Almost every serious graduate course in the humanities culminates in a final written assignment that I refer to in this chapter as the “seminar paper.” Because the seminar paper both allows you to demonstrate your knowledge of the relevant course material and prepares you for the difficult tasks of dissertation writing and scholarly publishing, it might accurately be understood as the *sine qua non* of your academic training. Nonetheless, for most graduate students, confronting the seminar paper each semester is akin to launching an arctic expedition without a compass or a map; you may have some sense of where you want to go but painfully little guidance about how to get there. Although there exists no universally applicable set of instructions for writing a successful seminar paper, especially across disciplines, you can take certain steps that will help you to master the form—steps which, in ideal situations, might even lead to publication. This chapter focuses on the perils and pitfalls of seminar paper writing—and how to avoid them. Since wise students approach writing seminar papers just as they approach writing articles, this chapter serves as a supplement to chapter 10, which deals with the publication process. The major subjects include:

- The value of emulation
- The construction of a reading list
- The organization of materials
- The note-taking process
- The formulation of an argument
- The context of an argument
- The evidence of an argument
- The process of revising for publication

**The Value of Emulation**

Especially because of the myth in academe that “originality” should be the goal of all scholarly research, the educational value of systematic
imitation often gets overlooked. This is unfortunate since savvy teachers and students have long recognized that imitation is a starting point for learning in many pedagogical systems. As we will see shortly, the academic definition of “originality” needs to be understood within certain highly specific contexts, but first it will be important to discuss how you should envision the seminar paper, a skill that will require a certain degree of familiarity with the form.

Because scholars do not publish seminar papers, we must look to article-length essays as the most appropriate models for the approximately 20-page papers we are typically asked to write in our graduate courses. And why shouldn’t this be the case? Many professors, after all, specify even in their syllabi that papers should be understood as practice runs for scholarly publishing. For example, each of my graduate students discovers on his first day in my class that a “20- to 25-page, potentially publishable final paper” will largely determine the final grade for the course. Indeed, such language was the rule rather than the exception in most of my courses as a graduate student, and it goes without saying that any student enrolled in a graduate program for longer than a semester is likely to have encountered it before. Of course, many professors—clinging to the outdated and somewhat irresponsible “apprenticeship model” of graduate education (see pp. 5–6)—deliberately shun such language in both their syllabi and their classrooms. More often than not, such professors are doing what they believe is best for their students; because they assume that an emphasis on the professional development of graduate students is only damaging and premature, they do what they can to protect them from preprofessional pressure. Although many students do, in fact, feel overwhelmed by the emphasis in today’s graduate programs on publishing and conferencing, ignorance about how to publish, rather than recognition of the need to publish, is probably the cause of their anxiety. The facts here are simple: avoiding the realities of today’s academic market, which demands publication, may make you feel less anxious in graduate school, but you will feel considerably more anxious later on if you are unable to land a job because you have not published. Even if you are lucky enough to secure a position, you may find yourself laboring frantically to do what should have become second nature in order to produce the publications necessary for tenure.

My advice, therefore, is that you embrace the seminar paper as a means of preparation for scholarly publishing. One positive and somewhat paradoxical side effect of such an approach is the diminishment of anxiety as a result of an enhanced sense of purpose and direction. As one of my best graduate students confesses, envisioning papers as