

WRITING IN THE HUMANITIES: THE SEMINAR PAPER AND BEYOND

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What is a Seminar Paper?

What a seminar paper is NOT:

- A fully realized critical essay ready for publication
- A finished document that you feel 100% confident about
- An exhaustive study of a given topic or issue
- A singular expression of your potential for graduate studies



What is a Seminar Paper?

What a seminar paper IS:

- A training exercise for academic research and writing
- An initial exploration of a topic, set of objects, concept or theory that you find interesting
- An opportunity to sample criticism and theory related to a given field or debate, and to get a sense of your position
- A *rough draft* for the article or conference paper you might write at a future time



What is a Seminar Paper?

What you take away from a seminar paper...

- A solid basis and some revision ideas for an article or conference presentation
- A possible mentor relationship with a faculty member
- A sense of a larger topic for your dissertation and a clearer sense of your scholarly interests
- A grasp of given field or scholarly debate, including both what you LIKE and what you DON'T LIKE



Notes on Annotation

Types of Reading in the Humanities

- Histories
- Criticism
- Theory
- Primary texts
- Survey studies



Notes on Annotation: Books

- Scan the Table of Contents to see which chapters or sections would be most relevant to you
- Scan the index to see if your topic is represented and then look at those pages
- Read the first sentences of each paragraph of the preface or introduction to get a sense of what issues, arguments or topics will be central to the work
- Flip through the relevant chapters to get a sense of what arguments they're making. This can often be signaled by sub-headings or the intro/conclusion paragraphs
- If a review of the book is available, read that before opening the book since that will provide a summary of much of the above.



Notes on Annotation: Articles

- Read the abstract if one is provided
- Read the introductory paragraphs and the concluding paragraphs to get a sense of what the argument is and where the author takes it
- Scan the article to determine if there are sections that are directly relevant to your topic
- Read the first sentence of every paragraph to get a sense of the development of the argument



Notes on Annotation: Reading Questions

- The thesis of the article/book is...
- The field(s)/subfield(s) that this author is working in are...
- The most interesting ideas in this work are...
 - Why do I find these ideas interesting?
 - How are they shaping my ideas about the topic?
- What aspects of the topic do I think the work overlooks or distorts?
- A potential use for this article/book in my work is...



Notes on Annotation: Digital Tools

STORAGE

- DropBox
- GoogleDrive
- iCloud

NOTES/BIBLIOGRAPHY

- Evernote
- Notability
- Zotero
- EndNote



The Lit Review: What is It?

- The state of thinking about your given topic or object
- A presentation of what's been said about your ideas and identifying what gaps are left for you to fill
- These gaps are usually one of three flavors:
 - An issue, perspective or approach left out of prior work
 - An error in prior work that you wish to amend
 - An extension of prior work into another field or with regard to another set of objects/issues



The Lit Review: Where Does It Go?

- The size and placement of your lit review will depend on discipline and the scope of your seminar paper
 - For those working in history, some papers – ie. historiographies – may be almost entirely lit review
 - For those working on a topic or some readings of aesthetic works, the lit review may be as small as a paragraph or as large as a few pages
- For the most part, the lit review appears in the first 5 pages of a seminar paper (based on length of 15-25pp)



The Lit Review: Getting Oriented

- What is my central question or issue that the literature can help define?
- What sort of literature should I be looking at? Historical material? Theoretical models or approaches? Methodologies? Criticism?
- What is already known about my topic?
- What conflicts or debates exist in discussions of my topic?



The Lit Review: Getting Oriented II

- Is the scope of the literature being reviewed narrow or broad enough to be of use to my paper?
- Does the material surveyed in the lit review relate directly to my topic?
- What connections can I make across the various items in my lit review? What are the camps that my interlocutors group themselves into?
- Where do I fit into the lit review? Who do I agree with? Who do I disagree with? Who do I find most useful?



The Lit Review: Key Phrases

I. Part-Whole Contradictions

- I. Though X does not seem to be part of Y, it is.
- II. Though critics claim that all X's have Y, they do not.

II. Developmental/Historical Contradictions

- I. Though X may seem to have originated in Y, it did not.
- II. Though the historical development of X seems to follow the pattern 1, 2, and 3, it does not.

III. External Cause-Effect Contradiction

- I. Though X seems to cause Y, it does not.
- II. Though X seems to cause Y, both X and Y are caused by Z.

IV. Contradictions of Perspective

- I. X has been used to explain Y, but a new theory makes us see it differently.
- II. X has typically been analyzed using Y theory/model, but by using Z theory/model we can understand X differently.

*These statements are drawn from: Booth, Wayne C., Gregory G. Colomb, Joseph M. Williams, Joseph Bizup, and William T. FitzGerald. *The Craft of Research*. University of Chicago Press, 2016. 90-92.



Writing Toward a Topic

- Keep a research journal
- Strategic Pre-Writing
 - Free-writing
 - Thought pieces
 - Close reading
- Creative or Non-Written Strategies
 - Free-talking/Dialogue
 - Free-drawing
 - Clustering/Idea Map
- Outlining



Writing Toward a Topic: Keeping a Research Journal

- Keep track of ideas, sources and approaches that you see in journals relevant to your field (long-term)
- Keep track of ideas, sources and arguments that you see in books or articles that you've read (long-term, short-term)
- Keep track of anything that bothers you as you're reading, ie. paths not taken, perspectives not considered, readings you don't like. (long-term, short-term)
- Keep a list of primary sources that you'd like to revisit (long-term)



Writing Toward a Topic: Strategic Pre-Writing

- **Free-writing:** Write about your topic, about your sources or about the criticism you've read without stopping. When you're done, review what you've written and see if there are any trends or concerns there that might be the ground for a paper
- **Thought Pieces:** A bit more structured than a free-write, a thought piece is organized by a central question that you try to answer without judgment about your writing.
- **Close Reading:** Pick a particular scene, work of art, passage, or moment and write an analysis of it. When you're done, think about where that analysis is leading you.



Writing Toward a Topic: Non-Written Strategies

- **Free-talking:** Talk to a friend, relative or partner about your paper. Tell them what you find most interesting, most frustrating, most confusing about the material you're working with. Have your friend take notes or record the conversation.
- **Free-drawing:** For visual learners, organizing ideas into charts or graphs can be a useful way of sorting the ideas and figuring out where you want to go with them.
- **Clustering:** Similar to free-drawing, clustering is a visual map of your ideas. Begin by writing down key words, phrases or ideas and then figure out how to group them. This can often help suggest and outline or organization for your paper.



Writing Toward a Topic: Outlining

List all of the points you want to make. Keep in mind that a seminar paper usually makes no more than 2-3 major points.

- Group your ideas according to relationship.
- Decide which are your major and minor points
- Work out a logical flow for moving through these points, prioritizing what a reader would have to know first
- Indicate the logical connections between points. How does one point link to or build upon the previous point?



Approaching the Argument

Orienting Questions

- I. What is this paper about?
 - I. What is the central idea or issue that draws together the primary and secondary texts I've been looking at?
 - II. What's the one idea that I find most interesting? Why?
- II. Why does this paper matter?
 - I. Why do I think it's important to talk about this issue?
 - II. Why do I think it's useful to draw these critics/sources together?
 - III. How would the way that I think about this author, topic or concept change how critics think about it?



Approaching the Argument

Key Phrases or “Babystepping” the Argument

- I. Although X may seem trivial, it is a crucial point of reference for thinking about contemporary concerns about Y.
- II. These findings have important consequences for thinking about the broader problem/issue of X.
- III. My discussion of X addresses the larger issue of Y.
- IV. By seeing this material the way I do, we can begin asking questions about X.



Writing, Editing and Revision

Drafting Schema

- **Zero Draft¹/Strategic Pre-Writing:** freewrites or thought pieces
- **Outline:** Simple or complex, sketch out the first draft
- **First Draft:** Get the ideas down AKA “the vomit draft”
- **Second Draft:** Revise structure, focusing on argument, evidence, transitions and big-picture claims.
- **Third Draft:** Editing your prose. Clarify sentences, remove passive voice, hone your word choice.
- **Final Draft:** Proofreading for grammar, spelling and format.

¹Bolker, Joan. *Writing Your Dissertation in Fifteen Minutes a Day*. Owl Books, 1998.



Writing, Editing and Revision

When you edit, edit for **C.O.S.T.**

- **C**ontent: argument, topic, critical sources
- **O**rganization: intro/conclusion symmetry, logical unfolding of argument and relevant information
- **S**tyle: Concision and precision in your sentences, massaged transitions between paragraphs/sections, word choice
- **T**echnical: proofreading for typos, cleaning up footnotes and citation, cleaning up any formatting issues



Writing, Editing and Revision

Revising the argument:

- Is the argument the right scope for the paper? Is it too broad or too narrow for a seminar paper?
- Does it generate interesting debate, discussion or possible disagreement? In other words, will it be interesting to a reader interested in similar topics?
- Does it lend itself to a logical procession of analysis in the paper?
- Does it lead to a clear conclusion?



Writing, Editing and Revision

Revising Structure and Organization:

- Do each of your paragraphs support and develop your argument?
- Is the transition between sections clear? Do readers have all the information they need in order to move on? Are there any gaps that might make things confusing?
- Are the transitions between paragraphs and sections clear?



Writing, Editing and Revision

Revising the Introduction and Conclusion:

- Does the introduction provide a quick gloss of the paper that follows?
- Does the introduction identify your argument and clarify why that argument matters?
- Does the conclusion match the introduction? I.e. does the paper have a feeling of symmetry?
- Remove any unnecessary repetition in the conclusion. The conclusion does repeat some ideas from the intro (symmetry) but should do so with development.
- Does the conclusion gesture out from the paper to the possible implications of your argument to the broader field? Does it suggest avenues for possible research moving forward?



Writing, Editing and Revision

Troubleshooting the Paragraphs:

- Is the paragraph too long or too short? If it's longer than a page, it's too long!
- Does it have a clear task to accomplish? Does it accomplish this task?
- Do the sentences all correspond to the main topic of the paragraph or are they going off on tangents?
- Do the transitions leading into and out of the paragraph work?



Writing, Editing and Revision

Working with Evidence:

- Does the paper make sufficient and effective use of examples, sources and/or data?
- Is your evidence appropriately incorporated and sufficiently analyzed in the development of your argument?
- If you're quoting passages at length, from either primary or secondary sources, are you providing sufficient analysis and or incorporation to justify the block quote?
- Are you letting the evidence dominate your voice or argument?



Writing, Editing and Revision

Tips

- Give yourself time. There is nothing worse than writing a 20-25pp seminar paper in a single day or overnight. It happens, sure, but it doesn't have to.
- Do not try to edit work that you have JUST produced. Sleep on it. If you can't sleep on it, take a 20-30 minute nap or go for a run or walk to clear your mind and get some critical distance.
- If you're stuck, ask the professor for guidance. This is an opportunity to build a relationship and improve your paper.
- Find a work buddy, but not one who will be a distraction.
- Plan rewards to keep yourself motivated.



Writing, Editing and Revision

Backwards Outlining

- I. Number each paragraph in your paper from top to bottom.
- II. On a separate sheet of paper, copy the numbers in sequential order and, next to each one, write a short phrase or sentence that summarizes the main point of each paragraph
- III. Analyze the outline
 - I. Can I identify one main argument or idea for each paragraph?
 - II. Is the progression of ideas logical?
 - III. Does every paragraph summary relate to my main thesis?
 - IV. What needs to be moved around? What needs to be deleted?

* This exercise drawn from the University of Michigan's Writing Center website:
<https://writingcenter.gmu.edu/guides/reverse-outlining>



Writing, Editing and Revision

Sharpening Transitions

- I. Try to articulate the relationship between your paragraphs either out loud or in short free-written sentences. This can often help give you the language you'll use in your transition sentences.
- II. If you're having trouble doing the above exercise, it probably means that you've got a flaw in your organization. Try identifying three key words across the two paragraphs and write a sentence that draws them together. If this doesn't work, you should look back at the outline and figure out a different organization strategy.



Wrapping Things Up

KEY POINTS

- Remember that a seminar paper is an exercise, not an indictment of your promise as a graduate student
- Use the seminar paper process as an excuse to work more closely—attend office hours, ask questions, seek advice—with a faculty member whose work you admire
- Take notes on EVERYTHING. Books, articles, meetings, conferences, ideas you had while showering. You will forget it if you don't. Just do it. Seriously.
- Don't procrastinate. Break your work down into doable chunks.
- NEVER. STOP. WRITING. Writing is like a muscle, the more you work it, the easier it is and the stronger your writing gets. If you're stuck, do a free write or a thought piece.



Wrapping Things Up

- Feeling stuck? Schedule an appointment with one of the writing consultants at the Graduate Writing Center.
<https://gwc.gsrc.ucla.edu/>
- We have consultants in many different disciplines, so there is sure to be someone who works in your area and can help you navigate problems in the research and writing phases.

