995. Netizens: On the history and impact of usenet and the internet. http://www.columbia.edu/hauben/netbook/ (accessed 10 January 2012).

Glossing linguistic examples

Non-English examples need glossing. Glosses consist of three parts

i. The sentence itself
ii. A word for word or morpheme-for-morpheme translation containing the relevant grammatical information
iii. The actual English translation

Footnotes

Footnotes are used for additional information which you feel might interrupt the flow of your argument.

- additional information that is useful to know but would disturb the smooth flow of the main text
- (e.g. additional references to secondary sources, contrary positions in the literature)

- further explications that enable a better understanding of terminology, quotations and minor aspects of the topic
- cross-references to statements of your own text (e.g. you can tell the reader when you postpone discussions).

Illustrations

Tables, charts, figures may be used to illustrate or summarize your findings. You can put them into the sections within your text or (if they are rather large) into an appendix (consecutive numbering required). They need to be commented on and explained.

References/Works cited

text formatting: 1 1/2 lines, font size 12 pt

MLA and **APA** are two of the most commonly used **citation styles**:

The *MLA Handbook* (published by the Modern Language Association)

https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/research_and_citation/mla_style/mla_formatting_and_style_guide/

The APA manual (published by the American Psychological Association)

https://www.scribbr.com/category/apa-style/6th-edition/

The **Examination Office** informs about registration of your B.A. and M.A. thesis:

BA thesis
https://www.uni-goettingen.de/de/document/download/bc8a02b5747fdc0d442d66c8db3c9d69.pdf/Merkblatt_Meldung%20zur%20BA-Arbeit%20EN%20(05.05.2022).pdf

MA thesis
https://www.uni-goettingen.de/de/document/download/9e98e0cc1d9c635fb95d26950ba92fa4.pdf/Merkblatt_Meldung%20zur%20MA-Arbeit%20EN%20(06.07.2022).pdf