

Senior Thesis: First Semester Expectations by Jackie Dirks, edited by L. Leibman

The Division of Literature and Languages requires that you meet three deadlines during the first semester of your senior year: 1) a one- or two-page statement of the thesis topic must be filed with the Divisional Secretary (in duplicate) by Sept. 29th, 2) a first chapter or substantial section (approximately 20 pages) with a brief prospectus of the remainder of the thesis must be filed with the Division Secretary (in triplicate) by November 22nd, and 3) you must have a thesis conference ("mini-oral") with your advisor and 1st reader between Nov. 29th-Dec. 3rd. In addition, in the spring you will be required to submit a first draft by March 28th and a final draft by April 29th at 3pm. The following guidelines should help you meet these deadlines with a minimum of anxiety, and put you on the road to completing a respectable thesis.

My evaluation of your first semester progress will be based on the following requirements.

I. Bibliography

Once you have decided on a topic in consultation with me, you should begin generating your bibliography. What is in the bibliography depends in part on your topic, but it also depends in your diligence finding sources. Initially you should cast your net wide for sources to include the important secondary work on your topic and general books and articles that provide background on the historical period and/or the problem that you've chosen. (You may want to include texts such as the *Cambridge History of American Literature*, the *Columbia Literary History of the United States*, or *A History of Modern Poetry* to fill in your knowledge of literary trends during your chosen era.) If you need help with new or old computer databases, or just a reminder of where important references are kept, consult a Reed reference librarian. They are happy to help you, and this service is part of what you're paying for. For periodical literature, use the *MLA Bibliography* and the *Humanities Index*.

Keep the bibliography in a computer file, and maintain a reasonably current hard copy for library use. Choose an appropriate bibliographic style and adopt this from the beginning as you enter your article and book titles. This will save a lot of time and re-checking of citations for publisher's information, titles, or other details you forgot the first time.

When you have completed your initial search, think about how best to organize the bibliography as a way of organizing your thesis. For instance, if you need general background on the literary movement or problem you are examining, you should list and read those books first.

You should have generated your initial bibliography and begun your reading by the time you turn in your thesis proposal. You should have a reasonably complete working bibliography for my perusal; in any case, you should turn in a copy of your complete bibliography to me sometime during the week after fall break.

II. Extended Proposal

The Division requires two copies of a one- or two-page thesis proposal. You should turn in the proposal to the Division secretary by the designated

deadlines. In addition, I would like a five-page discussion that explains the following points:

- 1) What is the focus or topic of your thesis?
- 2) What is the hypothesis, argument, or problem of your thesis? What specific questions are you interested in exploring or answering?
- 3) What are your primary texts? Why are they the best sources to use to explore or support your topic or question?
- 4) What is the relevant secondary literature on your topic and problem? What approaches have other scholars used? What conclusions have they reached? In general, what is unsatisfying or inadequate about these conclusions or approaches?
- 5) A one page outline of the possible chapters

III. Draft of the First Chapter

This five-page discussion should get you started in analyzing the issues in your thesis. Ideally, you will be able to expand the five-page proposal or some part of it into an introduction or first draft of a chapter (about 20 pages) after you have become familiar with the secondary literature, your primary text(s), and any other relevant theoretical or comparative work. The draft of the first chapter should enable you to consolidate your first term of work on the thesis, and tentatively outline the remaining sections of the thesis. This draft and tentative outline will become the basis of the discussion at your mini-oral in December.

IV. Suggestions for Organizing Your Thesis Work

These are not requirements, just suggestions culled from former thesis students and colleagues.

- 1) Keep an all-purpose thesis notebook, especially in the initial stages of formulating and researching your topic.
- 2) Plan the reading and research for your thesis as if it were a class. Set up regular appointments with your advisor, and think about how you can best use that time. Set up a regular, daily schedule for reading and note taking in the first term, and try to stick to it. In the second term, try to set up a regular writing schedule.
- 3) You will save a lot of time and anxiety if you consult a style sheet **before** you make your bibliographic entries, footnotes, or begin your writing. Use proper style and format from the very beginning rather than waiting until late second semester to fix up entries with missing dates or page numbers.
- 4) Writing a thesis requires steady work, organization, and deployment of your research and writing skills. Despite Reed lore to the contrary, it is generally not a mystical experience.