

How to write a term paper in 10 steps ...

You have to write a term paper in musicology but don't know how to proceed? With the following instructions we would like to help by giving you a guideline for writing a term paper. On the first page you will find a brief summary of the 10 most important steps when writing a term paper. If you click on the individual steps you will find key questions and explanations, that are essential for each specific step. We have also included some helpful links as an addition to some of the steps and you will find more useful references at the end of this document. If you get stuck on one of the steps, please contact us: muwi-tutorien@udk-berlin.de.

Good luck with your term paper!

The 10 steps at a glance

First steps: Preparation phase

- Step 1: [Finding a topic](#)
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Let's go: Writing phase

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Step 1: Finding a topic [\[back\]](#)

Key questions:

What interested me in the seminar? What is a suitable topic for a term paper?

In most cases, you can choose the topic of your term paper. However, it must be related to the seminar. Therefore, think about what particularly interested you in the seminar. Is there for example a composition, a person or an event in the history of music that you would like to deal with more intensively?

Keep in mind whether the topic is suitable for a term paper. Above all, it should not be too large, so that you can go into depth with examples and work on it in a reasonable amount of time. For example, dealing with all of Beethoven's piano sonatas in a 15-page term paper seems impossible. Taking a closer look at a single sonata or perhaps even just a single movement, on the other hand, is feasible.

Links:

[Themenfindung](#) [on finding a topic] (HS Nordwestschweiz)

Step 2: First search for literature and sources [\[back\]](#)

Key questions:

What literature/sources on my topic are available? Where can I find initial information and get an overview of the topic?

There is hardly a topic on which nothing has been written or published. For your term paper it is important to find reliable references quickly. The safest way to do this is via the specialist bibliographies [RILM](#) and [BMS](#). In order to get a first overview of the topic, you can also have a look at musicological encyclopaedias ([New Grove](#), [MGG](#)) and handbooks. At the same time, you should also check which sources you need. Is there a reliable critical edition of the composition you want to study? Where can you get the original sources you might need (music, letters, periodicals, etc.)? What has been digitised, what has not?

At the end of this initial research, you should have a preliminary list of sources and references, and you should have read your way in. Now is also a good time to contact your lecturer to discuss your topic and your preliminary bibliography.

Links:

[Rechercheleitfaden](#) (UdK, Musikwissenschaft)

Step 3: Formulate a central question [\[back\]](#)

Key questions:

What central question can I pursue in my term paper? How can I formulate this question?

After you have found your topic and read up on it, you can now formulate your central question. This question provides the framework for your term paper, and you will use it as a guide while writing your paper. The introduction usually leads to your central question and should be answered by the end of your paper. This question also helps you to focus on the essential aspects of your work in the individual chapters of your paper. It is therefore important to pose your central question as precisely as possible! For example, the question of how Beethoven's Ninth Symphony was received by posterity is too general and imprecise. If, on the other hand, you ask how and for what reasons the final movement of the symphony was declared the European anthem, you have a precise question that can be answered well by evaluating sources and literature.

Step 4: Search for further references and sources [\[back\]](#)

Key questions:

What references do I need to answer my central question? How can I access the literature that is of interest to me?

Once you have decided on your topic and your central question and have discussed both with your lecturer, you should once again search intensively for literature which you can refer to in your term paper. Again, it is advisable to consult the specialist bibliographies [RILM](#) und [BMS](#). In addition to reading the books and articles, you can pay attention to the references in the footnotes, and thereby complement your bibliography (this form of literature search is called the "snowball system"). Make sure that you note down all the references carefully and according to a uniform system (please refer to the script "[Grundlagen musikwissenschaftlichen Arbeitens](#)"). Doing this correctly will save you a lot of work in the following steps.

It is also important that you check the [Udk library catalogue](#) in time to see what books are available there. In some cases you might have to get books from other libraries in Berlin or via interlibrary loan. If you can't find anything, you can also ask the library for advice.

Links:

[Suchbegriffe zur eigenen Fragestellung finden](#) [finding keywords] (WWU Münster)

Step 5: Set up a timetable [\[back\]](#)

Key questions:

When is the deadline? How much time do I have until then? When am I going to do what?

Writing a term paper is a project that you have to plan. In order not to be pressed for time in the end (this is a classic!) it is helpful to draw up a timetable at the latest after you have completed your literature and source research. Plan all the following steps (6–10). First of all, you should be aware of the deadline for your paper and how much time you have left until then. Plan realistically when drawing up your timetable (take into account holidays, concerts etc.). It is better to calculate the time for each of the steps generously rather than too tightly. There can always be unforeseen delays (e. g. some literature might not be available immediately).

Step 6: Create an outline [\[back\]](#)

Key questions:

Which aspects are important to answer my central question? What is the most conclusive way in which I can present my results?

The outline serves as a structure for your thoughts and for your term paper. When you create a preliminary outline, ask yourself which steps are necessary to answer your central question. Each important step should be given a heading. The first heading is the introduction and it is followed by the further headings and sub-headings you have come up with. Your paper ends with a conclusion (or résumé or summary). The outline will help you in the following steps and can be adapted again and again during the writing process.

Step 7: Evaluate references and sources [\[back\]](#)

Key questions:

What do the authors write specifically about my central question? How do I secure the information which is relevant for my paper?

Before you start writing, you should study the references from your bibliography as well as your sources intensively.

While reading, always consider what information is specifically relevant to your topic and your central question. There are many answers to what the best way of reading a text is. Ultimately, everyone has to find out what works best for them. However, especially if you are unsure whether a text is relevant at all, it is advisable to first get an overview of the text by reading the abstract, introduction and summary. In the case of books, the blurb or the table of contents can often give you an impression of whether it is worth reading the whole book or just individual chapters. If so, you can start reading the text intensively. Try to understand how the text is structured and which positions the authors have in the academic discussions. Mark what is important or unclear in the text and write down your own thoughts. It doesn't matter whether you write everything down by hand or excerpt texts on your laptop, but you should always record all the information that is important to you and your paper in such a way so that you can find it again later! If you work on a laptop, you should back up your files regularly.

Step 8: Structure the content [\[back\]](#)

Key questions:

Where can the evaluated information be placed in my outline? How can it be put in a sensible order?

While analysing the literature and sources, you should consider which information you would like to integrate into your paper and where. The easiest way to do this is by immediately assigning statements which you want to include to the headings in your outline. Always make sure to indicate where the statements you use are from and who is the author. Therefore, set footnotes immediately and note where you got the information from (don't forget the page number!). Nothing is more annoying than not knowing where, for example, an important quotation was from shortly before handing in the paper!

Step 9: Write the term paper [\[back\]](#)

Key questions:

How can I present my results in a way that is comprehensible to the reader? Which terms need to be explained? At which points do I need to include references?

Now you can begin to transform the structured information you have found into a continuous text. Make sure that you present your results in a way that is comprehensible to the reader. Very important: Always assume that the person reading the paper is a musicologist but has not heard or read much about your particular topic. Make sure that your line of thought is easy to follow. This helps the reader immensely with understanding what you are trying to show. Explain central terms in such a way that it is clear what you mean by them. You do not have to define technical terms that are part of the normal vocabulary of a musicologist (tonic, dominant ...), but you should define terms whose meaning is not clearly defined (e.g. discourse, identity, nation). In addition, always remember to quote all statements and thoughts that do not originate from yourself in the footnotes.

By the way: If you follow the link below, you will be taken to the toolbox. Under the category "Hinweise zum wissenschaftlichen Arbeiten" you can find a format template ("Formatvorlage") into which you can write your paper directly so you don't have to worry about the formalities (margins, line spacing, font size, etc.).

Links:

[Formatvorlage](#) [format template] (UdK, Musikwissenschaft)

Step 10: Proofreading [\[back\]](#)

Key questions:

Have I answered my central question? Is my line of thought recognisable? Have I quoted everything that needs to be quoted? Is the spelling correct and the text understandable? Are the formal requirements fulfilled?

There is one important rule: never hand in the first draft of a paper! At the end of the process there is always a phase of proofreading, which you should take into account right from the start. On one hand, make sure that your language is correct and it is clear what you are saying. Pay attention to your wording, grammar and check your spelling (if you are unsure, check the [DUDEN](#)). At the same time, you should also check the content again. Is there a recognisable line of thought? Are all the statements that you have taken from other authors quoted correctly? Does your citation style and your bibliography correspond to the requirements which are written in the paper "[Grundlagen Musikwissenschaftlichen Arbeitens](#)"? In addition, do not forget to attach the signed declaration of academic integrity to your term paper when you hand it in. If you work carefully on this last step, it will improve the overall impression of your work a lot. Nothing is more annoying for correctors than having to read a text that is full of errors and/or is difficult to understand. After proofreading, you have made it: your paper is ready to be handed in! Well done!

Links:

[Tutorien-Website](#) [where you can find helpful documents under "Materialien", such as a checklist for your term paper]

Further references ... [\[back\]](#)

If you would like more information on writing a term paper or would like to get more general information on academic writing and research in the field of musicology, we recommend the following books:

GARDNER, Matthew und Sara SPRINGFELD: *Musikwissenschaftliches Arbeiten. Eine Einführung* (= *Bärenreiter Studienbücher Musik*, Bd. 19), Kassel u. a. 2014, on writing a term paper look at pp. 236–251.

KNAUS, Kordula und Andrea ZEDLER (Hgg.): *Musikwissenschaft studieren. Arbeitstechnische und methodische Grundlagen*, München 2012, on writing a term paper look at pp. 101–125.

ECO, Umberto: *Wie man eine wissenschaftliche Abschlußarbeit schreibt. Doktor-, Diplom- und Magisterarbeit in den Geistes- und Sozialwissenschaften*, 14. Aufl., Wien 2010.