

FAQs ABOUT FYPs

(Frequently Asked Questions About First-Year Papers)

The most important rite of passage for all first-year students in the Hopkins history department is the famed First-Year Paper. Here are some frequently asked questions about this project. (Note: This list does not cover infrequently asked questions, such as “In which year is the first-year paper written?”)

What is the First-Year Paper?

The first-year paper is like a term paper on steroids. But in view of your new role as a graduate student, you should think of it less like a term paper and more like a potential journal article. You are a scholar now as well as a student, and the first-year paper is intended to be a serious piece of original scholarship. That means it will require some extensive research in primary sources.

What is the subject of the First-Year Paper?

You decide. But you should call on your main advisor for suggestions about good topics. He or she will be able to tell you if a topic is too broad or too narrow to turn into a first-year paper. Your first-year paper will most likely relate to your major field of study, and often later versions of first-year papers end up in dissertations. But your first-year paper is not required to be a forerunner of your dissertation topic; it is a genre unto itself. Don't put off settling on a first-year paper topic out of fear that you will commit yourself to a dissertation.

How long is the First-Year Paper?

It varies. Most papers are around 30 to 35 pages long. A useful upper limit is 40 pages.

When should I start working on my First-Year Paper?

Now. The sooner you begin thinking about your first-year paper, the less stressful it will seem to write it. If you haven't had them already, your earliest conversations with your advisor should address this subject. Use your first semester to begin reading secondary sources and gathering information for the paper. The winter break will prove to be a useful block of time in which to work and write, but if you start moving in the direction of the paper now, you will preserve some of your winter break for needed rest and relaxation.

What is the First-Year Paper seminar?

The First-Year Paper would not be so important were it not for the First-Year Paper seminar. During the spring semester, you will present your paper to a public seminar attended by fellow graduate students and faculty members in your area. The main thing you will do in your seminar is to field questions from professors about your work. However, the goal of the seminar is not to make you feel intimidated, but to make you feel important. There are few history programs in which first-year students are welcomed so quickly into a research community as independent thinkers. So rather than fearing the seminar as a minor Inquisition, look forward to the chance to discuss your work with people who really take you seriously and have your paper's future prospects in mind.

When will my First-Year Paper seminar be?

First-Year Paper seminars usually begin around the time of Spring Break. Graduate students in American history will present their papers at weekly, regularly scheduled meetings of the

“American Seminar,” while Europeanists will present at the “European Seminar,” etc. When you return from the winter break, **if not earlier**, begin thinking about when your paper will be ready for presentation, and speak with Ayana Teal to sign up for a date. Signing up is on a first-come, first-serve basis, so if you don’t want to be stuck presenting in the same week that you will be taking your field exam, try to set a date early.

When must I finish my First-Year Paper?

The real deadline for your First-Year Paper is about a week before your seminar. This is because people want to read your paper before they attend; you will only give a brief introduction of your work at the seminar, and the bulk of the time is reserved for questions. You will be responsible for handing in your paper one to two weeks in advance to Ayana Teal. She will make copies of your paper and distribute to the graduate students and faculty in your area (American, European, etc.).

Whom should I let read my First-Year Paper?

Whomever will. Even though your paper does not technically have to be finished until a week before the seminar, it would be very unwise to wait until then to let other people read your work. Your advisor should read drafts of the paper throughout the year, although you should talk to him or her about particular expectations. But it is also advisable to get different people to read drafts; even if you do not incorporate all of their suggestions, comments from other readers will help you identify parts of your paper that don’t make sense or that may be expendable. Some of the best resources you have are the graduate students who have gone before you. Let advanced students comment on your drafts and give you advice about the seminar. But since you want this kind of advice, figure on having a fairly complete draft several weeks before your seminar.

What is the Butler Prize?

The Butler Prize is awarded every year to the best First-Year Paper. The prize is awarded at an end-of-the-year reception for the department, and includes the satisfaction of being recognized by faculty members, along with **\$\$\$\$\$\$\$\$A SUM OF MONEY\$\$\$\$\$\$**. The award is judged by a panel of three professors who rotate from year to year. Nominations for the prize can be made by professors or students near the end of the spring semester.

Should I stress about the First-Year Paper?

No. Relax! Get started early, seek help and support from those around you, and enjoy it!