

RELIGION 399
Senior Thesis Seminar, Spring 2018
Monday 1:30-4

Information for Senior Religion Majors

The department expects all of you to work diligently on your thesis and encourages you to **keep back-ups** of all thesis materials. You should set aside significant time to work on your thesis—think of this as a strenuous 300 level course that requires consistent and engaged focus—and establish **weekly meetings** with your advisor. Remember to allow additional time for any typing, revising, printing, or photocopying that may be required—and build in even more time for unforeseen emergencies. **Your completed thesis should be approximately 40 pages (excluding bibliography and endnotes).**

The work of the Senior Seminar in Religion consists of five stages: I) the formulation of a thesis proposal; II) presentation of the proposal; III) presentation of a portion of work in progress; IV) the writing and submission of first and final drafts; and V) oral discussion with department faculty. You have already accomplished the first two stages in Religion 398. This syllabus reviews the requirements for Religion 399. Attendance at all meetings (as a group and with your advisor), careful preparation, and active participation are required.

Seminar Schedule

1. During the first week of classes (January 22-26) you will meet with your advisor to discuss the **fifteen pages you have sent to your advisor by January 21**. These fifteen pages should reflect a significant issue in your thesis, and should inform the substantive conversation you will have with your advisor. **On Friday, January 26th, you will upload five of these fifteen pages to Moodle**. These five pages will be reviewed by all participants in Religion 399.
2. **Monday January 29:** we will hold our **first meeting** as a class to workshop the five page drafts turned in on Friday, January 26. You will be in a group of three or four students, and you will offer constructive feedback to your peers in that group. For each paper, you should type out responses to these issues, and deliver your responses to the author:
 - a. Write out the problem or puzzle that the author intends to address in this 5-page section of the thesis.
 - b. Write out your assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the writer's argument in this section. Here are some questions to consider:
 - i. Are you able to follow the argument? Is it clearly and logically presented?
 - ii. Does the writer offer sufficient evidence and textual support for their claims? Is the evidence of the right kind to support the claim being advanced?

- iii. Does the writer engage with primary and secondary sources, as appropriate?
 - c. Note at least two things that the draft does well.
 - d. Note at least two specific changes or revisions that the writer should make in the next draft. These changes and revisions should concern the content of the paper and argument, not matters of spelling and grammar. For instance: (1) Rewrite your introduction so that it more clearly states the problem that the paper will address; (2) Add more “signposts,” such as topic sentences and transitions, to help the reader connect the parts of your argument; (3) Consider objections to your argument, such as ...”
3. **Monday, February 19:** we will hold our **second meeting** as a class to review and workshop problems, concerns, and issues that arise during the thesis writing process. Since there will be required work for this class (including the submission of written material), but we cannot anticipate the obstacles that will arise, we will inform you by email a week earlier about how to prepare for this meeting.
4. **Friday, March 23: first draft of your thesis due.** You should submit a complete draft of your thesis to your advisor (by electronic or hardcopy as agreed upon with your advisor). By "complete" we mean a draft in which all principal sections are present and in proper order, and one in which a reader can follow your argument from beginning to end. The precise state of the draft and the date when your advisor will return it to you with comments are to be worked out individually with your advisor.
5. **Monday, April 2:** we will hold our **third meeting** as a class to review drafts of the senior thesis. You will read and comment on one other thesis, and meet as a pair on April 2 to discuss and offer critical feedback. For each paper, you should type out responses to these issues, and deliver your responses to the author:
- a. Write out the problem or puzzle that the paper is intended to address.
 - b. Write out the writer’s thesis statement or main argument. If you have trouble with (a) and (b), focus your review on helping the writer to identify the problem and thesis.
 - c. Write out your assessment of the strengths and weaknesses of the writer’s argument. Here are some questions to consider:
 - i. Are you able to follow the argument? Is it clearly and logically presented?
 - ii. Does the writer offer sufficient evidence and textual support for their claims?
 - iii. Does the writer anticipate and respond to potential objections? (i.e., is there adequate awareness of and attention to opposing views?)
 - d. Note at least two things that the draft does well.
 - e. Note at least two specific changes or revisions that the writer should make in the next draft. These changes and revisions should concern the content of the paper and argument, not matters of spelling and grammar. For instance: (1) Rewrite your introduction so that it more clearly states the problem that the paper will address; (2) Add more “signposts,” such as topic sentences and transitions, to help the reader connect the parts of your argument; (3) Consider objections to your argument, such as ...”

6. **Friday, April 20: Senior thesis due.** By 12 noon, submit **7 hard copies** of your thesis, in addition to one electronic copy (see #7 below for instructions), complete with bibliography, notes (presented in conformity with the Chicago Manual of Style, <https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/717/03/>), and a one or two page **abstract** that clearly and concisely summarizes your thesis (this should be included at the very beginning of your thesis, before your introduction). Your thesis will be read by all members of the department. The copies and electronic version must be delivered to the Administrative Assistant on the second floor of Gest. This deadline is non-negotiable, and failure to meet it will result instantly and automatically in a one-position change in the grade for the thesis (e.g., from 3.0 to 2.7); the grade reduction will increase one position for every subsequent 24 hours the thesis is late. **Please note:** neither your advisor nor the convener of the seminar can authorize an extension. Only the department as a whole, in consultation with the student's dean, can authorize extensions, which must be requested in advance.
7. **Monday, April 23:** we will hold our **fourth meeting** as a class to celebrate the completion of your thesis and to share insights on the thesis-writing experience. Each student will share a brief summary of their thesis so all can share and learn.
8. **Monday and Tuesday, May 7 and 8: Oral Discussions.** To register for your discussion time slot, follow this link <https://forms.haverford.edu/view.php?id=553729> to first upload the electronic copy of your thesis and complete a brief assessment survey of the senior thesis process. At the conclusion of the survey you will be asked to select a time for your oral discussion (to be held in the **Whitehead Campus Center, Room 205C**). All orals will take place on Monday and Tuesday, May 7 and 8. Sign up will be in order of submission of theses—the earlier you turn in your thesis, the greater your choice of times. Allow 60 minutes for the oral and subsequent discussion with the department. Your final grade for senior seminar will be sent to you by email later in the week.

Grading Procedures

You will receive a regular course grade for Religion 399b which will appear on your transcript. This overall grade is comprised of three separate grades that evaluate:

- your **participation** in the seminar process. This includes 1) punctual attendance at all seminar events, 2) careful preparation, especially the reading of your colleagues' work in progress, and 3) regular meetings with your advisor and submission of written drafts, according to the schedule mutually agreed upon with your advisor.
 - the **quality** of your thesis. Your thesis will be read by all members of the department who will mutually agree upon a grade for the written thesis. This grade will be weighted heavily in determining your final grade for the seminar. Your advisor will play a rather limited role in the grading of your thesis.
 - the **effectiveness** of your oral. The effectiveness of your oral discussion will be factored into the final grade for the thesis and for the seminar as a whole. All members of the department will participate in your oral discussion.
-

What Should You Aim For in a Thesis?

Writing a thesis that you and the faculty will be proud of is a considerable challenge. Although you will draw on a variety of skills you have practiced in other courses, you will now be constructing a work that will be longer and far more complex than any paper you have previously written. The following description offers one way to understand the challenges of thesis writing.

1. **Thesis, Argument and Evidence.** All presentations should make a specific claim (the thesis) and present an argument for that claim on the basis of evidence. The nature of the claim, the presentation and exposition of the argument, and the character of the supporting evidence will vary from field to field and from topic to topic. But a mere summary of a text is not a thesis; a simple recital of facts is not an argument; and the sheer assertion of opinion is not evidence. Your claim should be clear to any knowledgeable reader; the argument that articulates the claim should be easily discernible, and it should progress from point to point with precision and according to some sort of logical progression. Both claim and argument should be supported by clear and convincing evidence.
2. **Use of Sources.** Your project should be firmly grounded in your own analysis of the relevant primary sources. You should be able to come to independent judgments about the meaning and significance of these sources, and your analysis of them should be characterized by precision and attention to detail. Resist the temptation to summarize rather than analyze primary sources, or to use them as illustrations of general assertions of your own. We expect you to draw on relevant secondary sources, and they should also be used analytically and critically. While you should not allow any secondary source to predetermine your own insights into the primary material, there are circumstances in which a judicious use of secondary sources can aid you early on in the formulation of your project. The best theses will bring their arguments into debate with some arguments of other scholars in the field. You should specify in the endnotes/footnotes references to sources of all kinds, whether quoted directly, paraphrased, or summarized. Plagiarism is best avoided by coming to your own judgments on the basis of primary sources without prematurely filtering them through secondary sources. All sources to which you are indebted must, of course, be cited in the endnotes and bibliography.
3. **Originality, Inventiveness, Creativity, Willingness to Explore.** These terms characterize work that goes beyond mere summary (however careful, fair, complete and elegant) of an issue in order to explore new possibilities or offer insightful and original analyses. Hard to specify, but "we know it when we see it." These qualities most clearly set apart A papers from B papers; strive for them.
4. **Organization and Coherence.** This involves setting out the argument, evidence, sources, and insights in a clear, well-ordered way that any intelligent reader can follow. This is the transformation of heterogeneous materials into a cogent, persuasive essay. The way a paper is laid out is important: it should be the precise literary form that best

articulates the progression of your argument (to be distinguished from the actual progression of your inner thought processes as you come to conceive of your argument). You must transform the private progression of thoughts in your mind into an orderly public presentation written for a competent reader. It may be useful to imagine the reader of your thesis as an intelligent and well-educated person who has relatively little knowledge of your topic. Your job is not only to inform the reader about the topic, but to persuade them of your argument.

5. **Presentation.** Your thesis should attain the greatest degree of physical perfection possible: we are referring here to proofreading, spelling, page layout, illustrations (if any), table of contents, title, index (if any), etc. Writing an essay is a craft—like building a fine piece of furniture—and the physical presentation of your essay conveys a number of messages to your reader, including how you regard the thesis itself and how you want your readers to approach it.

Summary of Due Dates:

- **January 21** - fifteen pages due to advisor
- **January 26** - five pages uploaded to Moodle
- **January 29** - first meeting (workshop of five pages)
- **February 19** - second meeting (workshop on writing process, problems, and concerns)
- **March 23** - first draft due
- **April 2** - third meeting (workshop of drafts)
- **April 20** - senior thesis due
- **April 23** - fourth meeting (debriefing and celebration)
- **May 7 and 8:** Oral discussions