

## SEMINAR PAPER PROPOSAL

**DUE:** Monday, March 23

Your seminar paper proposal provides an opportunity to begin testing ideas for research, developing a research problem or question(s), and writing. It should offer you a provisional map, and an opportunity to receive feedback on the feasibility and significance of your project before you get too far into your research.

**Description:** Write a brief (no more than one- to two-page) proposal that outlines:

1. your research problem or question
2. a brief description of your project, including your methodology (e.g., historical, empirical, rhetorical, linguistics, hermeneutical, etc.), and the scope (e.g., time frame, object, people, region, etc.)
3. a brief discussion of the theory or set of theories you anticipate using in your project (you might attach a tentative bibliography of these)
4. a brief discussion of your assumptions concerning the problem or question(s) (what do you expect to find in your research?)
5. a reflection on why you are interested in this problem or question(s)

### Suggestions for Identifying a Research Problem and Drafting Research Questions

At the heart of any scholarly endeavor is a good question(s). Constructing good research question(s) or defining good research problems is a challenging task. The following heuristics are meant to help you get started. As you read the relevant scholarship in your research area, you may well find yourself revising those questions or problem statements. Stay loose. Revising these is all par for the course!

1. *Identify a research area.* What area or aspect of material culture relates best to your current interests and future professional goals?

- Jot down graduate courses, topics, problems and readings have caught your attention?
- Keep a notebook for listing ideas, questions, and problems that emerge from your readings and class discussions.
- Review calls for papers and editorial policies in current issues of scholarly journals related to your field of interest to get an overview of the hot topics and methods in your field of interest
- Examine the conclusions of sections of other scholarly essays for calls for “further research needed”
- Don't seize on the first research problem you encounter; give your choice careful thought and study. Be open.

2. *Build a preliminary knowledge base.* Read sources (prior literature or scholarship) in your research area to get an overview of what is known and what questions need further exploration. As you read, look for gaps in the literature. That is, look for aspects of the problem or question that have not yet been addressed or that have been questionably explored. (This information may provide good fodder for your conclusion.)

3. *Write a problem statement or research question(s)* . Consider what your focus of study will be (what material object or material praxis or other aspect of material culture are you interested in?). Why is this problem or question important? The characteristics of a good research problem or questions are that it is: a) limited in scope so that it is manageable in one study; b) carefully fitted into a broader context of current theory and research; c) is phrased in such a way that readers have a sense of what is needed to address it; is written in clear, non-technical language that stimulates readers' interest.

4. *For your proposal:* Remember—this is a proposal. You are writing it early so that you can receive feedback that will help you in your larger project. Be flexible. Research and writing is not nearly as orderly as any discussion or assignment suggests it may be. You'll find yourself working back and forth between your question(s) and your seminar project. Share your questions and problem statements with colleagues to help you shape them. And most of all—Enjoy the process.