

GENERATING TOPICS, RESEARCH, AND WRITING SEMINAR PAPERS

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- I. YOU NEED A GENERATING or MOTIVATING QUESTION** (Keep in mind that both the kinds of questions you ask, and how you establish one, may differ from field to field)
- A. Your motivating question IS NOT:
- an issue “area”
 - a survey
 - the observation that “this work of art or subject has not been investigated before”
- B. A motivating question IS:
- a specific question about some aspect of an individual work, (or genre), or in some cases a scholarly approach. (I find limiting yourself to one or two works of art for a ten week seminar paper works better than a genre, as the study of a genre runs the risk of being little more than a survey of data).
- C. How do you PRODUCE or FIND your generating question?
1. For an image or architectural space, you might ask “what is wrong (odd) with this image/ space/ form?” You DO NOT need to be an expert in the field to ask these questions, so do not put this off until the quarter is almost over. Indeed, the untutored eye frequently comes up with the most interesting and new questions.
 2. You may find questions generated by your reading in the literature on your subject or area. Think twice about:
 - a. those works dismissed by an author,
 - b. ideas in your readings that are fuzzy. This lack of clarity is most likely NOT your lack of understanding but a good clue to an area needing further thought and / or research.
 - c. boring or unsatisfactory statements. Another examination of a work of art through the lens of different data, or a different approach, may well generate a new understanding of the work.

II. COLLECTING YOUR DATA must be done in conjunction with III. APPROACH/METHOD (below)

- A. Always work with a tentative hypothesis. This will be implied in the question you ask.
- B. Primary sources.
1. The work. Examine the work itself carefully; sketch it; describe it verbally.
 2. Historical data.
 - a. Increasingly, archival materials and historical data is becoming available on the internet.
 - b. Do not dismiss late 19th-century publications of archival material. In many cases these have yet to be surpassed.
- C. Secondary sources: the bibliography
1. If your image or work has been recently published in a well-researched exhibition catalogue or recent collection catalogue, you will find a good list of literature there.
 2. Data-bases accessible on-line are becoming increasingly sophisticated.

3. I have found, however, that the most efficient and focused way to research your work and question is to begin with a good, recent article and scour its footnotes. You may find such an article in the readings for the seminar, or in a recent scholarly journal. These footnotes will lead you to other articles and books, which will in their turn produce for you additional references. Keep yourself and your topic focused as you go. Much as you will find other areas fascinating, do not let yourself become distracted -- unless of course you find/ develop a much more promising paper topic. Make a note of these works, bibliography, and your ideas, them and save them for another project. Eventually you will find that the footnotes begin to refer to material you already know, and you will know that you have scanned the field and have a basis for your own contribution.

III. APPROACH/ METHOD: what you do with your DATA.

- A. Your approach consists of specifically HOW you relate the data that you collect to the question you ask.
 1. Humanists today tend to look for the “causes” of the specific work of art or cultural artifact (in contrast to scientists today who try to formulate universal laws). Be self-conscious about what you are doing.
 2. In relating your data to your work to answer your question, are you looking for cultural “parallels” or actual contacts -- what kind of assumptions are you making -- and what are you seeking to actually prove?
- B. Stated or not, your professor and the seminar itself probably already has been structured with a method or approach in mind (even if pluralistic). Unless you have a specific alternative approach that you wish to work through with the instructor, you will probably find that in 10 short weeks you will get the most out of the seminar by taking advantage of the methodological strengths of the professor and seminar subject as presented. In this way, you will most likely receive the most guidance and practice in a specific approach which you can then reflect upon in the development of your own.
- C. For a 10 week seminar, it is prudent to restrict yourself to ONE kind of data, whether it be cultural or textual.
- D. You will begin to develop your own method(s) or approaches as you work -- reflect on what kinds of questions and data, and what kinds of ways of relating the two appeal most to you -- what do you find yourself doing most frequently? As you read, always keep an eye out for methodological models. If you find an article and argument that particularly impresses you, analyze it (see below [*]), and see if it might be useful as a model for your own work.

IV. WRITING: PUTTING IT TOGETHER.

- A. Write as you research; and write in full sentences.
- B. Your paper **MUST** be generated by your question and observations about the work of art you are investigating: unless the assignment specifically asks you to produce a survey, **DO NOT SURVEY**. Write a careful argument answering your question. The parts of your paper should include the following:
 - a. the **observation** that generated your original question.
 - b. the **question** itself. As you formulate your question, fantasize, hypothesize, every question actually implies an answer or genre of answer) within it.
 - c. what kind of **data** are you bringing to this question (and why this and not other types).
How are you relating the data to your work in order to answer your question?
Be very clear with yourself what assumptions you are making (ideas, data, taking for granted) and what you feel must be researched, argued, proven.
 - d. As you work, you will probably break down this process into several parts -- spell them out for the reader so he/ she knows where you are going; guide your reader with a *preview*.
 - e. Then -- just **do it** (present your data, relate it to your work, answer your question).
 - f. Draw your **conclusions**. In doing so, you may also wish to suggest your thoughts of the kinds of *implications* your discoveries or conclusions may have for other, or larger questions related to your subject.
 - g. **RE-WRITE** your introduction.
 - h. . Do an "idea" check for yourself at this point: might another kind of approach or data produce another kind of answer to your question?

* **NOTE:** These questions, in this order, provide an excellent exercise in the analysis of any text you may read. By systematically analyzing those texts that impress you, you can better come to understand those methods that work best for you. Pay particular attention to different kinds of motivating questions, kinds of data collected, and manner of linking the data with your original observation (to answer the motivating question). NB. Because of the nature of humanistic inquiry in the past 300 years, these elements will be part of most scholarly articles -- even if not spelled out or recognized by their authors.

- V. FINISHING, week nine.** Week nine and its state of momentary despair (should be outlawed, but since we must live through it...), always keep in mind that each seminar is an apprenticeship. In the process of researching and writing your paper, you may come upon the seeds of a dissertation topic that will turn the field on its head, but do not expect to, or feel badly if you do not, do so in a paper produced in ten short weeks. You are producing a focused question, well-researched and tightly written work.. If you find you have reached a dead end, write that up! This can also make a fine paper -- what went wrong?

Remember that you are, and will always remain, part of a conversation; you will never make the definitive statement on a subject (because in the humanities today, such statements do not exist).