A “Cover Letter” concerning a forthcoming syllabus for the Thesis Colloquia in the RRE

Dear Steering Committee,

For years now, the TC has been a problematic course. A lack of consistency throughout the universities has resulted in gaps within the level of readiness of the students when the time came to write their Master’s Thesis.

This is not necessarily the fault of the individual TC leaders. From the beginning the TC has been somewhat loosely defined, which means a majority of the responsibility has been placed on the individual leaders to craft a course which they feel would best prepare the students. Additionally, the students of the RRE are often at different levels of their own intellectual development, which means some are ready to jump right into the world of research, while others could use a more systematic recapitulation of methods from their baccalaureate days, while still others have not been exposed at all to the critical thinking necessary for a project like an MA thesis. Moreover, the method and theory introduction of the RRE has served in the past as something of a cold-dunk into a confusing dialogue with theory, which has not managed to show in a simple and comprehensible manner, the broader connections between theories and methods. In this short paper we would like to suggest an outline for a TC that can still be molded by the individual leader, but will cover what we feel would be the main tools needed to seriously and effectively prepare for writing a major academic work.

This outline, written by two RRE alumni, takes in to perspective experiences of other former RRE students from several different universities, the actual process of writing a thesis within the RRE, and the experience of a former instructor in the TC. Furthermore, we will try to incorporate a variety of scholarly methods gleaned from various textbooks and manuals on how to write academic works.

The following is a preliminary draft, designed to give the basic of gist of the overall course. Suggestions, comments, criticisms, questions, etc. are appreciated.

Sincerely,

Nick Marshall and Ruth Tsuria

Course Structure:

This course is divided into X units. These units may take more than one week to complete. Each unit corresponds to a portion of the TC final written exam. Each unit has weekly assignments that correspond to the appropriate portion of the TC final paper. Therefore, the students’ completion of these weekly assignments will result in a more or less coherent and complete final TC paper, which will probably require some editing.

Outline of Thesis Colloquium

Unit 1– What are you doing? ; Why are you doing it: Topics and research questions.

Unit 2- What are you doing it on: Primary Sources

(Explain the reason why you’re using a specific primary source)

Unit 3- How are you doing it?: Methods

Choosing a method:

Certain pieces of evidence demand certain methods and theories: e.g. looking at the role of women’s lives in the ancient world will probably involve some feminist theory at some level…

Certain research questions demand certain methods.

Certain audiences demand certain methods…

An overview of some methods

Literary Criticism

Phenomenological

Philological

Theological

Sociological

Cognitive

Historical

“Rankean”

Historical Critical

Classical

Feminist

Weberian

Economical

Marxist

**Comparative**

Mueller

Frazer

Smithian (J. Z. Smith)

Interrogating a topic through methods:

How do methods determine the questions asked of a given source/topic?

Unit 4-What have other people said about it?: Secondary Sources

Looking for, choosing, understanding and categorizing secondary sources according to methods.

Evaluating secondary sources

Unit 5- How are you thinking about it?; How have others thought about it?: Theory

Universalistic

Evolutionary

…..

Unit 6: How to write the body of an essay

Goal: Paragraph(s) describing an initial outline of the dissertation.

Unit 7: How to write a good conclusion

Unit 1: Topics, Research Questions, Theses, Hypotheses

Topic ( from *Topos*, Gk. “place”)

Related terms: topic, hypothesis, thesis, research question.

Hypothesis:

In scientific thinking: An explanation for a given phenomenon.

Topic:

A phenomenon, issue, term, event, group, or anything that a researcher cares to pay attention to.

Thesis

A position or proposition advanced and maintained through argument.

Merriam Webster: a long essay demonstrating results of original research and substantiating a specific view.

Research question:

A question that guides research within the thesis. Normally a thesis has one or two main research questions, but these questions may be further supported with sub-questions.

Some books on writing distinguish between a topic, a hypothesis, and a research question. Others see the topic as necessarily including the latter two elements. Don’t let this confuse you. Technically speaking a topic is a broad category within which a particular question is asked.

A topic answers the question: What am I interested in?

Topics need to be specific enough that you can imagine yourself becoming the expert in this particular domain in the course of your research. Appropriate limitation of a topic depends on the nature of the topic, but should in most cases in the RRE be chronological, thematical, geographical, or textual.

Good topics are not the first topics you consider, but are topics that you have thoroughly interrogated. If you cannot thoroughly interrogate a topic, the answers prove to be boring, or impossible to find, this is usually an indication that the topic is not worth pursuing. At the beginning stages, this can be difficult to determine, and many good scholars have had to radically revise their topics and the questions they were posing to those topics in the course of their research. This leads to another important point: the steps involved in choosing a topic should be repeated throughout one’s research. There is a potential in the midst of one’s research to lose sight of the overall problem with which one originally began.

NB: Some of these questions (maybe most) will be unanswerable at this time, but having these questions in mind can guide your reading. Write down each of these basic questions, perhaps even color code them according to the following headings and subheadings (thematic, historical, categorical, factual, etc.).

The following steps are laid out in a rough chronological order, but many of the processes are performed simultaneously, or subconsciously, and the whole method is highly recursive… research leads to more questions. It is worth taking the time however, to go through each stage of the process at least once.

Step 1: Decide on a broad topic.

Step 1a: How to decide a research question:

Define your broad topic. Are there any problems in this definition that you can transform into a research question? Has the definition changed over time?

What are the main issues concerning your topic?

Look to the secondary literature: What are the recurring themes and problems?

Limit your topic chronologically.

Do problems occur within the history of your topic?

Step 2: Ask yourself these basic questions about the main research question (adapted from Turabian 2007, 17:

1. Can my question be answered too easily?
2. Am I interested in just a summary or a factual statement about a historical event or textual source? If so, this is not an interesting enough topic for a piece of academic scholarship. (However, if the summary is problematic, I may have something more to go on. Many post-modern historical theories are based around the idea that previous summaries of historical events have constructed meta-narratives which favor one or another ideology.)
3. Has this question already been thoroughly answered by scholars?
4. Do I have evidence? (Problematic, admittedly…Many students will ask, “How can I know if I have evidence at the beginning about my topic? One way is to look through tertiary materials (encyclopedias). Start with broad, general encyclopedias and dictionaries (Britannica, OED), move on to more specialized encyclopedias (Encyclopedia of Religion, Encyclopedia Judaica, Encyclopedia of Byzantine Studies, Der Neue Pauly, RGG,), check bibliographies on your topic, if they exist. If they don’t try, bibliographies on broader or related topics.

Step 3: Ask these advanced questions about the topic (adapted from *Craft of Research* pp. 46-47)

Thematic:

What are the parts of your topic?

How do these parts interrelate?

How does this topic fit into a wider system?

Historical:

How has the topic changed through time?

How is your topic part of a wider account of history?

Characteristics/Categories:

What kind of thing is your topic? What is the range of variation? How are instances of it similar to and different from one another?

Factual (important, but probably less problematic and therefore less interesting):

What? (a simple declaration of what are your sources)

(May lead to methodological and theoretical considerations. E.g. Ruth Tsuria wrote her MA thesis about an online video. She had to consider how she wanted to treat the video, which had a strong textual component. The method she settled on, involved a partly textual study, but opened the door to a wider consideration of the nature of internet sources in general and theoretical questions about new media in the age of the internet.)

Who? (significant people, groups associated with my topic?)

Where? (geographical components)

When? (if simple, can stand as its own question, if more complex, may be worth considering through the Historical field above).

Remember, writing out these questions first can guide your research and make the task of taking notes on your topic much, much easier. You can categorize all the answers that secondary literature has arrived at for your questions on the same card/page.[[1]](#footnote-1)

**ALSO NOTE: You are not limited to just these questions. In fact, considering these questions, and other questions which may arise from your own interests, may result in further questions. Your theoretical considerations and the methods you use will also govern the questions you use on your topic. These are just preliminary guidelines, but they should continually be reconsidered in the course of writing.**

**THE TOPIC PARAGRAPH FORM**

**Finally: Plug in the appropriate details into the following simple outline, which is a basic form for expressing a topic (a good topic paragraph will include nearly all of these considerations. This form is not the final topic paragraph. However, it will serve as a skeleton for the final topic paragraph which will be written later.**

Topic: I am interested \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

Limitation: I cannot study all aspects of/the entire history of/every little facet of \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_, so I am limiting it by focusing only on such and such aspects which I have selected for(geographical/chronological/thematical/textual/other) reasons.

Specific Question: Because I want to find out what/how/why/to what extent/ \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_.

Wider Significance: In order to help my reader understand \_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_\_. (Normally, this is tied to a theoretical understanding.)

Poor Topic Choices:

Banal topics. Topics that are easily answered.

Uninteresting (to outsiders) topics. Topics that cannot be connected to wider questions of significance.

Impossible topics: topics that are either too specific or too broad to be answered, topics for which there is no available sources, topics for which there is no secondary literature.

Caveat: Normally, the existence of no secondary literature is an indication that the topic has no wider significance, or is uninteresting to other researchers. However,

this could also be an indication that the researcher is breaking new ground… It is still probably best for MA level students to practice and perfect their approaches on more well-known topics.

Two Assignments:

1. On the Shoulders of Giants:

In order to better understand and put into practice what you have learned about topics, it will be your task this week to read an article by someone in the field of Religious Studies/Study of Religion and analyze their topic. Read their opening paragraph and their ending conclusion. Pay no attention to matters of artistic style (e.g. fanciful introductions) and instead focus all your energies on observing the questions they set out to answer, the limitations they concede, the methods they employ, and the wider significance of their answers. Note, many scholars may simply leave this last part out and assume that the significance is inherently clear or is sufficiently expressed by the editorial aims of the journal under which they are published. In such a case, try to provide through your own ingenium a significance to their question. If you are having trouble, refer to the very first issue of the relevant journal series (usually the editor writes a mission statement which is thought to constrain the overall aims of the journal). Plug in your observations into the TOPIC PARAGRAPH FORM.

1. Your own topic statement

Begin thinking of a topic, following the technique outlined above. Consult tertiary sources, ask as many of the basic questions as you can, and at least five of your own questions. Remember, the topic you choose now doesn’t have to be your final thesis topic, and will probably change …

Assignments 1 and 2 are due six days from today.

1. The terms card/page are not meant to be prescriptive. Nick is a very old-school thinker and likes to have thoughts written on note-cards and in notebooks. Ruth prefers to have everything digital, in scanned documents with comments on pdf files. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)