

General Comments on Writing Research Papers

Based on grading a good number of seminar papers & M. A. theses over the last years, the following is a list of suggestions of which some may apply to you while others may not. But a review is always good, so as this is a prelude to the work you must do on your upcoming seminar papers & M. A. theses, perhaps you find it helpful.

The most frequent problems have to do with **referencing**. Once you decide on a style, stick to it. Too many papers use more than one style, creating the impression that people include material directly from the internet or elsewhere without modifying the reference.

1st Option: If you include the reference directly within your written text, open parenthesis, write in last name of the author/editor of the book, and either use a comma or a colon (it is even possible to use neither) and then the page number. Ex: (Brown:43) or (Brown, 43) or (Brown, p. 43) or (Brown 43). BE CONSISTENT! And use the *Anglistik/Amerikanistik Style Sheet!* The name and page number should refer directly to your Bibliography or Works Cited section at the end of the paper. It is therefore unnecessary and cumbersome to include more reference information within your text. This means, however, that your Bibliography must be very clear, last name of author/editor first, and all in alphabetical order.

If you have included in your bibliography two or more works by the same author, use an abbreviated but clear reference to the actual text you are referring to in the citation, eg., (Brown, "Magic Realism," p. 43) as opposed to (Brown, *Rites of Passage*, p. 46). Alternatively, you might use the date of publication (Brown, 1989:43) as opposed to (Brown, 1993:56).

Web references have presented a problem. We suggest to make an independent list of "Webliography", including the entire webpage address and the date you consulted it. As webpages can be excessively long, you may also include an index so that you can cite specific pages more succinctly within the text to refer clearly to the entire reference at the end. But definitely consult this with your thesis director before you use such material in your next piece of work.

2nd Option: Footnotes/endnotes with entire reference included for the first reference to a work and specific page number.¹ Subsequent references to the same author/work should just use the last name of the author, page number.² When you are making reference to a primary source, say *Dessa Rose*, and will be quoting more often in your paper, in a footnote after its first mention, include the entire reference and then mention that other references will be included in the text.³ Then you only have to use the page number in parenthesis after each quotation. If you are using more than one primary source, you may distinguish between them with initials, eg., (*DR*, p. 47) or (*B*, p. 72) or (*MD*, p. 35) or (*LBD*, p. 103).

¹Thomas Brown, *Rites of Passage* (London: Cambridge University Press, 1989), p. 46.

²Brown, p. 73.

³Shirley Anne Williams, *Dessa Rose* (New York: Berkley Books, 1987), p. 11. All subsequent references will be included in the text and will refer to this edition.

NOTE: Titles of book should always be cited in *italics*. (*Beloved* and Beloved do not refer to the same thing: book vs. character in the novel). Titles of short stories, articles and films should be cited in quotation marks: *Beloved*, Beloved, “Beloved” or *Lesson Before Dying* as opposed to “Lesson Before Dying.”

Bibliographical Entries: (Make sure that every referenced work included in your text is also listed in your Bibliography.)

Peterson, Nancy J., ed. *Toni Morrison: Critical and Theoretical Approaches*. Baltimore & London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997.

Or if you are using the date as reference within your text:

Peterson, Nancy J., ed. (1997) *Toni Morrison: Critical and Theoretical Approaches*. Baltimore & London: The Johns Hopkins University Press.

Or for an article/essay included in a book:

Pérez-Torres, Rafael. “Knitting and Knotting the Narrative Thread – *Beloved* as Postmodern Novel.” *Toni Morrison: Critical and Theoretical Approaches*. Ed. Nancy J. Peterson. Baltimore & London: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1997.

(This is not the only way to do this, of course. But be sure that you choose one style and are consistent throughout.)

Punctuation

When using quotation marks, the British system leaves the comma or full stop outside:
The Bodwins ... are clearly “good people”.

the American system inside: The Bodwins ... are clearly “good people.”

If you are quoting from the book, close quotations, open parenthesis for reference, close parenthesis, *then* place the full stop:

“This was a story they was telling me to help while away the hours Ada made me stay in bed”
(*DR*, p. 182).

If you need quotations within quotation marks, you must vary the number (but be consistent!):

“I thought ‘the deal’ was a joke when Nathan and Harker first started talking about selling...”

OR

‘I thought “the deal” was a joke when Nathan and Harker first started talking about selling...’

Indenting

Use indenting for quoting material more than three lines long. The use of indenting is the equivalent to using quotation marks, so unless the citation is itself a quote (direct speech of a character, for example) do not put quotation marks around the passage you are indenting. Also, the reference in parenthesis at the end of an indented quotation lies *outside* the end

punctuation.

Other questions:

1. The use of “historical present” is perfectly adequate, particularly when you are discussing a novel. However, be very careful not to switch back and forth between “historical present” and past tense. 2. Be very careful with changes in your register. A formal paper should avoid informal language and generally avoid contractions of verbs (e. g., “don’t”) etc., or the indiscriminate use of “get”, “a lot”, and similar colloquialism. 3. In German, you usually explain in the “Introduction” what you will be dealing with in the paper, using expressions such as “Ich will/werde.” However, the translation of this idea into English as “I will” does not work well and comes across as unsophisticated, particularly if you use it more than once. The general rule for writing a good introductory paragraph, for example, is to start with a general statement and then with each sentence make the idea more and more specific. The last sentence of the introductory paragraph(s) should be your “thesis,” i.e., what you will be centering your paper around. Let me give you an example from Patricia McKee’s essay entitled “Spacing and Placing Experience in Toni Morrison’s *Sula*,” included in Peterson’s book used as an example above:

In Toni Morrison’s *Sula*, spacing – that is, closing down or opening up distances between things and persons – has extraordinary urgency. Houses and bodies are the sites of hyperactive mechanisms of containment and expulsion working to effect identity and distinction: of inside and outside, of self and other. Spacing, moreover, becomes crucial to issues of representation and meaning in the Bottom, the place in which most of the action of the novel occurs. Houston A. Baker, Jr., has called attention to the importance of place in the novel: “What Morrison ultimately seeks in her coding of Afro-American PLACE is a writing of intimate, systematizing, and ordering black village values,” he suggests (238). Identifying this ordering with female domestic labor and rituals of cleaning, Baker argues that Morrison “places” African American experience by means of “manipulations of the symbolic,” countering conventions of displacement by affording “a mirroring language ... in which we can find ourselves” (258).

But although the manipulation of persons and things in space can effect a symbolic order, Morrison also uses other means of locating experience in *Sula*. In my discussion of the novel, I want to distinguish between systematic spacing arrangements, of the kind necessary to a symbolic order, and Morrison’s placements of experience that orderly representation misses. Two places in the novel that indicate her concern to locate missing experience are “the place where Chicken Little sank” in the river (61) and the place Eva Peace’s missing leg once occupied, “the empty place on her left side” (31). Neither of these is quite what one would expect a place to be, since neither is the present location of anything. (McKee, p. 37)

It’s very clear from this introduction just what this essay is going to examine. From the very beginning we know the text, the concept of spacing/placing, the critical background, the variation of the concept/thesis, and two of the specific instances in the novel which will be studied in detail to support this new hypothesis. Note how the introduction moves steadily from more general considerations to the specifics of the present essay.

For the conclusion, the concept is the inverse: Start the conclusion with the results of the specific analysis and then slowly move to a more general thought. If you can, a “catchy phrase” at the end of the essay should leave the reader thinking about your work and analysis. Here is Patricia McKee’s final paragraph:

To see Sula’s experience in these terms allows for the recognition of missing experience of several kinds. Morrison depicts African-American, historical experiences of loss rather than identifying loss, from a poststructuralist perspective, as a necessary and nonindividualized component of experience. In African-American life Morrison identifies both material losses – missing persons, and parts of persons – and nonmaterial losses – lost relations, lost possibilities – whose absence is historically significant. To miss these “things” that never were is to locate historical significance in nonmaterial as well as material experience and to insist, moreover, that the historical experience of loss extends far beyond material suffering. (McKee, p. 59)

ALSO IMPORTANT:

Please note that just quoting historical facts or the biographies of certain historical figures without any pertinent and original analysis of or at least detailed relationship to the literary texts is not judged as sufficient for a research paper. Yes, your thoughts should be well-founded and grounded in socio-historical context where relevant, but the point of a research paper is to provide new insight into some particular aspect, not just to reproduce what others have already done.