

GETTING STARTED: UNDERSTANDING THE QUESTION AND NOTE-TAKING

So, you've been given a seminar paper to write. Whether this is your first or your thirty-first, it can be difficult to get started. Below is a bit of guidance to help you push through those initial hurdles.

■ Read the question (properly)

This may seem obvious, but if you don't read the question properly and understand exactly what it is you're being asked, you're going to waste a lot of time and energy meandering down the wrong path. If you're confused as to what's being asked of you, ask your professor or lecturer. It can also be helpful to discuss the question with your peers and see what their take on it is: they may understand the task completely differently to you!

■ Examine the question

Once you understand what's being asked of you, you should examine the question thoroughly: in what way are you being asked to tackle this topic?

Below is a list of popular assignment questions:

- ▶ **“Argue...”**: you need to provide evidence for or against an issue, using sound sources and clear reasoning.
- ▶ **“Analyze...”**: to analyze involves looking at the different parts of an issue and scrutinizing their relationship.
- ▶ **“Compare...”**: for this question you might be given two or more concepts, theories or situations, and you'll then be required to look at the similarities between them.
- ▶ **“Contrast...”**: on the other hand, you might be asked to look at the differences between them.
- ▶ **“Define...”**: this involves giving the definition of a main idea using your own understanding, but backed up by evidence and sound reasoning.
- ▶ **“Describe...”**: when you're asked to describe, for instance, a concept, you'll be expected to provide a detailed account of this idea using your own words.
- ▶ **“Discuss...”**: to discuss a topic in an academic essay is not like having a discussion in a tutorial. In a seminar paper, you're expected to construct a main argument, and then to organize your evidence accordingly. You need to evaluate the literature you find, not simply provide a summary of source materials.
- ▶ **“Evaluate...”**: in this circumstance, you need to provide an assessment of, for instance, a particular situation or an ideology. You'll need to give an appraisal of its value.

- ▶ **“Examine...”**: similar to “analyze”, you should break a situation or concept down into different parts and debate each critically.
- ▶ **“Illustrate...”**: if you’re asked to illustrate, then you need to give examples of a particular concept, situation, etc.
- ▶ **“Outline...”**: this means that, instead of providing a detailed account, you only give an overview of the main features or ideas.
- ▶ **“State...”**: for this you’re expected to provide a clear and concise explanation without any form of analysis.
- ▶ **“Suggest...”**: this relies on your own experience and point of view. The question is asking you to contribute an interpretation, but you should still use evidence and clear reasoning to support it.
- ▶ **“Summarize...”**: this is where you provide the primary points and ideas of a more complicated topic.
- ▶ **“Trace...”**: as with “outline”, you’re only required to provide the central components of a particular concept, idea, etc.

In addition to these kinds of words, underlie other keywords and terms in the question and take time to consider what they mean.

■ Find a topic

This is not relevant for everyone as your professor or lecturer may have provided you with a specific question. However, if they didn’t, here are a few tips to get started on creating your own:

- ▶ begin by **jotting down what you already know about the subject area**, and use this as a platform from which to draft questions
- ▶ **look through your textbook, PowerPoint presentations, and lecture notes** for inspiration
- ▶ have a look at **journal papers** already written on your topic and skim down to the conclusion: sometimes you’ll find a few open questions posed by the author(s)

Make sure that your topic isn’t too broad. A seminar paper topic must be narrow in its scope. For instance, “global warming” would be too broad – you’re writing a seminar paper not a book – whereas “the effect of global warming on the Arctic tundra” would be more plausible for a paper of 15 pages or so.

Here’s a short check-list to help you ascertain whether you have a good topic for your seminar paper:

- ▶ Is it relevant to what’s being asked of you?
- ▶ Does your paper have a simple answer? A good question won’t have a clear “yes” or “no” answer; it’ll have a number of possible answers, none of which are necessarily “right”.
- ▶ Is your question one that would interest others? Will it hook people’s attention?
- ▶ Ideally, is it a question that interests you personally?
- ▶ Is the topic broad/narrow enough for the requested word or page count and deadline?
- ▶ Is there enough sound information available?

■ Jot down your ideas

Before you start looking elsewhere, consider whether you already know anything about this topic. What have you heard or read about this subject before? Have you already got an opinion about the issue or concept? Have you got some form of personal experience regarding it?

It can help to jot down the main elements of the subject you're going to discuss. There are a number of ways you can do this. Two are outlined below:

▶ **Free writing**

As its name suggests, this is where you just let yourself write down any thoughts you have on your topic. Even if you only know a little about the subject in hand, you can jot this down. Don't be tempted to look over what you've written while you're writing. Save this for the end, and highlight any interesting ideas. You might surprise yourself with what you come up with.

▶ **Mind maps/webs**

These are similar to free writing, but, instead of whole sentences, you just scribble down words and phrases. It can also be more effective if you're a more visual person as you can circle words and/or phrases, and make connections between different elements. If you're conscious about saving trees, you can download mind map software for free online.

■ Find your source material

Once you know what it is you're writing about, you can look for appropriate academic sources. For more information on where to look for such sources, check out "**Sourcing academic materials**" in this series.

■ Skim and scan the text

Before you read a text properly, it can help to skim over it first to ascertain if it's worth taking the time to read properly. **Skimming** helps to give you a general overview. If a text is useful, it can also help to gauge which parts are of particular interest. The sections that you should look at with most care initially are the abstract, introduction and conclusion. For the rest of the paper, focus on the first and last lines of each paragraph. Skim the text for main concepts, and avoid getting stuck on unknown words and ideas.

Scanning is slightly different to skimming. Whereas with skimming you're trying to get a general overview, with scanning you're looking for particular material. This is very important when writing a research paper as you may have to look through a number of journal articles and books in order to find the material you need.

■ Take notes from your source material

Once you've found a relevant journal article or book, you can move onto the next stage: extracting what you need from the text. This means determining key points

and taking notes. There are a number of reasons why note-taking is an important process and a useful skill to improve:

- ▶ by not simply copying from the text, you can avoid plagiarism (have a look at “**How to avoid plagiarism**” in this series for more guidance on this issue)
- ▶ good note-taking is not only useful for writing essays, but also for preparing for exams
- ▶ it can help you during lectures and seminars

There are a number of ways you can take notes:

- ▶ **highlighting or underlining text** in photocopies or print outs, and then paraphrasing in the margins
- ▶ **creating documents for different parts of your topic** – always remember to include the source, and if you copy and paste make sure you use quotation marks
- ▶ **writing in a note book or on note cards** – again, remember to jot down the source

Note-taking is very much a personal exercise. Therefore, you’ll need to develop your own, comprehensible style. However, here are a few tips to help you on your way:

- ▶ **Use headings and sub-headings** to organize your notes so that you can categorize your main points as you go.
- ▶ Using these central ideas, you can **attach secondary concepts** to each theme – you may find that these secondary concepts can attach to more than one central theme.
- ▶ **Don’t write out full sentences** – save time by simplifying your grammar and using abbreviations (although, of course, make sure you remember what any of your own abbreviations stand for).
- ▶ **Paraphrase from the beginning** – don’t be tempted to copy text word for word. In this respect, it can help to paraphrase in the margin if you highlight or underline text.
- ▶ When you take notes from a particular source, make sure you **write down the source’s reference**.
- ▶ To remain focused, it can help to **always keep your question or seminar title next to you**.