Seminar Presentation Guidelines
History 98b, 2003

Historical research is a public activity. While it is important to find a topic that is meaningful for you, it is equally important to present your work to others and get assistance from them. The 98b seminar is a chance for you to present your ideas to an interested audience, hear suggestions and constructive criticism, and find out how other researchers approach their own work. The following are some practical guidelines to help you prepare.

**Format:** Seminars will be made up of 12-14 students, grouped according to field of study. Each seminar meeting will consist of 4-5 presentations, each 12-15 minutes in length. These will be followed by time for discussion. Seminar schedules will be posted on the 98b website.

**Formal Précis:** In order to acquaint seminar members with your project and help them formulate questions, you will turn in a précis of no more than 500 words outlining the goals and argument of your presentation. In the précis, it is a good idea to include the main historical question or problem you will address, the sources upon which your presentation is based, and preliminary conclusions. The précis is an essential component of your oral presentation, and all précis will be posted on the 98b website so that seminar participants can be well prepared for both your presentation and discussion.

Post your précis on the class website (there will be a place for you to do so under the rubric “Discussion,” where you will find further instructions) AND email it to both your tutor and the Assistant Head Tutor, Patrice Dabrowski (pmdabrow@fas.harvard.edu) by 10:00 a.m. on the Monday before your presentation. A late précis will result in a drop of one-third of a grade for your presentation.

The 98b website can be found at http://www.courses.fas.harvard.edu/~hist98b. (Sample précis are also available on the course website under the link “Sample Précis.”) A schedule of the oral presentations will be posted on the website; check to make sure you read all the précis for a given meeting in advance. You are to come prepared each week with questions to pose to the presenters.

**Content:** Focus your presentation on the argument you are developing from your sources. Your audience needs a central point on which to focus, and a clear argument (even one that is provisional) is preferable to a catalogue or narrative of evidence. State clearly the historical problem you are addressing; briefly place your project in historiographical context, if necessary; give a sense of the sources you have consulted and the evidence you have collected; and offer your working thesis. In such a brief presentation, there is little time for copious evidence or lengthy quotations. Although you are not expected to have firm conclusions at this stage, strive to make your presentation as polished as possible. You might want to point out what questions have been raised by the research you have done so far, and to mention what you intend to examine next.

**Delivery:** Your first goal in this presentation is to communicate clearly. State your argument and its main points plainly and directly, reinforce your main points (particularly your argument), and speak at a reasonable pace and volume. Without becoming self-conscious, try to vary your tone and pace slightly in order to keep your audience’s attention; and use vocal emphasis to highlight important words, phrases, or ideas. You may choose to speak from an outline, from notes, or from a written text, but in either event try to maintain eye contact with your audience. Presentations should be 12-15 minutes in length, and no longer. Time limits will be enforced. Practice your talk ahead of time so that you know how long it is. In general, a double-spaced page can be read in about two minutes, so your presentation should be 6-8 pages if written out. Regardless of whether you read or speak from notes, you should practice your talk a number of times before the day of the presentation.

**Audience:** Address your remarks to an audience that is intelligent but that does not necessarily have expertise in your field. Be sure to define key terms and ideas.

**Discussion:** The goal of the discussion is to help the presenter further her or his work and to elaborate on interesting ideas. This kind of intellectual exchange demands attention on the part of the audience and mutual respect between audience members and the presenter. When responding to questions, keep your answers brief and to the point. The questioner can ask for further details if desired. Feel free to pause and think before you respond, or to ask for clarification if you do not understand a question. The presentation should allow each student a chance to test out her or his ideas in a supportive atmosphere. When you are a member of the audience, offer your incisive questions, trenchant comments, and constructive criticism to other students in a helpful and respectful manner.