Student Guide: Scientific Writing

We have compiled a few tips and tricks to scientific writing to help you with your next essay or thesis.

Literature research

Starting to write a scientific essay or paper can be a bit intimidating at first. It is best to start by getting familiar with the topic and reading relevant literature before narrowing down the exact topic you want to write about. Literature for scientific writing can vary but almost all the sources you will need can be found in libraries or on the Internet. To find the right sources you can use the library catalog (wu.ac.at/bibliothek) where you can find everything you have access to via the WU library. You can also access the library databank from home when using the VPN, which you can access with the password you also use for the WU Wi-Fi. Instructions on how to access the VPN can be found here: wu.ac.at/it/services/network/vpn

What makes a good source depends on different criteria. First, it is important that the source you are citing is trustworthy. This means that it is clear who is responsible for the material, all the sources used are traceable, it is free from mistakes and, for example, when statistical material is used, it is clear what is shown with the statistics. This means sources like Wikipedia (🡒 you cannot identify who is responsible for the content) or popular literature not citable. Besides the quality of the source, the actuality of the information given is important, meaning that material written many years ago can be outdated today. Especially when it comes to sources on the Internet, you should always carefully check if the research is reasonable, trustworthy, conducted scientifically, and traceable. If you want to refresh your knowledge on research and citation, the WU library regularly offers free courses on literature research, citation, and efficient use of the library resources. Additionally, there is helpful online learning material on the library website.

Style

When it comes to scientific writing, it is important to write in a simple style that is easy to understand. Your sentences should be short and clear, and you should mainly write in active form. You should avoid unnecessary information and personal comments. Everything you write must be argued and consistent, should be logically structured, and should avoid assumptions that you cannot argue or prove. Depending on the type of text, the structure can look differently, but most scientific writings consist of an introduction, the main body in which you state your arguments, and a short conclusion. Additionally, most scientific writings must also contain a table of contents and a bibliography.

Citation

One of the most important things about scientific writing is that you must cite every thought that is not your own. All information that is not

considered common knowledge must be cited as well. This obviously depends on the area of study you are writing in. It is essential that you acknowledge your debt to the sources of data, research, and ideas on which you have drawn by including references to, and full details of, these sources in your work. There are different styles used for citation, but what most of them have in common is an in-text citation provided in your text directly where you use the source and, additionally, a bibliography listing all the sources provided at the end of your text. In many courses, the instructor will tell you which citation style is preferred, and some institutes have common citation styles that they use for all their work.

Not citing or citing incorrectly is not something to be taken lightly! Plagiarism is a serious offense and leads not only to a negative mark but is also mentioned in your final record.

▮ Literature Management

If you are writing a longer scientific piece, it is best to use a literature management program to maintain a good overview over all the sources you are using. The most known are Citavi, Zotero and EndNote. In these programs you can save all your sources automatically and do not need to manually add them for every new citation. Also, they create your bibliography automatically and you never have to think about whether your citations are correct and consistent. Some of the programs also let you save your work online and have the option of working together on a project.

Zotero is a free software, whereas the full versions of EndNote and Citavi are not. As a WU student, however, you have free access to the online version of EndNoteWeb and to Citavi. Whether you use a literature management program or not, you should always write down the sources you are using immediately. Looking for the exact place you saw a quote afterwards takes a lot of time.

Questions? Contact us!

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