

Building a Scribner Seminar Course

As you prepare to construct or modify a Scribner Seminar syllabus it is important to keep in mind that these courses are fundamentally different from the courses typically offered at the College. They are unique in several ways: they are open only to first-year students; they include a fourth credit hour component that involves intense mentoring; they must be interdisciplinary in nature; and they typically include a peer mentor. Your syllabus should reflect your own perspectives on these unique attributes.

One of the biggest challenges in imagining a course and constructing a syllabus for the FYE is identifying a level of academic rigor that is appropriate for first-year students. We have heard in the past that students enter Skidmore with the false assumption that the Scribner Seminar is “fluffy” or easy and that traditional disciplinary courses are far more intellectually challenging. This assumption cannot be farther from the truth. In most cases (though not all), Scribner Seminars represent a first-year student’s most intense intellectual experience. We wish to maintain that high level of intellectual challenge and rigor.

We have included material to help you construct or modify your Scribner Seminar syllabus. Please pay particular attention to those components—like the “Seminar Goals,” the description of fourth credit hour programming, the interdisciplinarity of the course, and so on—that *must* be included on your syllabus. If you have any questions, please don’t hesitate to contact the Office of the First-Year Experience.

Seminar Goals and General Guidelines

Scribner Seminars carry four credits and have no prerequisites; they must be accessible to all incoming students, including international students. The enrollment cap is 16. Courses that satisfy the Scribner Seminar requirement may not be "double-counted" in order to satisfy other all-College or major or minor requirements.

Scribner Seminar Goals (to be included on your syllabus)

This course will introduce students to disciplinary and interdisciplinary perspectives on [insert the course topic], with the following goals [insert course-specific goals here or integrate them into the goals below]. In addition, this is a course about knowing, particularly about ways to identify problems, formulate productive questions, and go about answering those questions. Students in this course will demonstrate the ability to:

- *distinguish among, and formulate, types of questions asked by different disciplines*
- *read critically, and gather and interpret evidence*
- *distinguish among the evidence and methodologies appropriate to different disciplines*
- *consider and address complexities and ambiguities*
- *make connections among ideas*

- *recognize choices, examine assumptions and ask questions of themselves and of their own work*
- *formulate conclusions based upon evidence*
- *communicate ideas both orally and in writing*
- *relate the results of the course to their educational goals*

Interdisciplinary Perspectives

Your course should introduce students to interdisciplinary perspectives as well as disciplinary ones. This means that it should alert the student to the interconnections among disciplines by providing more than a single discipline-specific perspective. Ideally, students will learn to distinguish among, and formulate, the types of questions asked by different disciplines as well as learn to use the evidence and methodologies appropriate to different disciplines.

The interdisciplinary focus may be broad, drawing on a wide range of disciplines (e.g., biology, economics, and literature). Alternatively, the course may reflect the perspectives of a smaller number of disciplines, and those disciplines may all be within a similar area of study. For instance, one might propose a course that draws on the social sciences (e.g., combining historical and economic perspectives), or the sciences (e.g., combining biological, mathematical, and physics perspectives).

Critical Thinking

Your course should develop the sorts of skills that are consistent with the notion of Critical Thinking as espoused in Skidmore's Goals for Student Learning and Development. Specifically, students will learn to read critically and to gather and interpret evidence. They will learn to consider and address complexities and ambiguities. They will learn to make connections among ideas. They will come to recognize choices, examine assumptions, and ask questions of themselves and of their own work. They will learn to formulate conclusions based on evidence.

Communication Skills

Your course should seek to develop the Communications Skills espoused in the Goals for Student Learning and Development. Specifically, students will learn to communicate ideas in writing through routine writing assignments. Drafting and revising their written work with attention to clarity and correctness will help strengthen their writing skills. They should learn to focus an essay with a thesis or main idea, organize their ideas logically, and use appropriate transitions between ideas. Consistent with the goals of Critical Thinking, they should learn to support their assertions with evidence. Students will be introduced to conventions of documentation and understand the purpose of using sources and the need to uphold standards of academic integrity.

Students will also learn to communicate ideas orally. The small size of the seminar should allow regular student participation in discussions. In that environment, they should learn to express their positions clearly and support them with evidence.

Accessibility

All Scribner Seminars must be accessible to all incoming students. Please keep in mind, in particular, that international students may be excited to study American topics but may have less familiarity with our culture. If your course is in any way specific to the United States, such students may require additional patience and support.

Procedure for Course Approval

Instructors must submit a [Curriculum Committee form](#) for proposing Scribner Seminars. Use this same form whether the course is a revision of an existing course (including a revision of a previously approved SSP) or a new offering for the Catalog. The proposal packet must include a proposed syllabus and a Catalog description, and must indicate how the course will meet the Scribner Seminar guidelines stated above. Please describe your planned approaches, such as pedagogical strategies for smaller classes, writing and oral communication assignments, mentoring activities you envision, and/or campus resources you might include. Feel free to attach any other materials.

Submit one copy of the course proposal to the Director of the First-Year Experience by *January 5th*. The Director will review and sign the proposal before submitting it to the Associate Dean for Personnel, Development, and Diversity. Assuming it meets the general criteria for approval, the Associate Dean will forward the proposal to the Curriculum Committee by February 1st. *Note that you must seek approval from your Chair before submitting your proposal; typing his/her name in the appropriate space on the form indicates that you have done so.*

Catalog Descriptions for Scribner Seminars: Recommendations from Curriculum Committee

When writing catalog descriptions, Scribner Seminar faculty might want to keep in mind a few things:

- Curriculum Committee has guidelines that apply to any catalog description. However, please remember that your audience for a Scribner Seminar consists of recent high school graduates who are not on campus and are not familiar with the curriculum.
- Your description should be carefully worded to reflect the actual content of the course, and it should be brief. It is customary to begin the description with a sentence fragment; avoid passive voice, especially regarding student involvement, and avoid using phrases such as "in-depth" or "intense," which add nothing substantive to the description. Please limit abstractions and long Latinate words, and use student-centered, concrete examples whenever possible.
- Consult the [Skidmore College Guide to Writing](#) for stylistic clarification and the FYE website for examples of Scribner Seminar descriptions.

How to Schedule your Scribner Seminar

Course scheduling for Scribner Seminars happens each January—before departmental deadlines. You will receive an e-mail by early December with instructions on how to submit your day/time and classroom preferences. The four credit hour seminar may be delivered in two ways: 1) via a standard 4-credit hour block; or 2) via a three credit hour block with an additional "floating" hour for the 4th credit. For option #2, the floating 4th credit hour may be scheduled on any weekday morning, 8:30-9:30 a.m., or on a weekday evening (MTWTh), 6:30-7:30 p.m. or 7:30-8:30 p.m.

Please note that you must submit three options. While we will do everything possible to give you your first choice, we must balance a variety of concerns as we schedule courses. We will confirm with you first before recommending the final day and time to the Registrar's Office.

[SEE THE REGISTRAR'S WEBSITE FOR A LIST OF SCHEDULING OPTIONS.](#)

Additional Pedagogical Considerations

Team Teaching and Cluster Approaches

Scribner Seminars lend themselves to collaborations. Feel free to be creative regarding potential interactions with another seminar instructor; this might even involve occasional team teaching. Successful models have included "Human Dilemmas" (up to 9 seminars with a common syllabus) and "Sport and Society" (two instructors teaching the same course at separate times and joining together for the fourth hour).

Writing in the Seminars

Writing plays a crucial role in the seminars and links to the larger goal of helping students understand and practice the conventions of academic discourse:

- reading critically
- analyzing ideas and formulating relevant questions
- generating their own ideas
- developing a thesis and using it to focus an essay or presentation
- organizing ideas logically
- supporting claims with evidence
- presenting material orally
- moving through the process of drafting to revising
- attending to clarity, cohesiveness, and grammar
- using sources appropriately
- upholding standards of academic integrity

Possible assignments might include:

- brief written responses to readings
- online discussions or chat room participation

- in-class three- to five-minute writing exercises in response to specific prompts
- activities to help generate ideas (brainstorming, listing, mapping, free writing) in relation to a specific reading or a specific assignment
- discussions that examine a reading's organization, use of argument, and use of evidence
- peer critiques (it is helpful to provide guidelines)
- classroom workshops

ADDITIONAL INFORMATION ON TEACHING WRITING IS AVAILABLE THROUGH THE FYE OFFICE OR [THE SKIDMORE WRITING CENTER](#).

Developing Research Assignments for First-Year Students

Research assignments may be small or large, but they should follow some basic guidelines:

- Assignments should be specific and unambiguous
- Adequate time and assistance need to be provided
- Research should enhance course content and build on course objectives
- Students should learn how to locate, interpret, and evaluate sources
- Issues of academic integrity and ethical scholarship should be addressed

Scribner seminar instructors might consider the following in order to teach and facilitate research assignments:

- Scheduling a class session in the library with an appropriate reference librarian
- Placing high-demand research materials on reserve in the library
- Breaking large research projects into smaller chunks with discrete goals and deadlines

ADDITIONAL MATERIAL ON DEVELOPING RESEARCH ASSIGNMENTS IS AVAILABLE THROUGH THE FYE OFFICE.