

How to Succeed in HON 110 Freshman Interdisciplinary Seminar

What is a seminar and how is it different from a lecture class?

A seminar is, essentially, a group of people who come together to talk about a particular topic. Seminars are cooperative ventures and their success depends upon the full and active participation of each member of the class. Therefore, conscientious preparation and regular attendance are required. You should expect to be fully and actively engaged in the work of the seminar, whether in connection with class discussions, research, or completion of original projects or reports. If lecture classes tend to emphasize “coverage” through lectures and some **reading**, seminars tend to emphasize intense reading of books and articles or **research** into primary sources followed by a **group discussion** about what everyone is learning and what questions are arising. Regular writing assignments help to ensure that you continue to refine your skills in expository writing.

Moreover, by comparison with lecture classes, where the emphasis is on the absorption of a great deal of information gathered mostly by listening to a professor lecture, seminars place the focus on the talk and the questions of *all* of the seminar participants. Knowledge in a seminar is gained not by listening but by reading and talking. Seminars live or die depending on the willingness of each and every seminar member not merely to prepare for class but also to *engage* with the other members of the seminar.

The goals of a seminar are many:

1. Mastery. Of course, every seminar wants students to master the topic they are studying.

2. Method. In addition to the content of the class, though, seminars generally want students to think about some aspect of method—for instance, *how* history is written (not just what history has been written). Toward this end, professors often make a distinction between seminars in which students will research and write extensively in the seminar (a research seminar) and those in which most of their time and energy will focus on reading and reflecting on the reading (a reading seminar). In a research seminar, students will experience first-hand the research process and they will talk in seminar about the difficulties they are encountering and perhaps talk together about particular documents, discussing what the document might be telling them. They will experience the research side of how history is written.

In a reading seminar, students will spend time talking about what the authors of books or essays are arguing over, how each defends her view, how they critique other work, what questions and puzzles the readings may have raised, and just how convincing the reading was. They will experience the argumentative/analytical side of how history is written.

The distinction is not absolute: in fact, many seminar combine both approaches. Still, it's useful to understand what is going on in each (ideal) type. HON 110 incorporates elements of both types.

3. Community. Very closely related to the second goal is this one: to create a community in which we not only talk about the topic bringing us together, but continue to *learn how to talk*—how to listen, how to express disagreement, how to defend one's position, how to change one's mind, how to clarify a question or a point of confusion, and so on. Needless to say, learning how to talk in these ways extend well beyond the classroom. These skills add to all parts of our lives, including work, personal and civic relationships. They also foster our curiosity and desire to continue to learn over the course of our lives.

What does “engagement” mean?

Engagement means, first, careful preparation of the reading. Students are strongly encouraged to come to class with their notes from reading (and, needless to say, the readings themselves) so they can refer to them during discussion. Just as importantly, engagement means being willing to speak (to ask questions, to say what you think, to say what confused you, to say what you found convincing or unbelievable etc.), to question your perspectives, to receive fair criticism of your utterances (which are always subject to revision or clarification or reiteration). Finally, engagement means being willing to hear the perspectives of your classmates and to

question them; it means listening to the comments and presentations of your peers with open ears: ears that are attentive and critical.

What can you expect in our classroom?

In order to create a productive learning environment you can trust your instructor to ensure that all comments and questions are treated with respect, to explain points of confusion when the class is stuck, to ask questions with purpose and to guide discussion in the most promising directions. In order to create a productive learning environment, you are expected to treat all comments and questions with respect and civility. Most of all, you are asked to **take chances!** Speak your mind, even/especially when you disagree with others or with your instructor; ask questions when you are confused or curious about something — chances are that you are not alone.

How is participation graded?

Your instructor will be looking for a few things when evaluating student participation in this seminar.

1) Preparedness. Has the student done the reading and brought the reading and notes to class?

2) Quality of comments. Did the student contribute to the overall flow of discussion, make comments that were informed by the readings and the issues at hand, move the conversation forward, use examples from the readings to help back up his points?

3) Initiative and responsiveness. Did the student both initiate dialogue and engage in the dialogue initiated by others?

4) Quality of listening. Did the student listen to others, follow up on other students' comments, ask questions of classmates?

If at any time you would like to discuss how you are doing in your participation grade, feel free to meet with your instructor to talk about it.

Adapted from the University of Washington Center for Instructional Development and Research: *A Guide for Students*, by Professor Stephanie Camp, Department of History