

Selecting a Project for Senior Seminar

Finding a Topic Worth Doing

The senior seminar paper allows students the space and time to develop real expertise in an issue of English studies. This paper must offer a thesis-driven analysis of a primary text or texts and must support its thesis with specific, well-explained quotations and examples as well as critical and theoretical arguments.

As students in English senior seminar, your **purpose** is

- to demonstrate awareness of literary periods, traditions, and theories;
- to analyze texts closely and carefully;
- to present your ideas effectively for your audience;
- and to integrate research effectively.

Select a topic that allows you to highlight your abilities in all of those areas.

The topics for final papers will be defined by your own choice of specialization and revised through discussions with your outside reader and your senior seminar instructor. Your specialization should be a field in which you would like to delve much further than you ever have before or an area you wish you had been able to pursue but have not yet had the opportunity. You should select your topic thoughtfully, and stick with that topic throughout the semester, even if your thesis or critical approach changes over the course of the semester.

What **NOT** To Do:

- Do **not** pick a book just because you liked it or identified with the main character.
- Do **not** pick a book because you covered it in a class last semester and you wrote a five-page paper on it.
- Do **not** pick a childhood favorite (because you will need to analyze this text in depth and may lose your sweet childhood memories of the book).
- Do **not** pick a book because you think it's easy; the "easiest" topics are those that you genuinely want to know more about and will enjoy researching and studying for a semester.
- Unless you are a great researcher, do **not** pick a text that is so new, so obscure and/or so ignored by critics that you will be on your own with the argument. For instance, students who pick recent adolescent literature often run into trouble due to a lack of criticism. You also don't want plot summary to take over your paper because no one knows what you are talking about.

What To Do:

- Consider the literary periods or movements, national traditions, authors, or genres that you most enjoy and about which you would like to become an expert. Pick a text or texts from that time, place, genre, or author.
- Consider the kinds of literary questions that are most interesting to you—cultural, historical, linguistic, or focused on identity or human consciousness. Pick a text that deals with those issues in an interesting way.
- Consider the kinds of literary questions that are interesting to your audience (the English program faculty) and expand or focus your topic to link up with larger interests in the field of English studies. According to *Writing about Literature: A Guide for the Student Critic*, based on your audience of English scholars, you should identify the following:
 - what should and should not be said . . .
 - what topics and approaches are better received than others . . .
 - what evidence and support is expected¹
- NOTE: Education majors may wish to focus on issues of pedagogy or curriculum, but ALL projects should include serious textual analysis or literary interpretation, ideally focused on one or two literary texts.

¹ W. F. Garrett-Petts. *Writing about Literature: A Guide for the Student Critic*. Toronto, Ontario: Broadview Press, 2000, 16.