

## **MLS 701: Introduction to the Liberal Arts**

Mondays 6:00 – 7: 30 PM

Instructor: Timothy Alborn

“Research is formalized curiosity. It is poking and prying with a purpose.”

– Zora Neale Hurston, *Dust Tracks on a Road* (1942)

Reflecting on her fieldwork in the southern US, the anthropologist Zora Neal Hurston offers a useful point of departure for this seminar on interdisciplinary research and writing. She offers a vision of academic research as a type of *skilled* labor, one that requires training, organization, and purpose. This seminar will cultivate a set of critical, organizational, and professional skills geared toward designing and completing an independent research project. It will also provide an introduction to the sense of curiosity that is needed to ask research questions and seek answers across multiple academic disciplines. It provides an introduction to the nuts and bolts of researching, writing, and revising an academic paper, an introduction to CUNY’s electronic databases, and tips on how best to suggest and receive feedback. In the context of this seminar students will be expected to formulate their own research paper topics and produce a paper prospectus, which they will have the opportunity to present to their peers for feedback and constructive criticism.

By the end of the course, you will have: (1) developed a specific, pointed research question in conjunction with a literature review you have developed for a different MALS course; (2) identified primary source databases relevant to your project; (3) discussed different critical methodologies for engaging with those sources, drawing from at least two different academic disciplines; (4) gained practical skills with respect to revision and peer review; and (5) learned how to collect and organize data.

This course is online, but we will usually be meeting via Zoom each week on Monday evenings. Please see the course schedule below for specific meeting times.

All readings are available on Blackboard. My office hours will be Mondays from 4:00 to 6:00, but since these will be either via Zoom or phone, please let me know ahead of time to make sure I’m not already meeting with another student. I will also be free to meet with students at other times by appointment via Zoom or by phone. The best way to reach me is by email, at [timothy.alborn@lehman.cuny.edu](mailto:timothy.alborn@lehman.cuny.edu).

All readings (including assignment materials) for the course are posted on Blackboard, in the “Course Materials” folder. Within that folder, readings are in individual folders labeled by the assignment number or date they will be discussed in class. Please consult the course schedule below for reading assignments. You should be take notes on these readings and be prepared to ask and respond to questions about them during the class discussion.

## Assignments, Due Dates, and Grade Breakdown:

**1: Using primary and secondary sources.** Pick an academic article from the Blackboard folder marked “Assignment 1” and provide a list of *primary* and *secondary* sources. If you are unsure about any, include them in a separate list. **Due via email September 5** (ungraded).

Pick two of the primary sources and two of the secondary sources from your list. These should be sources with which the author of the article engages with in a sustained fashion (i.e. for at least a paragraph), and that you can track down online. Write at least one paragraph each about how the author uses these sources to provide evidence and/or to develop an argument about the article’s topic. Length: 3-4 pages. **Post first draft on Blackboard September 25; final draft due via email October 7.** Please provide links or pdf files for the four sources you have chosen by Sept. 25. Worth 20% of final grade. (A longer description of this assignment will be available on Blackboard).

**2: Citation exercise.** Go to the folder on Blackboard marked “Assignment 2” and find the article you picked for the first assignment. Convert its notes and/or bibliography *from* Turabian (Chicago), APA, or MLA *to* one of the other two citation styles. **Due via email October 17.** Worth 5% of final grade. (A longer description of this assignment will be available on Blackboard).

**3: Building on sources.** Using EBSCO, Google Books, Web of Science, and JSTOR, find five articles or books that cite the source you focused on in assignment 1; at least three of these must use the source in a sustained fashion (at least one paragraph). Discuss how your source enables the scholars to build a new argument, either by providing evidence, inspiring a question, or getting something wrong. Provide instructor with a list of your sources by October 25; feedback will be given on drafts submitted by November 6. **Final paper due via email November 13.** Worth 25% of final grade. (A longer description of this assignment will be available on Blackboard).

**4. Prospectus:** The specific topics of the work for this class will be formulated by the individual students in consultation with the instructor. By the end of the semester it is expected each student will complete a prospectus between 7 and 12 pages in length. The prospectus should identify and discuss, and preferably in this order: a topic, or question; its contribution to a diverse body of secondary sources (as developed in your literature review for a different course); and the primary sources that will suggest answers to this question. Your prospectus should be in Chicago, APA, or MLA style. **Due via email December 14.** Worth 30% of final grade. (A longer description of this assignment is available on Blackboard, including due dates for lists of sources and drafts and instructions for peer review on November 23 and 30).

**5. Participation:** everyone should regularly attend class and come prepared to discuss the readings and (in November/December) peer-authored work. Participation also

includes regular posting of responses to study questions on designated dates (see course schedule, below). For this, students will be divided into study groups and will, in some cases, be asked to respond to different sections of the assigned reading on a first-come, first-served basis (i.e. if you do this early you have more choice regarding what you respond to). Worth 20% of the final grade.

*Collegiality*: to maintain a supportive atmosphere in the seminar, all students should promote our conversation by carefully listening to one another and exchanging ideas in a respectful, collegial manner. Although all prospectuses should be intelligible and accessible, students should bear in mind that certain assumptions of prior knowledge might be appropriate to a specialist subfield.

### **A note on the readings and assignments**

With the exception of Noble's *Algorithms of Oppression* (September 21), which is a "meta" reflection on gaps in electronic databases, the other assigned readings in this course fall into in three categories: Repko on interdisciplinarity, excerpts from books about how to research and write, and things that I have written or am in the process of writing. Those in the first two categories can be slow going and are intended as a basic introduction, which I've included in the syllabus as sparingly as possible. The best way to learn how to research and write is by doing it, and the second-best way is by examining how other people have done it. You'll get experience in the first method when you work on your research proposal. The first two assignments are examples of the second method: first you will "reverse-engineer" an academic article by figuring out what the author(s) did with some of their primary and secondary sources, and next you will see what subsequent authors did with this article after it had been published.

The readings on October 14-26 approach this learning objective in a different way, by providing "behind the scenes" glimpses at how I research and write. **First**, you will read one of my published articles, together with an accompanying blog post that includes links to the bulk of the primary sources I used to write it (either in the form of pdf files or my notes with links to the original sources on Google Books). Your job will be to learn how I found these sources, *why* I chose to include some of them and not others, and *how* I included and presented the ones I used. **Second**, you will read the notes on primary and secondary sources that I converted into a section of a chapter I wrote this past summer—complete with my scrawled comments to myself about where to put what, and how. Your job will be to learn how writing is always about thinking, and vice versa—and about second guessing, moving things around until they're in the right place, and above all always *engaging* with the sources. **Third**, you will read a book proposal I submitted in 2015 and the introduction to the draft I submitted to the publisher in 2018, referee comments on both, and the acknowledgements and introduction to the published version in 2019. Your job will be to learn how I learned from feedback on earlier versions of the book, and (more generally) the lesson that scholarship only ever works when scholars work closely with and *listen* to their peers.

**Course schedule:**

- August 24                      Zoom orientation for incoming MALS students (6pm)
- August 31                      Introduction to class
- List of primary and secondary sources (see Assignment 1) due via email September 5
- September 7                    No class (Labor Day)
- September 14                  Thinking across disciplines  
Allen F. Repko, *Introduction to Interdisciplinary Studies* (Los Angeles: Sage, 2014), chapters 1, 4 and 5 (85pp).
- Respond to study questions on Blackboard by September 12.
- September 21                  Electronic databases 1: secondary sources  
Kate L. Turabian, *A Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations* (8<sup>th</sup> ed., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), Chapter 3; Safiya Umoja Noble, *Algorithms of Oppression: How Search Engines Reinforce Racism* (New York: New York University Press, 2018), introduction and chapter 2.
- Respond to study questions on Blackboard by September 19.  
Presentation: JStor, EBSCOHost, Web of Science, Google Books
- September 29                  Engaging with sources  
Wayne C. Booth *et al.*, *The Craft of Research* (3<sup>rd</sup> ed., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008), Chapter 6.  
Post first draft of Assignment 1 on Blackboard, September 25; and read and comment on at least three peer drafts by September 28.
- October 5                        Citing Sources  
Turabian, *A Manual for Writers*, Chapters 14-15  
Respond to study questions on Blackboard by October 3
- Final draft of Assignment 1 due via email, October 7
- October 14                      Moving from research to writing  
Timothy Alborn, "King Solomon's Gold: Ophir in an Age of Empire," *Journal of Victorian Culture* 20 (2015): 491-508 and Alborn, "A Digital Window onto Writing History Research Notes"  
Post comments/questions on Blackboard by October 12

Assignment 2 due via email October 17

- October 19 Building a research paper  
Timothy Alborn, "Life Imitates Art" (draft chapter from *Misers: British Responses to Extreme Saving, 1700-1860*, forthcoming, Routledge, 2022); with annotated notes  
Post comments/questions on Blackboard by October 17
- October 26: Receiving and Responding to Feedback  
Turabian, *Manual for Writers*, chapters 9 and 12  
Timothy Alborn, *All That Glittered: Britain's Most Precious Metal Between Adam Smith and the Gold Rush* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2019): book proposal with referee reports; draft introduction with referee reports; published acknowledgements and introduction  
Post comments/questions on Blackboard by October 24
- November 2 From Topic to Question  
Booth, *The Craft of Research*, chapters 3-4.  
Respond to study questions on Blackboard by October 31.
- Due November 4: list of at least 5 databases/ collections that feature the primary sources/evidence for your project
- November 9 Electronic databases 2: primary sources  
In class discussion/presentation
- Assignment 2 due via email, November 13
- November 16 No class (students will meet individually with the instructor between November 10-17 to discuss their research proposals)
- November 23 Towards answering your research question  
Post on Blackboard by November 21: 500-word statement of your research topic
- November 30 Peer review of draft project proposal (online; no in-class meeting)
- December 7 Final course wrap up
- December 14 Final draft of project proposal due by midnight

## **Additional information**

Official course description: <http://lehman.smartcatalogiq.com/en/2017-2019/Graduate-Bulletin/Courses/MLS-Master-s-in-Liberal-Std/700/MLS-701>

Students are expected to attend all class meetings as scheduled and are responsible for all class work missed as a result of late registration or absence. Excessive absences in any course may result in a lower final grade.

Lehman College is committed to providing access to all programs and curricula to all students. Students with disabilities who may need accommodations are encouraged to register with the Office of Student Disability Services. For more information, please contact the Office of Student Disability Services, Shuster Hall, Room 238, phone number, 718-960-8441.

The Academic Center for Excellence (ACE) and the Science Learning Center (SLC) are two of the tutoring centers on campus. The ACE provides appointment based and drop-in tutoring in the humanities, social sciences, and writing, as well as general writing and academic skills workshops. The SLC provides drop-in tutoring for natural and computer science courses. To obtain more information about the ACE and the SLC, please visit their website at <http://www.lehman.edu/issp>, or please call the ACE at 718-960-8175, and the SLC at 718-960-7707

**For Lehman's policies on plagiarism and academic integrity please visit this website:** <http://www.lehman.cuny.edu/student-affairs/documents/student-handbook-02.pdf>

The telephone number for the campus police is 718-960-8228.

Lehman College is committed to ensuring equal access to online instruction during the COVID-19 pandemic. If you need a laptop in order to participate fully in this class (and your other classes), please inform your instructor, who will put you in connect with someone at IT who can provide you with a "loaner" computer. Please do this at least two weeks prior to the start of the semester.