11-Point Checklist

for writing seminar term papers

Disclaimer
This checklist is meant for seminar papers in which a topic is supposed to be *summarized, edited and augmented*, based e.g. on a book chapter or a scientific article, in such a way that the final document presents an independent source to the reader, suitable as a stand-alone resource on the given topic.
This collection is not comprehensive but rather provides an incomplete collection of tips for some aspects that could be important for authoring. In addition, other points are at least partly important for other kinds of term papers as well. An extensive overview of the topic of scientific work and writing can be found in various books that are available in the library and/or on the internet.

Intellectual property and the correct usage of external sources (VERY IMPORTANT)

1) When you include parts of an original text in your report – be it paraphrased or verbatim, in the original language or translated **–** then this has to be made clear through a **citation**. **This is also necessary in a report about an article or a book chapter.** Superficial changes, such as e.g., replacing a word by a synonym, changing the word order, swapping active/passive mood, etc. do not turn somebody else's writing into your own original contribution: you still have to give a reference to the original source. The reader has to be able to distinguish between your **own contributions** and **external intellectual property**. Verbatim copies additionally need to be put in "double quotes".
Remember: your name will be on your report as its author, so the contents must be your own words unless marked otherwise. Claiming authorship of other people's writing is called *plagiarism* and is a **form of fraud**. We will check for it, we will find it, and you will fail the class – so don't do it.
There are dedicated books in case you don't yet have a lot of experience with how to cite properly in academic contexts.

2) A seminar report should always contain a **references section**. It should list **completely and precisely all external sources** that have been used – independent of whether they are books, papers, slide decks from lectures, websites or other sources. It is always a good idea to use additional **relevant and reliable** sources, choosing and relating them is part of the contribution you make when writing a seminar term paper.

3) Use the word **„we" with caution** in your text. If a passage of the report is reproduced from an external source (e.g., a proof or the arguments of the original author, etc.) it is possible that „we" is potentially the wrong choice. It is important to pay attention to this even though you may initially think it is „clear" anyway that this part of your paper is not about your own work. **It should be your goal that every potential reader gets the right impression of your text, not just the people who assigned you the task.**
Reminder: in scientific texts, „we" is mainly used:

- to speak for a group of authors
- to avoid having to use „I" whenever you find this too direct and thus don't wish to use it

→ In both cases it typically **marks your own intellectual work**.
If in doubt, there are many possibilities to word things differently when writing about external contents without creating a wrong impression.

Clarity and structure of the term paper

4) It is important to write your **own introduction** that motivates the report, also and especially for works that aim at giving an overview of a limited, perhaps theoretical topic.

- Put the information of the report into a bigger context:
  What contents are covered by the report?
  How does the topic fit into the (bigger) topic of the seminar? (…)
- What is the goal of the report? What does the reader get out of reading the report?
- Why and for what are the covered topics / methods relevant?
  Why is it valuable to read the report / what will you learn?

5) Insert **additional explanations and background information** into the report. Furthermore, **terms introduced in the text** should usually be **explained** in it as well, so that the report can "stand alone" as much possible. Of course you don't have to (and won't be able to) explain everything but **relevant, topic-specific** terms are typically good candidates for explanation in the report. Give information about which concepts are assumed to be known (and hence won't be explained) where necessary.
→ Check: can somebody new to the topic who wants to read up on it understand the text? In case of doubt, is it clear where to continue reading?

6) Concrete examples almost always help to improve an explanation. Adding your **own individual examples** is a great practice.

7) Write a **closing section**. Here you can summarize what the report addresses. What is the reader supposed to "take home"? In addition, this is the place for an outlook (if possible) and your own comments regarding the topic of the report. Even a comparatively small closing section can help rounding off a term paper and thus improve it.

General remarks

8) Your own ideas for **explanations, examples, structuring** etc. can often improve the report further. They show that you have exposed yourself to the topic thoroughly.

9) Length / Form: Has the content been covered? Are an elaborate introduction / motivation, explanations, and examples included? Is the formatting consistent and neat? Did you include page numbers? Do figures and scans have a good resolution and a self-explanatory caption? Is a citation provided, if necessary? If applicable: was a minimum / maximum page count given for term papers?

10) Use an **automatic spell checker** in order to avoid typos, transposed letters, etc. This presents no additional work but improves the overall impression tremendously. Careful repeated proof reading makes sure that no avoidable errors have been made with respect to both form and content.

11) Another general tip: Before you start working on a seminar report or a presentation inform yourself (or remind yourself) about the **target audience / readers**. The content and form of the presentation can thus be adjusted accordingly.