Excelling In The Humanities

Many courses in various departments at the University of Minnesota are humanities courses. Their designator might say History, Rhetoric, Art History, Music, American Studies, or any number of other labels, but they share some common concerns and approaches.

In fact, the humanities are as much an approach as they are a classification. Humanities courses focus on interpreting the world of values, beliefs, and perceptions. They look at human thought, motivations, and the search for meaning and coherence. Courses such as these ask very different things of you as a student than would, for example, a math, science or language course. The following are some techniques and approaches that might help you get the most out of these courses and to do your best in them.

Engage Yourself with Course and Texts

Humanities courses require that you become involved with the course. You must engage yourself with the readings and the ideas being discussed. It is usually not enough simply to know what authors are saying.

You must be able to respond to what it is they are saying. One way to do this is to write summary responses to each article and reading. When you complete a reading, write down immediately what the person is saying and, more importantly, what your response to it is. Do you agree? Did it move you in any way? In what ways does this writing enlarge your own perceptions? Since humanities courses often require that you write papers, you will often have a good start on a paper if you keep up with these responses as you go along.

A second way to engage yourself with the material is to share your perceptions with others. You might want to for discussion groups with other members of your class. Since classes are often large, you often don’t have the opportunity to discuss the ideas in class. If you force yourself to say something about what it is you are studying, it helps you to refine and organize your thoughts. Also, talk directly to your instructors and TAs. Most instructors complain that students never come in during office hours unless it is right before or after an exam.

Expand Context and Make Connections

Humanities courses should make you stretch yourself in making connections to other ideas and events and to put things in expanded contexts. When reading a novel, for instance, simply knowing the plot, characters, and other details is just the beginning. You might ask yourself what other works were done by this particular author. Is there a unifying theme in their work? How does this person’s work relate to others that were written in the same period or genre? How does the work relate to concerns of people far removed in time and place? There are seldom right or wrong answers in humanities courses. We are dealing with implications and meanings. Force yourself to think about the relevance and implications for your own life and times of what it is you are studying.
**Practice Good Academic Skills**

Like other courses at the University, humanities courses will be more satisfying if you practice the basic skills necessary for academic success. Humanities courses almost always require that you write papers and essays. Writing is a skill that is crucial and central in humanities courses. Writing is a skill that does not come naturally. It must be developed and maintained.

Secondly, there are various note-taking methods that might work better than others in humanities courses. As you take notes in lectures, you might want to write down your own responses to the ideas being presented in a separate column. Remember that most humanities courses do not require as much memorization as they require independent thought.

Also remember that humanities courses demand as much of your energy and time as do math and language courses. Plan and set aside time to work on them. Although you may not have something to hand in everyday, much reading is typically required and additional reading is often necessary in order to make the connections and analyses that you will want to make.

Finally, do not procrastinate. You cannot cram for a paper that requires you to develop your own thoughts and perspectives.

**Where to Get Assistance**

The Student Academic Success Services office (SASS) in 109 Eddy Hall is a good place to help with these academic skills. They offer workshops and individual help for students. Stop by or call them at 624-3323.

The Student Writing Center in Nicholson Hall is another good resource. The Student Writing Center provides writing help for undergraduate students at all stages of the writing process.

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