

I590: Special Seminar in the Cognitive & Social Sciences
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Syllabus

The current version of the syllabus is always available at <http://bit.ly/gsp2015>

How to read

Readings range from 40 to 150 pages in length. You should budget *at least* six hours for a week's reading. Split it over a few days. Class is Monday evening; you might do a little on Saturday, and the remainder on Sunday.

Athletes have a low resting heart-rate; our goal, by contrast, is to *raise* your resting words-per-minute rate. This is a skill that will expand your range as a scholar.

Read *smart*. What is the gist of the author's argument? What intermediate results or conclusions does she reach? Where is she going? What distinctions does she make between related concepts? What unstated assumptions are there? What payoffs does she get from what she's done?

Write, underline, and scribble to help you make sense of things. Dog-ear pages for easy reference during discussion. Big wordy passage? Untangle it fast, like shoelaces at a TSA checkpoint. Does something not make sense? Circle it and—when appropriate—pose it as a question in class. Bring your book (or photocopies) to class!

Seminars and the art of (informed) conversation

1. Seminars are an exercise in the *art of conversation*. We strive to listen to each other, and to build on what others say.
2. As a point of common reference, each seminar will begin with a question, posed by the seminar leader (yours truly). I explicitly solicit possible questions over e-mail.
3. Where we end up is less important than how we got there. At the end of a good class, you will understand the material far more deeply than before.
4. Each day is rooted in the book or text we have to hand. We attempt, as much as possible, to go back into the text when we get confused.
5. Give each other space to talk. This might mean (for example) holding back from saying something if you've been talking a lot. Or it might mean recognizing that the moment to say your clever idea has passed, and letting the conversation move on.
6. Be aware of the ideas of others. Refer to each other by name. Ask questions. Be the midwife of another's idea. You will learn more from helping someone else phrase an idea than from articulating your own.
7. Seminar is the best thing in the world, except if you haven't done the reading, in which case it is the worst.
8. Look overleaf for some helpful pointers.

Better Instincts

With the text

Strive to be

Charitable: assume the author is not a moron or a liar.

Specific: make the connection explicit, give a quote or go to the page number.

Constructive: give the table something to work with—a problem, a question.

INSTINCT: “X ignores Y. This is wrong.”

BETTER: “X ignores Y, but the fact that Y is true would seem to undermine her point Z.”

OR: “X ignores Y, but actually, I wonder if Y would be useful to her when she says Q.”

INSTINCT: “I don’t think this argument makes sense.”

BETTER: “X says Y on page 10; but on page 70, she says something that implies not-Y, and I don’t understand how she got there.”

OR: “There are two arguments, Y and Z, and I think they get mixed up, like on page 43.”

INSTINCT: “X says Y, but I read somewhere that there’s empirical evidence for not-Y.”

BETTER: “X says Y, but I can’t see where she cites empirical evidence for Y, and that bothers me because if not-Y, then the argument fails.”

OR: “Let’s say we observe not-Y. Does that destroy the argument she makes on page 89?”

INSTINCT: “This seems really speculative.”

BETTER: “X says Y implies Z, which feels like a leap. Y *does* imply Q, not as sexy as Z.”

OR: “I thought this quote on page 10 was really weird, but I think it might mean P. Do I have it right?”

With your fellow seminar-mates

INSTINCT: “I don’t get what you said, Quan.”

BETTER: “When you said X-Y-Z, Quan, what did you mean by Y?”

INSTINCT: “Mary, I don’t think the author meant X.”

BETTER: “Mary, you say the author meant X, but on page 43 he says not-X. Help me?”

COOL SEMINAR MOVES:

“Joan, you said X, but James said Z, which makes me think that you’d disagree because X implies Y and Y implies not-Z.”

“Mary, I agree with you about Y, but I don’t think that Y implies Z, because...”

“Jin wants X to be true, I think, Jin, but if not-X, then Y and Z, which is interesting.”