

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 direct address of issues related to first-year transition to college life; they must be interdisciplinary in nature; and they 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 is true neither in policy nor in practice. Ideally, Scribner Seminars offer an intense intellectual experience with the support of faculty and Peer Mentors present and attentive to academic challenges first-year college students often face.

We have included material to help you construct or modify your Scribner Seminar syllabus. Please pay particular attention to those components—such as 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 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. 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 knowledge and 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 help students see the benefits of employing more than one single disciplinary perspective when approaching any subject matter or issue. Ideally, students will learn to distinguish among, and formulate, the types of questions asked by different disciplines as well as learn to use their various methodologies to gain the most complete understanding possible.

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 will 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 will learn to support their assertions with evidence. Students will be introduced to conventions of documentation and understand the purpose of using sources for researching evidence and the need to uphold standards of academic integrity.

Students will also learn to communicate ideas orally. Therefore, regular attendance of class sessions is crucial to student performance and assessment. 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 contribute meaningfully to productive intellectual exchanges.

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 upload their course proposals in the Course Leaf's CIM system by January 8. Once inside the system, choose "New Scribner Seminar Proposal Form." In addition to filling out all required fields, you will be asked to upload your syllabus.

Please note that your Scribner Seminar syllabus must include the following:

- Learning Goals for Scribner Seminars (though you may also include your own learning goals)
- A clear statement of how your fourth credit hour will be used
- Description of the role of the Peer Mentor in the class
- Weekly schedule with readings (with chapters or page ranges specified)
- Assignments and relevant grade percentages
- The [syllabus statements required by Curriculum Committee](#)

Please "launch" and "approve" your proposal, which sets it into motion within the system. It will be approved by your Chair; the FYE Director; and the Associate Dean before moving to the Curriculum Committee. At any stage you may be asked for further inclusions or clarifications.

If you are proposing a revision of an existing course, email the Director of the FYE. Major course revisions will require full course review, but minor revisions such as title or course description edits may be considered without full review.

Catalog Descriptions for Scribner Seminars: Recommendations from Curriculum Committee

When writing catalog descriptions, Scribner Seminar faculty should keep in mind a few things:

- Curriculum Committee has [guidelines](#) that apply to any catalog description.
- 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 in early January 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 + 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

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 joint 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 original 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 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
- For larger assignments, students benefit from assignment scaffolding

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 and/or scheduling the library's escape room-like research session, "Save Scribbler"
- Placing high-demand research materials on reserve in the library
- Breaking large research projects into smaller chunks with discrete goals and deadlines

Please contact the Director of the FYE with any questions or concerns that arise as you contemplate the development of a new Scribner Seminar or significant changes to an already approved Seminar.

4th Credit Hour Program

Designing the Fourth Hour Component

The Scribner Seminars were designed to respond to some of the challenges of teaching new college students. Specifically, the 4th credit hour component allows students to explore some of the curricular and co-curricular issues that often arise in the first year of college but go largely unaddressed in other college courses.

So, for example, a Scribner Seminar might take advantage of the 4th credit hour to examine topics ranging from “how to manage your time” to “how to make an effective oral presentation” to “how to use the library.” That same seminar might also explore internships, studying abroad, and/or joining a club or organization on campus. Sometimes the fourth hour might be used for a special field trip or a social outing, or you might require that your students attend a public lecture or that they volunteer in a specific organization. Although we hope that faculty members are mentoring their first-year students throughout the entire Seminar experience, the 4th credit hour is specifically designed to allow additional time for that to happen.

The Office of the First-Year Experience trains the Peer Mentors to provide programming, but each faculty member must decide what works best for his/her/their course. Indeed, Scribner Seminar instructors are encouraged to develop their own approaches to the fourth credit hour, organizing events and addressing issues that they deem appropriate for first-year students.

Programming Offered by the FYE

The Office of the First-Year Experience trains Peer Mentors to support programming on the following topics, any or all of which may be integrated into 4th credit hour programming:

- Academic Integrity
- Academic Resources and Opportunities
- Alcohol and Drug Use
- Beyond Skidmore (OCSE, CDC)
- Civic Preparedness
- Community and Belonging
- Mental Health and Wellness
- Summer Reading
- Sustainability
- Time Management and Classroom Decorum

The Peer Mentors are able to deliver brief modules and/or facilitate conversations on these topics. While the Peer Mentors can offer these sessions outside of class, they are best delivered in the classroom with your encouragement and even participation, since they support student learning and engagement. The first-year students are more likely to recognize their importance if they are endorsed and sessions are attended by the faculty. We encourage you to collaborate with your Peer Mentor to implement specific sessions into the curriculum, preferably in a staged way throughout the semester.

A number of offices on campus might also prove useful to your first-year students and might be incorporated into fourth hour programming. Among these are the Tang Museum, the Office of Off-Campus Study and Exchanges, the Counseling Center, the Career Development Center, the Writing Center, the Library, the IdeaLab, etc. We are happy to facilitate “open houses” if faculty would like to learn more about these offices. If you would like more focused attention for your class, we encourage you to contact these campus offices directly; you do not need the FYE’s approval to schedule individualized sessions.

Funding

Each seminar receives \$600 for co-curricular programming, and \$50 for course development (books and other pedagogical materials). Faculty members who have not yet taught in the FYE receive an additional \$75 (for a total of \$125) for pedagogical materials. Receipts for reimbursement must be submitted by the conclusion of the fall term.. See POLICIES AND PROCEDURES for further information.

The FYE encourages faculty to think creatively about ways to enhance student learning. If you have something in mind that exceeds your budget, you may petition the Director for additional funds; this must be done by August 1 using the [Funding Request Form](#) (available on the FYE website). We will accommodate as many requests as possible.

The FYE further encourages collaboration among faculty in the planning of co-curricular events; indeed, several faculty members might wish to pool their resources. The FYE website lists the fall Scribner Seminars and provides brief course descriptions; we invite you to contact other faculty to explore possible collaborations. With some advance planning, seminars might, for example, combine forces and funding for a field trip.

Arranging Special Events

Please contact Christy Brown in the FYE Office for assistance in scheduling and arranging all field trips and for help with any other special event, including the ordering of food. Christy will also keep track of your budget and will let you know if you are approaching your limit.

Please be advised that all trips requiring bussing, including local field trips, necessitate the submission of a [Funding Request Form](#) (available on the FYE website). All forms must be submitted by August 1st. For trips without bussing, the field trip form must be submitted two weeks in advance.

Catering is available through Skidmore’s Dining Services, and Christy Brown can place the order for you. Please note that dining services requires two weeks' advanced ordering for all catering.

SEE [POLICIES & PROCEDURES](#) REGARDING TRANSPORTATION, PURCHASES, ACCESSING FUNDS, ETC.