

# ENG340: Thesis Writing Preparation for MA in Literature and Culture

## Course Report, Spring 2019

### COURSE CONTENT AND SCHEDULE

This is a course designed to prepare 2<sup>nd</sup>-semester MA students for writing their English literature MA thesis in semesters 3 and 4. The course consists of writing instruction as well as critical thinking and research methods. By the end of this course the students gain an understanding of the basic prerequisites, ideals, and conditions of MA-level literary research and are ready to write a thesis. The course used two main books, which were required:

1. Robert Dale Parker, *How to Interpret Literature: Critical Theory for Literary and Cultural Studies*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (Oxford, 2014)
2. Kate L. Turabian, *A Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*, 9<sup>th</sup> ed. (Chicago, 2018) [8<sup>th</sup> edition also ok]

The Turabian book was a new addition this year and extremely successful. Selections of the following books were also assigned:

1. Irene L. Clark, *Writing the Successful Thesis and Dissertation* (Prentice Hall, 2007)
2. Gerald Graff and Cathy Birkenstein, *They Say, I Say: The Moves that Matter in Academic Writing*, 3<sup>rd</sup> edition (Norton, 2014) – or most recent 2017 edition

For the exam, this course has a *mappe*, or portfolio of four assignments completed throughout the duration of the course. Each assignment is pass/fail and all assignments must pass for the portfolio to be complete and pass. The portfolio consisted of:

- [1] Report on 2 theses (2-3 pages)
- [2] Project idea form with two project idea paragraphs (1 page total)
- [3] Annotated bibliography (5+ pages)
- [4] Project proposal (2-3 pages)

There is a requirement of obligatory attendance at 6 of the 8 seminars, including required attendance at the final project proposal workshop (seminar 8). The schedule with class topic and assignments was as follows:

Seminar 1	Week 8 Mon 18 Feb 14:15-16:00 HF 371	<b>Getting started</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <u>Reading</u>: Turabian, ch. 1</li><li>• <u>Prep</u>: Come prepared with a list of 5 interests that could relate to a thesis topic: texts, genres, periods, authors, theories, anything related to English literature and culture – as specific as possible</li></ul>
Seminar 2	Week 10 Mon 4 Mar 14:15-16:00 HF 371	<b>Evaluating Sample Theses</b> <b>DUE [1] Report on 2 theses</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <u>Prep</u>: Class presentation of report</li></ul>
Seminar 3	Week 11 Mon 11 Mar 14:15-16:00 HF 317	<b>Theory and Method</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• <u>Reading</u>: Assigned theoretical/critical approach - one Parker chapter + one relevant essay from Rivkin &amp; Ryan</li><li>• <u>Prep</u>: Class presentation of assigned theoretical/critical approach</li></ul>
Seminar 4	Week 12 Wed 20 Mar 10:15-12:00 HF 217	<b>Theory cont. / Thesis idea brainstorming session [open]</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Reading: Turabian, ch. 2</li><li>• <u>Prep</u>: Come with 1-3 thesis project ideas</li></ul>

Seminar 5	Week 14 Mon 1 April 14:15-16:00 HF 371	<b>Brainstorming / Developing a Project Idea Paragraph Part I [open]</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <u>Reading</u>: Turabian, ch. 3</li> <li>• <u>Email the day before</u>: First draft of 2 project idea paragraphs</li> <li>• <u>Prep</u>: Bring in a secondary source for each idea</li> </ul>
Seminar 6	Week 15 Mon 8 April 14:15-16:00 HF 371	<b>Brainstorming / Developing a Project Idea Paragraph Part II [open]</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <u>Email the day before</u>: Second draft of 2 project idea paragraphs</li> <li>• <u>Prep</u>: Bring in an additional secondary source for each idea</li> </ul>
	Week 16 15 April	<b>DUE [2] Project Idea Form with two project idea paragraphs</b> ADVISOR ASSIGNMENTS MADE, WEEK 16-17 <i>Meet with your advisor to discuss your idea and formulate a plan for the thesis proposal, ideally involving one draft and revision</i>
Seminar 7	Week 18 Wed 15 May 14:15-16:00 HF 217	<b>Working with Sources Part I: the Thesis Proposal</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <u>Reading</u>: Turabian, ch. 4; skim ch. 5-7 and find 2 new/helpful ideas; read sample thesis proposals</li> <li>• <u>Prep</u>: Bring in one book on your topic from the library and at least 2 book reviews of that book (can be found on <i>Oria</i>)</li> </ul>
Seminar 8	Week 19 Tues 21 May 14:15-16:00 HF 216	<b>Working with sources Part II: the Annotated Bibliography</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Reading: Turabian, ch. 15, ch. 18-19; <i>They Say, I Say</i>, ch. 1-3,</li> <li>• <u>Prep</u>: Bring in 4 draft annotated bibliography entries</li> </ul>
	Week 21 23 May	<b>DUE [3] Annotated bibliography + draft full portfolio</b>
	Week 22 29 May	<b>DUE [4] Thesis proposal as part of FINAL PORTFOLIO</b> <b>13:00 to Inpera</b>
	Week 23 8 June	<b>Final Thesis Proposal Workshop – for all Lit/Cult MA students</b> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• <u>Prep</u>: Read all the thesis proposals and come prepared to discuss</li> </ul>

## STUDENTS

15 students were registered and fulfilled the obligatory attendance requirement. 13 students submitted portfolios and all portfolios were approved to pass.

This year was the first year that all regular students (not L-students) planning to write their thesis in literature & culture were required to take the course. This requirement seemed to function without a problem (though see note in conclusion concerned L-students). One student was unsure whether she would write in literature or linguistics, but took the class as normal without a problem even though she ended up in linguistics, and reported that it was still a good learning experience.

## TEACHING AND LEARNING APPROACH

This course was very much about in-class student-led activities that got the students producing ideas by themselves and through discussion with peers. For instance, in the first class I had them come with a few very general ideas of things they were interested in that could inspire a thesis, and then as an activity I had them work on a handout titled IDEA-QUESTION-ACTIONS, based on the “think-pair-share” method. They write down 3-4 ideas, brainstorm research questions about that idea by themselves, and then work in pairs to

brainstorm together actions to pursue those questions – i.e. go to the library to find books on X, do online searches on Y, read Z, etc.

Other classes were driven by student presentations that were often linked to the portfolio assignments. The students worked in “examiner pairs” to evaluate 2 MA theses of their choosing, and met outside of class with their partner to decide on a grade based on the sensorveiledning. They presented their evaluations of the sample MA theses, along with circulating their written evaluations to the whole class, and this fostered energetic discussion about expectations and standards of MA work.

The ‘theory relay’ where each student was assigned a chapter from the Parker theory/method textbook, according to their interest, required students to come in with a 1-page handout and to deliver a 7-minute presentation. They all put a lot of work into this preparation (even though it was not part of the exam portfolio) and all listened attentively to their peers. They asked questions and learned an immense amount and it was a very positive experience.

Class and small-group discussions about thesis idea paragraphs and proposals were similarly successful. For the thesis idea paragraphs, we discussed them in plenum over two meetings. For the annotated bibliography, I first had them present a monograph related to their topic and two published book reviews of the monograph. This helped trained them to think critically of published work and gave examples of how to summarize criticism, which they would do in their annotations. They learned a lot from reading book reviews (a new experience for almost all) and comparing their own evaluation of the books with other scholars’. For the next class had them work in groups of 3 to review each others’ annotated bibliography drafts, which raised the quality immensely. I also gave feedback to individuals during that class (as well as by email beforehand).

### **STUDENT FEEDBACK**

The end-of-semester official studentevaluating received 5 responses. Overall the feedback was very positive. In the official studentevaluating, 100% of respondents reported that information about the course was made easily available, that the level of difficult was adequate, that the progression speed was adequate, that the syllabus/workload matched the credits, that the syllabus was relevant to overall studies, and that the learning outcomes had been achieved. They reported that overlap with other courses with the theory textbook (Parker) and research methods was “absolutely an advantage,” especially with other 300-level courses that were heavily theoretical. 100% of the respondents reported the teaching quality to be the highest.

Some of the student reported that they desired more frequent or more thorough feedback/supervision on assignments. In the course itself, the students received confirmation if all individual assignments were of passable quality or not; they received detailed in-class feedback on the idea paragraphs, and in-class as well as written email feedback on 2 drafts of the annotated bibliography. Nonetheless, in the future it might help to be more clear about the level of feedback that will be provided for the portfolio assignments so the students have accurate expectations. It might also be worth giving feedback on oral presentations. One student noted that it was inconvenient that some of the class meeting dates moved around (this was because the students requested a later hand-in for the proposal form so we accommodated their request and subsequently had to change the course schedule). But it is relevant to note that perhaps such changes should be avoided in the future.

The students reported that things that helped them learn in the class included class discussion, the assignments, independent work, and constructive feedback on thesis ideas.

Specific comments included:

- “This is interesting and very necessary for me to develop a topic and thesis for my masters.”
- “Great course that has really helped me concentrate and focus on what my master will consist off. The course has given me amazing insight into literary theory. Furthermore it has given me knowledge on how to write a good paper and how to do research.”
- “Laura is an amazing professor. Every session was professional, structured and well-planned. I feel lucky to have had her as a resource in this thinking process!”

In addition, I distributed a 1-page unofficial feedback form in the final seminar, with 12 responses. This feedback echoed the official student evaluation, with some additional details. Students noted the helpfulness of: time in class discussing their thesis ideas with peers, the evaluation of 2 sample theses for comparison, presenting orally on the Parker theory chapters (could have come earlier in the semester, one even wrote), the annotated bibliography assignment, reading Turabian for note-taking and citation tips, learning how to give feedback on others’ ideas and work, how to read secondary criticism critically.

A few students noted that the timing of assignment submissions could be evened out especially at the end but did not specify how. Some also noted that all draft idea paragraphs/proposals should be pre-circulated before discussion in class, which is a good idea. A few requested more time on learning how to cite and citations (a good reason to include this more explicitly in first-semester 300-level courses, but also in ENG340). One requested a library research skills session (also a good reminder to include this for first-semester 300-level courses, but also in ENG340).

## **CONCLUSIONS AND OVERALL ASSESSMENT**

This course, now taught for the second time and now required of all regular English MA program students that will write their thesis in literature & culture, works well. The students were engaged and got a lot out of the course, both in their estimation and in mine. The syllabus helps to fill in gaps around critical theory, research methodology, critical discourse, and research practices that they might still have at this point, and sets them up to be prepared both academically and logistically to write a year-long independent research project. The students work hard and invest a lot of time in the course even though it does not have the same primary source reading requirements as regular courses. From seeing the success of the students who took this course the first time in 2018, I believe that investment pays out for a more positive, productive thesis-writing experience, and importantly, May submission.

The major problem that persists is that the L-program does not really allow for the L-students to take the course because they are extremely limited in how many literature courses they can fit in their schedule. The L-students were always explicitly invited and welcomed to come to the class sessions, and some of them did, but this was difficult because of their teaching praksis placements. They felt as if they were missing out on important training that they especially needed for their thesis writing, which is true. It is hoped that revision of the L-program will some day allow these students to take ENG340 and be better prepared to embark on their thesis writing.