Term Project

Where an undergraduate paper has been assigned it is due no later than the date of the final examination. It is preferable that it is submitted the week before. College rules prohibit faculty from accepting any assignments after that date. Graduate students should consult the class syllabus.

The paper should be at least 15 pages, typed, double-spaced. Both graduate and undergraduate students will be required to use a style manual such as Turabian, Style Manual for the Writing of Dissertations, or The Chicago Manual of Style. Footnotes must be placed at the bottom of each page. The term paper will be a key determinant of your semester grade.

1. READ AND TAKE SERIOUSLY ANY GUIDELINES PROVIDED. Please read this document and your class syllabus carefully. Raise any questions you may have at the beginning of a class or at our seminars. In-class questions help other students key into important issues as well as may prompt them to raise other questions.

2. MAINTAIN HIGH STANDARDS BUT REMAIN REALISTIC. The paper requirement page limit is usually set at fifteen. Can you submit a longer paper? Yes, you can. Is there any advantage to doing so? No, there is not. You will not get a better grade simply for a longer paper, particularly if it is poorly done, or consists of a lot of “filler.” That annoys me. However, outstanding work deserves and will receive a reward depending on the quality of the work. Writing a longer paper often prevents students from being as clear and concise as possible. [A variation occurs when excellent students use one quotation after another. Yes, I understand, the quotations sound great. How, you ask, can I hope to improve upon them by paraphrasing? Save only the best for quotation. Frequent quotation often results in disjointed papers tied together by feeble transition sentences. Upon careful examination you will be able to discern differences in quotation content, and how—by careful paraphrasing—the paper can be clearer and flow better. Students must learn to discriminate between quotation content—using only those that survive critical examination.] Fifteen pages should be long enough to thoroughly examine a well crafted topic and to demonstrate your research skills. Fifteen pages will not permit you to write the definitive study on any complex topic. Accept that. I understand that for some personality types that is more difficult than for others. We all have to build skill sets that are not comfortably acquired.

So the fifteen page limit, along with a requirement to be thorough, and the fact that you only have only a few months to complete the job done, are all consistent with a narrowly defined topic. [A more exhaustive research paper (where no page parameters are considered) can take years before one begins to write it.] The fifteen page parameter requires that you clearly identify
a topic and explore one or more of its facets (but not all of them). That necessity alone requires your brain to make distinctions (conveyed in the Table of Contents), hence permitting you to investigate only a few threads of a far greater topic.

The research project is intended to train you to do research (that is, collect and analyze evidence). The next required skill is to put that information in a coherent and well organized format, expressed clearly and concisely. Finally, you are required to present that evidence in a professional manner: using Turabian or the Chicago style manuals. You should learn how the best professionals use and cite footnotes. Other professors may no longer emphasize the more demanding manuals of style, or perhaps they substitute other models. But I believe you will profit more by mastery of a traditional style manual. [For those intending to go to Law School and joining a law review, master the Uniform System of Citations.] In sum, within the limitations you find yourself you must nevertheless remain thorough. The fact that you may have received excellent grades on your research papers with other professors is neither here or there as far as I am concerned. Am I more demanding? Perhaps, but in your career you also must learn to adapt to the demands of your supervisor.

(a). More on selecting a manageable topic.

The objective of any research project is to acquire “expertise,” that is, to acquire a greater understanding of an issue than a typical well informed citizen. Scholarship should not be confused with advocacy: that is, the desire to demonstrate that the position one holds on topics is correct, moral or just. That may be acceptable to other professors or in other venues, but it is not here. Scholarship seeks better understanding and is driven by curiosity. Advocacy rarely leaves uncertainty in its wake and usually has a predetermined agenda. Scholarship does not. Advocacy ignores and denigrates opposition arguments; scholarship acknowledges and confronts them. It has been my experience that the best scholars are not “thesis book” writers: i.e., scholars who appear to be pursue understanding but already have conclusions in mind. Such scholars are not intellectual frauds (that condemnation is reserved for those who know they are wrong but persist in conveying an untruth). It is because thesis book scholars are so attached to their premises (or desired results) that they can’t appreciate, or simply overlook, or generally dismiss evidence that otherwise would appear important were it not for their beloved thesis. In sum, their thesis blinds them to contrary evidence. For a topic to be manageable you have to narrow it, and to accomplish that task, perhaps ironically, you have to have some appreciation of its breath. So you should seek out broad discussions on a topic before you try to narrow your focus. For example, I advise students interested in the abortion issue to concentrate on only one aspect: legal, ethical, religious or moral. If they do not in all probably they will only skim the surface in each of those areas, and hardly move beyond a conventional understanding. Even if only one aspect of such a topic is selected, you still might have to narrow it further: e.g., “Supreme Court Abortion Decisions: When Does Human Life Begin?” You probably cannot cover every issue, even within a part of a topic, within fifteen pages. Over time trained researchers can cover more ground than graduate students, but that takes years of training—a training
that begins with a research project such as I am requiring.

What signals should you look for to know when the topic has been sufficiently narrowed? First, do some general reading on the topic. If the article or book is a sound source you will find distinctions and divisions there that help you to understand the topic’s scope: e.g., distinctions such as mentioned above. But you will find other general distinctions: such as those between legal developments (e.g., in sexual harassment cases) and public policy disputes on how Human Resource departments can enforce personnel policies on an issue such as sexual harassment. Sometimes inclusive dates can be used: “Coping with National debt between 1990 and the present.” There are other reasonable distinctions which could help you narrow your topic. You also may use footnotes to signal the reader, if necessary, that you are aware that the topic is more complex but you have decided only to discuss “X” and “Y” while “A,” “B,” and “C” will be excluded. You might provide the reader with sources on the topics you chose to exclude.

Students often think they satisfy research requirements by “telling a story,” using one source (often ignoring style manual instructions on how to repeatedly cite it) to establish the first few points of their thesis (or the first dozen!), then move on and use another source, to illustrate the next few or dozen points. That does not qualify as research. Scholarship on any subject generally does not speak with a single voice although one learns to recognize scholars who separate the wheat from the chaff, and, as a result, one is tempted to accept that scholar’s judgment on related topics because they have demonstrated discriminating judgment and thoroughness on related topics.

One source can work in limited circumstances, primarily when one is attempting to establish “facts.” Cite one source to establish that the attack on Pearl Harbor occurred on December 7, 1941, or to establish that “?” number of ships were lost (although you might find some differences in such estimates). You certainly might find several different assessments with respect to how crippled was the American Fleet after the attack. Likewise, if you attempt to explain why the Japanese attacked, or the internal politics of Japan and the United States, and other issues, one or two sources certainly will not be adequate. In fact, one source might be prejudiced one way or another, and if you repeatedly use it your paper may unintentionally adopt perceptions or conclusions not shared by other scholars. That is the difference between storytelling and research. And how would you know that, except having read several sources on the same topic?

When doing research there also is the problem of “the dominant view” versus traditional or even revisionist sources. If the majority opinion is one way (cite them) and use the “But see” footnote to help the reader understand that differences of opinion exists. But, if by chance, you latched on only to traditional or revisionist sources your paper may be inconsistent with the entire body of scholarship. The former occurs frequently when you consult only the latest sources. Does that mean, your recounting is wrong? No, not necessarily. But that judgment requires the
assessment of competing evidence.

And that is the point: you must learn to pick and choose among scholarly recounts, not on the basis of whether or not a recounting agrees with your prejudices, but whether or not sufficient evidence has been submitted, and whether or not the accompanying reasoning appears sound. [It goes without saying that you should be very aware of your own prejudices (attitudes), and to do that, you need some skill in identifying what they are: thus, mastery of the Three Levels of Human Discourse, not only contributes to greater self-awareness, it helps you to become a better scholar – a more objective one.] See Levels. You become an “expert” on a limited topic by reading so much in that area [Socrates referred to it as “sifting opinions”] that within a relatively short period you notice repetition. You soon distinguish between better and poorer recounts, evidence, argument, conclusions. When that occurs you have reached the point where you probably have acquired sufficient information and your topic is manageable. If that does not occur within a reasonable time (and you can tell that by your reading, because the topic continues to expand as do the ripples in still water after a pebble is thrown, consider further narrowing your topic. The dynamic of this process requires that you begin your research early, or you simply will not have time to fully experience the process and acquire the related skills. Rushed or inadequately researched term papers are easy to identify.

(b) Organization: A fifteen page paper on a limited topic may require a number of sources. Not as many as a professional article but enough to require some organization—that is, so you can find what you are looking for as quickly as possible. Do you take notes on the materials, whether photocopied or available digitally? Do you use some personal citation system to find different discussions on the same topic so you can easily find them and compare them? I have reservations about internet research. Some is great because you get original sources (e.g., Supreme Court cases although you often cannot cite specific pages); other internet material is poor. It may be anonymous, or contain conclusions drawn from incomplete or poor premises. Also, there is the matter of adequate citation. See your style manual for specific information on using such materials.

(c) Bibliography: If you understand the above comments you should understand that there is no magic formula for bibliographies: that is, I can’t tell you I will be satisfied if you use four books, and three articles, etc. The number of sources depends on the topic selected and that is why it is important to keep it manageable. From some of the comments above you also can see why I would look for multiple sources. My general (or more specific) understandings of the topic (based on my own reading) help formulate my bibliographical expectations.

EXAMINE ONE OF YOUR PROFESSOR’S ARTICLES, BOOK, ETC. WHICH MAY HELP YOU BETTER UNDERSTAND YOUR PROFESSOR’S EXPECTATIONS.

(d) A few more guidelines on writing a scholarly paper. This document has expanded beyond
my original intention, but I want to add a few comments on “writing.” It is a difficult craft, one that improves only by “doing.”

i. Clarity is the responsibility of the writer. You cannot assume that your reader is an idiot. If the reader doesn’t understand what you have written, re-write it!

ii. Imagine sitting in a chair and looking forward to reading a document. You wish to read it through without stopping. My colleague used to say it is the writer’s job to avoid “red” flags within a paper, that is, anything that stops the reader from continuing to read.

A. If, while reading your paper, the reader says “what”: what does the writer mean when he says “x?” The reader then stops to re-read the sentence or paragraph--that is a red flag. The writer should have prevented that lack of clarity. [All my comments here assume the reader is diligent and is not otherwise distracted. The point is that the reader will recognize when that occurs and not blame the writer if upon re-reading the sentence or paragraph, he fully comprehends it.] OR

B. Logic: if the reader observes, hey, that point doesn’t logically follow from the preceding point--that is a red flag.

C. Transition: if the reader finds it difficult to go from one point to another because something was left out--that is a red flag.

D. Language: if the reader finds the writer’s language too polemic, too political, too one-sided--that is a red flag. More important the reader becomes wary, less inclined to accept the judgment of the writer, whose judgment has become more suspect.

As a general rule reserve your personal judgments, assessment, et cetera for the end of the paper—don’t intersperse it in the body of your paper, especially by snide comments. Let the reader build confidence in your research, analysis and judgment. He will be more inclined to accept your conclusions. Resist making judgmental comments on those who disagree with your viewpoint. Let the evidence you marshal speak for itself. When you comment on the intelligence, viewpoint, or parentage of those you disagree with, you are more likely to destroy your own credibility.

IV. Miscellaneous Notations

1. If you wish to receive a grade at the end of the semester you must submit your research paper one week prior to the final examination. Minimum page length is fifteen typed pages (12 pt font),
double-spaced pages. The bibliography must be adequate to the topic selected and also should include the most recent thinking on the topic. Unless the nature of the topic selected (which must be approved by me) makes it impossible, only the highest quality published materials should be used: for example, professional journals--not "Time" or "Newsweek". Online resources may be helpful but should not constitute a significant portion of your research.

2. The use of a computer word processor is assumed. The paper must be written in accordance with the Turabian or Chicago Manual of Style. [If the topic is legal in nature you can use the Uniform System of Citations.] You will lose credit if the bibliography is not in proper form, or a Table of Contents is absent. Similarly, a uniform margin of one inch should be maintained on all four sides. Since word processors have made it relatively easy, footnotes should be placed at the bottom of the page. Parenthetical citations are not usually acceptable. Still, you should carefully follow style manual guidelines with respect to, for example, the correct footnote form, or what length quotations should be indented, single spaced, without quotation marks, in the body of the text. Also, learn how to repeat the use of a source, using supra note "X" to indicate to the reader where the sources was first cited, and how to use "Id" or "Ibid." You also should know how to handle multiple works by the same author in the same note. Footnotes teach you the most efficient way to convey information to the reader. It is akin to using a hammer instead of the side of a linesmen plier to drive a nail. Both can do the job, one is more efficient.

3. There should be no more than three pages of historical or other background or introductory materials. The paper must be issue oriented. The object of the paper is not necessarily to offer a solution for the problem identified but to demonstrate, without question, your mastery of what the problem is, what forces (economic, social, ideological, political interests) are at work, and what policy options (with what repercussions) are available. Furthermore, do not repeatedly rely on a single source to establish anything other than pure facts (a date). Good research relies on multiple sources because often there are different interpretations of policy, or the soundness of its execution. Thus, to rely on a single source may well "prejudice" your research, and short circuits the process of exercising critical thinking skills.

Here are some of the oft-repeated "errors" that have lost credit in the past.

a. Proofread your paper. I prefer to see hand corrections (some!) than no corrections. "Typos" become spelling or usage errors if they are not corrected: e.g., if "their" is used instead of "there," or "environment" appears on page after page instead of "environment." Use a dictionary if you are at all doubtful. [Most computer word processors today contain a built-in dictionary and thesaurus. Use them!] One of the best ways to catch errors is to read your paper out loud. If it sounds wrong it probably is in need of additional editing.

I strongly recommend that you have someone else read the paper before it is submitted to me. After a while (meaning that a good paper usually requires several drafts), it is very difficult to catch your own mistakes. (But give those recruited as proof-readers enough time to do a good job--not the night before the paper is due!).

b. Abstract: a one page summary of the paper should appear after the Title page. I want to
know immediately what the paper is about and where the paper is going. A good abstract (as well as a good Table of Contents) helps tighten the paper's organization. I should be able to go from the title page to the abstract to the bibliography and back to the Table of Contents and decide whether the works listed in the bibliography are adequate for the topic selected.

c. Table of Contents: This gives me an overview of the paper and its content. It should be no more than three levels: I ________, A.______, 1.____. Never have only one sub-heading.

d. Sub-headings (In the paper but not necessarily in the Table of Contents.): In addition to the Table of Contents levels noted above, a well organized paper often needs sub-headings within the body of the paper to give the reader a sense of digestible chunks of information. [Many word processors contain outliners. If you have the time, try to use it to expand, contract and move around parts of your paper.]

e. Footnotes: Some students forget that when material is paraphrased from a work, but not directly quoted, a footnote still is required. Hint: Is it your idea? If not, then, you probably should cite where you got it from. You must be familiar with when and how materials are footnoted, and that is why a style- manual must be mastered. Ignorance is no excuse. By now a recognized style manual should be part of your intellectual baggage. Again, it is advised that you read a professional article by your professor – it will help determine your teacher’s expectations on the use of footnotes.

f. I strongly recommend, Zinsser, On Writing Well, before you start to write your paper.