

Capstone Seminar (v. 1)

PPL 4010-001

University of Virginia
New Cabell Hall 066
Tuesday 18:00-20:30

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OVERVIEW

The aim of this course is to help you finish and improve your fourth-year PPL thesis. It will be collaborative: you'll learn by presenting and sharing your own ideas, as well as through giving critical, constructive feedback to others. In addition, I will offer general tutorial sessions on academic writing.

Your thesis is expected to be between 7,500 and 10,000 words long. In form and content, it should resemble an article-length (or chapter-length) piece of academic research. The standards by which your thesis will be assessed are clarity, precision, focus, structure, literature research, interdisciplinarity, originality, critical thinking, and quality of argument. We will discuss these standards together. You can also consult my guide on philosophical writing, available on Collab, as well as online [here](#).

STRUCTURE

Students will be split up into four groups, imaginatively named A, B, C, and D. Membership in those groups will determine the deadlines by which you have to submit certain materials (see SCHEDULE). The course is divided into three deepening stages:

First Stage: Thesis Brief

At this stage, you will share with the class (i) a short (~1,000 word) statement of your thesis topic (in prose), and (ii) an article or book chapter relevant to your proposed line of argument. Furthermore, (iii) you will give a brief presentation.

THESIS BRIEF

Your thesis brief should explain the main question of your thesis, your (projected) main line of argument, and how you intend to respond to potential objections. This brief must be submitted [48 hours](#) (i.e., Sunday) before the seminar meeting.

LITERATURE

You should provide to your classmates a digital copy of an academic article or book chapter which supports your argument, or which presents important objections to it. You will have to explain how you propose to defend or rebut the position taken in this piece. To give me and your class mates adequate time to prepare, please distribute a copy [four days](#) (i.e., Friday) in advance.

PRESENTATION

You should prepare a five-minute talk based on your short statement and the article distributed. You should explain your topic and your principal arguments in a clear and succinct way.

Second Stage: First Draft

In the second stage, you will submit a first draft of your paper. You will receive comments from assigned commentators, as well as from others in the class via Collab.

DRAFT

This is a first draft—it does not have to be polished, but it should contain all the major steps of the argument you wish to make (in prose, not as notes). Roughly, this means that it is at least half of the length of the finished item (i.e., at least 4,000 words). However, I encourage you to send in full-length drafts at this point. Ideally, you spend the second half of term working on, and polishing, an already existing draft.

Please include a brief note at the beginning of your draft explaining major changes between versions. It can also be useful to highlight parts of the paper you want feedback for particularly strongly. Circulate your draft *four days* (i.e., Friday) in advance of the seminar to your classmates.

MID-TERM DEADLINE

Note that, *independent from which group you are assigned to*, you need to send me your first draft before the beginning of spring recess, i.e., *2 March*. (The draft you send me need not be the same you circulate to your classmates.)

This date will be the major date at which I will somewhat formally check your progress (I will check at other points too!). If I think that you have not progressed enough by this point, I will ask you to send in a revised, more advanced draft by mid-March, and/or I will require you to meet individually with me to discuss plans for the rest of your term.

DESIGNATED COMMENTS

Each presenter will be assigned a designated commentator. They will kick off discussion of your draft by giving a five-minute critical response to it. This response should also be made available, in (at least rough) written form, to me and the thesis writer *before the seminar*.

The primary responsibility of the designated commentator is to constructively highlight ways in which the paper under discussion can be improved. Avoid generic and superficial comments—e.g., “I find this section unconvincing”. Furthermore, emphasise a few big points, rather than bickering over detail.

COLLAB REACTIONS

In addition, we will work out a scheme by which everyone will provide brief reactions to the drafts under discussion, given via Collab. The focus will be on providing presenters with the opportunity to gather more impressions of their paper, and comments on major or minor points. These comments should be provided *by noon on the day of the seminar*.

Third Stage: Final Draft

This stage is the same as the second stage, only that you will submit a final draft. This draft should have all minor and major gaps filled in, and should look like, in content and form, a submission-ready document.

The final submission deadline for your thesis is Friday, May 4. You get a free two-day extension if you fill in the official Collab feedback form for the course.

Individual Meetings

I have no fixed office hours, but I am available on short notice throughout the term to discuss any thesis-related issue with you. During normal work hours, I usually work from Gibson 342, though you should always check via email whether I am available.

You should use the opportunity to meet with me liberally; I suggest you meet at least once with me around the middle of term *at a minimum*. Never procrastinate on seeking help!

POLICIES

ATTENDANCE Attendance is mandatory. Students with three or more unexcused absences will fail the course. Please pay close attention to the deadlines that are given under STRUCTURE. If you repeatedly fail to adhere to deadlines, I will come up with some scheme for grade punishments. Further rules:

Participation. I expect regular and active participation from all students, and I will start to cold-call you if you don't regularly participate.

Preparation. You and others will get the most out of this course only if you do adequately prepare the readings. A lack of diligence in this respect will influence my grading.

Electronic Devices. Always switch off, or mute, but either way totally ignore, any mobile devices. You are permitted to use laptops or tablets, but *only* to take notes and to check electronic copies of the texts we're discussing. If I have the feeling that students are regularly distracted by such devices, I will ban them entirely.

Openness and Respect. This is a university course, so (i) there is nothing that cannot be questioned, but also (ii) you must *offer reasons* for what you believe, and (iii) be willing to accept criticism—sometimes harsh—from others, all the while (iv) staying within the boundaries of respect for, and kindness to, others.

GRADING *Contributions* (30% of total). The various contributions you make to the seminar will be graded on the basis of the degree to which they show diligence, engagement, critical thinking, help others improve, and adhere to given deadlines.

Thesis (70% of total). Final grades for your thesis are agreed between myself and your thesis advisor, subject to review by Professor Bird.

EMAILS

Please give emails you send me titles which allow me to identify their topic and urgency easily. I try to answer any questions quickly, but please give me 48 hours to answer any email. You can address me as “Matthias”, or more formally, “Dr Brinkmann”; UVA convention also suggests “Mr Brinkmann” is acceptable.

FEEDBACK

If, at any point, you have a suggestion or complaint to make about the course, its contents, my teaching methods, or another student, you should raise such an issue with me at the earliest possible point so that I can resolve it.

SCHEDULE

The following is the schedule as it is currently planned. Once the groups are filled in, we will figure out a scheme determining paper respondents. If you have suggestions for changes, do not hesitate to make them.

ESSAY WRITING

We will spent roughly two thirds of each session on discussing the various materials you present. I plan to spend the last third of each session on general essay-writing techniques. Projected topics for those sessions can be found below.

WORKLOAD

Please note that the workload will increase significantly over the term (both your own, and that of reading the work of others). You should schedule at least four hours for each week of this course, not including time spent on your own work.

23.1.	Introduction	
First Stage: Thesis Brief & Presentation		
30.1.	Group A	<i>Formulating a Thesis & Introducing a Topic</i>
6.2.	Group B	<i>Finding & Referencing Literature</i>
13.2.	Group C	<i>Writing Clearly & Succinctly</i>
20.2.	Group D	<i>Structuring & Layouting a Text</i>
Second Stage: First Draft		
27.2.	Group A	<i>Using Basic Argument Forms</i>
Mid-term deadline for draft: 2 March		
<i>Spring Recess (3-11 March)</i>		
13.3.	Group B	<i>Providing Good & Clear Definitions</i>
20.3.	Group C	<i>Discussing Secondary Literature Charitably</i>
27.3.	Group D	<i>Raising & Answering Objections</i>
Third Stage: Final Draft		
3.4.	Group A	
10.4.	Group B	
17.4.	Group C	
24.4.	Group D	
Final Submission Deadline: 4 May		