

## ROBERT WRIGHT : PREPARING FOR SEMINARS

Most day-to-day seminar work centres on required readings. For students making formal presentations, recommended readings may also be included.

While the issues raised by course readings will vary from text to text, there are a number of questions which ought to be asked of all sources. These questions are “methodological” insofar as they contextualize the approaches and even the biases of authors. It is important to note that, at the university level, how and why scholars write what they do are often more important issues than what they write about.

Wherever possible, read “around” a text in order to get a sense of an author's general disposition toward his/her topic. The preface and/or the introduction to a book are often used by authors to locate themselves in certain scholarly traditions or contexts. It is here, for example, that the influence of earlier ideas and approaches is usually acknowledged; this is also where authors acknowledge their debts to each other. It is a good general rule, therefore, to always read the preface, acknowledgments and introduction carefully. From there, you might ask of any scholarly work:

What are the methodologies employed by this author? What kinds of sources has s/he relied upon? How has s/he used these sources?

What are the apparent (or admitted) biases of this scholar? How does s/he see his/her work in relation to the corpus of scholarly work in his/her subject area? Can this author be called a “revisionist” (meaning that s/he is deliberately attempting to revise the work of earlier scholars or to call into question the prevailing assumptions about earlier scholarship)?

How do the issues raised in this work relate to present-day issues? Does this author appear to be writing about the past in order to serve the present?

Does this author appear to have brought any political, social or cultural predispositions to his/her topic? Does this author's characterization of certain phenomena, events or personalities reveal anything about his/her personal values? Are alternative values and, therefore, alternative scholarly characterizations possible? Are they preferable?

You might like to bear some of these questions in mind not only for your tutorial presentations but for book reviews and essays as well.

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