

Advice on Preparing For Senior Seminar in Philosophy

1. Define your main aims early in the semester, as early as you can, and begin to write as soon as you can manage it.
2. Try to choose a general topic for your thesis that really interests you. After this, define the main aims of your thesis early in the process. These can be definite conclusions you wish to argue for or a specific philosophical question that you wish to answer. But avoid taking on a question that is too complex to handle.
3. Consider how best to split the thesis into smaller projects, or sections. For example, you might have sections on the following:
 - explaining the problem or question and its importance
 - explaining and evaluating significant attempts by important authors (other than yourself) to solve the problem or question
 - argue for your view
 - considering the strongest objections to your view
 - replying to these objections
4. Each part of the thesis should have a clearly defined aim. Signs that this is lacking include the following:
 - the reader never knows just what is at issue or what your view is
 - the discussion seems to ramble from one point to the next without structure or rationale
 - issues introduced are not dealt with later, or are dealt with only superficially
 - significant portions of the thesis are irrelevant to the main aims
5. If in the course of your reading or in conversation with someone a point becomes clear, write it down. Later, you may find it difficult to recollect the point. You can always file it away under “notes” or “points to consider later.”
6. Avoid trying to answer empirical questions with philosophical methods. For example, “Why are people violent?” is an empirical question that requires a study based on observation. Also, avoid merely expressing your opinion. Your thesis must have arguments for your position.
7. In your research you should try your best to be thorough. This means that you should work hard to determine what the most important works are which are directly relevant to your thesis. However, it is also easy to get distracted and confused by either reading too much or by focusing on complex ideas that are not directly relevant to your thesis. To avoid this, try to find recent works that give a solid overview of your area, and use their bibliographies to guide and help you select your reading.

8. Use arguments from other philosophers to construct your thesis. Avoid reinventing the wheel. And when you use someone else's work, cite it.¹
9. It is essential that you do your very best to raise and clearly articulate the strongest objections to your own view. When reading important authors (other than yourself), pay the closest attention to ways in which they disagree with you. Mark the relevant passages and study them carefully. Restate their objections in your own words. Specify why you disagree with their arguments or interpretation of a text.
10. Be careful when using Internet sites as reference sources. Few sites are as good as the *Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*. It is probably best to use published books and journal articles initially, until you are more familiar with the field.
11. *The Philosopher's Index* is available to you for your research. Here are the instructions on how to access it through the Forsyth Library web site:

Go to FHSU home page
Click on Forsyth Library
Click on Research Resources
Click on Databases
Click on By Discipline
Click on Philosophy and Religion
(set a bookmark for the page above – the discipline)
Click on *The Philosopher's Index*
Put in your Forsyth Library username and password

After you've set the bookmark, you will only need to click on your bookmark and then scroll down and click on *The Philosopher's Index*.

12. Miscellaneous details: Use a plain font such as the one you are reading now ("Times New Roman"). Use footnotes. Provide a bibliography. Single-space your footnotes as well as your bibliography. The titles of books should always be *italicized*, and the titles of essays and journal articles should be in "double quotes." Number all pages except the first page (either bottom center or top right). Double-space the main text of your thesis. There should be a minimum of 20 pages of text. Quotations longer than four lines, however, should be single-spaced and block-indented. Sections of your thesis must be numbered with carefully worded titles.

¹Much of the current document, incidentally, is drawn from a photocopied booklet "Senior Independent Study Handbook," produced for distribution in the 2006-2007 academic year to the students of the Department of Philosophy at The College of Wooster, Wooster, Ohio.