Course Description

The MA in Medical Humanities, Compassionate Care and Bioethics requires a Capstone Course in which students produce a research paper of an estimated 20 to 25 pages with references. This is a significant endeavor that will require considerable effort from the very start of the semester. Though the paper does not need to be published, it should be of publishable quality, and we hope that some students will eventually pursue publication. Graduate Studies requires this of all students, and an impressive final product can always be presented as a writing sample in future job and graduate or professional school applications. Here the focus must be on current scholarship, rather than on personal experience.

Approach

Step 1: Decide on a topic of deep interest. Anything related to the MA program will work, but the topic should be fresh and not one that you have worked on in other courses, although it can be related. Always select a topic that floats your boat, and that you feel you can handle.

Students select a topic drawing on the research methods of the humanities (e.g., philosophical & ethical analysis, clinical ethics, literature, history, public policy, law, narrative medicine, religious studies, etc.). For example, a student focusing on literature must do in depth analysis and research on the primary writings of a figure such as William Carlos Williams, Anton Chekov, John Stone, etc., and draw on existing scholarship. It would be possible to delve deeply into the narrative medicine movement, drawing on the work of key physician contributors such as Rita Charon, Kathryn Montgomery Hunter, Howard Brody, and John L. “Jack” Coulehan. A student might wish to explore a literary tradition that addresses a major bioethical concern, such as anti-aging. As another example, a student might wish to work in the history of medicine, so long as it focuses on some aspect of medical ethics or healthcare policy. Or a student might want to investigate “compassionate” care or other features of a healing clinical relationship, including, for example, professional empathy and altruism and theories of how clinicians can best respond to the dynamic of hope in patients and their families. Images of the “good” clinician with regard to virtues and character are relevant. Papers might also focus on analysis of a clinical case in bioethics, drawing on moral traditions and healthcare law. Questions of healthcare justice and rationing, fertility and reproduction, genetics, pediatric care (including NICU decisions), organ procurement and transplant, definitions of death and their implications, disability ethics, death and dying, psychiatry and mental illness, aging and dementia, surgery, cancer care, and personhood are all valid.


Step 3: Prepare a very precise Big Question, a thesis, and the beginnings of an outline. Select a faculty mentor and have emailed him or her with a request for mentorship well before February 12.
Faculty Mentors

Selecting a Faculty Mentor

Within the first three weeks of the course, each student should select a Center faculty member as a mentor for this research paper. This involves a process of elective affinity, and for this reason we are inviting faculty members into this course to talk with students about some of their general interest areas. The student should set up an initial meeting with the faculty member to establish rapport and consent to mentor, and to explore faculty suggestions for core research references. It may be that a faculty member will suggest some other professor. Please have a faculty mentor in place by February 13th and report this to Dr. Post for record keeping. The following are good possibilities.

Stephen.Post@Stonybrookmedicine.edu
Compassionate Care; Bioethics; Dementia and Aging; Altruism in Healthcare; Clinical Ethics, Religion & Medicine, Film & Bioethics

Michelle Ballan, PhD, MSW, MS Professor School of Social Welfare
Michelle.Ballan@stonybrook.edu
Justice and Access to Care for Individuals with Disabilities; Disability and Bioethics

Linda Bily, MA – Affiliated Faculty
Linda.Bily@Stonybrookmedicine.edu
Cancer Clinical Ethics and Advocacy; Healing Arts

Dr. Richard A. Bronson, MD - Professor of Obstetrics/Gynecology and Pathology
Richard.Bronson@Stonybrookmedicine.edu
Reproductive Medicine; Poetry; Narrative in Medicine; Medical Education

Dr. John Coulehan, MD – Professor Emeritus
John.Coulehan@Stonybrookmedicine.edu
Literature and Medicine; Clinical Ethics; Professional Virtues; Poetry

Dr. Brooke M. Ellison, PhD – Assistant Professor
Brooke.Ellison@Stonybrookmedicine.edu
Sociology of Medicine; Medical Ethics; Stem Cell Policy

Robyn McKeefrey MA BSRN-C CCM CCE Risk Management Coordinator, Department of Risk Management Email: Robyn.McKeefrey@stonybrookmedicine.edu
Medical Law and Risk Management; Reproductive Ethics; Clinical Ethics

Dr. Phyllis Migdal, MD, MA – Assistant Clinical Professor
Phyllis.Migdal@Stonybrookmedicine.edu
Clinical Ethics, Bioethics, Human Subjects Research, Cognitive Bias, Physician-Patient Relationship

Dr. S. Van McCrary JD, MPH - Associate Professor
Stephen.V.McCrary@Stonybrookmedicine.edu
Clinical Ethics (Neonatal and Adult); Health Law and Policy; Medical Decision Making; Psychiatric Issues in Bioethics
Writing Your Research Paper

1. Introduction

A successful thesis-driven piece of scholarship will always begin with a very clear big question replete with careful definition of terms. Why are you asking this question? Then state your answer to the question in a clear thesis statement. This is best placed in the first paragraph of the paper. You will need to work on this and revise as needed, but do not ever lose sight of your thesis statement. You do not want to veer off course, because the rest of the paper is an argument supporting your thesis. Every sentence in your paper ought to be connected to your thesis in some way. It might help introduce your audience to the nuances of the topic you are discussing so that they will understand how your thesis differs from claims made by others.

A good paper usually includes a second paragraph that discusses in brief why the question and thesis are important. Is the thesis important for solving a major problem? Is it innovative? Who might be impacted by your paper? What is your audience?

A third paragraph usually describes how you are planning to structure the paper, and some mention of key sources. It is a good idea to ask about every topic or point in your paper, “how will adding this information help my reader understand my thesis?” If you cannot answer this question, then the information is probably better left out.

The outline and headings (i.e., the organization of the paper) should be designed to move your thesis forward in a constructive way. Outline your thoughts before you begin to write.

2. Main Body

Be certain to use headings well. Headings are a roadmap for the reader. They are like signposts on the highway. They should not be complex or long, so choose a few effective words. Subheadings can sometimes also be quite helpful. Headings should be in bold, and subheadings should be in italics.

Develop your ideas and use transitions to link the major strands of your exposition. Remember, though your interlocutors may be able to follow certain moves you make because they are familiar with the literature the public will not. Make sure that an intelligent person who is not an expert in your topic could easily follow your argument. If you jump around without an indication of why, it will be extremely difficult for your reader to follow you.

When agreeing or disagreeing with an author don’t merely state that you agree or disagree but make a case for why you do. Clearly identify the views of the author whom you will be discussing. Highlight important distinctions and concepts of which the author makes use. It is essential to use citations when doing this. This will indicate to your interlocutors precisely the point at which you disagree, while introducing the public to an important aspect of the conversation you are engaging in and of which they may not be aware.

If you plan to disagree with an author’s position then raise at least one objection that you would advance against the view as you understand it. While the public may be interested in simply learning alternative views on the matter, your interlocutors will want to know why your position differs from those already accepted. If you plan to agree with the author’s position, then be sure to explain why it is important that you agree. Others may have raised objections to the position with which you agree. Explain these objections and then explain
how it is that the position you endorse overcomes them. Once again, proper citation is essential to this aspect of your paper.

When in doubt, break up long sentences and split up long paragraphs. Semi-colons are hard to use well, so avoid them unless you are sure of your grammar, and avoid page-long paragraphs that beg to be broken up into two or three.

Be care to select quoted phrases, sentences, or segments of several lines with scholarly precision. Only quote the material that makes your point best, and always reference it. There is no need to quote excessively, and you should help the reader understand what you want them to get from a block quote, rather than leave it dangling at the end of a paragraph. We will talk about quotes and style in class. Block quotes are okay if used wisely, but they should rarely, if ever, exceed five to ten lines.

So often, a student really gets clear on their thesis in the final and concluding paragraph of the paper. Therefore, it can be very useful to try placing that final paragraph up at the front of the paper as you go through drafts, and incorporate it into the thesis section. Then write a second conclusion in a later draft.

Conclusions
Conclude with a summary of your paper. Also, be sure to point to another Big Question (or two) that your paper has not answered, but that seems now to be the next one you would want to see answer in your topic area (and why).

Style
(1) Your citations should be in the standardized format (e.g. MLA, Chicago, APA) that your faculty mentor suggests. He or she will best know what standards suit the type of paper you are writing.

(2) When in doubt, break up long sentences and split up long paragraphs. Semi-colons are hard to use well, so avoid them unless you are sure of your grammar. Avoid page-long paragraphs that beg to be broken up into two or three.

(3) Be certain to use headings well. Headings are a roadmap for the reader. They are like signposts on the highway. They should not be complex or long, so choose a few effective words. Subheadings can sometimes also be quite helpful. **Headings** should be in bold, and **subheadings** should be in italics.

(4) Be care to select quoted phrases, sentences, or segments of several lines with scholarly precision. Only quote the material that makes your point best, and always reference it. There is no need to quote excessively, and you should help the reader understand what you want them to get from a block quote, rather than leave it dangling at the end of a paragraph. We will talk about quotes and style in class. Block quotes are okay if used wisely, but they should rarely, if ever, exceed five to ten lines.

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Course Schedule---we will meet together as a full class on only 6 occasions

Week 1 (January 22)
Initial discussion of your topics. This is an introduction to the course including the process by which students will be working with faculty on a topic of their own choosing, schedule for deliverables, emphasis on peer review and student responsibilities to one another, a conceptual model of an excellent research paper, and the significance of good research in service to humanity. We will also discuss writing of your paper.

Week 2 (January 29)
Discussion of your topics. Students will have run an informal literature review though some venue like www.scholar.google.com which is especially good because it includes everything under the sun. Also, review relevant entries in The Encyclopedia of Bioethics (2004). It may be an excellent idea to start with the Encyclopedia contents.

Week 3 (February 5)
15 minute discussion by/with each student.

Deadlines: February 12: You must report the name of your faculty mentor to SG Post for record keeping.

Between February 12 and February 19 --- students will have met once with their faculty mentor
Between February 19 and March 5 -- students will have (1) gathered sources for their project including a list of at least 20 carefully selected items from the peer-review journal literature; (2) completed a 3-level outline and (3) completed a 7-page draft. These items will be sent to your mentor by March 5 and discussed by March 12 face-to-face in depth with mentor.

Week 6 (March 5)
We will meet as a full group and all students will present for discussion their 7-page drafts.

Between March 5 and March 26 -- students will have completed an initial 14-page draft (including references) and be prepared to present on progress it for a 15-minutes in-class feedback session.

Week 9 (April 2) All students present for 10 minutes on progress to date and receive peer feedback

Weeks 10-12 (April 9, 16, 23) all students will formally present from a penultimate draft made available to their peers several days beforehand. It should be emailed to the student’s mentor and to SG Post at least several days before your scheduled presentation. Students will make a 15-minute PowerPoint presentation without interruption, followed by a half hour of Q & A feedback. PowerPoint is required. The student is expected to make improvements on this penultimate draft before submitting a final draft to the mentor by April 30 (cc Dr. Post).

Grading:
Papers will be graded by the faculty mentor only. The overall course facilitator (SGPost) will not interfere with this process. The course facilitator, however, will be responsible for the assessment of class participation (P/F). Class participation, diligence, and engagement with peer’s drafts are important.

- Medical humanities, bioethics & health law teaching at graduate, med student, resident levels (etc.)
- Clinical ethics
- Experience of illness for both patients and families, and health care professionals (including ethicists)