

## How to Select a Senior Seminar Paper Topic

### 1. Peruse textbooks for topics that you may be interested in.

- a. Textbooks are general surveys of history and can usually be identified by their titles; for example, *The American Experience*, *The History of Western Civilization*, or *The American Nation*. Look these over to get some ideas of possible areas of interest or further research. Note: Textbooks usually are written so broadly that they will not provide topics themselves.
- b. Follow up your general interests or preferences by looking over bibliographies or notes for further reading. Most textbooks include suggested readings on specific topics.

### 2. Identify monographs and scholarly articles.

- a. Monographs are books written by historians generally for a scholarly audience. They focus on more specific issues or time periods and are often much more detailed than textbooks. These also can usually be identified by their titles. Typical titles include *Toward a New Order of Sea Power: American Naval Power and the World Scene, 1918-1922* or *The People's Farm: English Radical Agrarianism, 1775-1840*.
- b. Scholarly articles tend to be even more specific than monographs and appear in journals intended almost exclusively for other professional historians. There are many of these, including the *American Historical Review*, the *William & Mary Quarterly*, the *Economic History Review*, etc., etc.
- c. Review both monographs and scholarly articles that have been written on or around your general areas of interest. Our library has many of the most prominent historical journals either on the shelves or through an internet database such as JSTOR, America: History and Life, Historical Abstracts, etc. Even important monographs can be accessed online through the library's subscription to the ACLS History E-Book Project or NetLibrary.
- d. Keep in mind that you are trying to find a topic that is narrow enough to discuss thoroughly in a paper of 20+ pages. Therefore, avoid over-broad topics like the history of the Civil War, the history of Wisconsin, etc. Your final paper topic will need to be well-defined and quite specific.

### 3. Follow up leads for possible topics and *primary* sources

- a. Scholarly monographs and articles are based on footnotes (or endnotes) which are intended to reveal the source of the author's information. This transparency is the foundation of modern historical practice.
- b. Follow the references in the footnotes to find further articles or monographs and

continue to narrow down the range of possible topics you may choose from or the scope of the topic you already have in mind.

- c. Follow the references in the footnotes to identify *primary sources*. Primary, or original, sources are a specific type of historical evidence produced at the time of the event or by someone who witnessed the event and wrote about it later. They are called primary because the evidence was gained at first-hand and theoretically has not been filtered through ‘secondary’ witnesses or media. Historians generally believe that these types of sources tend to be more reliable than second-hand evidence. Typical types of primary sources are newspapers, published or unpublished letters, diaries and memoirs, autobiographies, transcripts of meetings or court cases, business records, government documents and reports, and photographs, but there are many, many others. *Your paper must be based on these types of primary sources!*

#### 4. **Locate and evaluate primary sources**

- a. Quickly establish where the essential primary sources are located and whether you will have access to them. If they are books or other printed sources, establish whether they are available in our library or through interlibrary loan. If they are manuscripts, establish whether you will have to travel to the library or archives where they are housed or whether they can be used in the library’s Area Research Center. (Note: Most manuscripts in the State Historical Society Archives can be lent to the Center.) Be careful to build into your research plan the possible delays involved in travel to archives and/or interlibrary loans.
- b. Evaluate the nature and extent of primary sources. Manuscripts are often difficult to decipher and will require extra research time and effort. Microfilm is also difficult to read. In addition, establish how extensive the primary sources may or will be. Will you have to go through 5 rolls of microfilm, 10, 20, or more? Archives often list their holdings in terms of archive boxes or, even more confusingly, linear shelf space. An archives box can hold up to one cubic foot of material. In real terms, this could be hundreds of individual pieces of paper. But archivists do not usually jam that many documents into a box. Sometimes a box may contain only a dozen or so individual items. It is important that you try to get an idea of whether your research will require you look through hundreds, thousands, or tens of thousands of documents. If you have questions, ask the archivist.
- c. Keep a record and begin taking notes. Organize a system (index cards, loose leaf notebook, etc.) to keep track of the material you are reviewing. Remember: Your final paper will require a full bibliography. In addition, you can save a great deal of time and energy by beginning to take notes immediately. It is not uncommon for students to forget or omit from their first drafts some of the earliest stages of their research and then have to go back and reconstruct it all for the final paper.

5. **There is no such thing as ‘spontaneous generation’**

- a. Finding a successful topic requires work. There is no substitute for time spent in the library looking through books or articles to get a new idea or better focus one you already may have. (My suggestion: avoid asking others for topics and do the background work yourself. Only you will be able to determine if the material available is necessary and sufficient for a paper. Those who generously offer you suggestions have not necessarily done the preliminary research and, in my experience, are not necessarily doing you any favors.)
  
- b. Finding a successful topic requires work. That’s right, I’m saying this again. Research topics do not miraculously come to you while sitting in your car, watching T.V., playing video games, doing your Math homework, spending a night at the bar, or staring into space. I don’t usually quote Thomas Edison, but he did quite aptly say, “Genius is one per cent inspiration, ninety-nine per cent perspiration.” In almost all cases, the perspiration precedes the inspiration. Get used to the idea that thinking is hard work and, like all hard work, requires time and dedication.