

## **Guidelines and Expectations for Term Papers & BA/MA Thesis**

*Please also pay attention to our Guidelines regarding the use of AI!*

### **Planning**

**Developing a research question:** Written work must have a clearly recognizable research question. A research question does not have to be a question in a strict sense, but it always addresses a problem that you have identified concerning the topic or literature that you are interested in. Ensure that you give yourself plenty of time to formulate a clear and well-defined overarching research question. To address this question or problem, you must develop a structured line of argument. This means that the research question will help you to narrow down the topic, define its boundaries, and provides a coherent throughline that guides the reader through your work. Always consult with your lecturer/professor about your research question before you start to write your term paper.

A good research question has two important qualities:

1. The question must be answerable within the scope of the assignment, i.e. it should not be too broad or too narrow.
2. Your guiding question must be contextualised within broader debates in the study of religion. This allows you to map out the full scope of the problem that your research addresses. For example, if you are analysing a particular ritual, your discussion should be framed in relation to current research or theoretical perspectives on ritual in the study of religion). You will become familiar with these relevant debates by reviewing the literature.

**Conducting a literature review:** The ability to conduct an independent literature review is an essential academic skill, fundamental to any written paper. When developing research questions, it also helps to conduct an initial review of the existing literature on the topics that you are interested in. This allows you to design a more specific research question, reducing the number of texts that you need to discuss in your full literature review. Several resources can serve as starting points for your literature review:

- The seminar reader
- The library's online catalogue
- The Bibliography of the Study of Religion „RelBib“
- Entries on relevant keywords in specialist encyclopaedias (preferably recent ones, e.g. *The Brill Dictionary of Religion*, *Encyclopaedia of Islam*, etc.).

Based on the references that emerge through these initial explorations, you can conduct more targeted searches for relevant literature (e.g. by examining a text's bibliography, or other publications that cite a given text). Discussing your literature review with your lecturer/professor can also provide valuable guidelines. A general search with an internet search engine or AI tools is neither useful nor reliable for searching literature.

**Paper/Thesis:** Both your term papers and BA or MA thesis should be designed and worked on in close cooperation with a lecturer/professor, especially if you conduct your own empirical research.

## **Structure**

Any term paper or thesis consists of the following components: a cover sheet, a table of contents, the main text (comprising an introduction, main body, and conclusion), a bibliography of sources and literature, a statutory declaration and, if applicable, an appendix.

**Cover sheet:** The cover sheet should include: (a) the title of the paper, specification of the assignment type (term paper, essay, BA/MA thesis etc.; both aligned at the centre of the page); (b) information regarding the course for which the paper was written (university, subject, title of the course/module, semester, lecturer; positioned at the top left of the page); (c) information on the author (name, student number, study program(s), semester, contact details; aligned at the bottom left of the page).

**The table of contents** lists all chapters from the introduction to the appendix, with corresponding page numbers.

**Introduction:** The introduction presents the broader topic and defines your research question. This must be clearly articulated in the introduction. You must also make clear what you want to demonstrate with your work and why you think it is important to pursue the question you chose. You can explain this significance by showing how your work is relevant to existing scholarship on your research question and to the study of religion more broadly (see "Developing a research question" above). You should also present your research methods and the materials with which you will work. At the end of the introduction, you should describe the structure of the paper, i.e. summarise how you intend to address your research question. Ideally the chapter structure should mirror your line of argument.

**The main body** is where you address your research question. Answering your research question must be the golden thread that runs through the main body (avoid discussing side issues that have a weak connection to the research question). In doing so, you should first show in more detail than in the introduction what knowledge you have of the debates in which your research question is embedded (based on the seminar reading, but also beyond this through your literature review). This should include discussions and, if

necessary, definitions of key concepts. You then discuss your research question against the background of what you have previously explained.

**Conclusion:** Not all questions (perhaps even very few) can be answered conclusively. In the conclusion, however, you should reflect on the insights gained from your work in relation to your research question. What did you want to demonstrate and how did you achieve this? Your insights should be brought into conversation with broader debates in the study of religion regarding your topic which you already mentioned in the introduction (see “Introduction”): how do your insights contribute to these debates? An “outlook on further research” can also be given: based on your findings, how could you or other researchers proceed further in exploring this question?

**Bibliography:** This is a list of the sources (texts, web pages, images, films, etc.) and academic literature that you refer to in your work. These are sorted into categories by source type and then sorted alphabetically. The sources must be listed completely so that readers can consult them if necessary. Further details can be found under "Citation style".

**Statutory declaration:** "I hereby declare that I have written this work independently and have not used any sources and tools other than those indicated. All materials used, from published as well as unpublished sources, whether directly quoted or paraphrased, are properly reported. No part of this work has been generated by AI and no use of AI-based tools was made without declaration. I am aware that untruthful information will be treated as an attempt to deceive and in such a case all methods of detecting plagiarism can be used." This statement must be signed and dated.

**Appendix:** If you refer to material in your work that is not publicly available (e.g. interview transcripts, observation protocols, photos, etc.), this could be included fully in the appendix. Consult your supervisor for guidance on including such materials.

### **Citation style**

Choose a common citation style and stick to it—consistency is important. For common citation styles see [here](#). The complete source citation belongs in the bibliography. In the text, short references are sufficient, e.g. Schrode 2014, p. 8. These belong either in footnotes or in brackets in the text after the quotation, e.g. (Schrode 2014, p. 8.). If you are paraphrasing a text, use the term “see”; e.g. (see Schrode 2014). It is crucial that you adopt a consistent citation style! For detailed questions, it is worth consulting the following books:

- Becker, Howard S. (2020): Writing for Social Scientists. How to Start and Finish Your Thesis, Book, or Article. Third edition. Chicago.
- Lareau, Annette (2021): Listening to People. A Practical Guide to Interviewing, Participant-Observation, Data Analysis, and Writing It All Up. Chicago.

### **Further layout specifications**

- Format: A4.
- Edge: Outer margin (3-4cm).
- Font size: 12 pt (footnotes and indented quotations 10 pt).
- Line spacing: 1.5x.
- Alignment: Justified with hyphenation.
- Quotations: Beginning and end marked by “”. Quotations that are longer than two lines should be indented in font size 10 pt.
- Insert page numbers in header or footer.

### **Plagiarism**

All references to the ideas of others (quotations, references, paraphrases, etc.) must be properly cited. Any omission is considered plagiarism, including any undeclared use of generative AI. Plagiarism is a serious violation of academic honesty and is considered an attempt to deceive. It is theft of intellectual property and prevents scientific progress. Plagiarism leads to failing the examination. It will be reported within the department and can lead to the refusal of further examination acceptances.

### **Spelling, grammar, syntax**

Pay close attention to correct spelling, grammar, and syntax. Whenever possible, try to use academic terminology from the study of religion and adopt a scholarly tone. Proofread your work yourself several times before submitting it.

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