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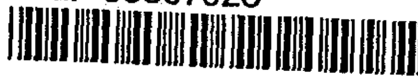

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Chapter 5

The Seminar Paper

Almost every serious graduate course in the humanities culminates in a final written assignment that I refer to in this chapter as the "seminar paper." Because the seminar paper both allows you to demonstrate your knowledge of the relevant course material and prepares you for the difficult tasks of dissertation writing and scholarly publishing, it might accurately be understood as the ***sine qua non*** of your academic training. Nonetheless, for most graduate students, confronting the seminar paper each semester is akin to launching an arctic expedition without a compass or a map; you may have some sense of where you want to go but painfully little guidance about how to get there. Although there exists no universally applicable set of instructions for writing a successful seminar paper, especially across disciplines, you can take certain steps that will help you to master the form—steps which, in ideal situations, might even lead to publication. This chapter focuses on the perils and pitfalls of seminar paper writing—and how to avoid them. Since wise students approach writing seminar papers just as they approach writing articles, this chapter serves as a supplement to chapter 10, which deals with the publication process. The major subjects include:

- The value of emulation
- The construction of a reading list
- The organization of materials
- The note-taking process
- The formulation of an argument
- The context of an argument
- The evidence of an argument
- The process of revising for publication

The Value of Emulation

Especially because of the myth in academe that "originality" should be the goal of all scholarly research, the educational value of systematic

imitation often gets overlooked. This is unfortunate since savvy teachers and students have long recognized that imitation is a starting point for learning in many pedagogical systems. As we will see shortly, the academic definition of "originality" needs to be understood within certain highly specific contexts, but first it will be important to discuss how you should envision the seminar paper, a skill that will require a certain degree of familiarity with the form.

Because scholars do not publish seminar papers, we must look to article-length essays as the most appropriate models for the approximately 20-page papers we are typically asked to write in our graduate courses. And why shouldn't this be the case? Many professors, after all, specify even in their syllabi that papers should be understood as practice runs for scholarly publishing. For example, each of my graduate students discovers on his first day in my class that a "20- to 25-page, potentially publishable final paper" will largely determine the final grade for the course. Indeed, such language was the rule rather than the exception in most of my courses as a graduate student, and it goes without saying that any student enrolled in a graduate program for longer than a semester is likely to have encountered it before. Of course, many professors—clinging to the outdated and somewhat irresponsible "apprenticeship model" of graduate education (see pp. 5–6)—deliberately shun such language in both their syllabi and their classrooms. More often than not, such professors are doing what they believe is best for their students; because they assume that an emphasis on the professional development of graduate students is only damaging and premature, they do what they can to protect them from preprofessional pressure. Although many students do, in fact, feel overwhelmed by the emphasis in today's graduate programs on publishing and conferencing, ignorance about how to publish, rather than recognition of the need to publish, is probably the cause of their anxiety. The facts here are simple: avoiding the realities of today's academic market, which demands publication, may make you feel less anxious in graduate school, but you will feel considerably more anxious later on if you are unable to land a job because you have not published. Even if you are lucky enough to secure a position, you may find yourself laboring frantically to do what should have become second nature in order to produce the publications necessary for tenure.

My advice, therefore, is that you embrace the seminar paper as a means of preparation for scholarly publishing. One positive and somewhat paradoxical side effect of such an approach is the diminishment of anxiety as a result of an enhanced sense of purpose and direction. As one of my best graduate students confesses, envisioning papers as

articles transforms them from hoops through which one must jump into serious and potentially useful exercises: "I found that I only achieved a degree of success when I began thinking of my seminar papers as pre-publication attempts rather than as papers to get finished for a class. I guess the difference in my mind has to do more with preparation for the paper than anything else—i.e. going to original sources rather than casebooks, knowing the range of scholarship in the particular field in which I am working, translating languages, finding the best (or standard) editions for each text, etc." Unsurprisingly, the student not only has turned in consistently excellent seminar papers; he has also published several articles as a pre-dissertation student.

Often what distinguishes excellent from mediocre seminar papers is the mature student's knowledge of what published work actually looks like. While professors and advisors can help you notice certain typical characteristics of published writings, the time that you spend in the library reading and thinking about how to emulate these essays will prove far more valuable. My student knows that he should seek out the most highly respected editions of primary works because respectable journals simply do not publish authors who use modern-English translations of *Beowulf* to research the poem. From reading journal articles closely, you will learn much about how authors formulate provocative claims, how they build upon the research of other scholars, what sorts of materials and methods they use to persuade their audiences, and how much evidence they bring to bear on their own arguments.

By focusing actively on more than the rhetorical elements of such articles, you will also learn much about the mechanics and even the politics of scholarly work in your field. How many pages long is the average essay in the top three philosophy journals? How large is the average bibliography in an essay on the development of American labor unions in the nineteenth century? Which scholars' names repeatedly come up in discussions of Moliere's writings? Which style manual, *Chicago* or *MLA*, tends to be most respected by editors of Spanish literature journals? Your ability to answer such questions will help you to avoid seeming naïve or ignorant about the way things work in the culture of your particular field.

The next section focuses on what and how much to read for a seminar paper, but we should reiterate some of the basic claims we have made. One key to your success in negotiating the seminar paper assignment will be your ability to keep in perspective the larger reasons for writing such papers in the first place, the most important of which is to develop your knowledge of and ability to construct the

fundamental unit of written scholarly work: the peer-reviewed article. By imagining what your work will look like in one of the top journals in your field (rather than in a pile on your professor's desk), you will gain an immediate sense of how to proceed in your research, based on your evaluation of the essays that have already been published therein. This goal-oriented sort of approach is likely to energize you by giving you a sense of purpose and drawing out the importance of the course-related work that you do as a graduate student. It may even result in some unexpected professional achievements. Systematic emulation of sound published work might with some degree of accuracy be called the starting point of all written research.

The editor of an excellent journal told me when I was an MA student that I should be spending at least two hours in the library each week simply reading recently published volumes of the top journals in my field. I would enthusiastically pass along his excellent advice to you.

THE RESEARCH STAGE

Once you have decided to pursue a particular interest, you are ready to begin your research. One of the factors that makes seminar papers more difficult to write than articles is the fact of uncontrollable deadlines. Although professors also have deadlines—for conference proposal submissions or article revisions, for example—they are more free to begin research projects when their interest in a subject happens to be piqued; graduate students are usually asked to select a topic on which to write on the first day of class (often before they know anything about a subject) or to turn in a proposal for a final paper midway through a semester. One positive aspect of such practices, however, is that graduate students are more often able to conduct research without bringing too many damaging, a priori assumptions to bear on their eventual conclusions. In ways, such research is purer than the type practiced by many scholars who look for ways to prove what they already believe to be true.

The research stage can be likened to Dante's journey through the heart of the inferno itself: only after descending directly into the depths of hell can the curious pilgrim eventually see the light of heaven visible on the other side. The analogy is useful only because it establishes the heroic and sometimes terrifying experience of confronting the well-known thinkers and ideas that have come before us. The specific sort of research we do depends largely on the fields we have chosen to study, but research across the humanities always begins with an engagement of the scholarly heritage of ideas pertinent to our subject

matter. It follows that the older or more established the practices or texts we are studying are, the more time we will need to spend in this initial phase of our research. Organized graduate students, therefore, do not wait until the final weeks of class to write their final papers; in a sense, they begin on the first day.

Constructing a Bibliography

On the first day of class, you sign up to write on Milton's *Paradise Lost*. Now what?

Research in most disciplines today begins with one or another of the elaborate electronic databases that have only just begun to transform the academic research landscape. A simple search for *Paradise Lost* on the MLA Database—the best search engine for scholars of classics, English, comparative literature, linguistics, and the modern languages—turns up as many as 2, 355 citations. Other important databases include: the Getty Index for art history; L'Anée Philologique for classics; Historical Abstracts, ERIC, and America for history; Philosopher's Index for philosophy; and Women's Studies International for women's studies. Remember that such databases are not flawless; MLA, for instance, will turn up *most* of the available criticism on a particular text, but it does not record scholarship published before 1963, and often even recent publications fail to show up. Furthermore, searches are sensitive and, therefore, require a certain degree of ingenuity. You may find only 416 works on "Early Modern and Women," but another 500 or so turn up when you type in "Renaissance and women." The initial process of building a reading list, then, might begin with electronic databases, but it should always be supplemented by more traditional research techniques: searching your library's online catalogue, consulting notes and bibliographies in major works, discussing key texts with experts in the field (i.e., your professors). Finally, be sure to learn about more specialized electronic databases such as Early English Books Online (EEBO) which, in the case of *Paradise Lost*, would help you to locate relevant commentary published earlier than 1800.

Once you generate a preliminary list of works for consultation, you must decide what you can safely ignore because no one can possibly read all that has been written on *Paradise Lost* since 1667. In the case of less established or more focused research subjects—the court record of a particular witch trial in 1788 or the writings of a twenty-first-century philosopher—you may be able to cover *most* of what has been written. In any case, in deciding what to read, always cast your

net widely (since articles on other subjects often contain ideas you can use), and always go directly to the source. A common mistake made by graduate students is to trust that what recent scholars say about previous scholarship is actually true or somehow indisputable. While Freud-bashing may be fashionable in modern scholarship, for example, it is incumbent upon you as a researcher to figure out for yourself whether or not Freud deserves to be bashed on a particular subject. The tendency to trust one's contemporaries, I should admit, is fairly understandable: for one, we are likely to accept ideas in circulation because doing so makes it easier for us to market own ideas; also, many common graduate-level assignments designed for wholly practical purposes, such as the annotated bibliography of the "last ten years of work," serve to reinforce the erroneous idea that modern scholarly practices have solved all of the problems that our primitive forebears were unable to overcome. We need to avoid conceiving the history of ideas in teleological terms, though, since such conceptions only lead to questionable scholarship. In the 1980s and 1990s, popular misinterpretations of Foucault's discussion of Panopticism, for instance, inspired numerous literary critics to explore similar modes of surveillance in relation to eighteenth- and early nineteenth-century texts despite the fact that Bentham's Panopticon was not actually put into practice until the late nineteenth century. Sean C. Grass has claimed that "[I]t is worth wondering whether recent scholarship focused upon surveillance has forged provocative links between the [Victorian] novel and the prison or only between the novel and Foucault."[1] If Grass's hunch is correct, we can say that such scholarly anachronism could have been avoided had more scholars familiarized themselves with Foucault's complex understanding of history or read more carefully about the history and fate of Bentham's original proposals for the Panopticon. The point is that you should always consider the *roots* of scholarly discourses and practices, not just the fruits that they continue to produce. If you are researching the relationship between madness and the nineteenth-century poetic imagination, you might begin by reading Plato's *Ion* and other classical texts. If you are researching twentieth-century feminist scholarship on *Paradise Lost*, you should look into what eighteenth- and nineteenth-century critics had to say about the poem's depiction of Eve. Only when you are confident that you know most of the important things that have been said about the subject, will you be ready to begin writing.

There's a rub here, of course: how would you know that Plato's *Ion* happens to be a relevant text if you're not yet an expert on the subject? Perhaps the most difficult part of conducting research is

figuring out which ancillary texts are important; a search on *Paradise Lost* will not necessarily turn up writings on Milton and women, which may be the subject you're interested in exploring. Here's where engagement of the scholarly heritage of ideas becomes crucial. Let's stay with our *Paradise Lost* example for a moment. We may not know much about seventeenth-century criticism of Milton's poem, but we do know of a famous essay by Gilbert and Gubar about Milton's apparent misogyny. The essay tells us that numerous, prominent women of the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries—including Emily Dickinson and George Eliot—recorded their negative feelings about Milton's Eve. Our research into Gilbert and Gubar's argument leads us to a counterargument by Joseph Wittreich that offers examples of other eighteenth- and nineteenth-century women who wrote more positively about Milton's Eve. Suddenly we have a list of about ten eighteenth- and nineteenth-century writings that searches on MLA and EEBO failed to turn up. Our bibliography is taking shape. As we begin to read both the primary and secondary materials, the bibliography will continue to grow while our interests continue to develop in more and more specific ways. The key now is figuring out how to manage all of this material and knowing when it's okay to stop reading (see also pp. 165–66).

Collecting and Organizing Materials

Since we have already discussed the importance of maintaining a thorough filing system (see pp. 58–59), we might be more specific here. Clear a shelf or two of your bookcases and take out two of three hanging folders. Label them specifically: since you are writing on Milton's Eve, you might consider beginning with three general categories: "*Paradise Lost* Criticism," "Milton and Women," and "Feminist Theory." Although the categories overlap somewhat, the maintenance of three folders rather than one will make it easier to locate things later on. Other researchers might prefer a different method such as organizing folders chronologically: a folder for writings between 1667 and 1800, one for writings between 1800 and 1900, and so on. Choose a method that works for you, and be willing to experiment.

At this stage you will need to recall books that are checked out and request other items through interlibrary loan. Both recalled books and interlibrary loans can take weeks to arrive so you should not wait to act. *Never* assume that it is acceptable to ignore works just because they are currently unavailable in your library. One of my colleagues at

Connecticut loves to talk about a former student who wrote a paper on the relationship between form and consciousness in the nineteenth-century novel. When he asked the student why the paper failed to include any reference to Ian Watt's seminal work on the subject, the student reported that the library's copy had been reported "missing." When my colleague asked why he had not bothered to order a copy from another university, the student became indignant, remarking that he "could not be expected to read everything." Because he had failed to consult the major work on the subject, though, he had no idea how major it happened to be (footnotes and bibliographies should have told him), nor did he know how much of his own argument had already been articulated by Watt. The "B−" he received on his paper could easily have been avoided had he been more thorough.

Once you have prepared appropriate space for storing materials, go to the library. The books you check out should be organized in some logical way on your bookshelves. I recommend to all of my students that they photocopy all journal articles and important chapters in books. (Be sure to include the title page and table of contents page so that you have hard evidence that the article involved is in this particular issue.) Many students learn the hard way that taking notes in the library may be cheaper than photocopying, but having to return to the library multiple times in order to quote material and then again to check those quotes tends to be more trouble than it's worth. By photocopying material and organizing it into the appropriate folders, you allow yourself easy access to it at all times, and you can mark up the materials as necessary. Especially if you decide to attempt revision for publication of a seminar paper, you can count on working with these materials for at least 2 years. Of course, if the articles are available online, you should simply download and print them out. In any case, avoid making unnecessary trips to the library, forgetting where you read something useful, or having to recall an item more than once in order to save a few bucks. Remember that in academe, as in other places, time is also money. By the time you are ready to begin reading, you should own a couple of very thick folders, and there should be some new books on your shelves.

Note-taking

While reading and note-taking strategies are as numerous and diverse as the people who practice them, you will maximize efficiency and increase retention by following a few basic steps. Because you may be

confronting 50 or a 100 texts in a fairly short period of time, you can bet that you'll quickly forget or even fail to register much of what you are about to read. You can also bet that you will not be able to spend much time on every single text you have brought home. The following recommendations are offered to help you to wade through the most time-consuming part of the research process.

The Art of Skimming

Often my students confess feeling guilty about moving too quickly through books and even articles. You should recognize, however, that very few people ever read scholarly books from first word to last. Indeed, the most prolific researchers tend to be experts in the art of skimming. The introduction of a scholarly book typically is the most important part to read carefully. The introduction will tell you what the author is arguing and those texts he is covering. It will also tell you whether or not you should spend more of your time reading the book. Often subsequent chapters in scholarly books simply apply the argument offered in the introduction to various texts. To return to our *Paradise Lost* example, a book on the effects of Milton's republicanism on his poetry might be very useful for a paper on Milton's Eve. Read the introduction and the chapters on *Paradise Lost*. Consider skipping the chapter on *Paradise Regained*.

Index Searches

Every scholar appreciates a solid index. Often an index will tell you what you need to know even before you check a book out of the library or read its introductory chapter. Always spend some time leafing through a book's index before placing it back on your shelves. The index of the book on Milton's republicanism might remind you that Milton happened to write poetry about another fallen woman: in *Samson Agonistes*. Perhaps what the author has to say about Dalila will be useful to your consideration of what he has to say about Eve and Milton's basic attitude toward women. The index also might change your mind about reading the *Paradise Regained* chapter if it informs you that pages 300–310 treat Milton's depiction in that poem of Mary, the mother of Jesus.

Two Versions of Notation

Some people can't help themselves from writing all over the materials they read. Selective underlining and well-organized marginalia can undoubtedly prove useful in the research process, but I would stress the relative inferiority of in-text notes, which can be difficult to navigate especially after some time has passed since an initial reading. Furthermore, you cannot (or at least should not) write in library books. I recommend using one of the two following strategies.

Buy some lined tablets. Beginning on a clean page, jot down the basic publication information of the text you are about to read: include at the very least the author's name, the title, and the date. As you take notes, be sure to include the specific page numbers that will help you to locate the pertinent information. A brief sample from one of my own note pages will perhaps be useful (see figure 5.1).

Note that I have starred the site of the actual argument of the book, which may prove useful to me later on, long after I have forgotten all of the details. Also note that I've written down the title of a work I'll need to add to my bibliography, and I've made it stand out on the page. Develop your own system of shorthand to facilitate your research. After you have finished taking notes on a book, tear out of the notebook the relevant pages, staple them together, and insert them into the book before placing it back on your shelf. Before returning a book to the library, be sure to remove the notes and place them in the appropriate folder; consider photocopying and attaching the relevant material from the book first. If the notes refer to an article, staple or clip them to the first page of the photocopied document and place them back into the appropriate folder. You may wish to skip the tablets in favor of a single sturdy notebook, in which you will record all of your notes for a single paper. This alternative has the benefit of cutting down on loose sheets of paper that can easily get lost or disorganized. But it also requires that you keep the notebook with you at all times, which—if large enough—may limit when and where you can read.

Another strategy involves typing notes and other useful information directly into a word processing program. So that you don't have to sit in front of your computer while reading, consider making shorthand notations within each text and typing out more specific notes later on, after you've returned to your computer. Some scholars choose to record electronically the bibliographical information

L. Knoppers, *Historicizing Milton* (Georgia, 1994)
—Milton scholars slower than other Renaissance scholars in applying NH [New Historicist] methods (3–8)
—A few precursors to Knoppers's work include (5–9)
**Book's argument and scope (10–12).
Add —Zwicker book mentioned on page 8
Quote —underlined claim on page 12

Figure 5.1 Sample notebook page

pertinent to each text they read and the quotations they intend to include in the final paper, both of which can then be conveniently cut and pasted during the actual writing process. Another advantage of electronic notes is that they allow you to perform quick and highly specific searches for material you've previously recorded, whereas locating information in paper notes invariably requires a certain amount of shuffling and discombobulation. As always, find a method that works for you and stick to it.

FORMULATING AN ARGUMENT

Allow your argument to emerge from your reading. By attending carefully to the dominant conversations about a subject that previous scholars have conducted, you will find yourself forming your own opinions on the matter. Once you have identified what you wish to say, and determined that it has not already been said in the same way, you will be ready to write. Let us outline this process a bit more thoroughly.

The philosopher, Charles Peirce, defines a logical, argumentative process called "abduction," which

> makes its start from the facts, without, at the outset, having any particular theory in view, though it is motivated by the feeling that a theory is needed to explain the surprising facts. . . . In abduction the consideration of the facts suggests the hypothesis.[2]

Such a process differs from inductive reasoning, which would begin with a theory based on one's general observations, or even deductive reasoning, which always begins with a hypothesis. In the scheme of things, abduction might be described as an ideal method for humanities scholars, though we would be remiss to ignore its practical limitations: we all bring conscious and unconscious assumptions to our readings, and these corrupt our ability to be objective. Nonetheless, we should try at least to pursue the sort of pure research method Peirce is recommending. Whereas a deductive procedure might begin with the contaminating ***assumption*** that Milton is a misogynist, and an inductive procedure begin with the transcendental ***claim*** that he is one, an abductive procedure would consider the facts: first, the primary writings themselves and second, what others have said about them. Only then would a relatively unbiased argument be possible.

Moving from this rather abstract consideration of the argumentative process, we might consider more carefully some practical

recommendations for formulating a strong and useful argument. Notice that in all of the following types of scholarly argumentation, the researcher's goal is to solve a particular "problem."

1. The Controversy Paper: one of the most common forms of scholarly argument is the claim that purports to end a controversy or debate. Whereas a certain group of writers have argued that Milton is a misogynist, others have gone so far as to call him a proto-feminist. You have analyzed the relevant materials, and you have formed a view that can be backed up by evidence. You are ready to weigh in on the subject.

2. The Textual Crux Paper: for years readers have pondered the meaning of an ambiguous, unclear, or even a missing part of a given text, whether a poem, an oral expression, or a nineteenth-century police blotter. Or perhaps one recurring, but fairly cryptic word in a text catches your attention. Your research leads you to a strong conclusion about the meaning of the problematic text or term, and you set out to prove that your conclusion is valid.

3. The Gap in Scholarship Paper: in reading the scholarship about a particular subject, you are struck that no one has said anything about a related and seemingly important matter. You decide to widen the scope of the conversation. When I was struggling to find my own dissertation topic, I began by researching what made me most curious at the time: Renaissance conceptions of the human body. I was pleasantly surprised to learn that despite all the scholarly attention—even obsession—that the subject had generated, no one had ever analyzed Renaissance literary conceptions of health and exercise. As a result, I decided to write a dissertation about sport and exercise in Renaissance literature. The practice of locating "missing" conversations in scholarship can lead to significant research at the seminar paper level and, eventually, at the dissertation and publishing stages. You should constantly remind yourself, though, that the mere absence of discussion about a subject does not validate the importance of that subject. My decision to work on sport, for instance, would never have been acceptable had I argued simply that "Sport is an important subject to study because no one has yet studied it." We always need to consider the possibility that a particular subject has never been studied because it happens to be a boring and unfruitful subject. The key to making this type of paper work is your ability to say very specifically why a previously ignored subject should, in fact, be studied.

4. The Historical Contextualization: in recent years, the process of contextualizing practices and texts historically has been central to scholarship in the humanities. Perhaps your consideration of

contemporaneous documents or cultural practices helps in some way to clarify the meaning of a particular work or explain its provenance, immediate reception, or influence on other contemporary texts, people, and/or events. For example, reading seventeenth-century marriage manuals or even Milton's own writings on marriage might shed useful light on your inquiry into Eve's relationship with Adam.

5. The Pragmatic Proposal: in this sort of essay, you are more interested in praxis than theory for its own sake. Perhaps you have determined that Milton is neither a misogynist nor a proto-feminist; he is simply ambivalent about Eve, and you decide to write an article that demonstrates how highlighting such ambivalence in the undergraduate classroom can bring *Paradise Lost* to life for your students. It should be acknowledged that some professors will not accept this sort of essay in a graduate seminar, but you are likely to practice such a form of argumentation at different stages of your career. (This very book is a form of the pragmatic proposal.)

6. The Theoretical Application: Many graduate students seek to apply a theoretical approach—feminist, Marxist, or microhistorical, for example—to a text or other cultural artifact. Such assignments became popular in the 1980s and 1990s, decades that witnessed the ascendancy of high theory in the academy. While theory has always been and remains a crucial part of what scholars do, we should be careful about how we ***apply*** theory in our readings. Setting out to prove that Marxism always works is no less problematic than attempting to prove that Marx's writings shed no light on literature or culture at all. Such an approach entails that we present a highly subjective, ideologically constructed or historically contingent idea as an objective truth. Furthermore, your job as a scholar is to say something valuable about a complex subject, not to support or validate what someone else (Marx or Greenblatt or Foucault) has said on the subject. The latter makes you a disciple, not a thinker. However, if you determine that Marxist ideas and terminology help you to ***articulate your own argument***, do not hesitate to appropriate them for your own purposes.

These six paper types by no means describe the only forms of argumentation that humanities scholars practice, but they offer a fairly comprehensive idea of the range of approaches you might take. Notice that in all of these cases, the construction of an "original" idea is not necessarily your goal. Rather than trying to invent the wheel, you might think about how to reinvent it; consider how your ideas contribute to a scholarly conversation, how they widen our understanding or expose the limitations of well-established ideas. As editor William Germano testifies, "The good news is that editors aren't really looking for what's radically original. Even the most experimental works of fiction are experimental within a recognizable context and history. What editors do look for is the new angle, the new combination, the fresh, the deeply felt or deeply thought."[3] With this in mind, ask yourself how you can solve a particular problem posed by a text or answer a question raised by previous scholarship or even your own reading.

After you have decided what to argue, ask yourself one more important question before proceeding: "so what?" Force yourself to explain why your argument is important or useful. Remember that the fact that "no one has ever looked at this before" may only mean that it is not worth looking at, not that it *should* be looked at. At this point, you should begin to share your idea with other people such as your classmates and especially your professor. This initial feedback is often as useful as the more detailed feedback you will receive later on. Seeking advice from others does not reveal your inadequacies or lack of independence; it suggests your maturity, your knowledge that research is never created in a vacuum, and your willingness to exhaust all available resources. Your colleagues will let you know how well you have articulated the problem you wish to solve and how persuasive you are in trying to market your idea. The next section of this chapter focuses in greater detail on how you might make your claims matter.

THE WRITING PROCESS

Once you have established a claim and decided that it is worth pursuing, you are ready to begin writing. Since many books describe methods of organization and outlining in the compositional process, I do not attend to outlining per se; instead, I focus on the basic rhetorical elements of a scholarly paper. I break these down into three activities: articulating your argument, situating your argument, and proving your argument. Such an approach is in no way intended to suggest that skipping an outline is a good idea. In fact, the three-part structure I offer here is partly designed to help you to construct logical outlines prior to actual composition.

Articulating Your Argument

Tell your audience what you wish to prove in your paper. Though this advice may sound so obvious as to be superfluous or condescending, I find myself reading paper after paper that lacks a clearly articulated claim. Sometimes the paper simply lacks an argument. At other times,

the paper is so poorly written or jargon-laden that the argument cannot be identified. Regardless of the reasons for the problem, nothing is more annoying to readers, who should never have to ask themselves on page five or twenty why they are wasting time reading an unclear paper about Melville when they could be rereading *Moby Dick*. By establishing up front a contract with your reader—"you will read my paper in order to learn X"—you ensure that your reader's goals are commensurate with your own. Furthermore, everything that you say should be offered in the spirit of fulfilling this contract with the reader. By forcing yourself to say in absolutely clear terms what you are trying to do in any given piece, you will also help yourself to focus on the task at hand and avoid being sidetracked by digressions.

Do not wait to state your claim. Whether you are writing a ten- or a thirty-page essay, your audience will always appreciate knowing what you are up to within the first page or two. Consider your own reading practices. When you pick up a magazine or a newspaper, you look immediately to the table of contents or the titles of stories. Magazine and newspaper articles tend to have titles that explain what they are about, allowing you to make an informed decision about what to read and what to skip, but titles to academic essays can only hint at the complex arguments they contain. Your introduction, therefore, should grant your audience the same sort of decision-making ability conveyed in a magazine's table of contents. Since your professor has no choice but to read your essay, thinking of him as your primary audience may make you complacent in your writing. As the practice of trying to emulate a journal article would suggest, you would be better off imagining an audience of skeptical scholars who may or may not be interested in the specific subject about which you are writing.

The ideal length of an introduction will differ from writer to writer and paper to paper, but you should aim to convey your major claim within the first few pages. Think of your introduction as an abstract that forecasts the larger structure of the document. In figure 5.2, an entire introduction is offered in the opening paragraph.

Whereas the first few sentences work merely to establish the subject under discussion—*The Compleat Angler* as a sporting treatise—the middle section of the paragraph tries to establish the problem that the author will attempt to solve: that critics have failed to consider adequately what type of sporting treatise *The Angler* happens to be. This second step is crucial to the success of a scholarly argument because the announcement of the problem implicitly addresses the "so what" question. The eventual delivery of the actual claim, in the final sentence of the paragraph, suggests precisely how the article will try to

Izaak Walton's *Compleat Angler* is certainly the most successful sporting treatise ever written. Never out of print since the first edition of 1653, the *Angler* ranks only behind the Bible and the Book of Common Prayer as the most frequently published work in the English language. Traditionally characterized as a simple pastoral dialogue by an equally simple, even accidental, author, the *Angler* has more recently been viewed as an allegorical protest against the precision of the Interregnum; as Steven N. Zwicker argues, the book "gave classic expression to the culture of sequestered Royalism." While Zwicker and other literary critics have helped to reveal the *Angler's* general political context, however, no scholar has done justice to Walton's complex and highly specific engagement of official Interregnum policies regarding sports and pastimes. Most recent work has attempted to reconcile a traditional portrait of Walton as an innocuous, simple-minded countryman with a growing awareness of the political suggestiveness of his literary masterpiece. But Walton does more than passively evoke the mythological image of a pre-Interregnum golden age; in fact, he uses sport quite deliberately and systematically to critique contemporary laws proscribing communal recreations.[4]

Figure 5.2 Sample introduction from published work

remedy the problem. It does so in just enough detail to inform the reader and perhaps to provoke his curiosity, but not so much detail as to make reading the piece unnecessary. Although the author has chosen to limit the introductory information to one paragraph, other options might have been pursued. Perhaps a three-paragraph structure would have worked: an entire paragraph announcing the subject, a brief one on the relevant critical tradition, and a more detailed paragraph on the author's claim and specific plan for backing it up. In any case, the reader knows right away whether or not to continue reading.

Situating Your Argument

Since you need to make clear why your argument is significant, it is important to establish that you are contributing to an established, relevant scholarly conversation—not merely talking to yourself. By saying that you need to "situate your argument," I mean that you need to make clear how your argument fits into the larger history of ideas. At this stage, demonstrating your engagement and understanding of previous scholarship becomes crucial.

Depending on your discipline and the sort of argument you are writing, you will be able to organize the scholarship according to certain logical categories. Your paper on the *Paradise Lost* controversy regarding Eve, for example, might trace the tradition of reading Milton as a misogynist, then trace the tradition that reads him as a protofeminist, culminating finally in an explicit statement of your view and how it contributes to the debate. A paper on a textual crux in the

poem might begin by reminding readers of the problematic passage, then reporting how previous critics have dealt with it, then discussing the limitations of their interpretations, before concluding with your new reading of the passage. A historical consideration of the poem might show how previous scholarship has been contaminated by anachronism or ignorance about actual historical conditions before providing the new historical information that solves the problem. Regardless of which form of argumentation you choose, in other words, your contribution should be defined in relation to the previous scholarship on the subject. Consider the following few examples of "situating moves" from well-known, published pieces:

> There are currently two strains in criticism of *Paradise Lost*, one concerned with providing a complete reading of the poem . . . the other emphasizing a single aspect of it, or a single tradition in the light of which the whole can be better understood. Somewhat uneasily this book attempts to participate in both strains. My subject is Milton's reader and my thesis, simply, that the uniqueness of the poem's theme . . . results in the reader's being simultaneously a participant and a critic of his own performance.[5]

> [I]t will be essential to my argument to claim that the European canon as it exists is already such a canon, and most so when it is most heterosexual. In this sense, it would perhaps be easiest to describe this book (as will be done more explicitly in chapter 1) as a recasting of, and a refocusing on, René Girard's triangular schematization of the existing European canon in *Deceit, Desire, and the Novel*.[6]

> Determinists have often invoked the traditional prestige of science as objective knowledge, free from social and political taint. . . . Under their long hegemony, there has been a tendency to assume biological causation without question, and to accept social explanations only under the duress of a siege of irresistible evidence. . . . This book seeks to demonstrate both the scientific weaknesses and political contexts of determinist arguments. . . . I criticize the myth that science itself is an objective enterprise.[7]

In the first example, Stanley Fish seeks to advance criticism of *Paradise Lost* by attempting to reconcile two extreme camps of Milton critics. In the second, Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick explains how she will appropriate Girard's important study of triangulation for more specifically sexual–political purposes. In the final example, science historian Stephen Jay Gould interrogates and exposes the myth of objective science promoted by countless, previous scientists over a period of several centuries. In all three cases, then, the authors work first to

identify common or popular ways of reading texts or cultural artifacts, and then they attempt to change how we read them.

A traditional way of describing the differences between professional scholarship and graduate work—especially between published books and dissertations—is to acknowledge that graduate writers tend to spend a good deal more time situating their arguments in relation to previous scholarship (see also pp. 168–70). There are several reasons why this is the case: first, unpublished or seldom published authors lack the sort of ethos that allows them simply to offer an argument without contextualizing it in a highly detailed fashion. For this reason, graduate instructors sometimes make them work to establish this ethos by demonstrating how much research they have done on a particular problem. Also, the relative lack of confidence characteristic of inexperienced scholars tends to result in overcompensation. The unfortunate result of this scholarly version of what Harold Bloom calls the "anxiety of influence" is the conscious or unconscious subordination of the author's voice to the voices of his predecessors. The increasingly professionalized nature of graduate studies and the need of assistant professors to turn their dissertations into books long before tenure review has closed the gap between dissertations and published books. Because of the realities of the academic marketplace, the gap between seminar papers and published articles has also begun to close. In seeking to situate your work, avoid subordinating your voice to the point where it becomes secondary or simply gets lost. Never forget that the purpose of discussing previous work is to highlight why you and ***your work*** are important and necessary.

Proving Your Argument

Ironically and relatively speaking, this is probably the easiest part of writing a seminar paper, and it demands the least amount of space here. Because your introduction should establish exactly what you will be trying to prove and the method you will employ in order to prove it; and because your "situating" section will establish why your argument is important; you should know exactly what to do—and your audience should know exactly what to expect—once the argument has been established and contextualized. In an experimental psychology paper, this might be the point where you would offer a description of materials and methods. In a history paper, this is the point where you would introduce newly discovered artifacts or information. In the *Paradise Lost* paper we've been discussing, this is where you would offer your close reading of Milton's poems or your reading of Milton's Eve in the

context of contemporary documents about women. In any case, your goal now is to show, not merely to tell, your audience that what you claimed in your introduction is in fact the case.

As in the other sections of your paper, keep in mind the value of organizing systematically the material you will use to accomplish your goals, and do not hesitate to tell your audience how you have organized it. There is much to recommend the following, introductory statement at the opening of the "proof" section of your paper: "After a detailed analysis of contemporary English attitudes about marriage and marital relations, I will show how Milton actually seeks to free Eve from the suffocating constraints of the traditional Renaissance marriage." You have now established your task, which is to offer a comprehensive report of contemporary attitudes, to offer a convincing reading of Milton's Eve, and to draw out the connections between the two.

Imagining your seminar paper as a three-step process of articulating, situating, and proving an argument will help you to organize a massive amount of information and to convey your ideas in a clear and systematic manner. Keep in mind that these are general rhetorical categories, not mandatory structural requirements. In some cases, you might wish to blur the lines between the three activities or to reverse the order of your procedure. Once you understand what a seminar paper looks like, you can manipulate the form in ways that suit your personal writing style and rhetorical preferences.

FINAL PREPARATIONS FOR SUBMISSION

Another advantage of beginning your paper early in the semester is that you'll avoid having to finish it at 5 AM on the day it is due. Allowing yourself several days for revisions will ensure that your work is as meticulous and, therefore, as persuasive as possible. Allow time for separate stylistic, mechanical, and rhetorical revisions. Be sure to check quotes for accuracy. Format your paper according to the appropriate style manual. Check the syllabus one more time to make sure you have followed the professor's instructions. Now rejoice that you have made it through hell.

Revising for Publication

A former professor of mine liked to muse that "no one ever publishes an essay that is filed away in his desk drawer." While you should never submit an essay for publication before you and your advisors believe it to be ready, you also should never underestimate your ability to

transform a strong seminar paper into an article. I learned this lesson firsthand when, six years after writing a seminar paper, I decided to remove it from my desk drawer, dust it off, and revise it; I was pleased to learn several weeks later that it had been accepted by a top literary journal. The point is that while most of the seminar papers we write tend to wind up in our desk drawers or even our garbage cans, many are capable of a greater fate.

In reading the graduate papers that I receive each semester, I never cease to be amazed by the quality of the arguments that they contain. But as I explain to almost every graduate student I teach, publishing success depends as much on how an argument is presented as on the argument's quality, and presentation is more the result of hard work than imagination. The logical conclusion is that since most students are capable of formulating a solid argument, they should eventually be able to publish their seminar papers by continuing to work hard on them after classes have ended. Of course, not all seminar papers are worthy of publication; you should go out of your way to learn from your professor whether he honestly believes the paper to be publishable. You should also demand specific feedback from your professor about what sorts of revisions are likely to lead to publication. But you should take very seriously a professor's encouragement to continue working on a paper, and you should try not to wait six years to begin revising it. In academe, holidays and semester breaks are ideal times for performing such revisions.

After revising according to the suggestions of your professor, ask whether he would be willing to read the piece again. Be prepared to make further revisions based on a second round of feedback. If the professor has offered to read it again, do not hesitate to go another round. If not, seek out other experts in your department and ask whether they'd be willing to look at an article you're thinking about submitting to a journal. Only after you have exhausted all local resources and done everything possible to perfect the paper should you reformat and submit it to a specific journal (see pp. 206–10). Although you can't be sure that your work will be accepted for publication, you can be certain of at least one thing: it won't get published sitting in your desk drawer.