

Presentation and write-up

Each student is assigned to present on a scholarly reading in two of our seminar meetings. Plan to speak informally for 10 minutes, incorporating some reflection on a primary text, leading up to discussion questions that will focus our attention on some issue that seems interesting to you. You do not need to do any additional reading. The academic genre this exercise most resembles is the “roundtable remarks,” the kind of thing a series of people might make at an event at a conference. It is less formal than a conference paper; clarifying significant issues and provoking useful discussion are its main purposes.

An effective informal presentation is *focused* rather than comprehensive. No general background or run-up is needed: begin by identifying what struck you as the most interesting, promising, frustrating, or baffling aspect of the text you are discussing. Use specific examples from our primary texts to sharpen your claims.

The assigned scholarly readings vary in length and density. If you have a short assignment, see if you can extend your remarks to some more of the assigned primary text. Conversely, if you have one of the long ones, you can incorporate the primary text with a light touch.

WRITE-UP

A write-up is due the Monday following your seminar presentation. Write no more than two pages based on what you have said in seminar, revised if you wish. This is not an essay, just a written summary of your thinking, so that I can respond concretely with some comments.

SOME ANALYTICAL APPROACHES

1. Retrace the *steps of argument*: how does a writer go from premises to conclusions? What are the foundations or assumptions that underwrite the text?
2. Look for what is *portable*: what terms, ideas, claims or methods might be translated usefully into a new context? (Which contexts?)
3. Think about the *kinds of evidence* that matter: what work do the examples do? What would the same argument look like with other examples?
4. Restrain the temptation, which is always powerful in a graduate seminar, to look for easy “but what about...?” points: it is rarely all that interesting to point out that a text *doesn't* talk about some (symbolically valued) topic. Sometimes, it is true, one wants to say that an omission seems to do significant rhetorical work. Nonetheless, with other people's think-

ing, try to begin with what philosophers call the “principle of charity”: imagine the *best* version of something before you set out to knock it down.