Study guide

Finding a topic for academic writing

at the FB 02 – Social Sciences, Media and Sports

SoWi?So! Erfolgreich und international studieren und lehren

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Dear students of department 02 (FB02),

the following guidelines for finding a topic are intended to summarize and briefly present important steps for you at the beginning of your scientific work. We wish you much success in finding your topic!

Preliminary remarks:

The following information is to be understood as interdisciplinary general information on scientific work. It remains important that you always inquire about subject-specific requirements in your respective examination and study offices, seminars and directly with your supervising lecturers. Furthermore, we would like to ask you to inform yourself about current changes in the context of the Corona pandemic under the following link: https://corona.uni-mainz.de.

I. Scientific Work – Introductory Words

During your studies you will be confronted again and again with different forms of scientific work, which vary greatly in type, scope, requirements and objectives. Thus, a scientific paper can aim at the expansion of one's own professional competence as well as methodological competence. It can also focus on a literature research or theory, an empirical focus, or the own professional practice. The scope can range from a ten-page seminar paper to an in-depth master's thesis at the end of the program (see Fig. 1). It is important to be aware of the different types, scopes, requirements and objectives and to acquire the appropriate expertise, which also shows transfer performance. It is the aim of the following guideline to find topics for scientific work to show known as well as creative ways.

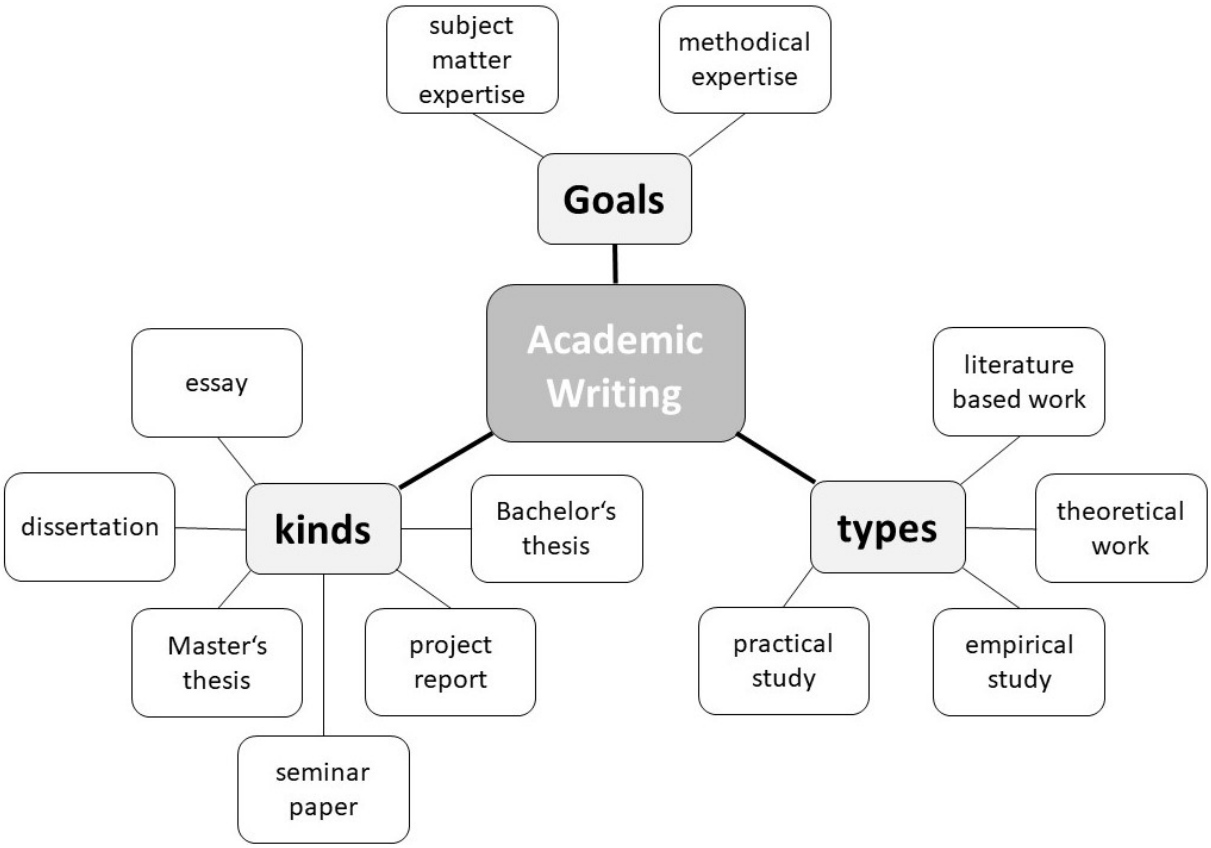

Fig. 1 Overview Academic Writing (based on Voss, 2019, p. 19)

II. Scientific Work – Finding a topic – Where do I find a topic?

The starting point of scientific work is the identification of topics. Right at the beginning, the question arises as to where topics can be found. Five areas show themselves to be particularly interesting for the identification of topics (Voss, 2019, p. 66ff.):

Preset topics by supervising lecturers	- No need to find your own topics. - Limited consideration of own interests.
Own practice	- Direct reference to the topic and own previous knowledge. - Limited possibilities in finding topics.
Seminars and lectures	- Recourse to existing/known literature, slides, knowledge from seminars and lectures.

Topics of public interest/ from the news, etc.	- Great variety of current topics.
Research (technical literature, manuals, journals, science blogs)	- The global portal "Science Blogs" (Konradin Medien GmbH, 2018) as an example of a science blog.

General Tips:

- If you are interested in a topic, make a note of it and, if necessary, appropriate literature and materials for later scientific work
- Wikimindmap: tool that uses Wikipedia to search for results for a specific topic and creates a mind map from it (Wikipedia, 2018)

III. Scientific Work – Finding a topic – How do I find my topic?

Even if the above areas offer good opportunities to find a suitable topic for scientific work, it is often necessary to use other methods to find a topic. These will be briefly presented in the following (Voss, 2019, p. 71ff.):

Brainstorming **(Osborn, 1963)**	- Alone or in a group/ with or without moderator/ with and without media use possible. - **Step 1** is to collect as many ideas as possible. Wild ideas are welcome and should be considered uncritically at first. - **Step 2** is to develop and combine the collected ideas.
SPSS-Approach **(Helfferich, 2011)**	- Methodology that originates from questionnaire construction, but can also be used for general topic identification. - **Collecting:** Open brainstorming to generate research questions within a defined topic area. - **Sorting**: Ordering the collected ideas by area → First core questions emerge.

	- **Checking:** Determining which topics are truly appropriate. - **Segmenting**: Narrowing down the topic.
Walt-Disney-Method **(Brunner, 2008)**	- Creativity technique based on a role play by one or more people. - Problem consideration from several points of view: **Visionary** (characterized by inventiveness, enthusiasm, chaos); **Realist** (pragmatism, consideration of necessary work-step and prerequisites; **Critic** (weighing and skepticism, questioning opportunities and risks).
SWOT-Analysis	- Analysis of your own strengths and weaknesses. - **Strenghts:** Own useful skills, motivation, resources, practical knowledge. - **Weakness:** Possible barriers, missing competences. - **Opportunities:** Possible advantages in the future for profession or environment by working on topics/ possible supporters. - **Threats:** Dangers in support/ research difficulties/ legal concerns/ other problems.
Fishbone-Analysis **(Voss, 2004)**	- Tool for identifying issues. - **Step 1**: Write the topic on the "head of the fish". - **Step 2:** "Bones of the fish" as specific issues/problems to/ at the topic. - **Step 3**: Adapt the "head of the fish" theme, based on the results of the "bones".
Mind-Mapping	- Note-taking and memorization techniques. - Pictures, markers, illustrations to stimulate ideas for finding topics and capturing cross-references. - **Step 1**: Place topic in the center.

	- **Step 2**: Note subordinate first-order key concepts by branching out from the main topic. - **Step 3**: Write down second-order subordinate key concepts by branching out from the first-order key concepts.

IV. Scientific Work – Finding a topic – What else needs to be considered?

After the first two steps to find a topic – the search in various areas of study and everyday life and by means of various methods to find a creative topic – there are additional requirements that students should pay attention to when finding a topic for scientific work (Voss, 2019, p. 78ff.):

1. **Specification**: Try to distinguish your topic from other areas and formulate a specific research interest through research questions.
2. **Operationalization:** Weigh up whether your chosen topic seems feasible under the resources available to you.

   Research Relevance: Ask yourself if your topic is of academic relevance: Are there aspects about your research topic that have not been explored sufficiently? Are you using a new methodology to address the topic? Are you addressing a new target group? Are you creating a new integration of different topics? Are you making new interpretations? Are you continuing existing research?

List of references

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