

Senior Seminar
AMS 414/416
Fall-Spring 2011-12
Tuesday 8:00; 10:50
Rooms: 119 and 215

Course goal and description

The goal for this course is to prepare you to successfully complete a senior thesis or project, which is the capstone requirement for a Bachelor's Degree in American Studies. The senior seminar is a two-semester, independent course of study, which allows senior students to investigate a topic under the supervision of a faculty supervisor, discuss it with their peers and others, and develop it into a thesis or project of at least 40 pages.

Course meetings will be largely devoted to discussing assignments, addressing any questions you have about developing and researching your topic, and making useful recommendations on improving your work. We will examine scholarly research and writing in American studies, social science, humanities, and other fields related to research and writing.

You will complete a structured set of assignments designed to help you define and develop your research paper and you will spend time at the library, online and elsewhere conducting research. You are encouraged to continually rethink, revise and rewrite your work.

By the conclusion of the fall semester, you will complete and submit a 25 page paper that represents the first draft of your work.

In the early weeks of the spring semester students submit the second draft of their thesis. They then continue with their research and writing, refining their thesis throughout the semester. The completed thesis, which should run to about 40 pages (plus notes), is submitted by early-April.

The format and style of your thesis may follow any of the MLA, APA or the Chicago style. As your instructor, I would recommend the latter, the Chicago Manual of Style as explained by Kate L. Turabian in *A Manual for Writers*, 6th ed. (University of Chicago Press, 1996). A paperback copy of the *Manual* is available at the AUCA library.

Course objectives

Upon the successful completion of this course, which requires the final draft on a senior thesis or project, students will demonstrate improved skills in interdisciplinary research and writing. Students will also develop and enhance their skills in critical and analytical thinking, research, time management, and interpersonal communication.

Course Rationale

Why write a thesis?

An undergraduate thesis can be a highly satisfying achievement, as it shows a student's understanding of a field of study and contributes original research or creativity to the field. Writing the thesis is also good preparation for the work demanded in graduate or professional school or even in many kinds of jobs. Doing research and drawing conclusions from it is a valuable skill that many schools and employers value.

Are there any disadvantages to writing a thesis?

Writing or producing a scholarly or creative thesis is a difficult and time-consuming task. For most students, work on a thesis can take on a life of its own, threatening to push even important responsibilities aside. A student thinking about doing a thesis must balance it with her or his final classes at AUCA applying for post-graduate education, or job-hunting. Still, when all is said and done, these challenges can help make the achievement very fulfilling.

Course Schedule:

23Aug / 30 Aug

-- SO WHAT IS A THESIS ANYWAY?

Your thesis should be a major independent project that demonstrates your scholarly and/or creative work in American Studies. In its most traditional form, the thesis is a work of scholarship in the field, usually including primary and/or secondary research, and showing a grasp of the field of study's methodology and principles. However, depending on your interest or background of the student, a thesis could take many other forms. For example, a thesis could be a creative work showing an understanding of the field, such as a film, a photography exhibit, a musical composition, a poetry book, or other creative expression, including a lengthy descriptive paper (of 20pages) that places the work in an American Studies context.

Group meeting.

In the first two meetings, the instructor introduces students to the challenges that lie ahead. The group will have brainstorming sessions pertaining to identification of their research interests and topics of 6-8 students. Over the course of the next two weeks, students should meet individually with their supervisors to choose a thesis topic.

Assign: Assignment 1

6 Sept. -- SEMINAR MEETING - MODELS FROM THE PAST

Students meet in class in order to

- a. discuss the two assignments
- b. explore the nature of primary research and discuss further what a senior thesis should look like. Several AS senior theses from recent years will be assigned to students for analysis or evaluation. Each student should read the thesis assigned for him or her. And write a brief evaluation on the basis of the criteria set out below, and come to class prepared to discuss his or her reactions. Please pay particular attention to the choice and use of primary sources in the thesis you read.

QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER WHEN READING (AND WRITING) THE SENIOR THESIS:

1. Topic: A good topic should pose an interesting question that can be answered by available evidence. How well does the thesis do this?
2. Title: A good title is difficult to create. It should excite the reader's interest, while reducing the thesis's core idea to a few words.
3. Statement of Argument / Introduction: The introduction should draw the reader into the topic and make clear where the writer is going. The writer should pose an answerable question and articulate the argument she will construct to answer that question. Does the author accomplish these goals?
4. Discussion of the relevant scholarly literature / Historiography: A good essay is part of a larger conversation among scholars. How well does the author define the scholarly discussion to which she wishes to contribute? Does the writer make clear what others have said on the subject? Does she make clear what her position is and what she is adding to the debate?
5. Primary Sources: Perhaps the main requirement of the senior thesis is that it convey a coherent argument that is centered on and driven by original research in primary sources. How well does the thesis satisfy this requirement?
6. Broader Context: To be successful an essay must provide sufficient context to make clear how the particular issues being explored relate to larger social, cultural, economic, political, or intellectual themes. Authors generally rely on secondary sources to establish this context. How rich is the secondary literature that the author has explored? Has the author provided adequate context? Has he/she struck the right balance between analysis and context?
7. Analysis of Evidence: On what kinds of evidence does the author rely? Is the evidence used sufficient to satisfy the author's goals? Has the author constructed a convincing argument based on that evidence?
8. Organization: The longer a piece of writing, the more critical the organization. How well organized is this thesis? Do the chapter divisions make sense in terms of the overall argument?
9. Details: Is the note form (either footnotes or endnotes may be used) proper and consistent? Does the author effectively use notes to convey useful information tangential to the main argument? Are quotations over 35 words indented?

Assignment: In ONE PAGE, write your thesis statement. The thesis statement should define the problem you wish to explore. As you compose your statement, you should ask the following questions: Have I chosen an important, interesting, *researchable* topic, one that poses a clear question, and one that can be answered by primary/secondary sources and available evidence? If not, what further refinements might improve my statement?

13, 20 Sept.: INDIVIDUAL MEETINGS

Students will consult with the instructor and meet individually with their supervisors to discuss the topics and theses they wish to pursue.

27 Sept.: SEMINAR MEETING - SUBMISSION OF THESIS TOPIC AND STATEMENT -SCHOLARLY LITERATURE

Each of you presents your thesis topic and statement while your peers evaluate, respond, and give comments/suggestions.

4 Oct. GROUP MEETING - DEMYSTIFYING THE WRITING PROCESS

The instructor and students will discuss the process of writing the senior thesis. Common problems and difficulties connected to the writing process are considered in an open forum along with practical techniques for dealing with them.

Assignment: SCHOLARLY Review. To facilitate the writing of the section of the thesis on scholarly literature, each student will bring to class (and be prepared to discuss on Oct. 25) a two-page analysis of the TWO most important secondary works on which he/she will be relying. In making his/ her presentation each student should answer the following questions: How have these authors explained the phenomenon that I am investigating? What assumptions have they shared? On what matters have they disagreed? Occasionally, a student chooses a topic about which there appears to be very little prior discussion in the scholarly literature. If a student finds himself/herself in this position, she should ask what larger debate among scholars might incorporate her interest. Every topic fits into some larger scholarly discussion. Here are some examples: debates over the causes of the rise of the modern state; debates over the meaning of sexuality in different historical epochs; debates over the ways in which national identities come to be constructed; debates over the meaning of consumption in modern culture; debates over the meaning of freedom and responsibility in different cultures and epochs, etc.

(A separate handout will be given for your guidance)

11 Oct: INDIVIDUAL MEETINGS - LIBRARY RESEARCH TOOLS

Fall Break

25 Oct: SEMINAR MEETING - SCHOLARLY DEBATES

To facilitate the writing of the section of the thesis on scholarly literature, each student will bring to class (and be prepared to discuss) a two-page analysis of the TWO most important secondary works on which she will be relying. In making her/his presentation each student should answer the following questions: How have these authors explained the phenomenon that I am investigating? What assumptions have they shared? On what matters have they disagreed?

Assign: Thesis Proposal

1 Nov: WRITING LABORATORY/ INDIVIDUAL MEETINGS/CONSULTATION

8 Nov: SEMINAR MEETING – DISCUSSION AND SUBMISSION OF THESIS PROPOSALS THESIS PROPOSAL -

Now that everyone has a topic and has thought about the place of his/her topic within the larger scholarly literature, it is time to submit a thesis proposal. The proposal, while brief (4-5 pages), **is the first major stage of the writing process and should be taken very seriously.** It should define the problem under investigation, discuss the issues involved, analyze the scholarly literature that already exists on the topic, and discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the available primary/secondary resources. Optional: you can also provide a suggested table of contents divided into 5 to 7 headings, followed by a brief summary of each section of the essay. Appended to it should be a bibliography of the primary and secondary works being used.

Each student should give one copy of her proposal to her/his supervisor.

15 Nov: PAIRED CONFERENCES ON DRAFTS

Students will discuss ways of strengthening each other's work.

Students begin writing a 15-page section of their thesis. Any section will do, beginning, middle, or end, but experience has shown that students have the greatest success when they choose a section/chapter from the middle of their thesis; beginnings and endings are always the hardest. All drafts must be annotated and include a full bibliography. Authors and editors will meet in pairs with their supervisor to discuss progress and problems.

22, 29 Nov: WRITING LABORATORY

6 Dec: SUBMISSION OF 30-35 PAGE DRAFT

Students must submit two copies of their 25 page drafts, one to the instructor and the other to the supervisor. How might the draft or the writing be improved?

13 Dec: INDIVIDUAL MEETINGS – CONSULTATION/DISCUSSION OF DRAFTS WITH SUPERVISORS

Students will meet with their supervisor and editor to discuss their drafts and to plan ahead for the spring term.

Note: Please keep in mind that the second 15 page draft of thesis is due *three weeks into the second semester*, and the completed first draft of the thesis is due the first week in March.

17 Dec. SUBMISSION OF REVISED 25 PAGE DRAFT****** WINTER BREAK ********SPRING SEMESTER, 2012****Jan. 10, 17: SEMINAR MEETINGS - PAIRED CONFERENCES**

Students meet in class to discuss progress on her research and writing, as they complete their second draft of their thesis.

Jan. 24, 31: WRITING LABORATORY**Feb. 7: SEMINAR MEETING - SUBMISSION OF NEXT 15 PAGES OF THESIS (SECOND 15-page draft; 40 pages in all)****Feb. 14, 21: WRITING LABORATORY**

Students complete the third 10-page draft (third 10-pages; 50 PAGES IN ALL), while working closely with their supervisors.

Feb. 28: SEMINAR MEETING - SUBMISSION OF NEXT 10 PAGES OF THESIS (third 10-page draft; 50 pages in all)**PRESENTATION OF WORK IN PROGRESS TO THE AS FACULTY**

First drafts should be complete, properly annotated, and with a full bibliography.

Students present the draft of their work to the AS Faculty. This will be the venue to discuss how each thesis might be further strengthened.

Mar. 6: **SUBMISSION OF FIRST FULL DRAFT OF THESIS****Mar. 13 : STUDENT-SUPERVISOR CONFERENCES**

Students meet with their respective supervisors. This is the period of the year that students should find the most rewarding, for it is only after they have completed a full version of their thesis that they can really refine what they want to say and gain mastery of their material.

Mar. 20, 27: THESIS REVISION PERIOD**Apr. 3: SENIOR THESIS DUE******

Your completed thesis should be in by this day. Please submit two hard copies and an electronic version. A copy of your thesis will be sent to our two external members of the State Examinations Committee, the body that will evaluate your thesis during the oral presentation and defense in May.
