

*A Guide to Writing in*  
**THE STUDY OF RELIGION**

FAYE HALPERN  
THOMAS A. LEWIS  
ANNE MONIUS  
ROBERT ORSI  
CHRISTOPHER WHITE

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# Introduction

This guide began as a pledge by your professors to think about why we assign writing. We should not assign essays just because our professors did; students should not write essays just to fulfill requirements. Although a small portion of the writing we assign has the simple function of making sure you know the material, the majority of the writing you do requires more than summary. We want you to engage and argue with the sources you are reading. We want you to take ideas in new directions. Some of what follows might look formulaic. But these guidelines are actually less constraining than the five-paragraph formula you might have learned in high school. We provide them here as a template from which you can make your own essays. It is the template we use when launching our own essays, so we know it can work.



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# Part I: Strategies for Getting Started

## GENERATING QUESTIONS

One might think that a good essay gives the sense that there is nothing the author does not know. In fact, most good essays begin with an honest question or set of related questions (which sometimes appear in the actual essay), questions that genuinely puzzle and interest the author—and, one can presume, the reader. When beginning to think about your paper topic, one of the first things you should do is find a good question. If you find the right question, you will need every page you have been allotted to answer it sufficiently.

So far, we have been assuming that you will be the generator of the question that founds your essay, but quite often you will be given the question your essay should address.

Example: “First Writing Assignment: On the basis of a close reading of *A Life of Jonathan Mitchell*, analyze Mitchell’s ways of thinking theologically about the two sacraments. Do his worries about the sacraments suggest that the “Congregational” system was coming under strain of some kind,

## WHAT MAKES A GOOD QUESTION?

### 1) A good question asks “how” or “why” rather than “what”:

Example: “How does the idea of original sin contribute to Augustine’s overall vision?”

Example: “Why should one choose to believe in religious pluralism over religious exclusivism?”

Not: “Is it true that the Puritans engaged in rigorous self-reflection?”  
(Resulting essay: “Yes.”)

Not: “What does Jonathan Mitchell say about the sacraments?”

### 2) A good question leads you back into the evidence (data) you have available:

Example: “Why does Durkheim spend so much time making distinctions in this text?”

Not: “How has Christianity changed in the past five centuries?”  
(This would require a whole library to answer.)

Not: “What kind of religious practice did prehistoric peoples engage in?”  
(By definition, there’s no evidence to answer this.)

### 3) A good question often zeroes in on a puzzle or contradiction:

Example: “Why does this author, who claims to believe in God’s love, spend all his time writing about God’s vengeance?”



or having to adjust? If so, how and why?"

Here you are given the question. Yet even with a directive assignment like this, you will still need to generate your own questions as you re-read the text before doing the assignment: Where does this strain show? Is this, in fact, best typified as a strain? If so, does this strain arise out of things we might not have initially expected?

## FREEWITING AND OUTLINING

A founding question is a great place to begin, but it is only a beginning. How do you proceed? People have different techniques for generating the content of an essay: we have heard of index cards, scribbled-on napkins, idea journals, and even proceeding without notes. There is no surefire method. But there are two techniques that most writers find helpful: freewriting and outlining. Freewriting involves ignoring that critical voice inside you; do not worry about whether what you are writing makes sense. Just sit at your computer or in front of a notepad and write every idea that comes into your head.<sup>1</sup> Do this for 10 or 15 minutes. On the other hand, “outlining” involves mapping out—in nested, flowchart, or even 3-D form—different sections of an essay and main points you want to make in each.

Each technique has different benefits. Freewriting is great for overcoming writer’s block, and outlining often produces a real feeling of comfort (i.e., “my paper won’t get off track now”). But each technique has pitfalls, too. Freewriting produces a lot of material that you will not use. And the ideas you generate while freewriting will, most likely, be very different from one another and some might not actually be right. This may seem paradoxical, but the trick to being a good freewriter is being able to delete most of what you have written. Freewriting is a process that gets you to the best ideas, but when you have pages and pages of freewriting you will have to select only the best insights and reorganize them into a coherent form. The pitfall with outlining is that you might feel bad about not sticking to the outline.

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<sup>1</sup> For more details about the process of “freewriting,” see Pat Belanoff, Peter Elbow, and Sheryl I. Fontaine, eds. *Nothing Begins with N: Toward a Phenomenology of Freewriting* (Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1991).

People often find that the writing process causes their thoughts to develop in ways they had not expected. Recognize that your outline is a hypothesis rather than a life sentence. Your outline is a working map of how you will proceed with your writing, which will most likely change as you begin to write.

Finally a word about divine inspiration and what have been called “little darlings.” We all have a tendency to think whatever we write, especially if written at 3 a.m., is inspired or brilliant, and in any case worthy of preservation. But revising and deleting are critical. They require that you throw away old sentences and paragraphs (and in many cases, whole sections) and rewrite them completely. As one of our own professors told us, “The quality of a paper can be measured by how much has gone in the trash.” Cutting is especially hard to do when you come up with a particularly nice turn of phrase. The problem is that these phrases often are off-topic or, given the improved state of your draft, no longer appropriate. Gertrude Stein once encouraged writers to be willing to murder such “little darlings.” We have found her brutal advice to be right.





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## Part II. What Every Good Essay Needs

### THESIS

An academic paper without a thesis would be like a mammal without a spine.<sup>2</sup> You might have heard “thesis” defined as the main idea or argument of your paper. In some cases, this basic definition makes sense. But in many writing assignments, especially longer research papers, the stakes for a good thesis go up. In more ambitious papers such as your junior essay, a good thesis must meet three criteria: it should be original, arguable, and interesting.

When we say a thesis must be original, we mean that it must be your own work. You cannot take your thesis from something you have been reading. Your thesis is your answer to questions you are asking of the text or other evidence.

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<sup>2</sup>We owe this metaphor, as well as the criteria for a good thesis, to Michael Radich, *A Student's Guide to Writing: East Asian Studies Sophomore Tutorial* (Cambridge: President and Fellows of Harvard University, 2003), 36.

## TWO LEVELS OF THESES

**Level One: Thesis-as-Thoughtful-Answer** (for short, often comparative essays in which the professor poses a specific question for you to answer):

The Assignment: "Discuss how Otto's and Proudfoot's ideas of religious experience differ from each other."

Thesis: "The difference between Otto and Proudfoot on the issue of religious experience can be explained by a larger difference between them: Otto is an insider and Proudfoot is an outsider."

**Level Two: Thesis-as-interesting-arguable-and-original** (more ambitious-and often longer-research essays):

Thesis: "In 1968, the Pope published an encyclical on the morality of the use of artificial contraception, which rejects this kind of contraception based on a particular understanding of 'natural law.' However, this understanding both contradicts other Church rulings on medical technology and ignores certain modern understandings of sex. This paper will not claim that artificial contraception must be accepted, but that this understanding of 'natural law' does not provide the justification to ban it."

Thesis: "Despite the compelling case Alvin Plantinga makes for religious exclusivism, it seems to me that we must accept religious pluralism as the better position since it allows our beliefs to remain consistent."<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> One of the biggest differences between these two levels of theses is the absence of motive in the first level. To reach the second level of thesis, there has to be a fairly explicit motive, which can be gleaned from the thesis statements offered above. We discuss motive in the next section.

In addition to being original, your thesis must be arguable. Another way of saying this is that there must be evidence for your thesis. Some theses are very interesting but not supportable without contracting the services of a medium or reading three libraries worth of material. Here are two examples of theses that are not arguable because they would require mountains of data:

Example: "Hindu views of the divine are more nuanced than views of the divine in other traditions." (The problem here is that proving this statement would require an immensely complex comparison, with data drawn from many different traditions. This would be an impossible task.)

Example: "The Great Awakening in America was one of the most profound moments in our religious history." (Again, the scope here is too broad. Demonstrating this thesis would mean showing that all other moments were less profound.)

Linked to the idea that a thesis must be arguable is the idea that it must be falsifiable. Could there be evidence that would disprove your thesis? It is important that there could be. If you are asserting things that no conceivable evidence could refute, you are not asserting anything interesting, even though everyone would agree with it.

Example: "The Rig Veda is a text of hymns addressed to the various gods of nature." (This is simply a statement of fact; it cannot be refuted or falsified.)

Example: "The Bible is the central text for the Christian tradition." (Same problem.)

One way to think about thesis statements is this: your reader will not agree with it until the end, after you have offered all of your evidence and arguments. A thesis statement that seems immediately true is a thesis statement not worth arguing.

Finally, a thesis must be interesting. How do you make it that way? Your thesis must concern a topic worthy of consideration, and you must attempt to convince the reader of a conclusion that casts fresh light on that topic.

Often, a thesis is interesting because, if shown to be true, it would require conventional views of the subject to be modified or changed. In other words, your thesis should say something that is in some way controversial. Exactly what counts as “interesting” may vary among subfields, so be sure to refer to the sections as the end of this guide on writing in specific areas. (We will show you a crucial way of establishing that characteristic below, when we talk about “motive.”)

All of these things are characteristics of what we might call a “second level” thesis—one that is interesting, arguable and original. These are the kinds of theses that you will need to generate for research papers, your junior essay and your senior thesis. But this kind of ambitious thesis is not required of every essay you will write in religious studies. There is what we could call a “first level” of theses as well, a simpler thesis that is merely your answer to a question posed by your instructor.

We will end this discussion of “thesis” with a few practical notes. Essays should not read like mystery novels; that is, you should not reveal what the essay is arguing only at the end, even though this structure might mirror your own process of drafting. This mystery-novel-structure happens to all of us in early drafts, and the solution is to take the end of that early draft, where you finally discovered what you want to argue, and make it the starting point of your revision.

In general, your thesis—which does not, despite what your finicky senior English teacher told you, have to be contained in one sentence—should come in the first few paragraphs. It is sometimes useful to flag your thesis statement clearly with explicit phrases like, “In this paper, I will contend . . .”; “This paper argues that . . .”; or even “My thesis in this paper is . . .”

## MOTIVE

Every academic paper has to answer the “so what?” question that critical readers always have in the back of their minds. Why is this thesis important? These questions take us into the realm of “motive.” The motive is the element of the paper that draws the reader in; motives set out reasons you have written your paper. Often they establish that your paper is a plausible counter-argument to another significant view on your topic. We talked above about how good theses sometimes correct a conventional understanding. So motives can start by



making the conventional view—the view you are arguing against or revising—explicit. By doing this, you have not only shown yourself familiar with what others have written about the text or with the argument you are tackling, but have also shown that your own thesis is worth arguing. In your motive you are saying: “Often, people understand this subject like this [explain that view], but there is something missing from this, something my own thesis adds.”

Yet your motive should not set your paper up as an argument against a “straw man.” A “straw man” is a dummy position, usually one that no serious person would really hold. A writer sets up such a straw man merely to knock it down so they can appear to have accomplished something important. Arguments that rely upon straw men are not interesting in the sense we have discussed because they tell us something new only if we happen to be someone who holds outrageous and unfounded beliefs.

Example of a “straw man”: “Although many people have found Christianity to be a polytheistic religion (it is, after all, the holy trinity), I will argue that Christianity is actually monotheistic.”

Straw man arguments are bad because they do not require much of the writer. The smarter the view you are going to be modifying or overturning, the smarter and more interesting your own argument.

Does a motive require you to engage with a claim someone else has actually argued? No, especially when it is an assignment that does not ask you to read secondary sources. In these cases, your motive might point to a superficial (but still plausible) way you could imagine someone else interpreting what you are writing about:

Example: “Although we might initially find it puzzling that Durkheim relies so much on dichotomies to advance his argument, there is a deliberate method he pursues here.”

Example: “Mitchell detects a strain in Congregationalism caused by the different views within the congregation about religious sacraments, but if we look closer, we realize that these seemingly opposed views on the sacraments share a set of common assumptions.”

The basic principle of the “motive” remains: the motive establishes that your paper will provide an interpretation different from another plausible (though ultimately mistaken) view.

We end this section with some practical points. First, the language of motive often begins or ends with phrases that include “although” or “despite”—as in the sentence “Despite what some observers have thought, this text is not about \_\_\_\_\_.” Second, motives need not be confined to an introductory clause in a single sentence. Especially when your motive involves discussing another thinker’s actual argument, you need to spend time (in a senior thesis, even a few pages) on what that view entails.

## THE BODY

### Using and Interpreting Textual Evidence<sup>4</sup>

A motivated thesis shows that you have a claim worth arguing; to prove that claim requires evidence. But providing evidence means more than studding your own claims with lines from what you have been reading. Using evidence effectively means more than repeating texts: it requires interpreting texts. To illustrate this, let us ask you a question:<sup>5</sup>

What is this?



“A pig,” you say? Wrong: It is an aerial view of a man wearing a sombrero and cowboy boots. As with this picture, you should not take the meaning of a passage to be self-evident—you need to explain what you think the line or passage means

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<sup>4</sup> Many of the points made in the body section are taken from Carla Marie, Travis D. Smith, and Annie Brewer Stilz, *The Student’s Guide to Writing in Government 10* (Cambridge: President and Fellows of Harvard University, 2002).

<sup>5</sup> This cartoon and the use of it to illustrate new ways of seeing come from the Vermont writer Geoffrey Stokes; Pat Kain, who teaches in the Expository Writing Program, has used this in her handout, “Idea and the Academic Essay,” to which our own explanation is indebted.

(and, if necessary, your reason for rejecting more obvious readings of it). As Marie et al. write, “Remember that students offering completely different answers to the paper topic will appeal to the same text you do. Your job is to convince the reader that the evidence supports your thesis rather than theirs. This requires thoughtful analysis, and the reader cannot do that for you.”

Interpreting a quotation involves two things: first and briefly, you need to summarize what the author said, i.e., re-state what you think the author is saying (and this might take a few sentences if the ideas in the quotation are complicated). But second and more importantly, you need to analyze what the author is saying. Unlike when you summarize, when you analyze you are adding something to the text, not just repeating it. You analyze a passage by noting something in it that is not on the surface: most dramatically, a contradiction in it or a subtext that the author did not intend or less dramatically (but more commonly), an interesting ramification it suggests or an implicit connection you see it has to other points. Quotations that you use should not be self-explanatory (just as self-evident theses are not really theses). Finally, you need to link this interpretation back to your own argument: analysis is merely a digression if it does not connect up with your own claim.

To sum up: Your interpretation of the quotations you use should satisfy three aims:

- (a) you should clarify in your own words what the author means in the quoted passage;
- (b) you should analyze the quotation;
- (c) you should explain precisely how this passage supports your argument.

Let’s turn to an actual example; you will see that it takes quite a bit of space to do justice to a piece of evidence.

Once again, we will end with some nitty-gritty tips about using quotations. What follows is not just a matter of propriety; it is often a matter of integrity:

This sympathy that Kampan expresses toward the character of Surpanakha comes to full flowering in the next rather lengthy passage (twenty verses in length), in which the raksasi fervently pines for Rama all night long. Here is a sample:

When [Rama] had gone, she felt her life falling away, leaving her body. With her senses stunned, shrunken into herself, she stood there and could hardly breathe. "He has no affection for me at all," she thought, "no room in his heart for me"...she felt that if she did not embrace his chest this very day she would die...as the sky turned red...she grew weak and anguished while the moon, high and firm in the sky, troubled her with its long light...her precious life was burning at the touch of the cool wind to her large, soft, sweet breast and she was seething.

She scooped up handfuls of ice, miraculously cool and placed them down on her young, radiant breasts but they were no better than butter that would melt away laid out on a hot ledge, with fire blazing around it... Though it seemed as if she were caught in the blazing fire that consumes a universe, that mindless woman did not lose her life[,] saved by the drug of her desire to have that man with his body the color of the dark ocean and then to live! (Kampan 99-102; 3:5:70,71,75,77,78,85)

With the coming of evening and the rising of the moon, the nighttime neytal (seashore) landscape of Tamil akam poetry is established, which, for the Tamil reader, immediately expresses the emotion of a lover's lamentation at separation from her beloved.<sup>26</sup> In this fashion, for the reader versed in akam aesthetics, the very landscape screams out the same fervent lament that Surpanakha experiences in these verses. Kampan also employs abundant similes to emphasize the intense longing of Surpanakha for Rama, a longing that causes her to become weak, to physically waste away, and to burn so strongly that not even the coolest substances on the earth can alleviate it. By all of these aesthetic techniques, Kampan helps us to experience viscerally the agonizing personal emotions of the raksasi, thus giving us the opportunity to truly identify with this creature, upon whom we now take pity. We realize that Surpanakha's longing is beyond her control—just as we sometimes cannot control with whom we fall in love—and we thus grow more sympathetic to her plight. In the reader's eyes, Surpanakha is no longer simply a bag full of lust, but rather, she is the victim of those emotions which even the very disciplined cannot always control.

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<sup>26</sup> "Seaside imagery is prescribed for the evocation of emotions of impatient lovers who must undergo enforced separation" (*Study of Stolen Love* x).

- a) Define key words and explain important ideas. Often a quotation contains terms and concepts that won't be familiar to the reader; before you do anything else, you need to explain them.
- b) If you reformulate another person's ideas in your own words, drawing them from a text without quoting it directly, it is still necessary to include a citation.
- c) Do not use quotations out of context.
- d) Try to avoid splicing too many sentence fragments in quotation marks into your own text. Use quotations when assembling textual evidence, but use your own words whenever you can.
- e) Individual words do not need to be placed in quotations, except perhaps the first time that you use and define them or if that particular word is distinctive or noteworthy.
- f) Use ellipses sparingly. Never use ellipses to cut out a piece of text that is inconvenient for your thesis. And never use ellipses to unite into a single quotation passages that should be quoted separately, being significantly separated from each other in the original text.<sup>6</sup>

## Anticipating and Refuting Counter-Arguments

Your paper should show that you are aware of possible objections to your argument. As Marie, Smith, and Stilz explain:

*Once you have laid out your argument and integrated textual support, go back to the step in which you assembled what you thought was the most important textual evidence. Examine the bits of evidence that were difficult to reconcile with your argument. Consider counter-arguments and alternative interpretations and try to refute the most forceful objections to your thesis. Where is your argument weakest or most vulnerable? What criticisms might a smart reader raise? What evidence would these people have on their side? Why is their position less convincing than your own? You will want to analyze briefly the passages that seem to indicate an alternative explanation, and then show why these passages are*

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<sup>6</sup>This list is taken from Marie, Smith, and Stilz, 16-18.

## TOPIC SENTENCE TIPS

According to Elizabeth Abrams of Harvard's Expository Writing Program, "there's no set formula for writing a topic sentence." Instead, she suggests, "you should work to vary the form your topic sentences take. Repeated too often, any method grows wearisome."<sup>8</sup> Abrams offers a list of topic sentence types:

**Complex sentences:** These are sentences that combine a transition from the previous paragraph with a statement of the main point of the new paragraph.

**Questions:** Asking a question can be a very effective way of setting up the thrust of a paragraph - just as long as you make sure you answer it.

**Bridge sentences:** Abrams writes, "Like questions, bridge sentences . . . make an excellent substitute for more formal topic sentences. Bridge sentences indicate both what came before and what comes next without the formal trappings of multiple clauses." Abrams's example: "But there is a clue to this puzzle."

**Pivot sentences:** These are topic sentences that, unusually, come in the middle of a paragraph, indicating that the paragraph will change direction. Such topic sentences are often found in "signpost paragraphs" that themselves serve overall as a pivot in the larger structure of the argument as a whole. Abrams points out that they are often used to introduce the refutation of counter-evidence (for example, "But there might be a more compelling interpretation to consider:").

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<sup>8</sup> "Topic Sentences and Signposting," on the Harvard Writing Center's "Writing Tools" webpage: [www.fas.harvard.edu/~wricntr/documents/TopicSentences.html](http://www.fas.harvard.edu/~wricntr/documents/TopicSentences.html)

*less representative than the ones you have chosen, or why those other passages are taken out of context, or why they do not present an adequate view. If you have been asked to compare and contrast two authors and you have taken one author's side, consider how the other author might respond to the criticism you have put forward.<sup>7</sup>*

## Using Topic Sentences and Signposts

How do you write so that your sentences and paragraphs can support the ideas you are trying to convey?

For paragraphs, use topic sentences. A topic sentence functions in a paragraph much as a thesis statement does for the argument as a whole, but on a microscopic level: it announces the overall point of the paragraph. As you write, and particularly as you rewrite and edit, you should make sure that each paragraph contains an identifiable topic sentence, usually close to its beginning (although sometimes in other places).

Example: In describing religious experiences, Proudfoot wants to be true to the person having the experience; he wants to describe it in the subject's terms.

Example: But how might Plantinga respond to this point about fairness?

If topic sentences indicate where that particular paragraph is going (and where it just was), “signposts” indicate where the whole paper is going, summing up where it has been in the process. They most often come at turning points in the essay, the moment before you are about to talk about a more subtle similarity between two thinkers or consider a qualification to your argument.

Example of a “signpost”: “To sum up, the major weakness of exclusivism is that it implies that adherents of the true religion are privileged in some way; yet this claim cannot be fair.”

Both topic sentences and “signposts” orient your readers, preventing them from getting lost.

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<sup>7</sup> Marie, Smith, and Stilz, 18.

## CONCLUDING YOUR ESSAY

By this point you have done a lot of work, and you may be running up against the assigned page limit for the paper. (Actually, it is great to be somewhat over the page limit when your first draft is finished, since a paper that must be edited down is always improved in the process.) Do not just tack on an extra sentence or two and go to bed. A good conclusion is one your reader will remember. You may want to recap the main point, but do not merely summarize the whole paper. You may want to explain how your paper does something that other arguments have not. You may want to say that you have unpacked some particularly elusive bit of evidence. You may want to place your own thesis in a larger context. But two things to avoid: do not make the mistake of trivializing your work in the conclusion. Even if you mention important remaining questions, do so in a way that points to contribution you have made. And do not end by taking the paper in a whole new direction (“But that’s a question for another paper!”). The conclusion should consider what your paper argued from a new angle, not open up a whole other debate. Here’s an example of a good conclusion:

*It is our hope that we have effectively demonstrated how a consideration of aesthetics is vital in determining the moral intentions of our three authors, and the moral significance of the stories they tell. There is of course a seemingly endless amount of work to be done—we have only analyzed two passages thus far!—but this study suggests the possibility of a general interpretive method that may be applied to these texts. Valmiki locates the reader at the aesthetic distance demanded by rasa-theory; Kampan brings his readers into the landscape and close to the experiences of the characters, while occasionally allowing for a distanced, cosmic perspective whenever such a perspective is required; Tulsi consistently adopts the most distanced perspective of the three, allowing for a combination of impersonal, didactic moral instruction and a glorious vision of the vastness and bliss of Rama, the Lord of the universe. Taking a hint from Abhinavagupta, may modern scholars and commentators take such aesthetic considerations into account as they attempt to interpret the moral significance of these three Ramayanas. At the same time, may they realize that, before the modern period, Indian tradition never viewed ethics as a category to be considered by itself, for to pre-modern Indian minds, ethics is inextricably intertwined with every aspect of human existence. Thus, by (re-)introducing aesthetics into the ethical debate, we hope that the world may begin to see again how all of our modern “categories of knowledge” are really profoundly interrelated—a point which Indian tradition has always affirmed.*



## A CHECKLIST FOR SUCCESSFUL WRITING<sup>9</sup>

### Do

- reread the text before writing
- examine the assignment question for clues about what kind of thesis it requires
- come up with an interesting question your essay is attempting to answer
- clearly state your thesis in the introduction. If it is a long essay also mention the main points you will use to defend the thesis
- carefully choose evidentiary quotes and interpret them for the reader in the body of the paper
- make sure that every point you make follows logically from the preceding one, leads logically to the following one, and ultimately supports your thesis
- tie your conclusion to the thesis and other points raised in the paper
- consider possible objections to your argument

### And for essays that you really want to be good:

- write an early draft and revise it at least once

### Do Not

- attempt to write without a careful review of the text
- select an argument that restates what is straightforwardly obvious in the text
- quote the professor's comments from lecture
- ignore all or part of the assignment question
- write an introduction that does not include a thesis statement
- use textual quotations without interpreting them for the reader
- write a conclusion that merely restates the body of the paper
- forget to consider objections to your argument
- use generalizations

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<sup>9</sup>This checklist borrows from Marie, Smith, and Stitzer, 21.



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## Part III. Different Approaches to Writing in the Study of Religion

### USING HISTORICAL METHODS

Whenever writing history you will want to follow the general advice already given in this handbook. In other words, you will need to find a topic (e.g., Christianity during the Civil War), generate a set of questions about that topic (e.g., What role did specific church X play in the conflict in Y region?) and marshal the evidence needed to answer these questions: documents, letters, newspapers, artifacts—essentially anything that can tell us about life in the past.

What distinguishes a history paper from another kind of writing? What are historians interested in? Historians study the past, but they study it with particular questions in mind. Historians are interested in explaining how events in the past changed over time, why they happened in the first place, what other trends they were connected to or what their significance was.

How should you proceed once you have fixed on a particular question? Many historical essays are inspired by the secondary literature: how have particular historians interpreted the topic at hand? In other words, you might proceed “backwards”—to go from secondary literature to primary. If your topic is evangelical revival in the 19th century (for example) you will want to know what other historians have said about this. You will want to know the debates that characterize different historical views on this subject. Once you have a sense for how others are thinking about this topic, you might want to start looking yourself at the primary sources (evidence) they are arguing about. What do you think about this evidence? Have you found other evidence from this period that might help you revise or critique what they are saying? Do you have another interpretive angle from which to understand this evidence?

Here is a point-by-point process for thinking about the research and writing process:

1. Read and understand scholarly interpretations of your topic.
2. Study and take notes on the debates that scholars are having about this past event.
3. Study and take notes on the primary sources you have read on this event.
4. Think about the questions, problems or contradictions that remain for you. What kinds of questions have scholars not asked about these primary sources? When and why have scholarly interpretations clashed? Do you have a slightly different reading of these primary sources—a reading that might resolve contradictions or puzzles in the secondary sources? Do you have a reading of the primary sources that might add something to how we understand these events? Do you have primary evidence that has not been used before—or not been used specifically to speak to these problems? Perhaps your reading of the primary evidence could change or shed light on our interpretations of the past?

Yet sometimes you will want to begin not with secondary sources but with primary ones. If you know about primary sources that are under-used (sometimes a faculty member can suggest primary sources to you) you can begin with these. Study them and take notes. Then read secondary interpretations on these sources or other sources related to your topic.

Whether you go from secondary to primary sources or vice versa, you will want to establish what we have earlier called a “motive”: you will want to show your reader what is interesting, new or significant about your argument. One good way to do this in history papers is to argue that you are contributing something specific to the scholarly conversation about your topic—that you have a new or slightly different answer to problems, puzzles or questions that historians have struggled with when encountering this past event.

## WRITING A PHILOSOPHICAL PAPER IN RELIGION

### Types of Arguments

Like most types of academic writing, a paper in the philosophy of religion should make an argument. The kind of argument it makes, however, differs from that in other academic fields. Most often, it involves writing about a view or position taken by the author of a text (or the views of more than one author) and/or arguing in support of one’s own philosophical views. Thus, generally you are not just writing an argument but writing about arguments. Depending upon the topic, the central argument of a paper might be one of several possible kinds. For instance, it might

- argue for a particular interpretation of a text (especially if there is a plausible, competing interpretation that you can imagine)
- defend the position developed in a text (or series of texts),
- argue that an author’s position has certain weaknesses or problems,
- compare two authors’ views to make an argument about the relationship between the two views, or
- develop and defend an original position on a philosophical question.

Regardless of which type of argument you engage in, your claim will require you to provide a clear account of the position in question; and this account will often take up at least a few paragraphs.

Whether you are focusing on a text or on a philosophical problem, remember that your paper does not always have to provide a definite solution. An excellent paper may argue that a problem remains unresolved or that an author's position contains a fundamental ambiguity. It is also appropriate to raise questions or issues that you do not resolve in the paper. But be sure to indicate to your reader that you are doing so deliberately.

## Supporting an Argument

As with any essay, you will need to provide evidence to support your argument. But certain kinds of philosophical essays require certain emphases. If you are arguing for a particular interpretation of an author's argument, most of your emphasis will fall on explaining exactly what you think that author's view is and showing how any quotations from that author supports your reading of his or her view.

Feuerbach argues that this anguish leads the individual to yearn for the "perfect types of his nature," a being who possesses the essential human predicates in a perfect and infinite manner (281). Feuerbach writes:

But the sense of limitation is painful, and hence the individual frees himself from it by the contemplation of the perfect Being; in this contemplation he possesses what is otherwise wanting in him. With the Christians God is nothing else than the immediate unity of species and individuality, of the universal and individual being. (183)

In this instance, Feuerbach appears to argue that the contemplation of the "perfect type of his nature" acts as a consolation for the individual's own limited and imperfect state, that he or she takes pleasure in seeing his or her own limits overcome not just in the abstract concept of the species, but in an actual being.

Note that in analyzing the quotation the author makes clear that the view in question is Feuerbach's, not the writer's own. Always be sure that it is clear to your reader when you are stating the views of an author you are interpreting and when you are stating your own position; this is especially important when your own essay is so closely involved in elucidating the text in question.

Other types of arguments require different kinds of support. If you are arguing that a particular view is weak or problematic, for instance, you need to provide your reader with reasons why. These reasons might involve pointing out internal contradictions, hidden and unjustifiable presuppositions, or objectionable consequences of the position. In both reading and writing, you should constantly ask yourself what an author's argument takes for granted, how each point she makes relates to others she has made, and what the position's consequences or implications are. It may be useful to provide an example that demonstrates the weakness of the position.

*A final note:* Perhaps even more than other kinds of essays, a philosophical essay must respond to possible objections. Just as you examine philosophical essays for possible weaknesses, so readers will examine yours, and if you can anticipate and defuse the major objections, you will go a long way in convincing them of the truth of what you are arguing.

*For further advice on writing in philosophy, refer to:*  
<http://www.jimpryor.net/teaching/guidelines/writing.html>

## WRITING A PAPER BASED ON FIELDWORK

Anthropologists study the lives that people make for themselves and for each other in the particular circumstances in which they find themselves. One major and distinguishing way that anthropologists go about this study is through fieldwork: fieldwork is embodied learning—you go out to live alongside a particular group of people because you believe that some question about human experience is best explored by attending to these lives in this place at this time. Writing a religious studies paper based on fieldwork entails then abundantly detailed accounts of three things: 1) how this group of people live (with a special emphasis on the kinds of bonds they form with each other); 2) the very specific circumstances of their lives; and 3) the religious idioms they have made, found, inherited, or improvised as they live in these particular circumstances. Writing

based on fieldwork is above all else the art of disciplined description.

Writing the paper is only one of the kinds of writing you do for a fieldwork project. You take notes in the field on what you are seeing and experiencing; you record what the people you are living with say to you in response to your questions about their lives and to your presence among them; you take notes on what you are feeling in the field, your fears, angers, hopes, and desires. The paper you write eventually should be based on this prior writing in the field.

Fieldwork means entering other people's lives; writing what you learned in this process poses moral challenges. How will you represent the lives of the people you have lived among, their understandings of the world—in their voices, in yours, in some combination? How will you protect their anonymity? How will you handle events or circumstances that may be less than flattering of them, perhaps even downright ugly, especially if these are people that others are inclined to be hostile to or suspicious of? You will have handled some of these questions when you filled out the necessary forms for research with human subjects, but other questions will come up in the circumstances of the field. There is no single answer to these questions about poetics and ethics. Different anthropologists have tried different experiments in writing up their experiences in ways that they feel honors their own life in the field and respects the integrity and autonomy of the people with whom they lived. The key thing is to be thoughtful and intentional about such matters. Above all, fieldwork as practice and writing is transparent, meaning that you never use quotation marks unless you had written a statement down when you heard it; you do not use composites; you give the context and circumstances of your conversations; you do not ask leading questions. This ethnographic honesty means a sharp and clear introspection too: to be attentive to your desires for the people among whom you go to be a certain way, your fears of them, what it is that brought you to this project in the first place, the ways that your own life informs the questions you are asking and the relationships you are making in the field.

So the necessary components of a paper based on fieldwork are: an account of the questions you brought to the field informed by reading on the subject; some discussion of why this venue and these people for your explorations; the most detailed description of those aspects of people's lives and relation-



ships relevant to your study; the inclusion of their voices and perspectives, especially when they disagree with or simply confound what you want to see; reflection on yourself as fieldworker; and your conclusions—what do you know now that you did not when you went out into the field and what do other students of religion learn for our own work from your experience and reflection?

## WRITING A COMPARATIVE RELIGION PAPER

Writing a paper on a comparative topic in the study of religion poses a distinct challenge. The problem is that comparison itself seems to provide a natural framework for analysis: one presents A, then presents B, then draws out similarities and differences between A and B. The problem is that this “natural” structure produces essays that list rather than argue, essays whose theses boil down to something like, “These authors are similar in certain ways, but they’re different in other ways.”

An effective comparative paper requires two things. First, it requires a sharply focused topic, which will allow you to get at some of the most crucial points of agreement and difference. While it may be enticing to compare Hindu and Christian notions of salvation and the afterlife in a five-page essay, for example, Hindu or Christian notions of salvation in and of themselves are topics for multi-volume scholarly studies. Far more productive would be a comparison of specific Hindu and Christian thinkers on the topic of salvation and the afterlife, say Buddha and Augustine.

Yet a narrow topic is not enough. A good comparative paper requires a rationale for the comparison itself: what does one learn about either A or B through comparing the two that one might not otherwise notice? If one sets out to compare, as above, the thoughts of Augustine and the Buddha on human suffering, the question that immediately arises in the mind of the reader is: *why?* In comparing such two historically and theologically disparate figures, what is to be gained by comparison? Does one notice something about the teachings of the Buddha if one considers them through the eyes of Augustine, or vice versa? How does engaging in comparison illumine otherwise overlooked elements of either thing being compared?

An effective comparative thesis on the topic above might be the following:

Example: In reading Augustine's *Confessions* through the lens of the Buddha's emphasis on compassion, Augustine's own doctrine of compassionate care for others emerges as foundational for the Christian moral life.

This thesis will move the author beyond simply listing all the similarities and differences between the texts in question because it has a tight focus, but it also provides a justification for the comparison itself. Without this comparison, without looking at Buddha's text, we might have missed this important point about Augustine's.

One more example of a successful comparative thesis will highlight a counter-intuitive aspect of comparative essays:

Example: Examining Martin Luther King, Jr.'s application of the Gandhian principle of non-violence reveals both the Christian and distinctly Hindu elements of Gandhi's thought.

As with the first example, this example does not give equal weight to the two texts: King's text is being used to illuminate an otherwise obscure aspect of Gandhi's. Thus, a useful metaphor for comparative essays is an optical one: in a successful comparative essay, one text provides a lens that brings into focus an interesting aspect of a different one. Comparative essays are not "list essays" but "lens essays."

## Resources for Writers

### HARVARD UNIVERSITY WRITING CENTER

*Free, pre-scheduled conferences with trained peer tutors are offered Monday through Friday during the day. Drop-in hours are offered from 7 to 9 p.m., Monday through Thursday at the Barker Center. (During the week, you need to arrive no later than 8 PM to guarantee a slot.) You are also welcome to drop in during the day, and, if one of the tutors is free, he or she will gladly meet with you at that time: [writingcenter.fas.harvard.edu](http://writingcenter.fas.harvard.edu)*

617 495-1655 | Barker Center 019

### HARVARD GUIDE TO USING SOURCES

*This is Harvard's official publication on conventions for using and citing sources, including the University's policies on plagiarism: [usingsources.fas.harvard.edu](http://usingsources.fas.harvard.edu)*

### WRITING CENTER'S "WRITING RESOURCES"

*These are brief articles explaining various elements of the academic essay, from how to write an introduction to how to construct a counter-argument: [writingcenter.fas.harvard.edu](http://writingcenter.fas.harvard.edu) and select, "Resources"*

### BUREAU OF STUDY COUNSEL

*The Bureau offers students help with some common academic problems. There are workshops available about reading, writing, procrastinating, time management, and other academic issues. The Bureau also offers individual counseling, both academic and personal, as well as peer tutoring, and other services: [bsc.harvard.edu](http://bsc.harvard.edu)  
617 495-2581 | 5 Linden Street*

### HARVARD COLLEGE LIBRARY RESEARCH GUIDES

*This is a good collection of handouts and research guides created by Harvard College librarians to help you begin your research: [guides.library.harvard.edu/hcl](http://guides.library.harvard.edu/hcl)*

### HOUSE TUTORS IN ACADEMIC WRITING

*Your house may have a resident or non-resident writing tutor who holds regular office hours.*

