

Researching and Writing a Senior Seminar in History
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History 460 (Senior Research Seminar) is the capstone experience for history majors. It requires students to draw on skills learned and honed in survey-level and upper-level classes to create and write a polished, unique research project. It also requires students to follow the path of historians in choosing a topic, finding appropriate resources (both primary and secondary sources), developing a methodology and an outline, reading sources critically, and writing and re-writing an extended paper. Throughout the process, each of the tasks delineated below should help lead you to the next and should be revisited during the process. Remember that your topic, your outline, your sources and your methodology are all flexible; you may have to change any and all of these as you proceed.

Step 1 – Choosing a Topic

Some questions to consider in choosing a topic:

- a. What will hold my interest for an extended period of time?
- b. What do I already have a solid background and understanding in through earlier coursework in the department?
- c. Is there enough current and accessible information for me to complete this topic?
- d. Is this topic feasible for a written final product of 25-40 pages? Is it too broad?
Too narrow?
- e. Are there specific research-oriented questions (questions of how and why, rather than what) I can answer through this project?

Step 2 – Statement of Purpose

This document should lay out the proposed topic you will cover in the research paper, the reasons why you chose to study this topic, the kinds of research questions you seek to answer, a brief historiography, and the issues your research will take into consideration. Keep in mind that this is a flexible document, one that will change as you research and write. Its purpose at this stage is to solidify your thinking about the topic, help you organize your thoughts and prepare you to begin reading and writing.

Step 3 -- Preliminary Annotated Bibliography

You should begin your search for sources with the library catalogues (including OPAL and Ohiolink). Make sure you also consult electronic databases (such as Historical Abstracts). The Reference Librarian can also assist you with research. The preliminary bibliography can be submitted either on index cards or in typed form. Each entry should contain standard bibliographic information followed by a brief description of what the source contributes to your project. Is it a primary or secondary source? [You should have a mixture of both.] What is the thesis statement of the source, i.e. what is its main argument? Why is this source important to your research project? Also keep in mind that the bibliography and footnotes/endnotes from general surveys of your topic can point you in the right direction for additional sources; make sure you use this resource. Depending on your topic, other sources, such as newspaper articles, maps, political cartoon or films, may also be appropriate.

Step 4 -- Preliminary Outline

The purpose of the outline is to help you organize your early research. You should think about how you will present your topic and which your organizational method (chronological, thematic) is the best for your topic. Your outline should be in standard format, with Roman numerals for major topics and letter for sub-topics. It is better to use a sentence format for your outline; this will force you to think about what you want to cover and why, rather than simply listing short phrases and topics. Again, this document will change over time, as your research and writing continue.

Step 5 -- Initial Partial Rough Draft

Once you have read through several sources, it's important to begin the writing process. Keep in mind that you do not need to have read all of your sources thoroughly to begin writing. Starting to write will allow you to understand what you've already learned and to test your initial methodology. It will also help to highlight potential gaps in your sources as you ask research questions that your initial sources do not answer fully. In addition, you do not need to begin with your first point in your outline. Simply pick a section of your outline that you feel well-grounded in and begin writing.

Step 6 -- Expanded outline and bibliography:

Now that you've written several pages and received feedback from your faculty mentor, you need to reassess your overall research plan and sources. By rewriting your outline and continuing your research to add additional sources, you are rethinking and expanding your project.

Step 7 -- Drafts of your seminar paper

Writing and re-writing your seminar based on faculty feedback and your own editing is an important part of the process. It also helps to keep you on pace to complete the project over the course of one semester and to prepare you for a more polished rough draft. All drafts of your paper should include endnotes or footnotes and bibliographic information, but neither a title page nor a table of contents is necessary. It is MUCH easier to cite sources as you write, rather than filling them in at a later time. It also ensures that your citations are accurate and complete. Drafts should all have standard formatting: 12 point type, double-spacing, one inch margins, and be securely fastened in the upper left-hand corner. This process will culminate in a complete rough draft.

Step 8 -- Final draft

The final draft should contain: a title page, table of contents, main body, endnotes or footnotes, and a works cited section or annotated bibliography (depending on the preference of your faculty mentor). It should be a minimum of 25 pages and a maximum of 40, with page numbers on all pages save the title page. Carefully proofread to eliminate all grammar and spelling errors, and do not depend on your computer to catch them all.