

Leading a Seminar at MSA: Guidelines and Recommended Procedures

WHO SHOULD LEAD A SEMINAR?

While MSA has no set policy on this issue, we recommend that you apply to lead a seminar only if you have already attended at least one MSA in the past. Graduate students are encouraged to attend seminars but are seldom selected to lead them.

SEMINAR STRUCTURE

Seminars take place in blocks of two hours and thirty minutes, with the final thirty minutes typically allotted to questions, general discussion, and/or participation of auditors. In advance of the seminar, participants produce short papers on the topic and share them with the entire group. All participants read all of the participants' papers—a process that ensures careful and significant dialogue on the topic. See “Things to Do” below for detailed information about planning and running your seminar.

INVITED PARTICIPANTS

Some seminar leaders choose to invite a few people to join a seminar in some special role—usually scholars with special interest or expertise in the topic. It is entirely up to you whether you exercise this option or not. You are welcome to invite up to three invited participants and to determine their precise role in your seminar. Seminar organizers are, however, strongly urged to require invited participants to produce papers for the seminar. Repeated experience suggests that seminars function best when all participants, with the exception of the seminar leader, produce fresh, written work for the occasion. Otherwise seminars may take on the tone of an “oral exam” rather than a conversation among peers, particularly for graduate students. The MSA encourages you to discuss with invited participants the role they will play in your seminar.

AUDITORS

Seminars are limited to a set number of participants (usually 12). By default, auditors are NOT permitted; if you do wish to allow auditors, please inform the conference organizers. Auditors, if allowed, must play a secondary role. Past seminar leaders speak unanimously on this issue: *do not allow auditors to dominate or to get the discussion off track. Limit auditor comments to the last 30 minutes.*

THINGS TO DO: BEFORE MSA

1. **Make Initial Contact.** Once you have received your list of participants, contact them immediately. Get additional contact information (phone numbers, etc., in case you have to hound someone for a paper later), including summer contact information from anyone who will be elsewhere during the summer. You might ask participants to introduce themselves via a short bio to the rest of the group (using the "reply all" email function.)

2. **Set guidelines.** In your first or second contact with seminar participants, set firm guidelines for your seminar. These should include, **at a minimum**

- **A deadline for submission of written work** (preferably about six weeks before the conference). Emphasize the importance of meeting the deadline. Contact your participants regularly to remind them of its approach. Be prepared to hector a small number of participants to get their work in. Use the MSA as the “heavy” if necessary to get people to submit on time. Make clear to your participants that *it is MSA's policy that participants who do not submit written work will not be listed in the conference*

program. It is perfectly appropriate to be tough: More than one seminar has suffered because participants did not have sufficient time to read all of the papers carefully.

▪**A recommended length for seminar papers** (typically 5 to 7 pages). While participants will generally exceed this limit, you can keep the length in control by emphasizing the limit and/or by specifying that you are asking for “position papers,” not fully developed essays. Past leaders strongly suggest keeping papers short; it will ensure that everyone has read and carefully considered each paper.

▪**The procedure for sharing of written work.** Email attachments are easiest; participants can deliver their papers to everyone by using the “reply-all” function.

Other guidelines are up to individual leaders and can lend seminars their unique styles (see suggestions below). In the past, some leaders have provided a list of recommended readings and/or a list of questions the group should consider. Some have assigned pairs of participants to do detailed critiques of each other’s work; others have given specific paper guidelines (encouraging or discouraging textual, theoretical, or methodological analysis, e.g.).

THINGS TO DO: AT MSA

Running the seminar

The seminar leader acts as a facilitator, rather than an instructor, in conducting this discussion among peers. It *is* your job to ensure that the dialogue is inclusive; do not allow one or two participants to dominate; exercise the chair’s prerogative to steer discussion in a way that includes everyone. None of your responsibilities is more important than making sure that everyone gets to participate fully, and that everyone’s submission gets attention. Bearing these principles in mind, however, you are free to use the time as you see fit, exploring the confluence or divergence of ideas among the essays, asking questions, or focusing on a particular reading. To reiterate, do not allow auditors, if any are present, to dominate the discussion.

ADVICE FROM PAST SEMINAR LEADERS

MSA seminars leaders have found that some approaches to running the seminar have worked particularly well, so here is a list of possibilities you might try. These are merely suggestions; pick and choose among them as you see fit.

1. Give your participants instructions for reading one another’s essays.

If people are asked to read the papers with a purpose in mind, they are more likely to come in already engaged with one another, and it will be easier for you as seminar leader to move the discussion from paper to paper. For instance, you might ask people to look for one essay that seems to intersect usefully with their own and another about which they wish to pose a particular question. Or if you find that several papers raise valuable questions that relate to all the submissions, you might formulate those questions and ask people to think about how they bear on their own essays and on one or two others. The beauty of this approach is that it need not require you to do a lot of extra work in advance: you shift the burden onto the participants to find relations among the papers.

2. Distribute discussion questions after you’ve read the papers, but before the seminar. Read over the papers quickly once they come in, and email some questions that seem likely to draw out connections and common issues.

3. **Use invited participants to help generate productive exchange.** Invited participants typically feel flattered to have been invited, and are willing to help you keep things going. Ask them to read the essays with special care for questions they might raise about each one; this will help ensure that all the papers receive quality attention.

4. **Comment on all the papers in advance.** This is undoubtedly labor-intensive for the seminar leader, but it can ensure from the start that everyone feels engaged.

5. **Encourage email exchange of responses before the meeting.** Much less labor-intensive than #4: put people in groups of 2-3 and ask them to comment on one another's papers before the seminar meets, copying their comments to you.

6. **Make a seating chart before you begin discussion.** Since you won't be able to associate names with faces in advance, you might jot down a rough diagram indicating people's names and where they are sitting. (Leaders typically ask everyone to introduce themselves at the start; you can make your list while they're doing so.) Then you can use your diagram to keep track of who's who, and you can check off people's names as you discuss their papers. This way you don't need to go around the room mechanically discussing each paper in turn, which can be deadly; you can let the discussion evolve more organically, addressing each essay when appropriate, and make sure everyone's essay is addressed.

7. **Designate a short piece of common reading.** While many leaders designate a set of shared readings to be considered before papers are written, it is also possible to suggest a short, common reading for the weeks just before the seminar meets. Be wary, however, of letting the discussion focus too much on that essay to the exclusion of some of the submitted essays.