

Phil/Rel 499: Senior Seminar in Philosophy and Religion Fall 2006 Syllabus

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Hours: 11:00-11:50/1:00-1:50 MWF

Description

The purpose of the seminar is to guide seniors through the process of preparing a senior thesis. This paper will be written in consultation with a faculty thesis director and submitted to the Department of Philosophy and Religion in fulfillment of a graduation requirement. Students will meet at regular intervals with their individual directors, who will oversee the specifics of their projects. They will meet periodically as a group to discuss their progress and solicit feedback from other students in the seminar. At the end of the semester, each student will formally present her work to the department faculty and other members of the seminar.

Faculty

Technically, the faculty for the seminar consists of all full-time members of the Department of Philosophy and Religion, though the seminar will be facilitated by a specified member who will act as their representative. This semester the facilitator will be Dr. Beavers.

Each student must select a thesis director from the department faculty who will oversee the details of their project. Eligible faculty are Drs. Beavers, Connolly, Colter, Oliver, Stein and Ware. *Students are responsible for finding a faculty member willing to work with them as thesis director.* Faculty members may decline to work on topics that fall too far outside their knowledge-base or that seem inappropriate for an undergraduate, senior thesis. In the event that a student cannot find a thesis director, the student must change his topic until a director can be matched appropriately. Student/director assignments must be approved by the department as a whole. In some cases, reassignment may be necessary to balance the workload across departmental faculty.

In addition to a thesis director, each student must identify and name a willing faculty member who will assist in the evaluation of the finished paper. Secondary graders must be full-time faculty members of the University of Evansville, though they need not necessarily work in philosophy and religion. They should be appropriately chosen according to the topic of the thesis in consultation with the thesis director.

Thesis Guidelines

Topic Selection

Topics must be suitable for the nature of the exercise, to offer final proof of one's academic achievement in the form of a studied and argumentative paper that addresses a topic of present concern. Summary papers, expository in nature, including "encyclopedia-type" articles, are therefore inappropriate. Instead, students must take a stand on an issue, whether this be as a challenge to established doctrine, taking sides in a current debate, or correcting a misinterpretation, mistranslation or misunderstanding in someone else's work. Smaller, more narrow topics are better.

It is acceptable to have personal motivations for settling on a particular topic; but these papers must not contain extensive personal confession, whether philosophical or religious, uncritical exposition, and un-argued or, otherwise unsupported, assertion. They are to be academic projects along the lines of articles published in scholarly journals.

The position of the paper, your *thesis*, or what you propose to say about your topic, must be supported by argument and evidence in light of relevant, academic research. Students should therefore consult the published literature before deciding on their topics to ensure that there is a research-basis for their work. If no pertinent scholarly material exists, this is a sign that the topic is ill-suited for an academic project, rather than a mark of originality.

One hint to the selection of an appropriate topic for *you* is to pick something with which you are already familiar, whether it is something you encountered in another class or in your independent research. The thesis must be completed in a single semester; thus, you will not have time to start new into something big, like the Letters of Paul or the philosophy of Kant, if needed to complete your project.

Paper Construction and Length

The actual techniques for writing a paper vary greatly from person to person; and they vary again when writing a thesis-length paper. Your thesis director will assist you as guide in the actual construction of the paper, not only with regard to content, but also with regard to the process of getting from idea to finished paper. Students should meet often with their directors (once every week or two) to ensure that their progress accords with the deadlines indicated below.

It is difficult to specify the length for a thesis, since some topics may require more space than others. As a target guideline, students should think in terms of about twenty-five pages, excluding any diagrams, figures or endnotes. The seminar facilitator will defer to thesis directors in the determination of length.

Format and Style

The thesis (and all other assignments along the way) must be formatted and styled according to the 6th edition of the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*. This includes not only the details of citation, but all others as well, including heading, title, page numbers, figures and tables, the use of abbreviations, etc. To get an idea of the range of details indicated by the MLA students should peruse the handbook. Copies are available in the UE bookstore, the library and at Barnes and Noble. Make sure you are consulting the 6th edition. A subset of the MLA style is represented in the Harbrace Handbook required at UE for all World Cultures students.

In addition to the details of the handbook, all papers and assignments must be formatted in Times New Roman, 12 pt, font. For the final copy of the thesis, attach a copy of the departmental coversheet (see the attached sample) filled out with the appropriate information to the front of your papers. Staple papers in the top, left corner.

Final papers that do not accord with these guidelines will earn the student an incomplete until such time that all details of format and style are appropriately addressed.

Submission Details

All assignments must be submitted to the seminar facilitator *in print* on or before the deadlines indicated below. Take note that part of your grade (20%) is based on the timely and regular progress of your project. The seminar facilitator will circulate the assignments as needed.

Academic Honesty

Plagiarism, whether in the form of directly copying from another's work or representing another's ideas as one's own, constitutes the highest offense in the academic world. Students are warned in advance that papers and assignments plagiarized from other sources, whether in whole or in part, will earn the student an F in the seminar. To graduate, students will then have to repeat the seminar the following year, thereby delaying their departure from college. Always document your sources!

Evaluation Criteria

Seminar grades are based not only on the thesis, but also on the progress of the project and the presentation. 60% of the grade, however, is based solely on the thesis which will be evaluated according to the following criteria:

Focus – Does the paper stick to its topic, addressing necessary details while avoiding extraneous ones?

Organization – Is the paper well-organized with respect to the order of presentation? Are ideas properly subordinated throughout the paper?

Clarity – Is the paper generally clear and the prose readable? Is the thesis and argument explicit?

Argument – Is the paper well-reasoned on the basis of sound and cogent argument? Is evidence interpreted adequately?

Factuality – Are the factual assertions advanced in the paper generally correct? Are they adequately supported by documentation as needed?

Documentation – Is the selection and use of sources appropriate for the topic? Are important resources included and frivolous ones properly omitted?

Grammar – Is language used according to the rules of grammar? Is it properly academic?

Overall Grade – Taken as a whole, how does the paper fare as an academic project? (Note that the overall grade is *not* the average of the categories indicated above.)

Presentation Guidelines

Format

At the end of the semester, each student will be required to make a formal presentation of her project before the department faculty, other students in the seminar and any guests. Each presentation will be allotted forty-five minutes, the last fifteen of which will be reserved for questions and answers.

During the first thirty minutes, students will “walk” the audience through the details of their paper with the goal of presenting an overview of the project, the primary claims being made and the arguments offered in support of them. Students will not have time to read their papers, though they may (and should) use notes.

Some members of the audience will have read the paper being presented, but most will have not. Thus, students must strive to be clear and communicative. It might help to think of these presentations as class lectures.

For the question and answer session, students are expected to be sufficiently versed on their topics to offer reasonable responses to pertinent questions and comments. They will not be expected to comment beyond the scope of their project.

Handouts or PowerPoint?

Since these presentations must summarize a detailed and lengthy project, it is easy for an audience to get lost. To help the audience, it is wise to provide an outline of the presenta-

tion, including an explicit statement of the thesis, a summary of any central arguments, and other material (such as important quotations, graphs and tables, etc.) as needed. PowerPoint will be available for this purpose, though often handouts work better. Should PowerPoint be used, students should resist the temptation to read the slides to the audience.

Evaluation Criteria

Skill with writing and skill with speaking are not the same, and so it is conceivable for an excellent paper to be poorly represented in oral form. (It is much less likely, however, that a poor paper will come off looking good.) Consequently, part of the seminar grade (20%) will be based on the presentation alone. This portion of the grade will be determined collectively by all faculty who attend the presentation. Guest faculty from other departments who happen to be in attendance will be invited to participate in this process. Presentations will be evaluated according to the following criteria:

Focus – Does the speaker stick to the topic, adequately addressing sufficient detail to summarize the project without compromising its academic integrity?

Organization – Is the presentation well-organized with respect to the subordination of ideas? Do first things come first?

Clarity – Is the presentation generally clear? Does the speaker represent her paper in such a way that an audience member who hasn't read it can still reach a reasonable understanding of it?

Argument – Is the thesis well-reasoned on the basis of sound and cogent argument? Is evidence interpreted adequately?

Materials – Are supplemental materials, such as handouts, PowerPoint slides, etc., generally helpful? Are they professional in appearance?

Responsiveness – Are responses to questions and comments adequate and appropriate? Is the student prepared to engage conversation on her topic?

Professionalism – Is the presentation professional? Is it presented with the dignity befitting the academic enterprise? Is the student appropriately dressed, etc.

Overall Grade – Taken as a whole, how does the presentation fare as an academic project? (Note that the overall grade is *not* the average of the categories indicated above.)

Seminar Grade Calculation

Final seminar grades will be determined according to the following percentages:

20% for regular progress throughout the semester, to be determined by the seminar facilitator

60% for the finished paper; 40% to be determined by the thesis director and 20% by the secondary grader

20% for the presentation, to be determined by all UE faculty who are in attendance

Some Additional Help

Help with Research

Research for the discipline of philosophy is organized by *The Philosopher's Index*. For religion, the critical index is *ATLA: Religion Database*. UE subscribes to both. They are accessible from the campus library and online through the university network. Both provide search engine access to a wealth of information.

Though some of the journal articles listed in these resources will be available in the UE library, most will not be. Some not in the library will be available online. Resources not in the UE library or available online, including books, can generally be ordered on inter-library loan. It may take a few days or even a week or two to get resources. So, students are advised to work well in advance of their deadlines.

It should go without saying, though usually it needs to be said, that bibliographies and works cited pages from other relevant resources often provide clues as to where to look next. A properly academic paper will list its sources, several of which might end up being your sources. Check bibliographies carefully, keeping in mind that pertinent resources may likely have to be ordered on interlibrary loan.

Finally, UE supports an excellent library staff that takes pride in helping students with their research. Feel free to ask for help as needed.

Help with Writing

The 6th edition of the *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers* includes not only the rules for formatting a paper, but also several helpful words on how to go about writing one. Chapter one is dedicated to the process of research and writing. Chapter two deals with the topic of plagiarism and how to avoid it.

When it comes to writing clear, academic prose, one could perhaps do no better than to consult Joseph M. Williams' *Style: Toward Clarity and Grace* (University of Chicago Press, 1990). This book includes a provocative explanation of why so many academics write so poorly along with concrete suggestions for communicating complicated ideas in textual form.

There are many guides for writing undergraduate theses online. These are mixed both in quality and in detail. Students should be warned in advance that different disciplines use different approaches. Thus, a manual for writing a senior thesis in biology at Penn State may not be well suited to helping with this one. If you have particular questions, talk to your thesis director or the seminar facilitator.

Assignments and Deadlines

Topic Selection Phase (- 8/30)

8/30 – Topic Statement and Director Selection Due

Students must submit a one-paragraph statement naming their topic and their academic (not personal) reasons for pursuing it. In addition, they must submit the name of a thesis director who understands the nature of their project and who has agreed to serve in this capacity.

Preliminary Research Phase (8/30 – 9/15)

9/6 – Preliminary Bibliography Due

Students must submit a working bibliography that indicates any scholarship they intend to address in their papers. The bibliography should include a mixture of journal articles and books. Avoid encyclopedia articles, glossary entries and Internet resources that have not been peer-reviewed. The bibliography must be substantial in size. A *minimum* of 15 to 20 relevant resources is recommended.

9/15 – Thesis Statement and Working Title Due

Students must submit a developed thesis statement and a working title for their projects. The thesis statement should be about one page in length, double-spaced. It must state not only the topic, but what the student intends to say about it, what position they will be arguing, and what evidence they plan to use to support their views.

Research and Writing Phase (9/15 – 11/6)

9/22 – Section by Section Outline and Secondary Grader Selection Due

Students must submit a section-by-section, paragraph outline of their intended paper or an outline of another form with the agreement of their thesis director. The purpose of the outline is to guide the interaction between research and writing and thus must be sufficiently detailed to aid in that purpose, but no particular outlining strategy is required.

Additionally, students must submit the name of a secondary grader who understands the nature of the project and who has agreed to serve in this capacity. (Secondary graders must be selected in consultation with the student's thesis director.)

10/25 – Completed First Draft Due

Students must submit a completed draft of their paper, including citations and a bibliography. This draft is not to be a first, 'free write', constructed out of scraps, but a sustained and earnest paper in which ideas are explicit and the organization clear.

11/6 – Response Due from Thesis Director

Thesis directors must respond to first drafts with detailed criticism and recommendations for change, whether they concern focus, argument, factuality, documentation, organization, clarity, grammar or format.

Formal Editing Phase (11/6 – 12/4)

11/20 – Revised Second Draft Due

Students must submit a carefully-edited, formal and complete, second draft of the paper that responds adequately to the criticism offered by the thesis director. They must also re-submit the draft that was originally marked by the thesis director.

11/27 – Response Due from Thesis Director

Thesis directors must respond to second drafts, ensuring that any criticisms have been adequately addressed. They may also offer any recommendations for final changes at this time.

Submission and Evaluation Phase (12/4 – 12/13)

12/4 – Final Paper Due (2 copies)

Students must submit two, completed copies of their finished thesis for evaluation and grading. They should be given to the seminar facilitator who will, in turn, give them to the thesis directors and secondary graders.

12/6-12/7 – Student Presentations

Students will present their projects orally to department faculty, other students in the seminar, and any guests. They should be ready to respond to questions and comments from the audience.

12/11 – Paper Grades Due from Faculty Graders

Faculty graders, including thesis directors and secondary graders, must submit an evaluation form for each thesis they are grading (see attached) to the seminar facilitator, who will use them in turn to calculate student grades.

12/13 – Department Archive Copy Due

Students must submit a final, carefully proofread and corrected, copy of their thesis for the department archives. This copy will be carefully checked for compliance with the MLA style and other directions as indicated above. Papers not in final form will be returned to the student for correction and an incomplete will be given for the student's grade.

12/15 – Seminar Grades Due

The seminar facilitator must submit final grades on or before this date.