

HISTORY 407 HANDBOOK

WHAT IS A 407 SEMINAR?

A seminar is defined as a small group of university students engaged in advanced study and original research under a member of the faculty, and meeting regularly to exchange information and hold discussions. Beginning in mid-nineteenth century Germany, then adopted in France and the United States, the traditional history seminar remains an important component of university study and training in the field of history.

The PSU Catalogue provides the following general description for the History 407/507 seminar: “Study and application of the techniques of historical research and writing.” History 300 or consent of the instructor are prerequisites, and seminars are limited in size to no more than 22 students.

WHY ARE SEMINARS REQUIRED FOR THE MAJOR?

The seminar – with in-depth study and primary source research – gives students an opportunity to demonstrate the skills acquired in the course of their history studies. It is designed to provide a culminating experience for history majors.

Your work in 407 seminars and in writing the final 407 seminar papers will build on knowledge and skills learned in previous coursework (particularly History 300), and will expand your abilities as a historian and as a critical thinker.

- You will be expected to carry out independent research in both secondary and primary sources, to examine those sources critically, and to interpret and analyze such sources that constitute the materials of history.
- You will be expected to pose a historical problem or ask historical questions, and to address them through a well-developed and supported argument based on your primary sources and your reading of the secondary literature.

Whatever your future plans, the 407 seminar develops useful and transferable skills in research, information assessment, analysis, critical thinking, problem solving, and argumentative writing. The final 407 papers can also be an impressive example of your research, analytical, and writing skills to present to future employers.

HOW DO 407 SEMINARS WORK?

407 seminars are usually on a specific topic (which may be broad or narrow) within the professor’s area of expertise. For example, there might be a seminar in “Early Modern England” or “Native American History;” there could also be one on “Japan in 1940” or “Puerto Rican Women,” much narrower topics. They are usually discussion-based (rather than lectures), and they require students to present their own work or lead discussions, and to engage in peer critiques or peer review. 407 seminars normally require a major research paper, but there are some exceptions (see below).

HOW DO 407 SEMINARS DIFFER?

Apart from History 407 seminars differing from professor to professor and from subject to subject, they may also differ somewhat in the nature of the final product. In some fields, it will not be possible to have extensive primary sources available in English, so the kind of research students can do will depend more on secondary sources. Seminars in public history fields, such as oral history, may also have differing expectations for a final product – likely not a formal research paper. What is common to all seminars, despite these differences, is the production by the student of original research – however it is conducted and however it is communicated.

Some seminars may have more or less background reading and class discussion on the general seminar topic, for example; other seminars may engage the students in independent research from the first week. Students may be expected to lead discussions in one seminar, give oral presentations in another, or do group work in another. Different instructors will require a different number of pages for the final papers, and grade according to different criteria. Some will assign specific steps in the research and writing process; and some will have specific writing guidelines,

While differences between seminars can be frustrating, variation is to be expected in the study of history, since it involves research on different times, places, peoples, and topics all of which may require different approaches.

WHERE CAN I FIND MODELS TO FOLLOW?

You can look for models for both primary source research papers and historiographical essays in scholarly journals. Journal articles can be found in print form in the PSU library, or on-line through the library electronic journals website, JSTOR (the scholarly journal archive), or Project Muse. Click on “Electronic Journals” under “Resources” on the library home page: <http://www.pdx.edu/library/> (You should have the library homepage “bookmarked” on your computer.)

The History Department maintains a file of exceptional History 407 seminar papers on a variety of topics. These are 407 papers that professors have selected from their courses to submit for the annual seminar paper prize – thus, they are true models for 407 purposes. (Students’ names have been removed to protect privacy, and papers cannot be removed from the History Department.)

When looking over scholarly journal articles and previous 407 seminar papers, consider how the author asked historical questions and constructed the thesis.

- Is the subject introduced in a way that makes you want to read on?
- Does the author present the thesis statement in an interesting, challenging, and clear way?
- How has the topic been framed and focused?
- How did the author define and use the body of sources (both primary and secondary)?
- How is the argument organized and structured?
- How successfully are larger historical (or historiographical) questions integrated?
- How convincing is the author’s argument?
- What makes it convincing (or not)?

HOW DO I FIND A GOOD RESEARCH PAPER TOPIC?

Your topic must offer original insight, analysis, or interpretation. A good research paper is not just a compilation of facts -- that is, in your paper you do not simply describe “what happened” and when. Rather, you bring insight and ideas to a subject, through your use, interpretation, and analysis of your sources. As you formulate historical questions about your topic, and then as you craft your thesis, ask yourself “so what?” – that is, consider the significance of your topic and your take on your topic. You might use another historian’s work or an earlier analysis as a “jumping off point” for your own argument, or you might improve on or dispute an earlier analysis. In some cases, you can look at events and sources in a new and different light, or give an old subject a new look.

Your topic must be feasible. That is, the subject and the sources must be within your abilities and doable in the 10 weeks you have. How much secondary background reading will be necessary for you to understand and to treat the subject adequately (how much can you read and process in 10 weeks)? Do you have the quantitative skills or the foreign language skills necessary to treat the topic and to make use of the appropriate primary sources? Equally important, are the necessary primary sources for your topic and for your argument available to you?

Limit the scope of your topic. It must be one that you can handle adequately in the time you have and with the sources you have. It should allow you to examine sufficiently the body of relevant primary and secondary sources. It must be framed in such a way as to allow you to make some original and significant factual or interpretive contribution in the paper. Ask yourself if your subject and thesis are more appropriate to a book-length treatment, rather than a 15 to 20-page journal article treatment.

HOW AND WHERE CAN I FIND RESOURCES?

The PSU library website is an excellent place to start. Note especially the heading “Research Help” on the library home page, the research “survival guide”: www.lib.pdx.edu/instruction/survivalguide/index.htm. You might also consult the history research guide: www.lib.pdx.edu/resources/pathfinders/historymain.html.

You will likely need to look beyond the library’s Vikat catalogue. Check the on-line library catalogue of a major research university, as well as Summit, Google Scholar, and ABC Clio. Looking up sources in WorldCat may yield results in Vikat that can save time and lengthy inter-library loan wait times.

For library help, contact the Humanities librarian, who can help you find books and articles on your topic, as well as bibliographies, research guides, specialized databases, and catalogues relevant to your topic. The librarian can tell you what keywords, search terms, and subject headings will be most fruitful in your catalogue research. The librarian can help you track down sources, and may also be able to direct you to potential and available sources at other libraries, universities, and organizations. The library can borrow some materials – books, microfilms, dissertations, and the like – from other institutions. Make sure to put your interlibrary (“ILLiad”) loans requests in **early**.

Secondary Sources: Secondary sources are what other scholars have written about a subject. Depending on the nature of your 407 seminar and the type of papers required, you will need to consult and use secondary materials for different functions in your research. Secondary sources most commonly include scholarly books and journal articles. To locate these, you might begin by consulting a standard handbook

like *The American Historical Association's Guide to Historical Literature* (1995), which is located at the library reference desk. While not completely up-to-date (it covers secondary historical literature between 1961 and 1992), it can help you recognize what secondary sources and authors are reputable.

- Secondary sources will serve as background to your period and subject.
- They will establish the general outlines of your period and your particular subject.
- They will allow you to identify what research and work already has been done in a field and on a topic, what the different interpretations or schools of thought are, and what issues are considered important and worth further study.
- They will also inform you of what primary sources historians have used to make their particular arguments.

As you read the secondary literature on your topic, keep the following suggestions in mind:

Read with a purpose. Read secondary sources for background and facts, to discern different interpretations of a topic and agreements or disagreements among historians, and to see what primary sources other historians have found and used.

Read critically. It is important to remember that not all secondary sources are equally valuable or reliable. Some books (and their contents) are more important than others. A book published several decades ago may still be a classic in its field, while other books may either be out of date or never have been respected by other scholars. As you read, note which books and authors are cited more than once. If a title or author is cited favorably and cited several times in different books and articles, you can infer that the author's book or article (or the author) is influential – so make sure to read it. Before reading a book, you might check for book reviews in scholarly journals; these can help you determine whether the book is going to be useful and worth reading. Also check the book reviews archived in H-Net Reviews (History Networks); these reviews will be more current and cover more recently published books (thus, searching H-Net Reviews can also be a good way to find the most current books on your topic): <http://www.h-net.org/reviews/>. Remember to read more than one book review, however – scholars do not always agree about the merits of a particular book! Critique as you read: who is the author; what is his or her approach; what is the argument; is the argument convincing; what sources does the author use; what questions does the author leave unanswered?

Read selectively and efficiently. You may not need to read an entire book if only a part of it pertains to your topic, but do read the introduction and the conclusion first, and then determine what else you need to read. Check the table of contents and look for relevant terms or names in the index. Make sure you understand the author's argument (even if you do not agree with it), and do not merely skim a book that is critical to your understanding of your topic. Finally, be sure to look at the footnotes (or endnotes) and bibliography in books and journal articles to lead you to additional secondary literature or to primary sources.

Primary Sources: Primary sources are records, writings, and other materials contemporaneous with the events studied; that is, documents or other materials that were created at the time under study. The PSU library website contains a description and examples of some of the materials that constitute primary historical sources: www.lib.pdx.edu/resources/pathfinders/history_primary_sources.html.

Examples of primary source materials vary between historical fields and according to the uses they are put. Primary sources include literary, philosophical, or religious texts, government documents (proceedings of

legislative bodies and executive departments, reports, tax lists, census data), organizational records, newspapers and magazines, chronicles, wills, memoirs, oral histories, autobiographies, journals and diaries, travel accounts, novels, published correspondence, maps, photographs, films, works of art, and material artifacts, including buildings and other structures, and even the natural landscape. Primary sources may be found in archives, museums, or manuscript collections, preserved on microfilm or microfiche, digitized and available on the web, or published in the form of books, pamphlets, or edited documents collected by historians.

To make a legal analogy, primary sources are the evidence you use to make your case about your topic. Alternatively, consider primary sources to be the tools you will use to interpret the meaning and significance of something, and that you will use to support your argument. You probably have worked with primary sources to a more limited extent in some of your previous history classes; you may have analyzed primary source documents in their historical context, for example. You already know that critical reading and careful consideration are imperative when working with primary sources. Do not take primary sources (or any sources) at face value. Do not assume they are “true” or “factual.”

In evaluating primary sources and their uses, ask yourself who created the source; when; under what circumstances; why (for what purpose); what do you know (or can you find out) about who created the source; who was the intended audience; whom does it include or exclude; to what uses was the source put in its own time; what can you infer from the content of the source; if it was translated from another language, can you trust the translation; if it was excerpted from a longer document or source, is the excerpt an accurate reflection of the larger source; what historical questions might the source answer; what questions can't it answer; what other kinds of sources do you need and need to examine to create a complete picture?

HOW DO I DEVELOP A GOOD THESIS?

A thesis is not simply a statement of your topic. Think of the thesis in terms of argument, or *is your thesis arguable?* – that is, might others rationally disagree with your thesis **and** can you adequately support (give reliable, evidence-based reasons to support) your thesis. A thesis statement so neutral that no one is likely to disagree with it (or that no one is either interested or challenged enough to disagree with it) is not an effective thesis statement.

It is helpful to approach your topic in terms of “asking questions” from the very beginning of your research, and you should ask both research questions and historical questions. As you begin reading and researching, what do you want to know more about regarding your topic? What particular aspect, area, or avenue do you want to explore further? As you research more, what do you think needs and deserves deeper explanation? As you identify and clarify your interests within a topic – and identify what supporting sources are available – begin articulating the historical questions you want to answer, because those historical questions will lead to a thesis.

Most likely, you will start with a broad historical question, such as “what was life like in Germany during the Nazi regime of the 1930s?” As you read more, research more, learn and understand more, and consider your interests and the sources available to determine where you reasonably can “go” within your topic, your questions should become more explicit and specific: “how did Nazi ideology affect married women’s views on birth control?” or “how did Nazi police methods affect youth socialization?” or “how did Nazi ideology later serve to limit German working class women’s participation in the war effort?”

WHERE CAN I FIND GUIDES FOR RESEARCH AND WRITING?

On-Line Guides from Other Universities: Three particularly valuable – and easily accessible – guides on researching and writing history papers are these below.

The University of Toronto Writing Centre Guide, *Writing about History*, is short (5 pages); it explains the difference between primary and secondary sources, and offers helpful advice on “Asking a Good Historical Question.” <http://www.utoronto.ca/writing/history.html>

Bowdoin College Professor Patrick Rael’s longer and very comprehensive guide, *Reading, Writing, and Researching for History: A Guide for College Students*, has excellent sections on reading secondary sources effectively, on working with primary sources, on asking good historical questions, and on making a historical argument: <http://academic.bowdoin.edu/WritingGuides/> or <http://academic.bowdoin.edu/WritingGuides/writing%20guides.pdf>

For Professor Diana Hacker’s *Research and Documentation Online*, click on “History”:
<http://www.dianahacker.com/resdoc/>
or go directly there: <http://www.dianahacker.com/resdoc/history.html>

Books on History Research and Writing:

- Kate L. Turabian, et al., *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*, 7th edition (University of Chicago Press, 2007). This is **the** standard for history students at all levels.
- Mary Lynn Rampolla, *A Pocket Guide to Writing in History*, 5th edition (Bedford/St. Martins, 2006)
- Jenny L. Presnell, *The Information-Literate Historian* (Oxford University Press, 2007)
- Richard Marius and Melvin E. Page, *A Short Guide to Writing About History* (Longman, 2002)
- William Kelleher Storey, *Writing History: A Guide for Students*, 2d edition (Oxford University Press, 2004)

General Guides on Writing:

- John R. Trimble, *Writing with Style: Conversations on the Art of Writing*, 2d edition (Prentice Hall, 2000)
- William Strunk, Jr. and E.B. White, *The Elements of Style*, 4th edition (Allyn & Bacon / Longman, 2000). Another classic, useful for all kinds of writing.
- Diana Hacker, *Rules for Writers*, 5th edition (Bedford/St. Martins, 2003)

WHAT FORMS SHOULD I FOLLOW IN DOCUMENTING SOURCES?

Using evidence to support a thesis requires you to document that evidence through citation (footnotes, endnotes) and bibliography (listing references). Citations (footnotes or endnotes and bibliography) for the final research paper should comply with *The Chicago Manual of Style*, Documentary-Note Style (also known as the Humanities Style). You can easily look up correct citation form whenever you are in doubt. See Kate L. Turabian’s *Manual* above, and see the helpful website below:

<http://www.press.uchicago.edu/Misc/Chicago/cmofstyle/tools.html>, or go directly to:
http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/tools_citationguide.html