

# BIS Liberal Studies Seminars

## Overview

The Liberal Studies Seminar concept is based upon the assumption that every BIS student should have multiple and complementary opportunities to develop a set of core skills early in his or her BIS career. These skills are best introduced through an extended exploration of some “critical issue.” The core skills include<sup>1</sup>

### All Liberal Studies Seminars

**Interdisciplinary approach to problems** – looking at problems from different perspectives and surfacing the assumptions that these perspectives carry with them.

**Academic writing skills**– exercised on multiple occasions, with several different academic essay types, each occasion following a draft-review-draft pattern with substantial instructor or writing partner feedback. Several of these essays should be on the same topic encouraging the student to build on the feedback he or she receives and develop a deeper understanding of the issue in question.

**Academic conversation skills** – receiving and evaluating feedback, facilitating a discussion, participating in a discussion of common readings and challenging material, presenting ideas with clarity and professionalism before a group.

#### 300-Level

**“Critical thinking” skills<sup>2</sup>**– understanding the elements of an argument (evidence, reasons and conclusions), constructing a sustained argument for a position using abstracts and structured outlines, evaluating the strength of arguments, recognizing the importance of hidden assumptions, sensitivity to objectivity and bias, and statistical and causal reasoning.

#### 400-Level

**Research fundamentals**– selecting and narrowing a topic, defining a thesis and associated research questions, designing and carrying out a sustained research program, familiarity with standard research sources and tools, interpreting and evaluating source materials (both primary and secondary), writing for the reader, understanding one’s responsibility in academic research and writing.

<sup>1</sup> Team building and participation skills are also extremely important. These will be considered separately in another proposal.

<sup>2</sup> It’s more realistic to think of these as general “intellectual problem solving skills” including both analytic and “synthetic” (i.e., generative or creative) elements. The phrase “integrative thinking” may be more apt.

## General Assessment Guidelines

**In order to earn a grade of C or better in any 300- or 400- level Liberal Studies Seminar a student must satisfy the following general guidelines the following three areas. (See LSS Assessment Criteria below for details.)**

### **Academic Writing Skills**

Aptness and clarity of expression in (revised) written work and in presentations, as demonstrated by:

- a) command of usage (grammar, spelling, composition, appropriate level of diction)
- b) clear and appropriate organization

### **Academic Conversation Skills**

Responsibility in academic interchange, as demonstrated by:

- a) in class discussion and posts, apposite contributions and openness to different perspectives
- b) in small-group work, timely fulfillment of assignments and provision of feedback
- c) in written work, effort to respond to feedback received

### **Critical Thinking Skills**

Understanding of the basic elements of critical thinking as demonstrated by each of the following:

- a) identifiable and cogently supported thesis
- b) appropriate use of evidence
- c) attention to counter-arguments
- d) ability to surface assumptions
- e) ability to evaluate reasoning

### **Additional guidelines for 400-level LS seminars:**

#### **Readiness for research:**

Demonstration of:

- a) ability to define an appropriate research question
- b) familiarity with research sources and tools
- c) familiarity with basic research methodology including citing sources and standards of evidence

## LSS Assessment Criteria

This document presents the BIS Liberal Studies Seminars rubrics. They specify acceptable performance levels across all of the Liberal Studies Seminar core skills dimensions.

**A. Academic writing skills**— exercised on multiple occasions, with several different academic essay types, each occasion following a draft-review-draft pattern with substantial instructor or writing partner feedback. Several of these essays should be on the same topic encouraging the student to build on the feedback he or she receives and develop a deeper understanding of the issue in question.

*Assessment dimensions for revised written work:*

	Needs Improvement	Satisfactory	Excellent
▪ <b>Clarity, clarity, clarity</b>	Most paragraphs require multiple readings; highly cluttered.	Most paragraphs do not require multiple readings.	All but one paragraph understandable on first reading; no clutter.
▪ <b>Showing rather than telling</b>	The paper relies heavily on what is told, lacks detail.	Contains appropriate number of specific examples.	Luminous details animate the piece.
▪ <b>Precise diction</b>	Diction is flat, lacking originality.	Diction is practical and useful with clear word choice. There is, however, a sense of flatness, of not delving more deeply.	The paper demonstrates great care in the choice of words.
▪ <b>Varied syntax</b>	Sentences follow a uniform pattern in the subject-predicate model.	Sentences vary in length and in word order but do not take the risk of adventure.	Sentences vary in syntax and length with the adventurous introduction of differing sentence types.
▪ <b>Consistent tense</b>	Tense shifts without warning.	Tense is mostly consistent but could be reconsidered. For instance, might the entire piece be in the present rather than in the past?	Tense is carefully considered and is consistent throughout the piece.
▪ <b>Intentional use of vocabulary</b>	Occasionally filter words are used.	Filler words are avoided.	Not only are filler words avoided but there is a sense of reaching, a palpable

			sense that each word is intentional and is “working” for the power of the essay as a whole
▪ <b>Sensitivity to audience</b>	Terms of art frequently used without appropriate explanation; sufficient context not provided.	No more than one unexplained term of art; sufficient context provided in all but one case.	Terms of art always explained. Suitable context consistently provided.
▪ <b>Usage - grammar, punctuation, and spelling</b>	One or more usage error every page.	No more than one usage error every three pages.	Appropriate usage is consistently demonstrated.
▪ <b>Composition</b>	The paper’s arrangement is not in union with its subject.	While the paper’s arrangement is in union with its subject, it does not augment that subject.	The work as a whole embraces its subject with authenticity, boldness and clarity. In this manner the constitution of the paper is fitting to its subject, is, in a manner, respectful of its topic.
▪ <b>Paragraph structure</b>	Most paragraphs do not clearly deal with a single identifiable idea.	Several paragraphs do not clearly deal with a single identifiable idea.	Each paragraph deals with a single clearly identifiable idea.

**Academic conversation skills** – receiving and evaluating feedback, facilitating a discussion, participating in a discussion of common readings and challenging material, presenting ideas with clarity and professionalism before a group.

*Assessment dimensions for discussion comments, posts and presentations:*

	<b>Needs Improvement</b>	<b>Satisfactory</b>	<b>Excellent</b>
▪ <b>Relevance to the discussion topic/prompt</b>	Addresses an irrelevant or tangential issue.	Is relevant to topic in some aspect.	Is fully relevant to the discussion topic.
▪ <b>Depth of the comment/post</b>	Restates an obvious point.	Summarizes and asks a relevant question about position under discussion.	Questions the reasoning behind a position or raises questions that moves the discussion beyond already presented considerations.
▪ <b>Originality of the comment/post</b>	Mentions, endorses or rephrases a previously presented issue.	Raises a relevant and previously unasked question about the issue.	Raises a question about an issue that ties together several strands of the discussion.
▪ <b>Support for position</b>	States an opinion or makes a claim	Contains a claim and at least one supporting reason.	Articulates a clear argument for a position including reasons and evidence.
▪ <b>Consideration of relevant comment/posts</b>	Ignores other relevant comment in the thread.	Acknowledges at least one other relevant comment in the discussion.	Incorporates and thoroughly considers at least one other relevant comment/post in the discussion.
▪ <b>Sensitivity and appropriateness of response</b>	Addresses the author rather than the substance.	Addresses the content of a previous comment.	Addresses the content of a previous comment/post in a way that validates the author's contribution.
▪ <b>Presents ideas with clarity</b>	Central idea cannot be discerned on first reading/hearing.	Central idea can be discerned on first reading/hearing.	Comment understandable on first reading/hearing.
▪ <b>Responds thoughtfully to questions, feedback and observations</b>	Ignores direct questions and comments.	Acknowledges questions, comments or feedback.	Responds to questions, comments or feedback with appropriate care and depth.

**“Critical thinking” skills<sup>3</sup>**– understanding the elements of an argument (evidence, reasons and conclusions), constructing a sustained argument for a position using abstracts and structured outlines, evaluating the strength of arguments, recognizing the importance of hidden assumptions, sensitivity to objectivity and bias, and statistical and causal reasoning.

*Assessment dimensions for written and oral activities:*

	Needs Improvement	Satisfactory	Excellent
▪ <b>Thesis statement</b>	Failure to state in a clear way either central point of the essay or an original interpretation of the essay.	Clear statement summarizing the central point of the reading.	Clear statement presenting a well articulated point of view or an original idea about the topic.
• <b>Analysis that supports thesis</b>	Inadequate reasons presented in support of the writer’s thesis; no reasons presented.	Adequate reasons presented in support of the writer’s thesis.	Cogent reasons presented in support of the writer’s thesis.
• <b>Identification of the salient arguments</b>	Demonstrates an inability to locate key arguments or identify the structure of these arguments.	Locates at least one key argument and explicitly conveys the logical structure of this argument.	Demonstrates a general ability to locate key arguments and identify the structure of these arguments.
• <b>Logical paragraph transitions</b>	More than three paragraph-pairs exemplify forced or illogical transitions.	No more than three paragraph-pairs exemplify forced or illogical transitions.	All paragraphs consistently lead smoothly and logically into the next.
▪ <b>Clarity of reasoning</b>	Neither the local (paragraph and paragraph transition) or global level logical structure is clear.	Structure of reasoning is clear – arguments are well-structured at local or global level but not both.	The overall structure of the reasoning is transparent at the local and global levels.

<sup>3</sup> It’s more realistic to think of these as general “intellectual problem solving skills” including both analytic and “synthetic” (i.e., generative or creative) elements. The phrase “integrative thinking” may be more apt.

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <b>Quality of reasoning</b></li> </ul>	Fails to consider alternative points of view.	No more than two instances in which writer fails to support a warranted conclusion or draws an injudicious or fallacious one.	Consistently draws and fully supports warranted, judicious, non-fallacious conclusions.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <b>Objectivity – counterarguments fairly considered</b></li> </ul>	Consistently fails to support warranted conclusions or draws injudicious or fallacious ones.	Considers at least one major counterargument.	Consistently considers key counterarguments and alternative points of view and generally demonstrates an ability and willingness to follow where evidence and reason leads.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <b>Assumptions surfaced – depth of analysis</b></li> </ul>	Fails to consider any procedures, assumptions or warrants.	Does not adequately justify key results or procedures or fails to consider key assumptions or warrants.	Consistently justifies key results and procedures and works to surface fundamental assumptions and warrants.
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ <b>Evidence</b></li> </ul>	Presents no evidence or incorrectly interprets at least one major piece of evidence.	Accurately interprets all key evidence. Incorrectly interprets no more than one piece of subsidiary evidence.	Accurately interprets all evidence.

**Research fundamentals (400-level)** – selecting and narrowing a topic, defining a thesis and associated research questions, designing and carrying out a sustained research program, familiarity with standard research sources and tools, interpreting and evaluating source materials (both primary and secondary), writing for the reader, understanding one’s responsibility in academic research and writing.

*Assessment dimensions for research projects:*

	<b>Needs Improvement</b>	<b>Satisfactory</b>	<b>Excellent</b>
▪ <b>Understanding</b>		Evidence of reading and grasp of basic concepts.	Clear evidence of personal reflection and synthesis.
▪ <b>Depth</b>		Summary understanding.	Understanding of key underlying issues.
▪ <b>Breadth</b>		Recognizes but does not fully understand the relevant context.	Recognizes and understands the relevant context.
▪ <b>Relevance</b>		Some recognition of relevant considerations. No more than one irrelevancy cited.	Clear, consistent & thorough recognition of relevant considerations.
▪ <b>Research question</b>		Appropriately scoped question that must be answered by synthesizing diverse opinions.	Appropriately scoped question that focuses on a critical assumption in the topic area that must be answered by synthesizing diverse opinions that focus on critical assumptions in the topic area.
▪ <b>Thesis statement</b>		Clear statement articulating the writer’s answer to his/her research question.	Clear statement presenting a novel or unexpected answer to his/her research question; e.g., conclusion which moves paper to a higher level.
▪ <b>Source quality</b>		No more than one questionable source cited.	No inappropriate sources cited.
▪ <b>Appropriate number of sources</b>		Dependent upon discipline and assignment.	Discipline and topic specific.
▪ <b>Citation &amp; referencing format, accuracy of attribution</b>		No more than one misattribution or incorrect citation format.	All sources correctly cited and attributed.