

How to write a linguistics paper¹

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 a possible/tentative alternative
- apply an existing theory to data in a new way
- discuss a puzzle certain data pose for a 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 analysing the data. For example, your paper should not say “first I thought X, but then I realised 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

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? Make sure to introduce any relevant terminology, formalisms, data, and background assumptions.

4. Be deliberate and careful with your words

- If your paper relies 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.

¹ The majority of this handout is adopted from guidelines composed by Hadas Kotek for a similar course on ellipsis.

- 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 clear.

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. 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.

8. 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 subtopic, and each paragraph to a different statement required to support the argument advanced in the subsection. 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.

9. Structure

There are lots of ways to structure a paper. Usually, boring is better. Here's a boring way to write a paper:

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

10. Formatting

Pay attention to your use of academic English. Use the correct English scientific terminology and be consistent with your spelling conventions (either British or American, you choose). Represent data uniformly and accurately throughout the text, and please follow the Leipzig glossing rules for glosses and translations:

<http://www.eva.mpg.de/lingua/resources/glossing-rules.php>.

Use full bibliographic references at the end of the text, presented in a uniform manner.

11. Citations

Because guidelines on citation differ from journal to journal in linguistics, I do not require you to follow a particular citation system, such as APA, Chicago, or Harvard. Rather, I suggest you pay close attention to the citation systems used in the articles that we will read together and choose aspects of these citation systems that you feel most comfortable with. Most importantly, use your system **consistently**. Here's my recommendations for the most widely used citation forms:

In-text

Underwood (1999:15) has shown that citations are citations.

However, contemporary research on citations suggests otherwise (Abe 2008, Larsson 2010).

Sometimes, *citation* can be used as a noun, as (1) shows (from Turner 1972 ex. 19):

Bibliography

Yow, D. 1999. A new approach to citations. *Language* 6(2): 110-125.

Albini, S. & D. Simms. 2014. Citations from a cognitive and functionalist perspective. In D. Crover & B. Osbourne (eds.), *New Frontiers in Citation studies*. Ulaanbaatar: Excelsior Publishers, 231-244.

Lebowski, J. 1991. *The syntax and semantics of citations*. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

12. Grading scheme

Your essays will be marked using a familiar “1 to 10” system (note that this doesn’t correlate directly with ECTS credits, however!). The percentage points that your essay may contribute to your final grade are also presented.

90% and above	<i>Very strong study; almost directly publishable</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • precise and careful argumentation about an outstanding problem in the field • novel data offered / new connections offered between phenomena • novel solution offered • solution extendable to other phenomena or data set, or other languages • an advancement / amendment to ellipsis theory is proposed
80% to 89%	<i>authoritative study; possible start of a scientific paper</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • good grasp and critique of all the relevant and contemporary literature • novel data offered / new connections offered between phenomena • precise and careful argumentation towards a novel solution
70% to 79%	<i>good study</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • good grasp and critique of the (primary) literature • application of a syntactic diagnostic and argumentation to the problem set • novel data offered / new connections offered between phenomena
60% to 69%	<i>adequate study</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • survey of the related research question in terms of the papers used in class • some literature consulted; the arguments in the literature reproduced
50% to 59%	<i>just good</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • problem definition clearly stated • basic tenets of relevant ellipsis theories and diagnostics reproduced
49% or less	<i>not good enough</i>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • none of the above

- All essays will be marked according to the grading scheme, regardless of whether a student is aiming to obtain 6 or 9 ECTS credits for this course.

- For students aiming to obtain 9 ECTS credits, your final essay must involve an independent research component, whereby you can demonstrate that you have spent a sufficient amount of additional time conducting research. (Officially, 3 additional ECTS equates with 75 to 90 hour's additional work. I deem conducting an experiment to be equivalent to this.)