Writing Seminar Papers in the Humanities

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During your first two years of graduate school, chances are that you will be writing at least 6-8 seminar papers. A seminar paper is usually a 20-25 page paper on some topic related to the material that you studied during the seminar. Every professor has different expectations concerning seminar papers. You should find out beforehand what is expected of you directly from your professors.

Seminar papers are not literature reviews (although they generally contain literature reviews). They must make clearly structured and original arguments, and defend those arguments with evidence. You should be able to explain to someone else who is not a specialist in your field what your main argument is in two or three sentences. You should also be able to explain how your argument contributes to existing scholarly literature on the topic.

The parts of a paper vary depending upon what discipline you are in; the arrangement of the parts may vary as well. Hence, it is useful to consult several current journal articles in your field before you write your paper, so you can see how professional scholars present their work, how they use references, and how they distinguish their work from that of other scholars.

The basic parts of a seminar paper are:

**Introduction**: Here, you present your topic, suggest a question about your topic and propose a thesis (which is an argument that you are putting forward in response to the question you have raised about your topic). Provide a “road map” paragraph in which you explain the steps that you are going to take in the paper. Not everyone recommends road map paragraphs, but most people find them very helpful. The idea is to provide your readers with an account of where you intend to go in the paper, and how you intend to get there.

**Literature Review**: Explain (very briefly) the current state of discussion pertaining to your topic in existing scholarly literature. Do not analyze other arguments in detail – just say what they are, and explain how your work corrects, supplements, or otherwise varies from what has already been said. If your particular topic has never been addressed (which is unlikely) you should say that, too.

**Main Body of Paper**: Develop and defend your argument. Keep the argument in mind throughout the body of the paper. Do not wander off on tangents or repeat yourself. Do not rely uncritically on one or two theorists and simply “apply” their theory to your topic.

**Conclusion**: Return to the original question you posed at the beginning of the paper and explain how you have answered it. Tell us (the readers) how our understanding of the topic has been changed (for the better) by your discussion. What should we have learned
from reading your paper? Explain how your argument has opened up new questions that you (or other scholars) might pursue somewhere else.

Ask yourself these questions:

1) What is your main argument? (This is the single most important question to ask).

2) What are its potential weaknesses? How are you addressing these weaknesses?

3) Is your argument clearly structured and concisely written? Have you taken steps to get rid of filler material and jargon?

4) What is the single most important thing that the reader should learn from your paper?

**Online Resources:**

http://faculty.chicagogsb.edu/john.cochrane/research/Papers/phd_paper_writing.pdf

This is written especially for students of Economics, but it contains highly useful advice that can be adapted to the needs of students in other disciplines.

http://www.ll.georgetown.edu/guides/seminar_papers.cfm

This is for students of law schools, but it contains some good general advice as well.