

How to Write a Seminar Paper **Based on suggestions from by Dirk Thißen**

Suggested General Structure of a Seminar Paper

A seminar paper should start with a title page and a table of contents, and it should end with a literature list. The general structure of the contents is like follows:

- Introduction: General motivation, goal of the paper, overview of the following contents
- Related Work: Overview about works related to the presented topics; to be discovered by the writer in a literature study
- New/Presented Work: Detailed presentation of the assigned topic
- Evaluation Results: An evaluation of the usefulness of the presented topic
- Conclusions and Outlook: Short conclusion on the presented work as well as open questions

The following subchapters give some more details on this structure. Please note: there is no reason to name all the chapters of a seminar paper exactly in this way; it is more a list of contents which should be covered in this order, not a fixed division into subchapters.

Introductory Chapter

The first chapter is the chapter “Introduction”. You should start with some general motivation of the topic, leading to a short, early formulation of the goal of the paper, i.e. which topic is presented – and why is this topic interesting and/or important. The second part of the introductory chapter is a raw overview of the contents of the paper. This is to give the reader a fast insight in the entire work.

Structure of the Concluding Chapter

The last chapter has to be a concluding chapter. Here, the core statements or findings of the seminar paper have to be shortly summarized. This summary is to be followed by an outlook: it should be stated, which questions are still open and what could be done in future to make progress in the topical area.

Other Chapters

There is no general rule how to structure the rest of the paper between introduction and conclusion, but it should be in related work, new work, and an evaluation. It is often practical to describe related work in the second chapter – simply to show gaps in current research and motivate the new approach which is the core topic of the own paper. Others say that related work should only be presented after the description of the own topic to enable a better comparison of advantages and disadvantages.

Nevertheless, related work needs to be included! Also, there is no general rule how to structure the main contents of the seminar paper. Generally, it is good to write at least two chapters: one of the presented approach and one on its evaluation, but the most suitable structure depends on the assigned topic, thus it should be discussed with the assigned supervisor.

General Rules on Writing

Beside the structure of a seminar paper, also there are some guidelines on writing style. Usually, it is avoided to use formulations like “I will explain ...” – it usually is written in third person, and if it is necessary to bring in own opinions, it is used terms like “In the author’s opinion...”, i.e. the one who writes the paper is never mentioning himself directly. Additionally, there are some formulations that should be avoided. It is e.g. bad to say “The author tried to explain...”. Instead, it should be written “The author explained”. In other words formulations should make the paper sound. Generally, abbreviations should not be used, particularly those not introduced earlier in the paper.

The first step in working on a seminar topic is to do a literature survey about related works in the topical area. A student should write in own words. When it is necessary to cite single sentences or to copy a graph, such things have to be marked as copied. In general, the text has to be written in own words. It is forbidden to copy text from other sources without proper referencing. Moreover, reader should be always able to see which parts of the paper is completely own thoughts and which parts are basing on which foreign sources. There are in general three different possibilities for referencing:

- Copying important sentences and marking them with different font or italic
- Copying figures/tables and marking them as copied
- Adding a general sentence to refer to some work(s) used as general basis

All referenced literature has to be included in the literature list at the end of the paper. Only literature referenced somewhere in the paper should show in this list. All entries in the literature list have to be complete. A seminar paper is a scientific work, thus it should base on scientific literature. A literature list should contain mostly journal papers or conference papers. Wikipedia or similar sources are allowed to use only in screening and orientation stage of your research.

DOs and DON'Ts

DOs

Plan a schedule for working on the topic at the beginning. This plan should consider a literature survey, designing a document template, reading literature, writing single chapters, discussion with the supervisor. Research the Internet sources to learn the underlying concepts, open questions, confronted theories and doctrines, main trends and expectations. Read the basic material and understand it – usually by consulting more literature in a literature study. Give feedback to the supervisor. Also hand in parts of the paper in between to enable the supervisor to give feedback early and to avoid that you are

writing something completely different. Write about the topic in own word using the initial material as well as papers found in the literature survey.

DON'Ts

Do not expect that it is possible to do the seminar work in a few days. Do not copy text from foreign sources! It also is forbidden to use work from other sources with small adjustments in hope that the supervisor will not mention it. Do not use an incomplete literature list and also do not use sources like Wikipedia often. Do not write in the paper in an unclear way – this gives the feeling that you have not understood the contents. Do not ignore suggestions for improvement and advices given by the supervisor!

Self Evaluation

Mark the listed questions below with 3 for distinguished, 2 for pass and 1 for fail:

1. Can the thesis (the central argument) be easily identified and remains evident and central throughout the whole paper
2. Do you support your thesis with adequate evidence?
3. Does your literature review cover the relevant research and move from general to specific?
4. Are methods appropriate for answering the question posed? Is there sufficient detail to know how the study was conducted?
5. Is there a clear and logical development of the paper?
6. Are conclusions clearly stated and do they follow from the evidence you presented?
7. Creativity, originality, and critical sophistication
8. Does your paper properly edited in terms of grammar, academic language, transitions between paragraphs, use of subheadings and consistency in use of the chosen or compulsory format for citations and references
9. Paper demonstrates that author understands the underling concepts and trends in relation with the topic
10. Paper demonstrates that author understands the overall context of the topic (PEST - framework, ethical dilemmas)

It is not advised to submit papers with scores lower then 25. Rework the parts of your paper that cause some question to be evaluated with 1 (fail).