A Guide to Writing Academic Essays in Religious Studies

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Ed. Note: The following is a revised version of a resource that the author created for undergraduate students in the Department of the Study of Religion at the University of Toronto. This guide attempts to explain various aspects of essay writing that students need to know but are rarely explicitly taught. The academic format described is best suited to research essays involving the use of secondary literature. Those who find this guide useful are encouraged to make it available to their students; as with all bulletin articles, it may not be reprinted in another form without permission of the CSSR. Anyone wishing to obtain additional copies of this guide should contact the CSSR Executive Office.

1. What Is an Academic Essay?

In order to write a good essay it is customary to develop a thesis, which is a particular proposition to be argued. Essays are not general discussions of a topic, like those found in a textbook. Ideally, they are arguments of a particular point that you consider to be correct and worth making. To begin an essay you should do extensive reading on a specific, as yet unresolved (or too facilely resolved) topic, critically assess the positions of the authors you consult, and then integrate their findings and your own insights into a paper that presents your considered opinion on the matter. The first paragraph (or so) briefly outlines the issue your paper addresses then presents a clearly formulated thesis statement representing your understanding of the best solution. The body of the essay attempts to demonstrate the validity of your thesis through a logical progression of arguments. The final paragraphs sum up what you have demonstrated and comment on its relevance.

Essays, then, do not just summarize handbook discussions of a topic, nor do they just repeat the usual arguments of an established view. They are attempts to convince others that your way of conceptualizing a matter is the most adequate alternative available. The mode of presentation for an essay is therefore analytical: the strengths of your thesis and the weaknesses of the competing theories are demonstrated through discussion and analysis of the relevant evidence. The position defended in your paper does not need to be original. It may be an adaptation of one that you encountered in your research. That is, you may be arguing that a theory offered by one scholar or a group of scholars provides a better explanation of the data than the other theories you encountered.

This argumentative approach is the standard format for a research paper. It is the format one comes across most often in articles published in academic journals. The argumentative essay is the best format to showcase your ability to think critically and independently. It is not, however, the only way to write an essay. A variation on this format is what might be called the explanatory essay, which starts with a problem, intensively analyzes the evidence, then reaches a conclusion (i.e., what otherwise would be the thesis) at the end. Some people prefer to write a paper this way because it allows them to review all the evidence systematically, thereby conveying to their readers that their own assessment is not controlling and biasing their analysis, leading them to conceal evidence they cannot explain. While the motive is commendable, this procedure is probably not the best way to write an essay, for it involves an unnecessarily lengthy presentation of the evidence and leaves your reader wondering what all this analysis is leading up to. Having a thesis statement may engender better organization and clearer communication of your thoughts, for the structure of the paper will be determined by whatever would be the most logical progression of the arguments and discussions that substantiate your case.

Also acceptable is the essay that discusses the origin and development of some aspect of a religion, for instance the evolution of the Hindu god Shiva, or of the practice of sati, or of the Christian conception of Satan. Such issues usually do not lend themselves to the formulation of a single thesis statement because many disparate factors may contribute to a sequence of historical changes, and each must be analyzed individually. Because the scope of these essays is broad and the subjects of analysis are not always controversial, essays like these may not provide as good a forum for demonstrating your ability to think for yourself. It might be better to discuss only one stage in the development of some feature of a religion, particularly a stage about which there is some dispute.

Quite inadequate, however, is the descriptive essay that offers standard information about a religion. Do you remember when you were in junior high school and your teacher told you to write a report on some topic, whereupon you went to the library, opened up the encyclopedia, and tried to put the information into your own words? Your intellect has by now surpassed that challenge. A university research essay is not just newly re-packaged information. An essay that offers a mere description of "The Shinto Religion" or "Sikh Wedding Rituals" or "What the Buddha Believed" may not receive a passing grade.

In addition to these general kinds of essays, there are special types of essays that rely on the standard, argumentative approach. One might choose to do a comparative essay—that is, an essay that compares two religious traditions with respect to a particular subject. One might compare Buddhist and Christian understandings of the essence of a human. Or one might compare Israel and Pakistan as two religious states. Essays of this sort still require a thesis or at least a "point" to be made. Noting similarities and differences between two religions is a useless endeavor unless something meriting argument can be demonstrated through this comparison. Thus the comparison must have a definite focus, and the analysis of similarities and differences should substantiate some larger insight, which would be the thesis of the paper.
Another specific type of essay is called the exegetical essay. The word exegesis is derived from a Greek word meaning “to lead out.” The term refers to established methods of interpretation designed to draw the author’s meaning out of a text. The systematic approach of exegesis is a means of countering the natural tendency of reading one’s own presuppositions into religious texts (which is called eisegesis). An exegetical paper explains the meaning of a particular passage, or group of related passages, of scripture. Such essays are arguments about what the author meant these words to convey. One might, for example, attempt to argue for a particular interpretation of a difficult or controversial passage, such as the Gospel of Mark 4:11–12; or one might explain what an author meant by a particular phrase or concept through an analysis of all the relevant passages. Again, these essays should have a thesis. Unlike commentaries on scripture, exegetical papers do not go sentence by sentence through the passage explaining every thought in order. The structure of an exegetical essay should correspond to the most logical and compelling presentation of evidence and arguments that support a particular interpretation.

2. Presuppositions

2.1. Theoretical and Methodological Assumptions

In the public university, the study of religion is considered an academic rather than a religious exercise. We are not out to defend or refute the spiritual values and beliefs of the religions we investigate. We cannot, for those realities are not open to scientific inquiry. Instead, we set metaphysical and supernatural matters to one side and concentrate on what can be learned about religious phenomena through the “secular” avenues of investigation used in the humanities. This is not to suggest that academic scholarship seeks to “explain away” religious realities or to reduce them entirely to factors that are not religious. Rather, it is to affirm that all aspects of human existence are influenced by forces that are open to scientific investigation (e.g., social, psychological, economic, cultural, and political forces)—regardless of whether other scientifically inscrutable factors are involved. Thus, scholars investigate the religious dimension of human behavior using the very same methods, theories, and assumptions that are used to study human nature in the humanities and social sciences. The tools of historiography, sociology, literary criticism, and so forth may not tell us everything we want to know about religion. Indeed, a strictly academic approach is not apt to shed light upon the ultimate questions of human existence. However, the introduction of theological questions and metaphysical constructs is highly problematic within the non-religious context of the humanities and social sciences, for such ideas are invariably reflections of the faith of the investigator and will not seem plausible or rationally defensible to investigators who do not share those religious convictions. The institutional endeavor to develop and refine a common, empirically based set of presuppositions is what permits researchers of differing faiths to communicate meaningfully and reach the kind of consensus that furthers the academic enterprise.

Scholars, then, do not attempt to comprehend religions in the ways that religions tend to comprehend themselves—that is, in terms of encounters between the divine and the human. Rather than considering intangible realities such as enlightenment, divine inspiration, revelation, and divine intervention, scholars focus on tangible factors discernible within the larger social-historical context. At first brush, this restriction of the academic study of religion to what is accessible to objective inquiry might seem to misconstrue the essence of religion. Yet when religious ideas and practices are examined within their historical contexts, they become less mystifying, more intelligible. Metaphysical systems lose some of the ethereal quality of disembodied thoughts. And the proponents of these systems cease to appear quite so much as hallowed beings who had a special revelation of the truth and the moral fortitude to proclaim it. The academic approach enables us to appreciate the ways in which the founders of religious movements were culturally conditioned individuals who, like ourselves, accepted most of the prevailing assumptions of their societies. And it enables us to appreciate how the new and influential aspects of their teachings had social and political relevance to that time and place.

Traditional accounts of the origins of religious customs and beliefs usually envision godly teachers who either brought eternal truth down from heaven (e.g., Krishna, Christ), received it as a revelation from above (e.g., Moses, the prophets, Muhammad, Guru Nanak), acquired access to it through some rite or procedure (shamans, magicians), or through discipline managed to transcend their own culture and humanity to a point where they could see ultimate reality as it truly is (e.g., the Buddha, Mahavira). However much truth there is to these pious conceptions, they leave little room for historical analysis of the formative thinkers and texts, and obscure the relationship between religious truth and the shape of society. It is not only explicit theories of revelation and enlightenment that obscure this relationship, for the same problem occurs when religious customs and ideals are explained with reference to a religious leader’s personal dispositions and beliefs. Explaining that a particular leader ordained something because he or she believed something is a circular explanation unless that belief is itself accounted for as a reasonable response to particular circumstances. Saying, for instance, that the Buddha had no regard for the caste system because he believed that anyone can attain enlightenment is an empty, circular explanation. For it does not explain why, as a person living in a particular set of circumstances in a particular time and place, he might have been disposed to see the matter this way. Noting that his disregard for caste was part of a wider rejection of aspects of Brahmanism (e.g., the authority of the Vedas, expensive animal sacrifices) that undercut an inequitable social structure in artificial dependency upon the priestly class—that is an historical explanation (whether or not it is the best one).

It is useful to consider how religious ideas can do things. Whereas established religious ideals tend to preserve the status quo, new or revived ideals often empower social change. When religious thinkers reject the metaphysical basis of one system of thought in favor of another, they are often producing a new world-view or system of meaning that entails a revised social order. The introduction of a new cosmology (i.e., a new view of the “shape” of the universe and of our places within it) through the promotion of a new doctrine can result in tangible benefits to the adherents, which in turn help explain the popularity of a tradition. For example, being a Buddhist in the 5th century BCE before the Common Era (BCE) could raise the social status of a person from a lower varna (class) and make possible the pursuit of social and religious goals that were being curtailed by Brahmanism.
Students studying the origins of theistic religions (e.g., the teachings of Moses, Zoroaster, Jesus, Muhammad, or the Sikh gurus) are especially likely to overlook the social, political, and economic factors that made these new messages attractive. The “pipeline” model of revelation is so entrenched in these traditions (and much of the scholarship on them) that people seldom think to ask why these founders might have embraced the basic “truths” they proclaimed, and why so many people responded to them as they did.

It is important to be very clear about the proper methods and subject matter of academic, university investigation because the writing of religious or theological essays is a common and costly mistake. Each year teachers and graders in introductory religion courses receive essays exploring questions like: What is the truest form of Sikhism? Is Jesus the Son of God? Should Muslim women wear the veil? And so on. These may all be stimulating questions, and the essays produced may be judged to be very good when written/read in a religious context; but they frequently result in a poor grade because they do not offer the grader a chance to evaluate the breadth of the student's research into the academic literature and ability to analyze an issue according to the methods of that scholarship. It is possible to study the ideas of theologians and other religious thinkers without doing theology yourself, provided you manage to take a disinterested, third-person perspective and undertake to consider these ideas as social phenomena—as intelligible products of a particular place and time. But if you have difficulty viewing your own religion the way that scholars investigate “other peoples” beliefs, then write your essay on another religion (if that is an option). Researching a religion of which you are not a participant is the safest option, particularly considering that students new to university religious studies find it very difficult to recognize when they are assuming things that scholars would not accept. What scholars have concluded about a matter and what people are taught about that matter through their religious education are often very different things.

2.2. Assumptions Concerning Background Knowledge

Students are often unsure about what knowledge or hypotheses they can take for granted or presuppose in their essay and what they need to define, explain, or argue. For introductory level courses, it is generally best to presume only that your reader knows and accepts the information and hypotheses about a particular religion that are offered in the course readings and lectures. That means that if you are studying a topic not covered in the course itself, you will need to do more explaining than usual. The graders in World Religions courses are often graduate students who specialize in one particular period of one religion. The professors in these courses will have more general knowledge about religions, but are also not experts in all religions. If you know for certain that you will be evaluated by someone who has studied the topic you have chosen or been assigned (as is more typically the case in higher level courses), you can explain less. But bear in mind that it must be evident that you know the meanings, relevant dates, and so forth of the terms you are using. If that is not perfectly apparent to your reader, your paper will be returned with comments asking you to define and explain things (the same applies for tests). Likewise, if you are accepting controversial theories in your study, you need to show your awareness of this fact and offer some justification for your selection.

3. How Is an Essay Evaluated?

The person grading your essay will attempt to assess the extent of your research and learning on the topic; the amount of independent, critical reflection that preceded your solution; and the reasonableness and intellectual integrity of your argument. Your ability to express your thoughts clearly and effectively in a logically organized and compelling manner will also be assessed, as will the completeness and correctness of the paper's documentation. The areas of evaluation can be discussed in terms of form and content.

3.1. Content

The content is the most important thing. It should demonstrate extensive learning and intelligent analysis. The goal of academic inquiry is to advance the state of knowledge within a particular field. Thus it is the quality of this analysis that is evaluated, not the character of the person who produced it. Academic essay writing is not a forum for defending personal or religious convictions or for disclosing one's private thoughts. The writer of a research essay is engaged in the exercise of applying logic and reason to a phenomenon in order to gain some rational understanding of its occurrence. The persuasiveness of the argument should therefore be logical rather than rhetorical, aimed at the intellect and not the heart. References to subjective knowledge (personal experiences or preferences) and appeals to the emotions are not only out of place in academic writing but actually weaken one's position, for by relying on these things one is tacitly acknowledging that the evidence does not provide sufficiently strong support.

Though logic and reason are the primary instruments of investigation, the analysis is more impressive if it is conducted within the framework of an established theory. You might, for example, do a Marxist analysis of the Hindu class system, a Durkheimian analysis of the Protestant work ethic, or a Jungian (or some sort of literary-critical) analysis of a passage of scripture. The attention you need to give to theory and methodology will increase as you advance through a religious studies program.

Whether or not you adopt a particular theory, it is important to remember that an issue is only adequately examined when it is fully situated within its historical context. The tell-tale signs of weak historical perspective include the substitution of vague phrases, inductive generalizations (sweeping conclusions based on a few examples), and casual inferences for specific social-historical description. It is not sufficient to state that something happened "in ancient times," or to explain that particular texts were composed by "the religious elites." Be as specific as possible. Note when things happened, who was involved, and which sect or branch of the religion is at issue. All religions change over time: Like branches on a tree, new forms develop with new sets of rituals and beliefs. Thus one should not assume that, for instance, all East Asian Buddhists accepted the same basic texts and beliefs associated with the Theravada school in India. Even the supposedly "fundamental" beliefs of a religion are not interpreted the same way within every form of the religion.
So focus on the particular beliefs and practices of the particular branch of the religion you are investigating.

One familiar assumption reflecting inadequate historical consciousness deserves special mention. Some students subscribe to the notion that there must have been one group of wealthy elites who invented the religious beliefs in a civilization and foisted them onto the ignorant masses in order to oppress them and preserve the status quo. Though these ideas have the semblance of a critical theory, this scenario cannot simply be projected onto any religion as a substitute for learning the “facts” about particular societies and cultures. Students who take this approach often try to deduce specific social realities (e.g., forms of oppression that are, or must have been, occurring) from the general beliefs of the religion as a substitute for finding actual evidence (usually Buddhism and Hinduism are picked on, for reasons I cannot fathom). When actual information exists, there is no justification for resorting to hypothetical deductions.

3.2. Form and Grading

Closely related to content, and nearly as important, is the written expression of your thoughts. If your ideas are not clear on the page, they are not clear in your head either. Any university will expect all of its students to be able to write proficiently in the language of instruction. For some students this means extra work in a writing lab. Consider reading through a style manual and taking a course in effective writing through the English Department. The ability to write well will probably be every bit as useful to you as the specific knowledge you acquire through writing papers. (Essay structure and style will be discussed below.)

Since there is no one right way to evaluate an essay, the actual breakdown of your grade will depend on the predilections of the individual grader. This is one possibility for a marking scheme:

- Content: 50%
- Evidence of Research: 10%
- Structure and Organization: 10%
- Independent Thought: 10%
- Style, Grammar, and Spelling: 15%
- Documentation: 05%

4. Some Reflections on How to Write an Essay

4.1. When to Start

For people who start their research a month or so early, and work leisurely an afternoon at a time, essay writing can be quite rewarding. It is to the people who habitually start their essays within a week of the due date that essays seem like massive undertakings. Essay writing deprives them not only of all their spare time but even of their sleep, and every other thing they have to do that week becomes a crisis. Should some unanticipated circumstance prevent them from finishing on time they begin to feel that something up there hates them. And when they fail the paper because they have not done nearly enough work they marvel, “But I never worked so hard in my life!”

Those “acts of God” that beset you the week an essay is due may seem to be unavoidable and, therefore, excuses. But your more enlightened grader may interpret these occurrences as omens warning you to repent of your procrastinating ways. Re-
its own terms. Apologetic and pseudo-scholarly books are
sometimes donated to university libraries by religious organiza-
tions in an effort to disseminate their views. It is up to you to dis-
cern the biases of the authors you consult and to use appropri-
ate, scholarly research. Often (though not always) the title of a
book will supply a good indication of the kind of work contained
within. Essays posted on the Internet by their authors are a
mixed bag at best. Some are published that way as a last resort,
others because the author likes the technology. Some are writ-
ten by undergraduate students and sound more impressive than
they actually are. Public libraries are also an unreliable source for
scholarly writings. If you are in doubt about the academic cre-
dentials of a particular writer, you may want to check the au-
тор’s name in the Religion Index One (use the CD-ROM) to see
if he or she has published any articles or books that can be found
in the university libraries. And feel free to take advantage of your
professor’s or Teaching Assistant’s office hours to consult about
the research materials you have chosen.

4.4. Beginning to Write

Do not start writing before you have some opinion on the so-
lution to the issue you are confronting. Otherwise you may pro-
duce a paper that wanders aimlessly through the evidence,
never reaching a conclusion. Wait until you have an idea of what
you want to argue then start writing these arguments down. If
you have done extensive research you could probably fill up ten
pages in an evening. But when you read them again the next
day, those pages will probably seem pretty awful. Treat them as
a first draft. Unless you are incredibly bright, you may need to
“see” your ideas on paper before you can adequately evaluate
them. Having your arguments set out in writing enables you to
tackle them as if you were someone else, someone who
knows the same things you do but is not partial to your interpre-
tation. Do your arguments seem logical to you? Do they suffice
to establish that your perspective is better than all the others?
Once you detect the weaknesses in your arguments you will be
led to explore new ideas that you would not have thought of be-
fore you started writing. You will probably come to change
some of your initial views.

5. Rewriting, Proofreading, and Printing

As you refine your arguments, your thesis will become clearer in
your mind. Nearer the end of your work you will know precisely
what it is that you are succeeding in arguing, and for that reason
you should put off writing your opening paragraph until you
have finished the body of the essay. It is really through the pro-
cess of writing and rewriting that you determine your precise
thesis. The thoughts you had while researching your essay will
have been somewhat random and scattered—as ordinary think-
ing usually is. The process of writing is what allows you to start
systematically structuring these disjointed insights. Thinking “on
paper” allows an artificial clarity you might not obtain otherwise.
Essay writing helps teach you how to think.

Work your thoughts into distinct paragraphs, each develop-
ing a particular idea. If your paragraphs tend to be only a few
sentences long or else go on for a few pages, you have not re-
efined your thoughts to the point of clarity. It will take some time
for you to get a grasp of what it is you are trying to say, but once
you reach that point you will be able to order your ideas into a
logical sequence of arguments that support your thesis. This de-
gree of organization is rarely achieved without a great deal of
work. Good writing is often one quarter writing and three quar-
ters rewriting.

You may want to subdivide your essay using subheadings. If
you do, make sure that everything beneath a heading actually
belongs to that topic and that all second- or third-level subdivi-
sions belong within their respective higher-level topics. Be con-
sistent in how you distinguish headings from subheadings. The
two levels of headings used in this guide may serve as an exam-
ple.

Your introductory paragraph should be as concise as you can
make it. There is no need for lengthy preamble (or padding!).
Outline the basic issue as tersely as possible, then clearly and
overly state your thesis, mentioning how you will go about
demonstrating your case. Always strive for clarity. By the end of
the first few paragraphs, your reader should have a clear basic
understanding of what you intend to accomplish and how you
intend to do it. Half a page may be all you need for the introd-
uction. The introductions in published articles may supply you with
a model.

Once your argument is complete, the essay may be con-
cluded with a summary of what you have demonstrated and
some comments on the relevance (academic or social) of this re-
search. Resist the urge to slip out of the academic mode. This is
not the place to add your “two cents worth.” Do not get per-
sonal or emotional or sermonize or castigate or prescribe solu-
tions to the problems of the religious groups investigated. Just
remind your reader of what you have contributed to the aca-
demic enterprise and, if you wish, of how your conclusions may
be useful to those who, in different context, strive to improve the
world.

Throughout the process of rewriting, periodically print up a
draft of the essay and make corrections on the pages them-
selves. It is much easier to get a sense of the whole argument
when you can see all of it on paper. Mistakes that are easily
missed when looking at a computer screen are more easily spot-
ted in print.

The very last thing you should do before printing your final
copy is run the spell checker one more time (to catch the typos
you added during your last round of corrections). Always scan
through your final copy in case something went wrong as a re-
sult of your final revisions (e.g., sometimes titles get shifted to the
last line on a page, or manually typed hyphenations end up in
the middle of a line).

6. Documentation

Documentation is the most straightforward aspect of writing an
essay. Mistakes in your documentation can therefore only give
your reader the impression that you do sloppy research or else
cannot be bothered to learn the accepted methods. Con-
sidering that graders often examine the bibliography first (so that
the body of the essay is fresh in their minds when they finish
reading), you might want to consider the advantages of flawless
documentation as a way of making a good first impression.

6.1. What Is Documented?

Some students seem to believe that notes are required only
when directly quoting someone. Documentation is actually re-
quired whenever you make use of someone else’s ideas—even if you use your own words to express them. Every time you rely on another writer’s way of conceptualizing a matter you must note your intellectual debt. That is not to say that you always need to specify the source from which you learned some of your information. Items of common knowledge (generally accepted “facts” that can be found in more than one source) do not have to be attributed to any one author. An over-documented essay gives the impression that you did not read enough to know that much of the information you are citing is actually common knowledge, whereas an under-documented essay gives the impression that you need to pretend that you are capable of thinking for yourself (and gets you in trouble). A properly documented essay will accurately convey the full extent of your research.

Make sure that your quotations are free of copying mistakes. If the sentences you are quoting contain typos or other mistakes that a grader might attribute to sloppy copying on your part, indicate your awareness of these problems by inserting the Latin word sic (meaning, “thus”) in “square” brackets. Square brackets are used for inserting your own comments or clarification into a quotation. Consider, for example, this unconscious “clarification” of Dewey Bunnell’s memorable lyric: “In the desert[,] you can remember your name, [be]cause there ain’t no one [sic] for to give [sic] you no pain [sic].” Though the temptation can be strong, avoid using square brackets to interject your scorn for the stupidity of another writer (e.g., adding “[I]” or “[sic]” after a particularly foolish comment). Adding derision will only detract from the merits of your argument.

Quote only when necessary. You are not doing your own work if your essay is a pastiche of direct quotations. The point of quoting a scholar is to indicate what that person thinks, and this can often be done through (properly documented) paraphrases and general discussions of various authors’ positions. Quotations of scholars do not prove points or effectively substantiate your arguments. Many students think that a position is sufficiently proven by quoting a “real” scholar who expresses that opinion. But unless a quotation includes an assessment of the evidence, it really only demonstrates that this particular scholar holds that opinion. Even renowned “authorities” can be wrong. (In fact, the “great experts” must often be wrong if you consider how much they disagree with each other!) It is up to you to argue the significant or essential points you make in your paper, by discussing the evidence. Remember, if the books you are using do not relate this evidence, they are probably too general for your purposes.

In the course of substantiating the main points of your essay, you will frequently need to make brief assertions about matters related to these points. These peripheral matters can be dealt with summarily in the notes by citing the conclusions of authors who, in your view, adequately examined these issues. Your footnotes may include some brief discussion of the evidence—enough to convince your reader that you know the issues and are accepting a reasonable conclusion. A brief review of the evidence in a note is important if you are assuming things that some of the writers you have consulted would dispute.

6.2. Avoiding Plagiarism

Plagiarism is the academic offence of presenting another person’s words or ideas as one’s own. Students commit plagiarism when they submit another person’s essay, have someone write an essay for them, or lift sentences and paragraphs (not to mention complete articles) from the scholarship they used. They are likewise cheating when they resubmit work they did for another course. The penalties for these offences are stern, and may include expulsion from the college or an automatic assignment or course grade of “0” with the word plagiarism appearing beside it on transcripts. The severity of the penalty depends upon your university’s policy, the weight of the assignment, and the extent to which the work submitted is not one’s own. Honest people need not fret over the possibility that they inadvertently used some of the same words that appear in their sources, though the borrowing of choice words and apt phrases should be acknowledged with quotation marks and documentation. And there is nothing wrong with writing a new and essentially different essay on a topic you previously researched.

The Internet has made plagiarism much more convenient, but also much easier to catch. No matter how many different sites are traversed in finding an essay, a suspicious grader needs only to type the title or a distinctive phrase from the first few pages into a search engine in order to be taken there directly. Purchased essays may also be readily traceable, for they may have been sold to other students who took the course, taken from the Internet, plagiarized from existing sources, or stolen from the pile of essays that were returned the previous year. The more expensive made-to-order essays, on the other hand, are produced by people who are vastly more knowledgeable than the student. It does not take long for a professor to determine whether the essay in question was written by the person who submitted it. Finally, essays that incorporate passages from books invariably contain sections and "seams" where the plagiarizer’s inferior understanding and writing style are clearly discernible. Catching plagiarism is not as difficult as it might seem.

6.3. Methods of Documentation

Though you are usually free to use any of the standard methods of documentation (check with your instructor), you must choose one that is appropriate for the type of essay you are writing. If you have few references you might want to use the name-page method. If you have many references and periodically wish to add supplementary information, use footnotes or endnotes.

In religious studies you must give the exact pages where you encountered the ideas you present. The name-date method of documentation, which gives the author’s last name and the year of publication, is therefore usually inappropriate. It is mainly used in the social sciences where references to an article typically refer to the whole paper, and the need to refer to more than one paper by the same author occurs frequently. Why keep repeating the year of publication when you could be giving relevant information? On the other hand, this method can be used with page numbers. Of course, if there is little value in mentioning the year, use the name-page method as your primary style and add the year only when referring to authors from whom you used more than one work. Note, though, that these in-text methods may incline you to document too sparingly (in effect, to plagiarize), for the inclusion of many parenthetical references within the body of an essay can seem obtrusive.
Footnotes or endnotes remain the most common method of documentation in religious studies scholarship. The superscript number is an unobtrusive way of indicating the existence of documentary-supplementary information without forcing the reader to consider it. More important, notes give you a place to add additional evidence or relevant digressions that are hard to fit into the body of the essay. Notes are not just used for documentation.

When using notes, you only need to give the full publication information about a book or article the first time you cite it (and again in the bibliography). Scholars once used words like *ibid.* (meaning, "in the same place") and *op. cit.* (meaning, "in the work cited") for subsequent references, but this approach just causes aggravation for the reader, who has to hunt backwards to find the previous references. Thus it is now common for succeeding references to mention the author's last name plus a shortened title of a few consecutive key words (i.e., the title is shortened, not abbreviated) then the page(s). Some authors give the full publication information in a footnote when a source is first used then use in-text references for subsequent referrals; some just use parenthetical references but add explanatory footnotes when necessary. I personally see no value in mixing these methods considering that footnotes are sufficient by themselves.

Here is an example of an in-text reference using the name-page method (it is an excerpt from a paragraph):

The specific wording "to his disciples and to Peter" in Mark 16:7 is often viewed as a passing reference to an early resurrection tradition naming Peter as the first to whom Jesus appeared (e.g., Fuller 57-58, 63-64; Stein 1991, 144). Though such an allusion is plausible .... Notice that the parenthetical reference goes before the terminal punctuation and includes all the relevant pages. If the parenthetical reference comes at the end of a block quotation it may be put outside of the terminal punctuation. If you choose that variation or any other, be consistent.

6.4. Footnotes, Endnotes, and Bibliographies

The conventional formats for arranging the information contained in footnotes and bibliographies can be found in style manuals. Two of the most respected manuals are the MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers and The Chicago Manual of Style. These are available in college libraries. Books on writing and style based on these standard reference works are usually carried by university bookstores, and the better ones are worth buying and reading completely. Useful but brief style guides can be found on the Internet. The locations of the sites change periodically, but typing "MLA style guide" into a search engine should lead you to them. Conventions for citing Internet and multimedia resources (e.g., CD-ROMs, essays posted on the World Wide Web, news groups, and e-mail correspondences) may be found in Andrew Harnack and Gene Kleppinger's Online! A Reference Guide to Using Internet Sources (New York: St. Martin's Press, 1997) and Janice R. Walker and Todd Taylor's The Columbia Guide to Online Style (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998).

Construct your bibliography as you work. Record all the publication information about a book when you first refer to it, so that you have that information before you return the book. If you forgot to record some aspect of the publication information or are confused by the presentation of this information on the title page of the book, you may be able to get the proper bibliographic format through the university online catalogue. That will save you having to find the book again.

6.5. Block Quotations

Quotations longer than about five or six lines on your page are put into block quotations. These are indented from the left margin (or both margins), preferably single-spaced (or a spacing between single and double), and set off from the body of the paragraph by a triple line-space before and after the quotation. A quotation briefer than five lines may be set in block format if it is of something important enough to the discussion that it is worth highlighting. For example, if you repeatedly refer back to a particular verse of scripture over the course of a few pages you might want to set it apart in this fashion to facilitate your reader's inspection.

The punctuation preceding a block quotation is determined by the syntax of the sentence introducing this quotation (e.g., if this sentence is complete, use a colon; if it is only a complete subordinate phrase, use a comma; if it is a fragment of a sentence that is completed by the first words of the quotation, use no punctuation). The quotation itself is not put in quotation marks; the block format serves as sufficient indication that the words are being quoted. Quotation marks are used within block quotations only when the material you are citing itself includes quotations or direct speech. Finally, block quotations within essays are not put in italics. If the material you are citing is already completely in italics, put it in normal type, but mention in your note that the italics were removed.

7. Style

Many students have never been taught the rules of grammar and punctuation, not to mention the technical aspects of style, such as which words to capitalize in a title. This sort of information may be found in style manuals and writer's handbooks like the ones mentioned above. Brief discussions are often available at the backs of large dictionaries, along with examples of documentation methods, lists of standard abbreviations, and other information relevant to formal writing. Of course, many questions about style and documentation are easily resolved by comparing how things are done in well written published works. Beware, though, that publishing companies and scholarly journals delight in defining their own idiosyncratic conventions.

8. Layout

Your essay should have a title page containing your name, the course number, the name of the professor, and the date submitted. Titles on title pages should not be put in quotation marks, italics, or completely in capital letters; and they do not end with a period. (A title placed in the center of the page in bold type looks effective.) Attractive binders are unnecessary and even cumbersome for the grader: a staple in the top left corner is sufficient (if you use endnotes or the name-page method you might want to use a secure clip rather than a staple so that the grader can remove the documentation pages at the back of the essay for easier reference). The essay itself should be in 12-point font, double-spaced, with 3.5 to 4 cm (about 1.5 inch) margins on both sides and at the top, and 2.5 to 3 cm (1 inch) at the bottom. The essay is easier to read if the right margin is not justified.
file of the parts you remove from your essay during rewriting, in case later you decide to put some of them back in. Why just delete a paragraph on impulse if you can just as easily transfer it to another file for future reference? Consider also that it is a bad idea to erase an essay file once you are finished, even after you have submitted the essay. As conscientious as your graders try to be, they are subject to the same "acts of God" that plague you. If the TA’s pet Chihuahua eats your essay, you will be the only person who can produce another copy. If you use a typewriter, make a photocopy of your essay to keep for yourself (submit the original, not the copy).

10. Some Final Thoughts
As you can see, essay writing is not just a way of expressing your views. It is a process that structures your thinking, allowing you to turn random insights and interesting ideas into cogent theories. Not surprisingly, writing essays is one of the best ways to master a subject, and mastering essay writing is an integral part of becoming a scholar. Give it your best: the greater comprehension you attain should more than reward your effort.

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The Bible in Bean Town: A Guide to the Annual SBL Meeting

Reed M. N. Weep

A year ago I dedicated this column to recommending some of the more interesting panels scheduled for the annual meeting of the American Academy of Religion. As a service to the profession—and "service" is my middle name—I thought I would perform the same operation in this column for the Society of Biblical Literature. The problem is that the AAR/SBL sends out this program book that is, like, 350 pages long! You can’t possibly wade through all of it. While you are in Boston, you’ll have to spend a good deal of time prowling the book display, hoping to pick up free tote bags, so there’s no time for that massive program.

Not to worry; I have gone through it and I have selected the panels that are sure winners. As a preface to "Reed’s Picks," let me explain an important principle that I was working with, that is, stick with the groups. All the sections are too boring to bother with, and the seminars and consultations are just too weird. What you’ll find below is a selection of the more choice group meetings, plus one very worthwhile plenary session.

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Saturday Afternoon
November 20

Bible in Ancient and Modern Media Group

1:00 p.m.- 3:30 p.m. George Washington Ballroom

Theme: Apocalyptic Literature and the End of the World

Papers will be presented in this session about the end of the world. If this event has not occurred, then the session will be postponed until next year.

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Computer Assisted Research Group

3:45 p.m.- 6:15 p.m. John Adams Ballroom

Theme: The Cutting Edge of High Tech Scholarship

Al Gore, Washington, DC, presiding

Michael Drorsin, New York City

Using the Bible Code to Find Monica Lewinsky in the Torah

Bill Gates, Redmond, WA

Bow to Me, Master of the Universe

Steve Jobs, Cupertino, CA

It Comes in a Nice Little

Terri Hedegaard, University of Phoenix

I May Not Know Much about the Bible, But I Know How to Make Money