

SEMINAR PAPERS: CONVERSATIONS
WITH YOUR MIND

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THE LONG HALL

When you step into a classroom, when you open a book, you are opening yourself to a conversation that has been going on for a long, long time. The ideas you encounter there are ideas that hundreds, thousands, millions of other people have discussed. Welcome to the discipline. Welcome to the hall of the history of the human intellect: It is shadowy and brilliant, full of living ideas and the ghosts of scholars. Voices have been silenced here. Voices have been raised up. Most of the talking takes place through ink and paper. Have you talked to Plato yet? You've really got to hear his ideas about republics. And if you talk to him, you've got to talk to John Adams. But no matter who you talk to, make sure that you talk back. A conversation's only a conversation if everyone speaks.

WRITING SEMINAR PAPERS—WHAT'S THE POINT?

This is what I used to think: *Why do I need to write a seminar paper, anyway? I read the book. We're going to discuss it in seminar tomorrow. What's the point? That's like saying, Why should I chew the strawberry shortcake, anyway? I'm just going to digest it in my stomach later on. What's the point?* It's always better to process something as you're taking it in; not only does it go down easier, it also tastes better. I love strawberries.

Here's another thing I used to think about seminar papers: *I just have to write them to show I read the book.* Here's what I have to say about that: Even if that is all my professor wants (for most, that's not the case), what good would it do me? What am I learning if I'm just covering my bases? I say, let's take the seminar papers as an opportunity to taste as much as possible.

PUZZLING PASSAGES

Some of the wisest advice about learning I have ever heard is this: If you're going to take the time to think in depth about what you're reading—to write about it, or discuss it—don't choose something

you already know or agree with. Choose something that you haven't thought about much before. Perhaps that part that gave you a funny feeling. Maybe the bit that you disagreed with so strongly you couldn't even contextualize it. Or the part that just plain confused you.

Figure it out on paper. The first time I read Nietzsche, I couldn't understand him. It was as if I didn't speak the language. I started picking a paragraph apart word by word, paraphrasing and interpreting and wondering. Lo and behold, I arrived at some understanding of what confused me—and I had more questions.

PICK SOMETHING

I don't like the beginning: the moment with book in hand and empty page before me. The only thing to do is to pick something, and start writing. My goal is to engage in the text in some way—any way. I might summarize, interpret, rant, or write, "I am totally confused." To begin with, it makes sense to do this—to say whatever is on your mind. Then, kindly, question yourself. Challenge yourself to go deeper, think harder, go farther—like wading in the cold ocean.

ANYTHING

I have tried and failed so many times to write about the book as a whole. It's a near-impossible task to respond to the entire book both briefly and deeply, especially right after finishing it. Instead, I like to pick a passage and discuss it at length. Or to pick a theme, a symbol, a particular technique of the writer's, or an idea that is entirely new.

THINKING ON PAPER

Once I have my teeth in it, I can usually just let go. Once I begin doing the focused work of noticing things about the text, opinions come thick and fast. They do not come out pretty; I have to work with them a little bit. But opinions lead to more opinions, and if the focus stays on the text, soon there is more to say than room to say it in. This is the chewing, the tasting, the swallowing. This is letting loose; just like talking to a friend, or thinking out loud. It's talking on paper. It's beginning to seminar before the seminar. It is responding to the text.

NO HOLDS BARRED

Response is about listening and then, with your whole self, expressing your opinion. Books, films, conversations with friends, childhood memories, deeply held principles: These are all parts of our intellectual selves. They make up our understanding of the world. If the reading makes you think of something that happened to you, write about it. If it makes you want to write poetry, or type in all caps, do it. If writing about molecules makes you think about love, write about love—and about

molecules. If writing about truth makes you think about racism, write about racism. What I am saying is: Let us recognize response as emotional and as intellectual. It is both, and the feeling and the intellect enrich each other and allow us to plumb the depths of the whys and the hows. Don't hold back; trust that every thought is important, and part of learning.

CONVERSATIONS WITH YOUR MIND

You're standing in a room, empty or chaotic or both. You need to say something to fill the silence, or to string the confusion into a pattern. The more you say, the more you have to say. You are beginning to truly think. (Don't think about it too much, or you might stop thinking.) You follow this thread, that theme. What was your reaction? Note it. Why did you react that way? Write it down. Why does the writer say that? Maybe because of this, or that. Is what she just put forward a good point? Does it relate to your experience of the world? Finally, you have something to say. That is: X. When you say X, you ponder it for a while. Maybe X is not actually quite true, unless it is qualified. But then, if you look at it in another way, X is impossible. Now you are disagreeing with yourself. You're talking with yourself. It's not crazy: It's intellectual.

TEXT EXPLORATION

Talk to the text like you talk to yourself. Converse. Respond. That book you just read was written by a person: a living, breathing person who laughs, drinks coffee, sleeps, is discontented, shits, makes love. What if they were talking to you in person instead of on the page? What sorts of questions would you ask them? At what point would you say, "Whoa, I don't know if I follow you"? What parts are weak? What is strikingly true? Reading a book is not so different from talking to the author. In fact, I talk to the author as I read. I scribble in the margins, and I berate the writer out loud. I look for holes in the argument. I notice style choices and organization. These are things that inform my response. The world of the book and my world are joining as I read: I try to be endlessly curious, fiercely questioning, aware of myself, open-minded, as I explore the world that this other person, this absent author, has created. It is strange to my eyes. There are some things that are the same—I recognize blue sky, land, water—but the air is different. Through my telescope, the plants are bizarre, the inhabitants foreign. How shall I make sense of all this? First I must experience it.

PROCESS OF INQUIRY

Perhaps there are two extremes of response. One could be characterized as passive, the other aggressive. I have written both kinds. In the one, I do a lot of describing the text, paraphrasing the argument, perhaps offering hints of its greater significance. In the other, I assume that I am right in my quick-formed opinion of the text, and I make big pronouncements about the writing, the argument, what was neglected, what we should understand from the book. However, I favor a response that falls between these two poles. Describing, identifying, and then questioning. Observing, wondering, and connecting. The fertility of the middle ground lies in inquisitive

thinking. Rather than just repeating, or just opining, I want to really get to the heart of what I think I'm hearing from the text. I want to figure it out, and I want to connect it to what I know and believe already, and I want to just think and talk as much as possible. This means observing, and it also means arguing, but mostly it means exploring:

Here are all these ideas. How shall I make sense of them?

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