



Tips for Writing a Term Paper in American Studies

A) Language, Concepts & Arguments

1. Differentiate between the theory you use and the thematic/political orientation of your chosen primary work. The names for theoretical approaches are sometimes the same as the political orientations they are inspired by (cf. feminism, feminist criticism), but sometimes they are not (cf. environmentalism/ ecocriticism). While you can, for example, use the theoretical approach of ecocriticism/ environmental criticism to analyze a novel, this does not mean that the novel you analyze is an 'ecocritical' novel. The novel may be a green or environmental text (or environmentally oriented or suggestive), but it is not necessarily a work of ecocriticism (i.e., a scholarly work making use of ecocritical concepts and ecologically-oriented theorizations). Similarly, not every novel you can read productively with the help of Marxist, feminist, or queer criticism is necessarily a 'Marxist/ feminist/ queer novel'; in fact, it may be the opposite: employing Marxist or feminist criticism may reveal how the materials you analyze are classist, sexist or heteronormative.

2. Avoid adapting the outdated language of older primary works and older secondary texts (in fields where the language used and considered appropriate by scholars has changed). Academic language changes over time. As discussions about topics intensify and as public discourse evolves, our understanding of what constitutes good scholarly language changes. While some scholars from the 1970s (and in rare cases up to the 1990s) used the word *Negro/es* in their scholarship to refer to African Americans, partly because it was a term that Black artists of the Harlem Renaissance used to describe themselves, it is not an acceptable term anymore, neither in general conversation nor in scholarship. Quoting texts that use the term "Negro" or similarly terms is fine, but if you paraphrase or comment on these sources, make sure to replace the phrase with a term such as *Black people* or *African Americans*.

In a related manner, it is important to avoid using the word *race* in the 19th-century sense of 'a sub-category of human beings,' as if there are different human "races." There are no "races" of human people; there are people with different bodies, which has historically led to certain racist classifications and social hierarchizations. Race is a cultural construct, NOT a biological given, even though the characteristics used to establish it as a social category of difference are biological and even though the idea of race has many real-world effects (including the negative effects of discrimination as well as the positive effects of shaping community formation). This means that one can speak (in an American context) about race relations or racial identity (here, the assumption is that one means race in the sense of the social category of difference), but not about the "conflict of human races" or a "hierarchy of races," for example.

Similarly, terms such as *females* or *transsexuals* are outdated (and considered offensive by many), because, from a scholarly point of view (which is the view we uphold in our discipline), they are reductive, essentialist, inaccurate, and misleading. Instead of speaking about *females* use *women*, or, depending on the context and who you speak about specifically, people who identify as women, individuals presenting as/read as female, or menstruating people, etc.; instead of using the word *transsexuals*, use *trans people/trans men/trans women/trans youth/trans and nonbinary folks*, etc.

Another example of changing scholarly vocabulary is the phrase *enslaved people*, which is often preferred in contemporary scholarship to the word *slaves*, so as to indicate that slavery was something done to human beings, rather than to suggest that these people were only and nothing more than what the institution of slavery classified them as: slaves. Scholars will still sometimes use the word 'slaves', especially in cases where they refer to the legal status, but when they talk about the human beings who were legally categorized as slaves, the term *enslaved people* has become more common. Read current scholarship to make sure that you are up to date with regard to the language you use!

3. There are two types of concepts and context: first, the main theoretical approach/key concepts and larger cultural/ historical context that you need to provide to your readers before your analysis starts (as a framing of your entire argument/as the 'stage' you build for your argument to make sense and shine) and, second, the additional theoretical/critical concepts and more specific pieces of contextual information that your readers only need at a specific moment in your argument. In the first case, include them in the framing/ theorizing before the analysis chapter of your paper; in the latter case, provide the definitions and info in your analysis at the moment when those definitions or info are needed for your analysis to make sense/ gain in depth.

4. Avoid overusing expressions such as 'clearly,' or 'obviously.' Either a primary work is clear/obvious about what its message is, in which case you can simply point out what your primary work states without overemphasizing that it is clear/obvious, or what you write about is not at all clear or obvious to everyone engaging with your chosen primary material. In the latter case you don't want to downplay your own achievement in analyzing a given scene or passage and your efforts at making 'clear' to your readers what it suggests by saying that what you argue is obvious, even though the text itself may be multilayered, complex, or obtuse.

5. Avoid overusing emotional expressions in your scholarly writing. While your emotional reactions to your material of choice can be an indicator for elements in the material that may be relevant for analysis, whether something moves, angers, or troubles you, or whether you enjoy it shouldn't be the only way you identify matters of interest in a given text; nor should these emotional reactions guide your analysis. While it is understandable (and important for change) that social injustices or environmental destruction sadden or anger you, for example, this fact shouldn't be the main focus of what you write about when you write a scholarly text. Your main focus should be on understanding how a certain material presents or is involved in shaping the discourse around a certain topic, not how the material or the topic it discusses makes you (or others) feel.

6. Keep in mind that moral/value judgments or policy suggestions lie outside the scope of scholarship in our discipline in most cases. Avoid judging a primary text you are analyzing based on your aesthetic preferences or personal beliefs and value systems (be they social, religious, or economic). While you may prefer movies with complex female characters and while it is absolutely valid to note that a movie you analyze does not feature complex characters or that a novel you analyze does not address, say, environmental destruction although it is set in a place affected by pollution, your main task in such a case would be to examine what the effect of this lack of complexity in characterization or omission is, not to criticize the movie or novel for its choices. Your argument shouldn't be about whether (something about) a movie or novel is good or bad. This also means that, even when you do have suggestions, for example, concerning how a practice or a policy can/need to change (f. ex. if you think that there should be more complex female characters in horror movies or novels that acknowledge ecological devastation), such generalized suggestions do not belong in your analysis. If at all, they may be mentioned in the conclusion of your paper.

B) Organization, Formatting & Style

1. Avoid including a separate sub-chapter on the plot of the film or book you analyze. Instead, integrate a general (focused) plot summary into the introduction with enough info to explain to readers why the chosen primary work is of interest in relation to the topic you will discuss, and then add more information in your analysis as required. Always only provide as much information about the plot and the context of a specific scene you discuss as your reader needs to follow your argument. If you add too much unnecessary information, your reader will have difficulties to distinguish important information from unimportant information and, hence, be distracted from your argument.

2. When first mentioning the title of a book or essay in the text of your paper (not in the brackets), add the year of publication. If a book or essay is so important to your argument that you mention it in the text itself, your reader should know its date of publication, because the (rough) date of publication can be an indication for how to read a work, be it a primary work or a secondary text. Write, for example: “In his monograph *Slow Violence* (2011), Rob Nixon argues that...”. By contrast, when you first mention a scholar’s name in brackets, only provide the last name of the author, unless you quote two scholars with the same last name in your paper, in which case you need to add the first name or initial also. Only provide a short title in brackets in addition to the author’s last name, if you quote two sources by the same scholar.

3. Avoid including paragraphs in your essay/article that are two or three sentences long. As outlined in the MLA handbook/the Stilblatt of the ESI (cf. p. 13, 4.2), paragraphs are units of meaning. They usually consist of a topic sentence (introducing what the paragraph will be about), quotations from secondary texts and/or from the primary text + commentary by you/an interpretation/how these quotations relate to your argument, and a summary sentence (showing how your argument has advanced through engaging with the secondary sources/ the primary sources in your paragraph). As you can clearly see, all of this cannot be done in 2-3 sentences; it usually requires at least 5-8 sentences.

4. Make sure your sentences are complete (subject + verb + object) and that each sentence ends with proper punctuation marks. Writing incomplete sentences (without noticing that they are in fact incomplete) is something to look out for especially if you have written a long sentence that includes a couple of dependent clauses or parenthetical information. While, for example, verbs are necessary to make your sentences mean what you want them to mean, punctuation marks help readability. Your essays/articles/theses have a reader (your instructor) and so you need to make sure that every sentence in the work you submit (a) means what you intend it to mean and (b) is complete and understandable for your reader.

5. Make sure to match English nouns with the right verbs and adjectives. Many English nouns have to be combined with certain verbs and adjectives rather than with others. Even when your native language is one that is close to English (or sometimes especially when it is), some of these idiomatic noun/verb and noun/adjective combinations (= collocations) will be different from the ones you are used to. If in doubt about the right combination, check a collocation dictionary such as this one: www.freecollocation.com/. It allows you to check which verbs go with which nouns, which adjectives go with which nouns, and vice versa.

6. Remember that you DO NOT NEED to memorize citation rules. Of course it is helpful and saves time to know the basics, but you can always print a list of the most common citation rules together with citation examples from the MLA handbook (or online platforms such as Purdue Online Writing Lab) and place it on the wall by your writing desk so you can check the correct format or rule for a citation when needed. It can be useful to bookmark the MLA handbook or the Purdue Online Writing Lab on your browser for ease of access.

7. Before submitting your work, revise AND edit the text carefully. This means that you should

- (1) make sure you do not repeat the exact same argument several times in different words throughout the paper. If you have the feeling that you are repeating yourself, you should think about whether the various sections where you discuss the same point need to be brought together; whether one is redundant and has to be omitted; or whether you can actually revise those sections where you repeat yourself so they add something new to the argument.
- (2) read the text (for some people it may be useful to read it aloud) and consider whether the various paragraphs and sub-sections of your paper follow a logical order. In order to do so more effectively, keep in mind, again, that your text is written to be READ by your instructor and so it should make sense to them as much as it makes sense to you.
- (3) look out for sentences (even sometimes paragraphs) that seem out of place/ disconnected from the argument and may need to appear elsewhere in your paper. As an example, as you continue to develop the argument in your paper, a point you raise on page 3 might work more effectively on page 1 or page 17.
- (4) check the text for observations that do not support your main argument(s). Eventually, no matter how interesting or important a point is generally, if it does not thematically belong to the paper you are currently working on, it needs to be omitted. For example, if you write about class identity in a comic, the fact that it touches on environmental issues may be interesting to you, but if you cannot connect it to your argument about class identity, leave it out (or only mention it as one other topic worth exploring in the conclusion).
- (5) keep an eye for language mistakes (spelling / grammar / capitalization / syntax) after you have revised the paper for its contents.
- (6) re-read your introduction ONLY AFTER you have read the entire text and revised it to ensure that your paper delivers what your introduction promises and vice versa. This correspondence between the introduction (and introductory passages in sub-sections) of your paper and the what follows is key to how your paper is read and assessed by your instructor.
- (7) similarly, and as the very last step before submission, double check the working thesis and the title of your work to make sure they correspond to the latest developments in your paper. Please note: you can always revise the title of a paper you write for a course before submitting it (unless the instructor has insisted on a precise wording), but you cannot revise the title of your B.A. and M.A. thesis once you have registered it officially.