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Honors Pre-Thesis Workshop, 2.0

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Almost every week throughout the year, the University Honors Program of Miami University holds recruitment programs for prospective honors students. High school juniors and seniors, often with assorted parents and family members in tow, file into an auditorium to learn about the key features, requirements, and benefits of our honors program. Smiles, nods, and eager questions greet comments relating to honors housing, honors seminars, advance course registration, and scholarships. Inevitably, when the mention of a required honors thesis arises, concerned looks, stony silence, and side glances emerge.

The hallmark of most honors programs across the nation is the undergraduate honors thesis, which represents a fitting culmination of a student's college experience yet inspires fear and trepidation even among the most academically gifted and motivated students. Perhaps one reason for this reaction is the daunting goal of most honors theses: to demonstrate command of relevant scholarly literature and make a personal contribution to that scholarship. Although a thesis can take many forms—from scientific experiments to artistic performances—it usually involves a substantive written document that captures relevant background, methods, and techniques as well as details of the process used in completing the project.

Because of the daunting nature of the honors thesis, many honors programs offer or encourage various forms of support. Students, for example, are typically required to select a faculty advisor or committee of faculty members who offer guidance and feedback on work-in-progress. Sometimes, students have the opportunity to enroll in independent studies or tutorial courses with their faculty advisor while other programs provide a one-credit support course to help students develop a thesis proposal and identify a faculty advisor.

Like many honors programs and colleges, the University Honors Program of Miami University offers an optional pre-thesis support course that is one credit hour and ungraded. The course generally comprises twenty students from all different majors who are usually in their third year. A few seniors or sophomores also enroll. For six years, Carolyn Haynes, the director of the program, taught the course using the same structure: students would complete a questionnaire on possible interests; create an annotated bibliography of possible sources with the help of specialist librarians; develop and revise a draft proposal; identify and interview potential faculty advisors; and create a timeline for

project completion. The pedagogy drew primarily from the work of composition scholars such as Ballenger and Booth, Colomb & Williams, who emphasize a process-oriented approach to writing research papers that helps students through various stages, including brainstorming, identifying a question or topic, engaging sources, planning, drafting, revising, editing, and proofreading.

This pre-thesis honors course has transitioned away from a systematic focus on each step in the writing process to an infusion of play and creativity into the early stages of the research process as well as higher expectations of student engagement and collaboration. We argue that the incorporation of play and peer-to-peer interaction into the pedagogy is particularly necessary for honors students who, perhaps due to their high need for achievement and drive for perfectionism (Hickson & Driskill; Mathiasen) as well as preference for independence and solitude (Rinn & Plucker), tend to follow accepted formulas for success and work in isolation. These tendencies can hinder creative and intellectual risk-taking as well as productivity.

EVALUATION OF ORIGINAL WORKSHOP

In evaluations of the original version of the pre-thesis workshop, students generally responded favorably to it. The most commonly cited benefit was that the course demystified the thesis process and debunked misperceptions about the thesis. Students learned, for example, that the length, genre, media, tone, and content of theses vary significantly depending on the purpose and goals of each creator. Another key benefit of the course was that it helped students recognize that, with careful time management, they can complete the thesis. The course represented the first step in this management process in that it provided students with a structure and set of deadlines for tackling the early steps. Because of their multiple interests and talents (Gagné; Kerr & Erb; Shute), honors students tend to be notoriously overcommitted with double majors, leadership activities, volunteer responsibilities, and other extracurricular endeavors. The pre-thesis course, while helping them make progress on the thesis, simultaneously taught time-management skills that they could use during the remainder of the project and in future endeavors. Finally, many students cited in their evaluations the value of having peers in the course who were confronting similar struggles yet enjoyed different interests and backgrounds from their own.

The diversity of students enrolled in the course served simultaneously as the course's greatest asset and biggest challenge. Here are two typical student comments:

- It was great to hear all the different ideas from students. However, sometimes I felt talking with them was not helpful to me because they did not understand my topic.

- I think it is always beneficial having students working on different topics. But it would also be good to have some people working in the same or similar field as mine.

Similarly, some students lamented that they would have liked specialized feedback, pointed guidance on the content of their proposal, and concrete suggestions for source material. In other words, they craved more individualized attention and advisement.

Although this concern warranted consideration, the faculty instructor (Carolyn Haynes) was more worried about an issue not raised by the students on their evaluations. Because of the structure (brief brainstorming exercises followed by proposal creation) and the instrumental goal of the course (i.e., development of a thesis proposal), students seemed to move quickly into determining their thesis topic and structure. As a result, she worried that students might dismiss opportunities for more creative projects that foray across disciplinary boundaries or explore new media, methods, or approaches. Her concern has been echoed by other composition scholars, such as Cohen and Spencer, who complain that student research papers are often "mediocre, regurgitative, and uninspired" (222; see also Larson; McKeachie). Her concern was reinforced when, toward the end of one semester, she happened to ask Aaron, one of the students in the course, whether the course was benefitting him. Aaron's thoughtful analysis of the course follows:

> Upon beginning the original honors thesis workshop course, I already had a pretty solid idea of what type of thesis project I wished to complete. Having worked for three years in a biochemistry research laboratory, it only seemed natural to complete a thesis project pertaining to what I learned through this experience. Many other students in the class had also done similar work in their respective fields and thus had a strong foundation for their project ideas, but at the same time there were students who had only a nebulous idea of what type of project they wanted to complete. To try to bring these undecided students up to speed, Carolyn introduced several generic brainstorming activities that sought to help students decide on a topic that interested them. While these activities were useful for students lacking concrete project ideas, students like me were stuck performing what seemed like redundant exercises during the first weeks of class.
>
> After a few weeks of these activities, students had each chosen a topic for their project and begun working on shorter assignments leading to their full project proposals (e.g., drafts and revisions of topic statements, annotated bibliography, interview with potential faculty advisors, and outlines). It was at this point that students like me were finally able to start making progress on their projects. This portion of the course was useful because it fully explained the requirements of a thesis project, taught students how to create a useful annotated bibliography, and helped

students to form a working project proposal that could be presented to potential faculty mentors. Upon completion of the course, we all had working project proposals that could be applied towards starting our thesis projects.

While the traditional format of the thesis workshop course was beneficial to all students, I felt it lacked efficiency and the opportunity for more creative exploration. Students who already had working thesis ideas lost weeks of time participating in redundant activities while students yet to form a project idea were pushed to quickly form an idea that may not have been an ideal project for them. The diverse interests in the class also contributed to the lack of efficiency in the course, particularly when it came to group work and peer review assignments, as students in disparate fields lacked the knowledge needed to provide constructive feedback for one another.

Aaron's suggestions for improvement propelled the faculty instructor to realize a course transformation was in order and to solicit Aaron's assistance in the revision of the course and its implementation. Aaron enthusiastically agreed to serve as the peer instructor alongside the faculty instructor.

REVISED WORKSHOP DESIGN

Given the students' variable rates of progress and widely diverse class interests, Aaron encouraged a revised thesis workshop course that would better cater to students of all interests and at all points of progress in completing their thesis projects. He recommended that the new course advance four primary goals:

1. Set high expectations and actively engage all students from the start to maximize productivity;

2. Increase the quality and quantity of work produced by students;

3. Promote more creative project ideas by encouraging students to move outside of their intellectual comfort zones;

4. Facilitate class coherence and collaboration by lessening thesis project diversity issues.

One of the most important aspects of successfully teaching any course is engaging all students from the first day of class (Barkley). To accomplish this goal, the course began with a peer interview activity in which students were paired up with a fellow classmate and given a list of questions to ask one another. This assignment served two purposes: it built a trusting and positive class environment by facilitating discussion among students; and it posed questions relevant to that week's assignment, a one-page personal mission statement that

articulates what students view as the purpose of their life, including their core values and goals. To help them get started, we encouraged students to consider such questions as: Is there a service you have always been drawn to giving or providing? Have you had flashes of intuition where you knew something was right for you? What is there in your life that under no conditions you would want to change?

The personal mission statement was designed to guide students throughout their lives, but most immediately it served as a reference for students during the next four weeks while they were completing the new signature assignment for the course, which the faculty and peer instructor called the "Four Ideas." This assignment called for students to develop one-page proposals for four different types of potential thesis projects, using ideas generated in their personal mission statement:

1. *Empirical* projects in which students collect and analyze data;

2. *Interpretive* projects in which students analyze existing texts and other objects to produce a new view on the subject matter;

3. *Action-based* projects in which students participate in an experience or activity such as community service, shadowing or preceptorship, study abroad, or internship to address a problem or issue or gain insight into a topic or career; and

4. *Out of the box* projects in which students pursue a creative, multi-genre, or integrative project.

Each week, students shared a new idea in class and received oral peer feedback; they also submitted their ideas in writing to the instructors for written feedback. The "Four Ideas" assignment was successful in accomplishing many of the goals of the course over a short period of time. It actively engaged all students by helping those with undeveloped ideas to create four potential projects and helped those with well-developed ideas to better refine their projects by considering different ways they might approach their inquiries.

Following the "Four Ideas" assignment, students developed a full project proposal complete with annotated bibliography, project timeline, and an extended project description. The proposal could be a developed version of one of the original four ideas assignments, a combination of several or all of the ideas, or a completely new idea. Many students ended up synthesizing several ideas into one. For example, one student originally wanted to create a project that analyzed crimes involving alcohol use among students on our campus. However, after completing the "Four Ideas" assignment, he decided to diversify and enrich his original statistics-based empirical idea by including an analysis of the university's alcohol policy and a personal account of his experience riding along in a patrol car one Friday night with campus police (an experience the police kindly agreed to provide).

As students were developing their final project proposals, specialized librarians were invited to review draft proposals and bibliographies of students conducting projects in their subject areas and to participate in one class session to offer students new strategies for identifying additional sources. Students also spent time brainstorming strategies for selecting and working with a faculty advisor. Upon completion of this second portion of the course, students met individually with the instructor for a progress check. In this meeting, each student's project was critiqued by the instructor to ensure that the project fulfilled the honors program requirements, was coherent, and could be completed in a reasonable amount of time.

After meeting with students individually, the instructor had a good idea of the types of projects students planned to complete. Using this knowledge, the instructor divided the class into research affinity groups (RAGs) in which students with similar project interests worked in groups of three or four. In the third phase of the course, which lasted four weeks, students worked together in their RAGs on completing a significant work that would constitute a beginning to their thesis project. During the first week of RAGs, student groups discussed what would be a reasonable amount of work to submit for the final assignment at the end of the course. Final assignments included completing a chapter of a memoir, critically analyzing and summarizing multiple scientific articles, completing an introduction to an interpretive project, and completing the institutional review board (IRB) training in human subject research. Students used the entire course period during these weeks to work on their projects and communicate their progress with their fellow RAG members. Each RAG developed a plan for the final class sessions to ensure that all members of the group made progress. Through this approach, the often intimidating start of the thesis process was made enjoyable, and students were held accountable by their peers. Students submitted the completed assignment to the instructor during finals week.

CONCLUSION AND EVALUATION OF REVISED WORKSHOP

Although students' evaluations of the original version of the workshop were solid, the evaluations of the revised version were stronger. On a scale of 0–5 (with "5" representing "highly effective"), students in the original version gave an average rating of 3.5 to the statement "This course gave me a better idea of what a thesis should be." The average rating for the same statement among students in the new version was 4.7. When rating the statement "The course was a positive experience," students in the original workshop provided an average score of 3.2 while those in the revised workshop gave an average score of 4.9.

By implementing this new course format, we successfully improved the students' level of satisfaction and increased their productivity. In the revised workshops, students not only emerged with a full and better-conceived project proposal but also took initial steps towards beginning their thesis projects. This

amount of quality work that students completed in the time frame of the new workshop design represented a significant increase in productivity over the original workshop in which students produced only a project proposal. The higher productivity is no small point. Academic procrastination is high among all college students (Day et al.; Ellis and Knaus; McCown and Roberts), especially when faced with written projects (Solomon and Rothblum). The extensive time frame in which to complete a major thesis-type project lures students into a sense of false security so that they often struggle to meet the project deadline unless faculty and peers are actively involved, as they have been in the new course format.

Continuous in-class peer discussion on individual project ideas kept students on track, built stronger class coherence, and facilitated motivation for the projects. The higher expectations and accountability measures among peers, coupled with the "Four Ideas" assignment, prompted students to think more deeply about their topics and form a more viable and personally meaningful project idea. Representative comments on student evaluations included:

- I saw the diversity among students and their topics as a benefit because it allowed me to explore new topics and pinpoint a topic I really wanted to explore, rather than just following through with my first idea.

- I was exposed to so many other ideas and possibilities which helped me to discover my own project idea.

- I liked the fresh perspectives that arose out of considering so many diverse perspectives.

Perhaps most significantly, a higher percentage of students in the revised version of the workshop (85%) persisted in the thesis process than in the original workshop version (66%).

The best lesson for the faculty instructor was the importance of listening to her students. A workshop that had frustrated her for years was easy to improve once she had the good sense to ask one of her students for feedback and assistance. This experience reinforced her long-held view that honors students are always smarter than the faculty—we just need to give them the opportunity to prove that point.

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APPENDIX A

SYLLABUS OF REVISED WORKSHOP

HON 290D, Developing an Advanced Honors Project or Thesis – Fall 2010

Class Meeting Time and Place: 009 Irvin Hall, Monday 4:25–5:15 pm

Instructors: Mr. Aaron Coey, <u>coeyat@muohio.edu</u>

Dr. Carolyn Haynes, 98 Bishop Hall; <u>haynesca@muohio.edu</u>

Office Hours: By appointment only (call phone number above)

> I don't write out of what I know. It's what I don't know that stimulates me.
>
> —Toni Morrison

Course Description and Objectives:

Designing and implementing your own project is a learning process like no other. Unlike most college assignments where the faculty member tells you what to study and how to communicate your findings, the advanced honors project or honors thesis places you in the role of a scholar or a professional leading an initiative. It offers you the opportunity to tap into your own curiosity, formulate a question or topic to pursue, design a plan to address that topic or question, and communicate what you learned to other scholars, peers and others who care about your inquiry.

This workshop is designed for students who are in the earliest stage of the process. The workshop goals include:

- Understand the criteria and processes of advanced projects or theses
- Generate a variety of project or thesis topics and approaches
- Develop a thesis topic and proposal
- Create a timeline, annotated bibliography and action plan for completing the project or thesis successfully
- Gain tips on offering and receiving feedback on your and others' work
- Locating a faculty advisor for your project.

Because University Honors students come from a wide range of majors—spanning most departments of the university—honors projects or theses will necessarily vary greatly. In many cases, students are able to expand on assignments from coursework or initiatives in their co-curricular experiences to create their advanced honors project or thesis. Honors projects or theses may feature any one or a combination of the following: critical or textual analysis, a case study, laboratory or field experiment, ethnography, a problem-solving argument, an interpretation, a service-learning experience, a business plan, a set of lesson plans or an original creative product. All theses involve some research, writing, and close mentorship from an advisor.

No matter which form or method you use for your thesis or project, it must include some writing, but the length varies greatly and depends on the type of project or thesis you select. Honors projects or theses involving an original creative product (e.g., a portfolio of poems, paintings, or photographs) or substantial field or experiential work (e.g., helping organize a political organization, conducting a scientific investigation, or developing a new educational curriculum or business plan) often include less writing than other projects because much of the work is conducted in action. Your advisor should be able to give you an idea of the typical written length or scope of research projects in your subject area. This writing should discuss the process of investigation or creation and should be grounded in the relevant professional literature.

The goal of this course is to assist you in the introductory stages of developing a successful honors thesis.

Course Requirements
Good writers do not work in isolation. Instead, they work closely with others. They continually seek advice and assistance from those whose opinions they respect or who have expertise in their field of knowledge. Consequently, in addition to attending, participating actively in, and completing all of the requirements of the weekly workshop, you are required to meet regularly (at least every 2–3 weeks) with your thesis advisor (once you have identified one). The length and substance of those meetings should be negotiated between you and the advisor. You should also make contact with the other readers of your committee and inform them of your progress at least once during the semester. Be proactive in these meetings. Your writing will not improve unless you seek constructive feedback, ask probing questions, engage in intellectual discussions, and share accomplishments, struggles and breakthroughs.

Course Assignments and Evaluation
Your course grade will be based on the following:

- Attendance and Participation 10%
- Personal Mission Statement 5%
- Four Ideas Assignment . . . . (5% each) . . . 20%
- Full Project or Thesis Proposal (four parts). 40%
  1. Statement 15%
  2. Timeline 5%
  3. Annotated Bibliography (at least 12 sources). 10%
  4. Advisor Interview and (for seniors) signed cover form 10%
- Special Assignment (constructed in consultation with instructors) 25%

The items in the list constitute the minimum requirements for students enrolled in the course. Students are encouraged, for their own sake, to complete more than the minimum.

Recommended Books

Booth, W.C., Colomb, G. C., and Williams, J.M. (2008). *The Craft of Research.* 3rd edition. Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

A good handbook on writing and style guide in your discipline or field; and a good guide to the appropriate documentation system for your discipline or field.

Tentative Weekly Schedule

Week 1	**INTRODUCTION TO THE THESIS & COURSE**
SEMINAR:	Introduction to the seminar; paired interviews on individual interests and passions
ASSGNMT:	Write a short personal mission statement on your passions, interests and values (one page), and bring to next seminar.

Week 2	**INTRODUCTION TO THE EMPIRICAL PROJECT**
SEMINAR:	Activity and discussion related to the empirical project or thesis and the criteria and processes used to develop it
ASSGNMT:	Complete parts 1 and 2 of Four Ideas Assignment.

Week 3	**NO CLASS-HOLIDAY**

Week 4	**INTRODUCTION TO THE INTEPRETIVE, ANALYTIC PROJECT**
SEMINAR:	Activity and discussion related to interpretive or analytic projects
ASSGNMT:	Complete part 3 of Four Ideas Assignment.

Week 5	**INTRODUCTION TO THE ACTION-BASED PROJECT**
SEMINAR:	Activity and discussion related to action-based projects
ASSGNMT:	Complete part 4 of Four Ideas Assignment.

Week 6	**INTRODUCTION TO THE CREATIVE OR INTEGRATIVE PROJECT**
SEMINAR:	Activity and discussion related to creative, multi-media or integrative projects
ASSGNMT:	Complete Part 5 of Four Ideas Assignment.

Week 7	**DEVELOPING A PROPOSAL**
SEMINAR:	Discussion of the thesis or project proposal and its component parts. Peer review of project ideas to help you decide which project you would like to pursue
ASSGNMT:	Using feedback, revise one idea into a proposal statement. Proposal statement includes topic summary, description of which research method you plan to use, statement of project significance.

Week 8 **CREATING AN ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY**
SEMINAR: Discuss the annotated bibliography—its purposes and possible formats. Invent a format that works for you. Discuss possible sources of funding for your project or thesis.
ASSGNMT: Continue working on the proposal statement and annotated bibliography. Email copy of proposal with bibliography, along with questions to ask librarian, to instructors.

Week 9 **CONDUCTING EFFECTIVE SEARCHES**
SEMINAR: Freewriting exercise on concerns and rationale for sources, followed by small group consultations with specialist librarians
ASSGNMT: Expand your annotated bibliography to include at least 12 needed sources. Expanded version is due next class. If needed, make appointment to meet outside of class with specialist librarian for assistance.

Week 10 **SELECTING AN ADVISOR OR CO-ADVISORS**
SEMINAR: Share tips on selecting an advisor. Role-playing exercise and discussion of how to identify and work with advisors and other members of your team.
ASSGNMT: Set up an appointment with a potential advisor to interview him or her and to discuss your proposed project or thesis idea. Create one-to-two-page summary of the key findings of your interview. Interview summary is due in your individual conference.

Week 11 **SETTING UP YOUR INDIVIDUAL TIMELINE**
SEMINAR: Discuss guidelines for writing/research groups; divide into research affinity groups (RAGs) and collaborate to develop plan for RAG meetings. Sign up for individual conference with instructor.
ASSGNMT: Complete your timeline, including an idea for your special assignment. Meet with instructor in one-on-one meeting. Bring copy of timeline and interview summary to meeting.

Week 12 **INDIVIDUAL CONFERENCES**
SEMINAR: Meet with instructor at appointed time and day.
ASSGNMT: Using feedback gained in your individual conference, revise your timeline as needed.

Week 13 **RESEARCH AFFINITY GROUPS**
SEMINAR: Meet in your RAG, and complete tasks your group developed for this week.
ASSGNMT: Continue to make progress on your timeline and special assignment(s) for the remainder of the semester.

Week 14   **RESEARCH AFFINITY GROUPS**
SEMINAR: Meet in your RAG, and complete tasks your group developed for
this week.
ASSGNMT: Continue to make progress on your timeline and special assignment(s)
for the remainder of the semester.

Week 15   **RESEARCH AFFINITY GROUPS**
SEMINAR: Meet in your RAG, and complete tasks your group developed for
this week.
ASSGNMT: Continue to make progress on your timeline and special assignment(s)
for the remainder of the semester.

Week 16   **CONCLUSION AND CEREMONY OF RAG AWARDS**
SEMINAR: Final reflections, loose ends; awards for best RAG participants
ASSGNMT: Submit your special assignment by Wednesday, finals week.

APPENDIX B

FOUR IDEAS ASSIGNMENT

This assignment is separated into five parts. For each part, you will create a tentative idea for a project related to a general topic you wish to pursue for your honors thesis or Tier 3 project.

Part 1: Brainstorming or Prewriting Exercise

For this part, you will engage in some brainstorming exercises to generate possible topics to pursue in your honors thesis or Tier 3 project. If you already have a general topic in mind, then use this exercise to come up with more refined topics related to that general topic.

Find a place where you can really concentrate and are free from distractions. Read over the following brainstorming techniques. Choose two of the six techniques described below, and work on each for at least ten minutes or until you feel like you have come to a good stopping point. You can create the "brainstormings" by hand or on the computer. Make or save a copy to submit.

Freewriting

Simply write for ten minutes (later on, perhaps fifteen or twenty) about your general topic idea (or about possible ideas for a thesis). Don't stop for anything. Go quickly without rushing. Never stop to look back, to cross something out, to wonder how to spell something, to wonder what word or thought to use, or to think about what you are doing. If you can't think of a word or a spelling, just use a squiggle or write, 'I can't think of it.' Just put down whatever is in your mind. If you get stuck it's fine to write 'I can't think what to say, I can't think what to say' as many times as you want; or repeat the last word you wrote over and over again; or anything else. The only requirement is that you *never* stop.

Clustering or Mapping

Mapping or clustering is a nonlinear, graphic representation of your thoughts. This technique seems to integrate the functions of both hemispheres of the brain by combining visual with verbal learning styles:

> "To create a cluster, you begin with a nucleus word [which can be the thesis topic], circled, on a fresh page. Now you simply let go and begin to flow with any current of connections that come into your head. Write these down rapidly, each in its own circle, radiating outward from the center in any direction they want to go. Connect each new work or phrase with a line to the preceding circle. When something new and different strikes you, begin again at the central nucleus and radiate outward until those associations are exhausted. As you cluster, you may experience a sense of randomness or if, you are somewhat skeptical, an uneasy sense that it isn't leading anywhere. That is your logical mind wanting to

> get into the act . . . Trust this natural process, though. We all cluster mentally throughout our lives without knowing it; we simply never made these clusterings visible on paper." Gabriele Lusser Rico, *Writing the Natural Way* (J.P. Tarcher, 1983), 35–36.

If you have several possible topics in mind, create several clusters and compare. Which seems to offer the richest array of material? Which intrigues you the most?

Listing

Think out loud about possible topics, and create a list of phrases, terms or ideas that come to mind. You can jot down a random assortment of words or phrases that come to mind. Or you could take a more systematic approach by listing possible topics and then listing all of the subtopics or facts you know about your topic. It doesn't matter as long as you are generating ideas. Once the associational list is fairly full, try to make sense of it. Do any ideas stand out? Can you combine related items? Sort them?

Dialogues

Write a conversation between two imaginary speakers with distinctly differing views about what your topic should be or how to approach a topic you have chosen. This method can help you consider wildly different topics, opposing viewpoints on a topic, find a controversial point of focus or hone your thesis. Once you have come up with a dialogue, you can then create a list of those that really stand out to you.

Three Perspectives

Start with a list of several topics you have in mind. Then, answer the questions for each of the three perspectives relating to your topic ideas. Once you have completed this task, look for interesting relationships or mismatches you can explore.

1. **Describe it.** Describe your topic in detail. What are its components? What are its interesting and distinguishing features? What are its puzzles? Distinguish your topic from those that are similar to it. How is your topic unlike others?

2. **Trace it.** What is the history of your topic? How has it changed over time? Why? What are the significant events or scholars that have influenced your topic?

3. **Map it.** What is your topic related to? What is it influenced by? How? What does it influence? How? Who has a stake in your topic? Why? What fields do you draw on for the study of your topic? Why? How has your topic been approached by others? How is their work related to yours?

Cubing

Cubing enables you to consider topics from six directions. After generating a list of 2–3 possible topics, respond to these six commands:

1. Describe it.

2. Compare it.

3. Associate it.

4. Analyze it.

5. Apply it.

6. Argue for and against it.

Look over what you've written. Do any of the responses suggest anything new about your topic? What interactions do you notice about the six "sides"? Do you see patterns repeating or a theme emerging that you could use to approach the topic? Does one side seem particularly fruitful?

Part 2: Generating an Idea for an Empirical or Experimental Project (due with Part I)

For this portion of the assignment, you will develop a possible idea for an empirical project related to one of your general topics. Select one general topic that you would like to pursue and write a three- paragraph statement that explains your idea for the project. Questions you should address:

1. What question or hypothesis would you pursue?

2. How would you test or answer that question? What method might you use?

3. What would be the benefits and challenges of this project?

Once you have created the three-paragraph essay, skip a few lines. Then, write a one- or two-paragraph essay attempting to write in the style of an empirical or experimental research article. The paragraphs can be on the topic you have chosen or on some other topic. The goal is to practice writing in the style of empirical scholars or experimental researchers to see how it feels.

Part 3: Generating an Idea for an Interpretive or Analytic Project

For this portion of the assignment, you will develop a possible idea for an analytic or interpretive project related to one of your general topics. Select one general topic that you would like to pursue and write a multi-paragraph statement that explains your idea for the project. Questions you should address:

1. Which phenomenon or object (e.g., texts or related texts, case, visual image(s), behaviors, event or performance) would you like to understand better?

2. Why do you think that this is an important phenomenon or object to analyze, interpret or explore more fully?

3. How would you go about analyzing or interpreting it? What approach or steps would you take?

4. What would be the benefits and challenges of this project?

Once you have created the essay, skip a few lines. Then, write a one- or two-paragraph essay attempting to write in the style of an interpretive or analytic scholarly article. The paragraphs can be on the topic you have chosen or on some other topic. The goal is to practice writing in the style of analytic scholars to see how it feels.

Part 4: Generating an Idea for an Action-Based or Experiential Project

For this portion of the assignment, you will develop a possible idea for an action-based project related to one of your general topics. Select one general topic that you would like to pursue and write a three- paragraph statement that explains your idea for the project. Questions you should address:

1. When reflecting on your general topic, what action could you take to gain a further understanding of it or to solve a problem or to address a need related to it? Describe the problem, need or question you wish to pursue that would involve taking action.

2. How would you go about solving that problem, addressing that need or answering that specific question? What specific steps would you take? What method(s) might you employ?

3. What would be the benefits and challenges of this project?

Once you have created the three-paragraph essay, skip a few lines. Then, write a two-paragraph essay attempting to write in the style of an action-based research report. The two paragraphs can be on the topic you have chosen or on some other topic. The goal is to practice writing in the style of action-based researchers to see how it feels!

Part 5: Generating an Idea for an Integrative or "Out of the Box" Project

For this portion of the assignment, you have two choices: (1) create a proposal that combines elements of the three previous proposal ideas you generated (parts 2–4) into an integrative whole, or: (2) develop a totally "out of the box" idea for a project related to one of your general topics.

If you select the first option, consider how your thesis or Tier 3 project could incorporate multiple methods to address the question, problem or issue you are pursuing. Then create a new and unified proposal that combines those aspects of the previous proposals you developed that you see as most promising. The goal is to develop the best proposal possible for addressing your topic.

If you select the second option, think boldly; think creatively! You might generate an entirely new project idea or generate a wild idea to pursue one of your earlier topic ideas. What new genre or mode might you explore? What new knowledge or disciplines would you pursue? What would you do if you had loads of funds or time? Dream big.

Then, write a multi-paragraph statement that explains your idea for this project.

If you select option 1, try to create a formal proposal with the following parts:

1. *Topic summary*: Here you address the following questions: What problem will this project attempt to solve, or what question will it attempt to answer? What is the scope of the project? What will *and won't* it include?

2. *Statement Describing Research Methods or Plan of Action to Complete the Project*: Discuss the steps you plan to take to complete your project (e.g., research methods

or means of collecting the information you need; obstacles you anticipate encountering and how you plan to address them; other steps you plan to take to complete the project in general)

3. *Discussion of Project's Significance*: Explain why this project is important to you, for your field, for your intended audience, or for society at large. What is new or unique about your project?

If you select option #2, here are some questions you should address:

1. What topic, theme, message, question or idea would you want to explore? Why?

2. How would you go about completing this project? What specific steps would you take? What method(s) might you employ?

3. What would be the benefits and challenges of this project?

APPENDIX C

GUIDELINES FOR RESEARCH AFFINITY GROUPS

Step #1: Get better acquainted.
Move around the circle. Each person should:

• Introduce themselves.

• Explain your project idea

• Summarize what you hope to accomplish in your special assignment for the end of the semester.

• Explain what you hope the group members can help you to do or better understand.

Step #2: Select a leader or co-leaders.
Discuss among your members:

• Will one person be in charge of facilitating the meetings and the overall structure of the group?

• What will be the responsibilities of this facilitator? Keeping the group on track? Reminding participants of what they are supposed to bring? Taking notes during the meeting?

• Does this position rotate? How?

• Who would like to undertake this responsibility? Try to come to a consensus on the leadership of the group.

Step #3: Establish some ground rules for how to work together.
Once a leader has been selected, he or she will then facilitate a discussion on how the group will work together. The leader may ask another member to take notes on key points of agreement. Possible questions to discuss:

1. How often will the group meet? Besides meeting in class, should we meet again? If so, where will the group meet? Coffee shop, library, residence hall living room?

2. How will the members communicate between meetings? Phone, email, messages in mailboxes?

3. What system will members use to decide who will submit writing or work for any particular meeting? For example, a group of four might meet, with two people submitting writing for each meeting.

4. Will members submit the work ahead of time? If so, how will this exchange work? Central drop-off point, campus mail, e-mail, Web page?

5. What happens when members who are scheduled to share their work are unprepared or can't attend the meeting? Cancel, postpone, skip a turn?

6. How short or long should submissions be? A tricky sentence, a few paragraphs, 3–5 pages, up to 10 pages?

7. How will members respond to each other's work? By commenting directly on the draft, oral comments in the meeting, on a separate response sheet, via e-mail?

8. What will you do during the meeting? Discuss general problems, offer oral comments on writing or explain written comments, suggest research sources or methods, debate options for a particular text, offer support, check in about the week's writing activities, state writing goals for the coming week?

9. What kind of feedback are members most interested in, and how will members specify these needs at any particular point?

10. If any members feel that the group is not meeting their needs, how will they make their concerns known?

Summarize your group's "ground rules" on a sheet of paper.

Step #4: Create a meeting plan and schedule.
Once you have determined your group's ground rules, decide what your group will focus on at each meeting and what each person's responsibility will be for each meeting. Create a weekly schedule for your meetings which includes meeting goals or agenda as well as the expected responsibilities for each group member.

A possible schedule might look something like:

Meeting Day and Time	Meeting Goals, Purpose, Activities	Group Member Responsibilities for Meeting

Possible group activities might include:

Touching base

• Mutual support can be one of the most important functions of a research affinity group. Sometimes encouragement and the knowledge that others are interested in and committed to your work and your progress as a researcher can be just as helpful as feedback. To that end, your group may want to reserve some time in each session to "touch base" or "check in" with one another. During this time you could:

• Describe your project-related activities since the last group meeting in terms of pages written, parts of a project completed, or hurdles overcome.

• If you haven't done much since the last meeting, you could talk about the obstacles that have hindered your progress (writer's block, having a big exam this week,

needing to gather more data before you can write, etc.).

- Explain how work that was discussed during the last meeting is now evolving in response to group comments. You might explain which comments you chose to act on, or tell how a section of the piece has been reorganized or rethought in response to the group's feedback.

- Share your plans for the coming week so that your group members will know what kinds of writing they will see and so that you can help one another stick to your goals.

- Decide, as a group, on a theme for the next meeting—brainstorming, drafting, proofreading, style, writer's block, etc. Choosing an issue to tackle together will help you understand the challenges each member is facing at the moment and enable you to plan meetings that will help group members meet those challenges.

Systems for sharing work

Some groups ask members to distribute their work in advance of the group meeting, particularly if the work is lengthy. You might distribute your writing at one meeting for discussion at the next or send work via e-mail. Readers can offer the most helpful feedback when the writer has provided a list of questions, trouble spots, or issues for them to consider in their responses.

The following ideas might help you respond to work that has been distributed beforehand:

- Group members could write comments and suggest editorial changes on their copies of the paper and give those to the writer during the group meeting.

- Group members could prepare a written response to the paper in the form of a letter to the writer, a paragraph, a written discussion of the work's strengths and weaknesses, or on a form developed by the group.

- Group members could respond verbally to the piece, each offering a personal, overall reaction to writing before opening the discussion to a broader give-and-take.

- The author could come prepared with a list of questions for the group and lead a discussion based on those questions.

- One group member, either the author or (perhaps preferably) a different member of the group, could keep careful notes on key reactions and suggestions for the author's future reference.

Some groups prefer to bring writing, particularly shorter pieces, to the group meeting for immediate discussion. Since the work presented during the meeting will be new to everyone except the author, you might try these additional strategies:

- Read the paper aloud to the group before launching discussion. The author could read, or another member of the group could read while the author notes things that sound like they might need revision. You could either read the entire text or break

it into chunks, discussing each after it is read.

- Group members could also read silently, making notes to themselves, before launching the discussion.

- Sometimes, especially with long and daunting projects like a thesis or writers needing a boost of confidence, it can be helpful to share writing without anticipating feedback. This kind of sharing can help writers get over fears about distributing their work or being judged.

Brainstorming as part of the group process

Research affinity groups can provide not only feedback and a forum in which to share work, but also creative problem-solving for your writing or research troubles. Your group might try some of these brainstorming ideas:

- Identify a writing or research problem that one group member is having. Ask each group member to free-write possible solutions.

- Cut up a copy of a paper that needs organizational changes so that each section, main idea, or paragraph is on its own slip of paper. As a group, move the pieces of paper around and discuss possible options for reorganizing the work.

- After reading a piece, generate a list of items that the group might like to know more about. Organize these questions into categories for the author to consider.

Writing during writing group meetings

Your group may choose to write during some of its meetings. Here are some ideas for what to write:

- If everyone in the group has a major deadline approaching, use one session as a working meeting. Meet in a computer lab or bring your laptops so that everyone can write and work independently, taking breaks periodically to assess your progress or ask questions.

- Use some group time to free-write about your writing project—new ideas, to-do lists, organizational strategies, problems, or sentences for your drafts would all be appropriate topics for free-writing. You could also free-write about the writing process (you could all write about "How I start to write" or "The writing environment that works for me" or "When I sit down to edit . . .") and share your responses with one another.

- Write about the dynamics of the research affinity group as a way of getting everyone's ideas out on paper. You could free-write about the kinds of feedback that help you, what you like about each other's writing, your frustrations with the group, and your suggestions for improving the way the group works.

Reading during writing group meetings

Just as writing during group meetings can prove beneficial, reading can sometimes help research affinity groups work together better:

- Pick a book on writing or research such as *Bird by Bird, Writing with Power, Writing Down the Bones, Writing Without Teachers*, or *Writing Your Dissertation in Fifteen Minutes a Day* and assign yourselves sections to read for each meeting. Discuss the reading during some part of the group's meeting each time.

- Bring a piece of writing (an article in your field, an article from a journal or magazine that you enjoyed, or a piece of fiction) that you think is especially well-written. Read over it as a group and talk about what the author did in the piece that made it so effective.

- Bring pieces of data or evidence that you are using in your project and share them with the group. If the group becomes familiar with the things that you are researching, they may be better able to help you write about them effectively.

Bring in a guest

Just as guest lecturers in courses sometimes spice up the classroom experience, guests in research affinity groups can enliven the discussion:

- Invite a faculty member or other guest writer to your group to talk about his or her writing and research process and to offer suggestions for improving your own.

- Bring in a friend who is working on a project related to the project of a group member. This may help your group member develop a network of people interested in his or her particular topic and may also show your friend how helpful a writing group could be.

Planning

Your group can also help you plan your research schedule for the week:

- Discuss your writing or research goals, both broadly and for the immediate future. Ask your group if those goals seem realistic.

- Ask group members to e-mail you with reminders of deadlines and encouragement.

- Give each other writing "assignments" for the next meeting.

HONORS IN PRACTICE