

Phyllis Rackin
Close Reading

My advice would be to speak as little as possible at the actual meeting of the seminar. Both of our sessions were remarkably successful (a) because of Deanne Williams' brilliant idea of organizing the discussions around keywords (see my fourth letter to seminar members), which I appropriated and (b) because both Dympna Callaghan (who ended up moderating the second session after Peter Parolin was snowbound) and I restricted our own contributions to encouraging and facilitating discussion among the participants.

First letter to seminar members:

Welcome to this year's SAA seminar on close reading! Because our seminar was over-enrolled, the SAA office has decided to divide it into two sessions meeting on consecutive days, and Peter Parolin has kindly agreed to moderate one of them. I will attend both sessions and read all the papers, but you will not need to. However, if you do want to see all the papers, let me know and I'll send them to you; and although you'll only be able to participate in one session, you'll certainly be welcome to attend the other.

In order to impose a semi-rational order on the division, I'd like to see your paper topics as soon as possible so Peter and I can try to arrange for people with similar interests to be together. Once we have the topics, I'll let you know which section you'll be in and who the other participants will be, and I'll also send you information about deadlines and organization.

Meanwhile, let me know if you have any questions.

Best regards,
Phyllis

Second letter to seminar members:

Dear All,

Based on the topics you sent, I've divided our seminar on close reading into two groups. I will organize the first group, meeting on Thursday afternoon, and Peter Parolin will organize the second group, meeting on Friday afternoon, but both of us will attend both sessions. I'm sending this message twice, once to the members of each session so you'll have the names and email addresses of the other people in your session so you can use them for your correspondence about the seminar; but if you want to see the abstracts and papers from the members of the other session, let me know, and I'll see that you get them.

Some of you have already sent me full abstracts of your proposed papers, but at this point, I'd like to ask everyone to send a full abstract to your group by November 20.

If you have any questions, please let me know. Based on what we've seen so far, Peter and I are looking forward eagerly to seeing your papers and to meeting with you in New Orleans.

Best regards,
Phyllis

Third letter to seminar members:

Thanks to all who sent abstracts. If you didn't send yours yet, please either send it immediately or confirm by email that you've decided to withdraw from the seminar.

The next deadline is for your completed paper, which should reach all of the members of your group by February 1. This deadline is firm, because at that time I will need to send to the SAA office the names of all the people to be listed on the program as participants in the seminar.

The page limit--10 pages, double-spaced--is also firm because we will all need to read all the papers carefully in order to prepare for our discussion at the conference.

Happy Holidays!
Phyllis

Fourth letter to seminar members:

Thanks to everyone, for two sets of excellent seminar papers. If they're any indication, we should have two terrific seminar sessions at the SAA. If you would like to see the papers from the other session, let me know, and I will forward them to you, but you are only responsible for reading the papers submitted for your session.

For our meetings in New Orleans, Peter and I have decided to appropriate the structure Deanne Williams devised for the superb seminar she led at the 2011 SAA meeting. She asked each of the participants to prepare one keyword that would apply to an issue, topic, or theme that linked some of the papers together. The keyword did not need to be applicable to all the papers, but it did need to place a group of papers in conversation with each other.

So to prepare for our seminar, you should read carefully all the papers submitted for your session in order to come up with your keyword, and then prepare some notes you can use at the seminar for a minute or two of explanation of your reasons for choosing it. At the beginning of each meeting of the seminar, we'll ask all the participants in that session to share their keywords. We'll write the keywords on a board and then we'll all proceed to discuss them. If Deanne's seminar is any indication, this should produce a wide-ranging and productive exploration of the topics raised by your papers.

The key to success with a seminar like this is, of course, preparation. Ideally, each of us will

come to the seminar very familiar with all of the papers submitted for our session and will have thought in depth about our own keywords, as well as spent some time imagining what some other keywords might be and anticipating what we might have to say about them as our seminar discussion unfolds.

Please let us know if you have any questions about this.