

## How to write a (linguistics) paper<sup>1</sup>

### 1. Choosing your topic

For a short paper, your topic should be **as focused as possible**. There is a lot to be said about even very small empirical facts. Your paper must be more than a summary, and must be more than a reaction. **Your goal is to contribute a new perspective.** There are many possible ways to do this: offer a critique of an existing account of data, and ideally propose an alternative; apply an existing theory to data in a new way; discuss a puzzle certain data pose for linguistic theory and offer a suggestion, spell out a prediction of a theory and propose an experiment that would test it.

### 2. Use your pages wisely

**Length is not a virtue.** If you can say something in one page, do not use two pages to say it. Be concise and do not introduce unnecessary information. Make your point clearly.

Importantly...

- **Research papers are not personal narratives** — the reader does not need to know your personal experience in analyzing the data. For example, your paper should not say “First I thought X, but then I realized that Y and so I finally concluded Z.” Instead: “The analysis must be A because of B and C.” If you want to discuss your first idea that didn’t work out, you might say: “X is a plausible alternative analysis, but cannot be correct because of facts Y and Z.”
- **Research papers are not mystery novels** — The reader should never wonder why they are reading what they are reading, or what the result is going to be. Explain the motivation for the paper and the result (i.e. main claim) early, and relate the discussion back to your main claims throughout.

### 3. Know your audience

Hint: It’s not me! A rule of thumb is that your audience is intelligent but ignorant. Imagine a fellow student who has not taken this class. Put yourself in their shoes. Spend some time setting up the discussion—what’s important and why?—and make sure to introduce any relevant terminology, formalisms, data, and background assumptions.

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<sup>1</sup>Large parts of this are taken and adapted a handout by Jessica coon, and are based on Jessica Rett’s very helpful guide, here: <http://www.linguistics.ucla.edu/people/Rett/writingadviceforlinguists.pdf>. See also <https://depts.washington.edu/lingweb/Documents/NewmeyerGuidelines.html>, and <http://www.ee.ucr.edu/rlake/Whitesideswritingrespaper.pdf>.

#### 4. Be deliberate and careful with your words

- If your paper draws on key terms, introduce and define them clearly.
- Avoid demonstratives: don't use "this account" in a section in which you're comparing your analysis with several others.
- Don't quote from other papers; instead, paraphrase the arguments and give citations.
- Don't be afraid to write in the first person ("I propose that...").
- Avoid unnecessary hedges: don't use "seems" or "it appears that" when the facts are clearly there. For example, in describing (1a–b), it is inappropriate to say "SVO and OVS seem to be possible word orders in Hebrew." Instead: "Example (1a–b) illustrates that SVO and OVS are both possible word orders in Hebrew."

##### (1) Possible word-orders in Hebrew

- a. ha-yeled axal et ha-uga  
the-boy eat.PAST ACC the-cake
- b. et ha-uga axal ha-yeled  
ACC the-cake eat.PAST the-boy  
'The boy ate the cake'

#### 5. Recognize the difference between empirical generalizations and theoretical claims

Here is an example:

- A. The basic word order in Hebrew is SVO.
- B. OVS word order is the result of stylistic inversion.

Statement A is an **empirical observable fact**, which you can see by looking at the data. There is no *alternative analysis* of statement A, because it is simply a fact. Statement B is a **theory**, something that is up for debate. Be sure that the language you choose reflects this difference.

For example, you can say: "X observes/notes/shows that OVS is a possible word order in Hebrew, and proposes/argues/claims/hypothesizes that this order is derived through stylistic inversion." Be careful in your choice of verbs, reversing any of these does not work.

Likewise, don't say that an author "claims that Y" or "assumes that Y" when in fact the author goes to great lengths to motivate this proposal. Instead, say: "X argues that Y" or "X proposes that Y (because Z)."

#### 6. Spell out your assumptions

It is fine to adopt someone else's theory, but make it clear that you are doing this. Example: "I assume, following Hankamer and Sag (1976), that VP-ellipsis requires a pronounced linguistic antecedent in order to be licensed."

## 7. Back up every empirical observation—Show don't tell

Is it a well-known empirical observation? It should be easy to find citations. Is it little-known? All the more important to find citations. If it's your observation—no matter how small—give us all the data we need to be convinced of your point. Use grammatical data, ungrammatical data, and look at your point critically so your reader doesn't have to do the work for you.

## 8. Formatting matters

Align words and glosses in examples, and explain what each example is showing in prose. Provide grammatical and ungrammatical examples to illustrate your point. You might use bold-facing to draw your reader's attention to the relevant parts of complex data. Example:

### (2) Hebrew is a *wh*-fronting language

- a.    ha-yeled axal        et    ha-uga  
      the-boy eat.PAST ACC the-cake  
      'The boy ate the cake'
- b.    **ma**   axal        ha-yeled?  
      what eat.PAST the-boy  
      'What did the boy eat?'
- c.    \* ha-yeled axal        **ma**?  
      the-boy eat.PAST what  
      Intended: 'What did the boy eat?'

*Example (2) shows that Hebrew is a wh-fronting language. Basic order is SVO, as shown in (2a). In (2b) the wh-word ma 'what' is fronted to a clause-initial position. Leaving the wh-word in its base position results in ungrammaticality, as shown in (2c).*

Be sure to provide references for all data that came from the literature.

Give each example an informative heading that tell your reader what the example shows.

Spell-check! Proof-read! Use capitalization and punctuation correctly! Be judicious with footnotes. Cite all sources using a consistent citation format. Direct quotations must be in quotation marks, and avoided when possible!

## 9. Be as charitable as possible to your theoretical adversary

Some of the strongest theoretical papers give the alternative theory the best fighting chance possible—and show that it still doesn't work. Avoid being overly aggressive. Know the difference between data a theory can't handle and data it just wasn't designed to handle. If you can alter the theory in a reasonable way to handle your data, do so. There may very well be problems elsewhere.

## 10. Give us a break!

Make your sentences and paragraphs relatively short. Just as each section should correspond to a topic, each sub-section should correspond to a sub-topic, and each paragraph to a different statement required to support the argument advanced in the sub-section. The smaller your paragraphs, the easier it will be for your reader to separate these various supporting statements and ideas. At the end of each paragraph, ask yourself “so what?”. The next paragraph should answer this question.

## 11. Structure

There are lots of ways to structure a paper. Usually, boring is better. Here’s a boring way to write a paper.<sup>2</sup>

### 1 Introduction

1.1 What are you talking about? Why is it interesting? What’s the point?

1.2 How is your paper organized?

### 2 Empirical overview/background

2.1 Background literature and data

2.2 Other background or new data

### 3 Analysis

3.1 A theory to account for your data

3.2 Implications

### 4 Discussion

4.1 Situating your discussion in terms of the theoretical/empirical landscape

4.2 Possible extensions/consequences/alternatives

4.3 ...

### 5 Conclusion

5.1 Summary of what you’ve shown

5.2 Possible avenues for future research

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<sup>2</sup>Note that if there is one subsection, there must be two.

Here is the grading rubric that will be used to grade the paper:

## Final paper (10 pages) Grading rubric

Name:

<i>Category</i>	<i>pts</i>		<i>General comments</i>
<b>Structure/focus:</b> The paper has a clear overall structure; the aims of the paper are explicitly stated.	10		
<b>Organization:</b> The key points/findings are highlighted and logically arranged; the paper uses appropriate section headings; paragraphs are well organized.	25		
<b>Content/development:</b> Each main point is adequately developed; evidence is used correctly to support the claims made in the paper.	40		
<b>Citations:</b> Arguments and data borrowed from the literature are cited correctly. A consistent citation format is used throughout the paper.	5		
<b>Expression:</b> Information and ideas are clearly articulated throughout the paper; expression is appropriate to the audience.	15		
<b>Mechanics:</b> The paper has no significant errors in grammar, punctuation, or spelling.	5		
<b>TOTAL POINTS:</b>	100		