

Narrative Guidelines

The Assignment: Stories are powerful tools for individuals as well as for institutions: they reveal our values and assumptions, and depict their consequences in daily life. Divinity schools are, in the words of one dean, “communities of memory and communities of imagination.” As such, they are brimming with stories. These stories are typically filled with dilemmas and humor, traditions and forces of change, chaos and grace. We invite you to tell a story about your divinity school that catches who you are. Your assignment is to write a 2-page (single-spaced) narrative, which tells the story of one situation, anchored in teaching and learning, in the life of your school. (Note that this is not a case study, which is more didactic and controlled, but rather a story, which has a life of its own in the best sense of the storytelling tradition.) This story should embody your school’s day-to-day existence—the particular successes and challenges, or the things that drive you up the wall. This story will become the building block for your Lexington Seminar project.

The Purpose: The purpose of the narrative is two-fold: First, it provides an entry point into your school for The Lexington Seminar’s conversation in Maine. Our working sessions will draw upon your narratives. Hence the narrative should focus on a question that serves as a window into a host of issues for your school. Second, it helps your faculty identify and articulate a situation that the divinity school may want to address later in an educational project. Your audience is thus both your own faculty, as well as the faculty on the other seminar teams.

The Form: Dilemmas, confusion, changes, or quandaries provide the action for the story. The tension may be between characters or groups, or between conflicting values or traditions. You may start from a real event, but the narrative should not be a transcription; rather, it is a fictionalized account. Let your imagination fill in the details. The text should reflect the fluid language, diction, and dialogue of a story. Include a title that captures the essence of the story. 2006 titles included: “*If We Build It, Will They Come? – The Curriculum Reform’s Field of Dreams*” (Candler School of Theology at Emory University), “*Who Gets to Say What A Religion Means? – Insiders, Outsiders, and Everybody In Between*” (Harvard Divinity School), “*Learning Goals – Bridging Professional Formation and Academic Pursuits*” (University of Notre Dame Department of Theology), and “*Rob’s Letter – An Occasion for Change*” (Vanderbilt University Divinity School).

Past narratives have included the following situations:

- An e-mail venting one faculty member’s frustration about changes at his school is mistakenly sent to the entire community; the professor receives a host of interesting responses.
- A student writes a detailed letter to her advisor wondering why her oral exam went so poorly and wondering how to do what the school seems to be requiring of her.
- A faculty member tries to address the diverse and overwhelming needs of the stream of students knocking at her door the hour before she is to lead campus worship.
- A faculty candidate comes for a campus interview and departs realizing that he doesn’t understand the school or the position for which he is applying.
- A group of students in class discuss whether or not that class should be a required course for the M.A. In the process, they reveal both their diversity, as well as the dean’s reluctance to handle yet another curriculum revision.
- A student seeks campus counsel about why, when he went home and preached, his parish wasn’t thrilled about what he had been learning (and unlearning) in seminary.

The Process: We suggest that the entire faculty team work on the narrative; and that a designated member of the team orchestrate the process, keep the team on task, and attend the planning meeting in the spring. The following schedule will help you guide this process:

- A. **October and November 2006** — The team meets to develop initial concepts for the narrative. In the past, some teams have met, developed a narrative, and then consulted with other faculty colleagues for feedback. Other schools have invited the entire faculty to participate in the initial brainstorming process. You know what works best for your school. In either case, the process involves:
 - 1. *generating several typical situations* in teaching and learning in the life of your divinity school.
 - 2. *identifying key issues and challenges.*
 - 3. *selecting one situation* that best reflects your pedagogical issues.
 - 4. *choosing one writer* from the team to compose a fictionalized account of the situation.
 - 5. *crafting the story* with details that reflect the ethos, spirit, and voice of the divinity school.

- B. **December 1, 2007** — A draft is e-mailed to me (gziegenhals@earthlink.net) for consultation. I will confer with the writer.

- C. **December 2006 - January 2007** — The team works to ensure that the draft is revised.

- D. **January 26, 2007** — The revised draft is e-mailed to me (gziegenhals@earthlink.net). The narratives are then copied and distributed to the other deans (or designated faculty team leaders), who will read and reflect on them in preparation for the March 2, 2007 planning meeting in Washington, D.C.

- E. **March 2007** — Each team has the opportunity to edit and refine the text, based on the feedback from participants at the meeting in Washington, D.C.

- F. **March 30, 2007** — Final versions are e-mailed to me (gziegenhals@earthlink.net). The narratives are then printed in a book that is distributed to all participants in the June seminar.

- *Gretchen E. Ziegenhals*
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