Frequently Asked Questions About Freshman Seminar...

How is Freshman Seminar different from other ninth grade courses?

Freshman Seminar addresses issues that have either not been addressed directly in high school curricula or are addressed in an intrusive way in “regular” classes or extended homerooms. Topics such as high school orientation and organizational skills are usually addressed, if at all, in extended homerooms that can wreak havoc on the academic schedule. Others topics, such as career and post-secondary options, are usually addressed by having a counselor visit the classroom, sometimes in scattered fashion that doesn’t reach all students, while intruding on important academic time. Teaming and cooperative learning teaching methods are also emphasized with the teacher acting as education facilitator.

What is the connection between Freshman Seminar and the academic curriculum?

Freshman Seminar works best in cooperation with other academic subjects. Instead of teaching study skills and test-taking skills in a vacuum, the Freshman Seminar lessons draw on materials being taught in other classes, primarily English (Strategic Reading), social studies, and science. In learning how to read a textbook, for instance, students will use a textbook from one of their classes. Freshman Seminar lessons are structured so that students can learn test-preparation skills and apply those skills for specific tests in other classes. The Freshman Seminar teacher can help other teachers on the team by supporting assignments given in those classes. Other teachers reinforce the importance of Freshman Seminar as an integral part of the curriculum by expecting their students to use the skills taught in Freshman Seminar.

How is Freshman Seminar taught?

Freshman Seminar’s emphasis is on team building and cooperative learning. Many lessons or parts of lessons are structured around these models, requiring students to work in pairs or teams, to generate ideas, present information in groups to the class, teach information to each other, etc.

What skills are taught in the Social Skills units?

Brainstorming, cooperation, active listening, staying on task, recognizing loss of self-control, disagreeing without being disagreeable, asking for help, compromising, remaining calm under pressure, avoiding trouble with others, settling differences without fights, and knowing how to take notes, study, organize their time, or work in a positive manner with peers and adults.

Too many students enter large, comprehensive high schools without the necessary social and academic skills or understanding of what will be expected of them as they move through the high school curriculum and the post-secondary education that will prepare them for the world of work. Often the fear of the unknown that this lack of knowledge reveals itself in hostility, frustration, resentment, and apathy. The Freshman Seminar program was created, in part, to expose students to that path and, by giving them that exposure, to defuse the hostility and frustration.

The Problem...

Teachers often say that students enter high school not knowing how to take notes, study, organize their time, or work in a positive manner with peers and adults. These same teachers, however, rarely have the time or the opportunity to meet these very real needs as they focus on their own curricula.

The Solution...

Freshman Seminar (FS) is a course offered during the first semester of ninth grade designed to address and remedy these problems. In-depth lessons use a variety of both innovative and traditional teaching techniques including: long-range projects, cooperative learning activities, and reflective journal writing. Students practice the note-taking, time management, study, social and human relations skills they need every day in their academic and elective subjects and in their “real” lives outside of school. They learn more about themselves and their futures in the worlds of post-secondary education and careers as they prepare to choose a Career Academy.

Each FS unit is comprised of a series of 80- to 90-minute lessons. Each activity contains a suggested time length, required materials, and daily behavioral objectives.
Course Materials
Course materials include eight units, ranging from 7 to 18 lessons. Each Freshman Seminar teacher receives:

- Teacher’s Manual — containing 95 lesson plans
- Student Workbooks — containing all written activities
- Class Reader — containing all the required readings
- Teacher’s Binder — containing the current unit being taught plus the Social Skills unit
- Teacher’s Manual available on CD-ROM

Each Freshman Seminar unit is comprised of a series of 80- to 90-minute lessons. Each lesson suggests a time length, required materials, a daily behavioral objective, and includes an array of activities such as:

- Cooperative learning (brainstorming, problem-solving, information gathering, etc.)
- Small-group and whole-class discussion
- Opportunities for note-taking
- Reading
- Individual and/or small-group/team presentations
- Journal writing
- Homework

Assessment Plays a Vital Role
Student performance is measured on a daily basis through class activities, projects and presentations, and teacher-made quizzes and unit tests. Teachers receive samples of exam elements to help create a final course exam that will best meet their students’ needs and reflect the course as taught. A Talent Development-created pre- and post-test can also be administered to measure students’ growth in human relations, study and social skills, and knowledge of career and post-secondary options.

Staff Development is the Key
Freshman Seminar teachers are supported by Hopkins-based TDHS instructional facilitators and curriculum coaches who train them to teach the course before the beginning of the school year and who meet with teachers regularly during the school year for on-going staff support and training. The curriculum coaches also work directly with teachers in the classroom throughout the semester.

Freshman Seminar was revised and updated in 2009. Units were realigned; each lesson has been made more useful for teachers with the addition to each lesson of Assessment Opportunities, Instructional Strategies, Making Connections and Before You Teach; the teaching of social skills has been folded into lessons throughout the units; more detailed information about assessment and the use of rubrics in Freshman Seminar has been added to the Introduction; additional study skills are now taught, and the teaching of study skills already taught in the course has been enriched; age-appropriate readings have been introduced; a unit-culminating job interview project has been added to the Careers unit; the teaching of technology has been broadened to include Excel, spreadsheet basics, and plagiarism; a complete new culminating unit of student presentations of their semester’s work in all classes has been added.

Introduction
- Assessment in Freshman Seminar
- Creating and Using Rubrics
- Cooperative Learning
- Accommodations and Modifications for Students with Special Needs
- Preparing for the Portfolio Project (Unit 7)
- Complete Word Wall Vocabulary

Orientation
- Five lessons covering:
  - Getting to Know You
  - Getting to Know Freshman Seminar
  - Brainstorming and Goal Setting
  - Working Together
  - Building Consensus

Study Skills
- Twenty-three lessons covering:
  - Note-taking skills: Cornell Notes, Memory Principles, Mnemonic Devices, Active Listening, Graphic Organizers, Outlining
  - Giving Presentations and Public Speaking
  - Previewing and SQ3R
  - Staying Focused and on Task
  - Time Management
  - Study Space
  - Test Preparation: Test Anxiety, Objective and Essay Tests

Careers
- Thirteen lessons comprising:
  - Career vs. Job
  - The Holland Inventory
  - Investigating Careers
  - Education, Career and Lifestyle
  - Dream Jobs and Reality
  - Writing a Resume
  - Completing a Job Application
  - The Job Interview

Post-Secondary Decisions
- Eight lessons comprising:
  - Graduation, and Then What?
  - Lifestyle and Career
  - The Tests You’ll Need
  - Different Kinds of Colleges
  - Choosing a Major
  - College Costs

Human Relations
- Thirteen lessons comprising:
  - The Dynamics of Conflict
  - Conflict Loops
  - Approaches to Conflict
  - Problem Solving
  - Understanding Our Emotions
  - Strategies for Controlling Anger
  - Active Listening and I-Messages
  - Coping with Being Left Out
  - Resisting Peer Pressure
  - Dealing with Disrespect
  - Dealing with Authority

Technology
- Twenty lessons comprising:
  - Creating Documents on the Word Processor: Editing, Layout and Formatting
  - Creating Tables, Charts and Graphs
  - Internet Research
  - Evaluating Websites
  - Copyright Issues and Plagiarism
  - PowerPoint
  - Spreadsheet Basics
  - Creating a Grade Book
  - Using Excel

Student Portfolio Presentation
A 7- or 13-lesson process in which students collect and create a portfolio of work from all their classes and present their work to their parents, or a staff member.
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13 lessons comprising:
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Brainstorming, cooperation, active listening, staying on task, recognizing loss of self-control, disagreeing without being disagreeable, asking for help, compromising, remaining calm under pressure, avoiding trouble with others, settling differences without fights, and giving everyone a fair chance are all social skills emphasized in Freshman Seminar. Skills are covered in a logical order, beginning with those skills most often required as the basis for more complex skills. For instance, brainstorming and cooperation come first and second of the thirteen skills as almost all subsequent skill lessons build on the use of brainstorming and cooperation. Instead of the typical 50-minute lesson, each skill is taught in five 10- to 15-minute lessons, each lesson intended to begin each class period for five days. The lessons are all written in this form.

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