

RELS 485: Senior Seminar
Rhodes College/Department of Religious Studies
Spring 2008

Instructor:

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Office Hours: MW 8:30-10:00; and by appointment
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Time/Place:

TTh 3:30-5:30 in Clough 300
On many days, the class meeting will end at 4:30. Towards the end of the term when students present and defend their papers, we may use the entire time slot.

Course Description:

In 1988 the Rhodes tradition of comprehensive examinations in a student's major was suspended in favor of the Senior Seminar. These integrative seminars were to focus on the development and practice of skills in analytical discussion, analytical writing, and oral expression, and include formal oral and written presentations. The importance of these seminars was reaffirmed by the college faculty in 2002. The Religious Studies Senior Seminar has been developed to satisfy these requirements and to prepare students to write and defend a Senior Paper that reflects the knowledge and skills expected of a graduating Religious Studies major. The two overarching objectives of this class are: (1) to hone students' critical thinking, writing, and reading skills through discussion, common reading, and critique of written work; and (2) to guide students through the process of researching, writing, and defending a successful Senior Paper.

Required Texts:

Diana Hacker, *A Pocket Style Manual* (4th ed.; Boston: Bedford/St. Martin's, 2004).
Other required readings will be distributed in class or via e-mail.

Course Requirements:

Attendance, Preparation, and Participation: Participation in the seminar (= contributing regularly to discussions in a critical fashion) presupposes attendance (= being present in class on time and remaining until class is concluded) and preparation (= coming to class having read the assignment; possessing a mental or written list of questions, comments, puzzles, etc.; and/or bringing appropriate draft materials for paper workshops). Students may miss class three times without an automatic (and deleterious) effect on their grade for the course. *Attendance, preparation, and participation constitute 20% of the grade for the course.*

Small Group Work: Students will be assigned to one of five small groups. Small groups will meet five times (during the weeks of January 21, February 4, 18, 25, and once after spring break). These meetings will be devoted to sharing and critiquing ongoing work on Senior Paper projects. More specific instructions for these meetings will be provided as the semester progresses. At the conclusion of the small group experience, each student will write a report detailing the group's work and assigning grades for each member. *Small group work constitutes 5% of the grade for the course.*

Senior Seminar Paper and Defense: Producing a Senior Paper that reflects broad familiarity with the field of religious studies, extensive knowledge of a limited topic, and excellent writing and analytic skills is the major task of this seminar. (See the appendix to the syllabus for more instructions on the paper process.) When students have chosen and refined their topics, they will be assigned faculty readers who will

oversee the writing of the paper. The Senior Paper, which should be fifteen to twenty pages in length, will be the focus of an hour-long discussion with faculty members and students in the Seminar. *The Senior Seminar Paper and Defense (the average of the grades assigned by professor and faculty readers) constitutes 75% of the grade for the course.*

Course Schedule:

- Jan 10 Course Introduction
- Jan 15 Faculty Conversation: Prof. Gail Streete
Reading: To be announced
- Jan 17 Paper Expectations (continued discussion)
- Jan 22 Faculty Conversation: Prof. Luther Ivory
Reading: To be announced
- Jan 24 Faculty Conversation: Prof. Michelle Voss Roberts
Reading: To be announced
Progress reports due
- Jan 29 Faculty Conversation: Prof. Mark Muesse
Reading: To be announced
- Jan 31 Faculty Conversation: Prof. Steve Haynes
Reading: To be announced
- Feb 5 Faculty Conversation: Profs. John Kaltner and Steve McKenzie
Reading: To be announced
Progress reports due
- Feb 7 Paper Workshop
- Feb 12 Paper Workshop
- Feb 14 Paper Workshop
First paper draft due
- Feb 19 Paper Workshop
- Feb 21 Draft Presentations
Progress reports due
- Feb 26 Draft Presentations
- Feb 28 Draft Presentations
Paper abstracts due
- Mar 4 No class—Spring Break
- Mar 6 No class—Spring Break
- Mar 11 Draft Presentations
- Mar 13 Draft Presentations

Mar 18 Paper Workshop
Mar 20 No Class—Easter Recess
Mar 25 Paper Presentations
Mar 27 Paper Presentations
Apr 1 Paper Presentations
Apr 3 Paper Presentations
Apr 8 Paper Presentations
Apr 10 Paper Presentations
Apr 15 Paper Presentations
Apr 17 Paper Presentations
Apr 22 Paper Presentations
Apr 24 Paper Presentations

Appendices

- I. Faculty Readers and the Senior Paper
- II. Paper Guidelines
- III. Abstracts
- IV. Religious Studies Senior Seminar Progress Report
- V. Religious Studies Senior Seminar
- VI. Senior Paper Grade Report

Faculty Readers and the Senior Paper

Early in the semester each student will be assigned two faculty readers with whom he or she will work on the Senior Paper. It is the responsibility of the student to meet regularly with faculty readers, to respond to their questions, implement their suggestions, and, ultimately, to write a Senior Paper that meets their satisfaction. After the Senior Paper is presented to the seminar, each reader will evaluate it as acceptable, unacceptable, or acceptable with revisions. In the case that revisions are required, it will be the responsibility of the student to complete these revisions by the time designated by the College for the examination in this course (May 2, 2008, at 1:00). If the paper is unacceptable or unsuccessfully revised, the student will fail the course.

Consistent and substantive consultation with your faculty readers is essential to the process of writing a Senior Paper. Taking seriously meetings with your readers ensures the success of your paper. These meetings serve several important purposes:

1. They provide you with an external structure for making progress on your research and writing by obligating you to work on the paper steadily and incrementally.
2. They allow you the opportunity to become better acquainted with the faculty members who will grade your work. Becoming more familiar with your readers will make the presentation experience less intimidating and more enjoyable. It also gives the faculty readers the chance to know you and your work better, providing them with the necessary background for giving you advice.
3. These meetings can be a significant resource for assistance with the substantive aspect of your paper. Faculty readers can help you with such things as discerning the appropriateness or value of a source, assessing the clarity and strength of an argument, suggesting potential directions for exploration, and advising you about the paper's structure and coherence. Faculty readers, however, are not responsible for formulating your thesis, constructing your bibliography, or editing your papers. In their capacity as readers, they are consultants, not collaborators.

Guidelines for Meetings:

1. As a rule of thumb, you should meet with your readers at least every other week. As the time for your presentation approaches, you may find more frequent meetings beneficial. If possible, try to meet with both readers together. It may be helpful to establish a schedule at the first meeting.
2. The length of the meetings may vary. You may need only a few minutes to check in to discuss your progress or you may require more time for longer discussions. Let your readers know in advance the approximate amount of time you will need. More important than the amount of time you spend will be the regularity and quality of your meetings.
3. Since the reader's role is advisory, you are responsible for setting the agenda for each meeting. You should arrive prepared to show your progress and to ask specific questions about your work.
4. The final grade you receive for the paper will include the readers' assessment of the quality of your meetings with them.

Paper Guidelines

*In terms of mechanics and format, Senior Papers are to conform to departmental policies (see http://www.rhodes.edu/public/2_0-Academics/2_1_7-Religion/2_1_7_6-News/2_1_7_6_1-Paper.shtml) and to the mechanics and style prescriptions in Diana Hacker's *Pocket Style Manual* (either the MLA or the Chicago style).

*It is crucial that you meet the deadlines for various stages of the Senior Paper (proposal, draft, abstract, final version). ***Both draft and final copies are to be available to faculty and students no later than 3:30 p.m. on Sunday (for a Tuesday discussion/presentation) or Tuesday (for a Thursday discussion/presentation). Papers should be sent to the class via e-mail attachment. Please deliver a hard copy to the instructor.***

Abstracts

(adapted from documents at <http://leo.stcloudstate.edu/bizwrite/abstracts.html> and <http://www.rpi.edu/dept/llc/writecenter/web/abstracts.html>)

An abstract is a condensed version of a longer piece of writing that highlights the major points covered, concisely describes the content and scope of the writing, and reviews the writing's contents in abbreviated form.

Unlike executive summaries written for non-specialist audiences, abstracts use the same level of technical language and expertise found in the article itself. And unlike general summaries which can be adapted in many ways to meet various readers' and writers' needs, abstracts are typically 150 to 250 words and follow set patterns.

Abstracts begin with a one-sentence summary of the main point of your paper (the “claim”) and introduce the problem the paper explores. Especially for papers based on research, the first sentence (or two) of the abstract announces the subject and scope of the research as well as the problem and your thesis.

After a summary of the main topic/problem/point of your paper, the abstract provides some detail on how you reached this point (your “grounds”). The information provided in the abstract should follow the organization of the paper itself, almost like providing an outline for the reader in text form.

Informative (as opposed to **descriptive**) abstracts typically follow this format:

- Identifying information (title)
- Concise restatement of the claim, including the initial problem or other background
- Methodology and key findings
- Major conclusions

An effective abstract:

- has a brief, non-repetitive style
- avoids reference to other literatures
- uses one or more well developed paragraphs that are unified, coherent, concise, and able to stand alone
- uses an introduction/body/conclusion structure
- follows the chronology of the article
- provides logical connections (or transitions)
- adds no new information, but simply summarizes the paper
- is understandable to a wide audience
- uses passive verbs to downplay the author and emphasize the information
- is concise and clear

Religious Studies Senior Seminar Progress Report

1. Date:

2. Paper topic:

3. Question/Problem addressed in the paper:

4. Thesis/Claim:

5. Grounds supporting your thesis:

6. Method(s) to be employed:

7. Progress:

Please address the following issues: 1) research done to this point and what it has revealed; 2) problems with the topic that have emerged in discussions with faculty readers and their suggestions for addressing them; 3) your next steps.

7. Working bibliography (note whether works have already been consulted)

8. Signatures and comments of faculty readers:

Religious Studies Senior Seminar
Senior Paper Grade Report

Student: _____

Faculty reader: _____

1. Please check ONE of the following:

_____ The student's senior paper is acceptable as is. My grades are below.

_____ The student's senior paper is acceptable with revisions. My grades are below but are predicated on successful completion of the specified revisions.

_____ The student's senior paper is unacceptable. See my comments.

2. Please assign grades in the following areas:

A. Preparation grade (for diligence in meeting with you about the paper and following your guidance):

B. Paper grades:

Style:

Content:

C. Presentation Grade:

D. Overall grade (preparation, paper and presentation):

Comments (to be shared with student unless otherwise stipulated):