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LOCAL GUIDELINES FOR  
THE WRITING AND  
DRAFTING FOR  
MA RESEARCH PAPER  
COMPOSITION

For the MA Students / Film Studies

The John F. Kennedy Institute  
of North American Studies,  
Freie University of Berlin

- Content
- Style
- Criteria

## INTRODUCTION

**Please note the following guidelines for submitting a Research Paper (RP) for Alan Taylor, JFK-I, F U Berlin 2007-2008.**

Of late it was sufficient to require 20 pages for the work, but such is the range of different fonts, line gaps and margins are now in use/misuse that some uniform composition practice needs to be underlined and is now expected.

### FORMATTING....for ALL WORK - IRRESPECTIVE OF GRADE

All readers/ graders are *immediately aware* of the student writer's commitment to a project if the format of the piece at least looks professional. So:

1. **All Margins** are uniformly set at 2.5
2. **The body of the text** will be blocked **to the right margin**
3. **Gap Lines** are set at 1.5
4. **Fonts** are Times New Roman, Size 12
5. **All pages are numbered**, bottom right
6. **Key details** are included on the HEADER and FOOTER
7. **Quotes** are laced into the text. Over three lines they are granted their own central column.
8. **Word count:** there are precisely 995 words in this document, it covers 4 sides, so we are expecting a RP of around **5,000 words**.

Establishing these settings *at the start of composition* obviously makes the later drafting process easier, when more critical focus can fall on the re-working of content.

### CONTENT QUALITY

We are talking about a *Research* Paper at Master's Level. It is not a polemic. It is designed to show how well a student can select a core and important question (to who? why? who says?) and reveal a *sophisticated awareness* about answering that question. This does NOT involve deciding upon a point of view and then cherry picking a small selection of texts/quotes that 'magically' agree with that view.

## **RHETORIC – THE ART OF PERSUASION**

We are and remain the good children of both Socrates (critically testing points of view) and Cicero (pleasing *and* informing). Hence, we are in the job of *composing* not just ‘writing’. The RP core agenda is to make the chosen topic/question relevant to the nominal reader and going some length in arguing an important case.

### *Failings*

- Unfortunately, a list of cold listed statements does not make a *reasoned argument*.
- Too often student’s fail to *fully engage* and give adequate air to arguments/views that do not chime with their own. This makes THEIR (opposing/differing) case all the weaker. Hollywood, like Socrates, tells us that the better the villain, the better the story.
- Another related mistake is to repeat central arguments, which, in time, also deflate the opening promise. The RP quickly becomes a one-trick pony.
- Students do not spend enough time questioning ‘simple’ terms, phrases, themes, and so miss vitally important insights. This is what makes the work ‘research’.
- Like any great film, novel or drama, a ‘simple’ rearrangement of points can make a stronger work (see drafting below)
- Also, it can be detected that these ‘arguments’ have been heated up from previous essays where, no doubt, they did succeed.

This comes down to an obvious failure to draft work that is *sensitive to the challenges of this particular course*.

### **DRAFTING, ie: “*You have written the essay, but have you read it?*”**

#### *Crazy But True...*

Despite the good work of Bill Gates, it I still the case that ‘completed’ work is handed in:

- with basic misspellings.....on the first line
- where pages are unattached, so freely able to fall uninterrupted to the floor
- where bibliographies extend to no more than three (lightly read) books

There is no excuse for such amateurism; it quickly announces the student’s attitude to his or her own work.

Accordingly, such work will not be read.

## THE GRADING PROCESS

### Criteria

Unfortunately, in the absence of any given agreed criteria, Alan Taylor *only* uses the following expectations for the 2,0 grade.

| <b>FU–Note</b>   |                        | <b>ECTS Grades</b>      |
|------------------|------------------------|-------------------------|
| <b>1.0 - 1.5</b> | <b>hervorragend</b>    | <b>Excellent (A)</b>    |
| <b>1.6 - 2.0</b> | <b>sehr gut</b>        | <b>Very good (B)</b>    |
| <b>2.1 - 3.0</b> | <b>gut</b>             | <b>Good (C)</b>         |
| <b>3.1 - 3.5</b> | <b>befriedigend</b>    | <b>Satisfactory (D)</b> |
| <b>3.6 - 4.0</b> | <b>ausreichend</b>     | <b>Sufficient (E)</b>   |
| <b>4.1 - 5.0</b> | <b>nicht bestanden</b> | <b>Fail (F)</b>         |

### 2.0: STRUCTURE & WRITTEN STYLE

1. Engagement with the course undertaken - an echo and extension of issues, debates as they have arisen. This is best underlined in the introduction and *confirms student's thoughtful engagement with the course*, and ability to build on its intent. So an ability to identify quickly and accurately relevant and critical issues
2. A fluent ability to *synthesize data/information* from diverse sources towards intriguing novel insights (example: quotes would be *orchestrated*)
3. Structured *engaged* account - intro overview, substance & conclusions, that includes reflective summary overview that prompts future considerations & further questioning
4. Excellent spellings and phrasing; effective paragraphing, *suggestive of the drafting process*; neatly embedded relevant quotes with bottom page references
5. Accurate, *relevant* & detailed descriptive analysis of core case studies (films, novels, paintings...). This is not as easy as it looks.
6. Competent grasp of technical terms and comfortable with critical theories/discourses
7. Prose style: – engaging, authoritative, propositional, aware of readership (tone, assumptions:- as Tonto said to the Lone Ranger, “Who do you mean by “We”?)
8. Coherent ability to assess relative strengths and weaknesses of opposing arguments
9. Effective use of Appendices (how to balance necessary material/data with content argument). In other words, why do I have to read the whole plot in the body of the paper? (*please note that this list is in single line!*)

**In closing...it's a journey...**

It is *immediately apparent* to a reader when opening the plastic folder if the essay inside has been worked upon. A sample reading of single lines, clauses or paragraphs from pages 5, 10 or 15 will underline if it has a depth and sense of informed awareness, of direction and subtle understanding that we hope for. In a profound way, the student has taught himself or herself something new about the subject. It isn't as it first appeared to them. They have been surprised and have confronted that experience and explored it...and communicated that experience with the reader.

This is likely to happen if the student shows productive use of **at least 10 book texts** - something that will be immediately evident in the **bibliographic list** - which will clearly distinguish books, journals, newspapers, Internet sources. Note that films, too, are regarded as texts, so a **filmography** is expected (title, director, studio, year). Then the actual reading begins, usually in one sitting.

**Final checklist holistic questions for the conscientious student****Have I...?**

- 1) ...expanded upon first principles on an intellectual and imaginative level?
- 2) ....shown evidence of *applied critical thinking*? Have I challenged myself?
- 3) ...have I delivered what is expected or only what is thought necessary?
- 4) Do I have a need to communicate...to answer the final question, "So what?"

So, we are looking for thoughtful, critically engaged developmental response that is alert and *responsive to the content of the course from which it has emerged*.

I hope this has been useful

ALAN TAYLOR October 7<sup>th</sup> 2007, Berlin

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