



THE GRADUATE SCHOOL
mentor memo
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This Mentor Memo, part of a series, responds to graduate students' requests for advice about navigating graduate studies successfully.

The series also addresses topics in career preparation and professional development. For more information and to suggest topics, contact Graduate School Dean Jerry Baldasty at baldasty@u.washington.edu.

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Some of your most important and impression-forming interactions with your classmates and professors occur in graduate seminars. Your stellar performance in graduate seminars is paramount to your success in the graduate program. Graduate seminars are the building blocks for your knowledge in the field and in graduate school.

What should I do to succeed in a graduate seminar?

To prepare for class

Do the reading. All of it. But don't stop there. Annotate your reading. Ask questions of the text in the margins. Maybe even type up your notes. Always consider what's at stake in the reading, how the reading informs your understanding of the class themes, other course materials, the methods, the content. How does the reading relate to your own burgeoning research questions?

Come to class with questions and discussion points. If you are reticent about speaking in class, recruit a friend to chat about your ideas for five minutes the day before class. Do not, however, memorize one point in the reading so that you make your one perfunctory comment in class. Everyone is on to that game!

In class

Do your part to help foster community. This means: Listen. Participate fully. Be respectful.

Showcase your intellectual curiosity by engaging with all types of ideas, not just the ones in your designated area of study.

When you speak, remember to look at your classmates, not exclusively at the professor.

Use your breadth of knowledge—connect the readings to other readings in your class and other out-of-class readings. Feel free to apply the readings or theme of the day to your project, but don't be so focused on utilitarian knowledge that you fail to engage fully with all of the issues at hand.

there's more... ►

Do not fall into the trap of wholesale skewering the reading of the week. This is intellectually lazy. The work must have some redeeming value if the professor has chosen to assign it. Even if you want to make a serious critique of the reading you should attempt to articulate its contributions/interventions as well as limitations.

Writing

Turn in all writing assignments on time. Do not save your seminar papers for the last week of class. Begin generating ideas the first week of class. Talk about your ideas with your classmates and your professor. If the professor has not given you a series of deadlines, create deadlines for yourself (i.e., identify paper topic in the third week of class, generate working bibliography in the fourth week of class, create abstract in the fifth week, write your first draft in the sixth week, etc.).

Graduate seminars are your first practice attempts at being a scholar. It should be fun to engage with ideas. Be prepared to spar respectfully—and always be prepared!