

University of Wales Trinity Saint David

Study Skills for Study of Religions

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Introduction

Aim of the Module

The purpose of the Study Skills section is to ease your return to study, and to give you a firm grounding in the practical skills that you need to acquire (or polish up!) in order to succeed at this level. The aim is that you should gain the technical expertise needed to produce academic work comparable to the professional standard for your discipline, and apply these standards to your essays and to your dissertation. It is good practice to read the whole of the section (and especially Unit 5) before beginning your assessment tasks for this module.

The section is divided into a number of units with specific reading and writing tasks, designed to introduce you to some key academic skills and give you the opportunity to get started on some academic writing early on in your studies, without having to undertake too wide a range of reading. It is not part of the formal assessment but might be useful. You will start by writing *an encyclopaedia article*, something that requires mental discipline and conciseness, as well as subject knowledge – it is also something that research students and academics in the early stages of their careers are sometimes asked to write. You will then write *a book review* – a task that demonstrates critical reading and analysis. The third task requires you to complete a *literature survey* on a chosen topic, a routine exercise in academia which you will find yourself doing every time you want to write an academic essay. The fourth requires you to write *a short essay*. Building on the previous tasks, this final exercise is intended to further enhance your skills by challenging you to construct a solid, well referenced argument in answer to a choice of three set essay questions.

Section 1

Returning to Study

Introduction

We all feel a certain amount of apprehension when embarking on something new, and returning to study, particularly if it is after a break of some years, certainly comes into this category. Even if you have only recently graduated with your first degree, you should be aware that life as a postgraduate is likely to be very different. For one thing, you will be expected to work far more on your own, and this is true whether you are a residential student, or studying entirely at a distance.

For some people, postgraduate study is a fundamentally lonely experience when compared with the sociability and group learning of undergraduate days. The opportunity to examine material in greater depth than at undergraduate level can prove an adequate compensation, and a taught master's programme will give you the foundation for further, higher-level research, if this is something to which you aspire. For many students, however, a master's degree is an end in itself.

Making and Managing Time

Finding the time for study in the midst of an already busy life is a major concern for many who are studying part-time. A great deal obviously depends on your personal circumstances. You may be able (and indeed may be encouraged by senior colleagues) to integrate study into your work schedule. However, people

juggling a variety of roles at home and at work, or with unsympathetic employers or families, may find that it is far hard to obtain regular, uninterrupted study time. It would be a good idea to set aside – to the extent possible - blocks of time on a regular basis for uninterrupted study, allowing for short, concentrated, regular bursts of study time. Your domestic/work situation will govern this and finding time may call for some careful negotiation.

It is important at the outset of post-graduate study to be realistic about the demands that you make on yourself. If you have a challenging job and a young family, it is probably not realistic to plan to do three hours of study every evening – unless of course you really are a night owl with exceptional energy. It is better to plan sensibly what you can achieve, and the length of time that your studies are likely to take, rather than having over-ambitious plans, and being racked with guilt every time you collapse exhausted in front of the television in the evening. When you are studying largely on your own, it is important to devise strategies that prevent you from becoming demoralised.

Our Master's degree programmes allow you a certain degree of flexibility, and therefore you should be able to tailor your workload to fit your circumstances. If you are to complete your studies successfully, it is important that you set your own goals, and try to stick to sensible schedules that you determine for yourself.

Effective Study

Once you do get some peace and quiet, you need to ensure that you make the best use of your study time. This may seem obvious, but it is surprising how even highly committed students can sometimes struggle with this. For example, a student once produced about sixty pages from one of the primary sources that he was using, all laboriously typed, with key passages highlighted in italics.

Why, his tutor asked him, had he not photocopied the primary source, and used a highlighter pen for the key passages? He looked astonished at this suggestion, and admitted that he had been getting up at six in the morning for weeks on end in order to type the document into his computer. This, clearly, had not been a good use of his study time.

The art is to find shortcuts without cutting corners. Make photocopies of key material, and highlight and annotate them. Make concise notes, either on paper or on a computer, avoiding the temptation to write everything down (even experienced researchers can find this a challenge, particularly when using material of central importance to their subject). The best thing may be to provide your own brief summaries of the author's argument, and the factual content of the material, together with accurately transcribed quotations that illustrate central points. Whatever method you adopt, you should make sure to note the full title and publication details of the source, together with the page references for all the material that you note. This is indispensable for subsequent citation and referencing in your essay or dissertation. There is nothing more frustrating than hunting through a large book for hours, in search of the page reference for that 'perfect' quote that you know is in there somewhere. Small 'Post-it Notes' are also useful for marking passages in books; you can write on them and they do not fall out of, or damage, the book.

You need to keep in mind *why* you are reading a particular book or article, and what you hope to gain from it. In most cases, the answer will probably be 'material for my essay or dissertation, and in particular, something on x ...'. As there are no exams for the Master's degrees (except for language modules) you do not have to worry about making notes to use for revision, which was probably a central task in your previous experience of study.

With any piece of research, there is a moment when you have to stop reading

and start writing. Some people find this extremely unnerving, and it is vital not to become scared of the writing process. It is well known that some researchers become so engrossed in their research that they become less and less inclined to begin writing. It is best to start on some writing at an early stage, even if you suspect that what you have written is not quite right, and will need to be revised later.

It needs to be emphasised that although we hope to see presentation comparable to publishable standard in your written work, we do not necessarily expect the *content* to be up to that standard – though naturally we will be delighted if it is, and it will receive high marks. Most students find that their master's degree work starts at about the same level as their final year undergraduate work (usually an adequate standard to reach the pass mark of 40%) and that it improves as their knowledge and confidence increase. Please do not worry if you feel very rusty – once you start reading and writing, you may well find that your work is of a better quality than you initially feared.

Section 2

Hierarchies of Reading: The Encyclopaedia in Research

Introduction

One of the basic repositories of academic information is the encyclopaedia. Yet, many people engaged in a research task by-pass encyclopaedic sources to read either lengthy textbooks (in order to gain background or an overview) or plunge straight into monographic pieces (either books or articles in journals) without acquiring an overview of the subject area. Providing an overview and offering perspective within a convenient format are the chief benefits of encyclopaedias – and these benefits are usually part of their design. Using them effectively is therefore a valuable research skill worth acquiring right at the outset.

What is an Encyclopaedia?

Based on a medieval notion of presenting an encompassing view of knowledge, and further refined in the eighteenth century as a 'repository of all known facts', the modern encyclopaedia emerged at the end of the nineteenth century as a work which was an overview of current information on any particular topic, using a retrieval system. The simplest retrieval system is an alphabetical list of topics. In most works this is reinforced by a cross-referencing system – how well and how completely this is done is a key measure of the quality of an encyclopaedia. Since many modern encyclopaedias also exist in electronic format, information

retrieval is often based on using a built-in search-engine to look for words or phrases; while in many encyclopaedias there are indices of words or topics which back-up the cross-reference system. In many encyclopaedias there are also study guides where articles are listed in such a way as to provide the newcomer to an area with a collection of distinct entries which can, taken together, provide an introductory course on a topic. In actual research, you will often be building just such a study guide of your own.

Encyclopaedias may be of different kinds. The following offers one method of categorising them:

- General single-volume works
- General multi-volume works (e.g. *Encyclopaedia Britannica*)
- Single-volume subject specific works (e.g. any of the volumes in the *Oxford Dictionary of ...* or *Oxford Companion to ...* series)
- Multi-volume subject specific works (e.g. Hastings' *Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics*)

As a general rule each category above contains material of greater detail, depth and complexity (in the sense of assuming prior knowledge) than that preceding it. As a rule of thumb, works in the first category are of little value in academic research except for ascertaining 'the popular conception' of a topic.

Shapes and Forms

Subject specific encyclopaedias appear under a variety of names in addition to *The Encyclopaedia of ...* . Here are some of them:

- *Dictionary of ...*
- *Companion to ...*
- *Lexicon to*
- *Key to ...*

Do not forget that *atlases* are often encyclopaedias presented through the medium of maps.

As a general rule the title 'encyclopaedia' is reserved for the most detailed level of research reference works, yet there are many exceptions. For example, in the area of the study of the Christian scriptures the most detailed encyclopaedic work at present is the *Anchor Bible Dictionary* (New York 1992) – and this is a tradition going back to James Hastings' 5 volume *Dictionary of the Bible* (Edinburgh 1898-1904).

In recent years a large number of encyclopaedias have appeared in electronic form, while others have appeared in paper and electronic form, and there has been a great increase in the number of reference works since technology is reducing the costs of organising and publishing these works.

Online Resources

There are numerous on-line reference works which you will find useful in your studies. Make sure you attend the 'Introduction to Library Resources' run by members of the library staff at many of our residentials in order to access such information. If you cannot attend residentials you can obtain a very useful information pack about library resources available to postgraduate students from Kathy Miles in the library. Sites on the Internet such as Wikipedia and sites run by individuals come with an academic health warning! Whilst some are well written and argued, many lack the essential peer-review process which checks for the accuracy and credibility of the information contained in these sites.

Why Use Encyclopaedias in Research?

As a general rule make encyclopaedias your first port of call. The reasons are as follow:

- They distil a vast body of secondary literature into a small space so that you can begin to engage with the subject in ways that enable you to see the wood rather than a mass of trees.
- They usually present the state of play at the time of writing, and explain the shifts in intellectual paradigms that may have taken place previously.
- They will often show the varieties of opinion on a topic and so set specific books or articles within a larger context of academic debate.
- They are time-efficient.

What Encyclopaedias are Available?

In recent decades there has been an explosion in the production of reference works and this shows no signs of diminishing. Therefore, the best way to find out systematically what is available is to spend time looking on the shelves of the reference section of libraries. Remember to search the reference section thoroughly since publications which you think relate to one area, may be viewed by a librarian as belonging elsewhere.

Eg, where would you locate this work?

K. van der Toorn, B. Becking, and P. W. van der Horst eds, *Dictionary of Deities and Demons in the Bible* (2nd revised edition; Brill, Leiden / Eerdmans, Cambridge 1999).

Some libraries place it under 'Theology' or 'Religion' or more precisely under 'Scripture'; but it has been found also under 'Folklore,' 'Classics,' and 'Literature: General.'

There is no substitute for scrutinising closely the items on library shelves, and every researcher is continually discovering new resources and adding to their list of available tools.

Using Encyclopaedias

The rule of thumb is to move, first, from general encyclopaedias to more specific works; and second, from survey (usually one volume) works to more detailed works.

Think of it in terms of trying to locate, on a map, a town in a foreign and unfamiliar country. You might start with a world map to get your bearing, then you would in all likelihood ignore the other countries of the world and focus only on the country of interest. You would then zoom in on the region where the town is located, and you would eventually get down to a road atlas that shows you how to get about the town. When you have reached the street map level, you are, by analogy, no longer using encyclopaedic works, but the equivalent of textbooks and specialised studies.

Some Words of Caution

Perspective

While in most cases contributors to an encyclopaedia are asked to give an overview of the subject rather than advance one scholarly position, there is still always a question of perspective. Familiarity with an encyclopaedia through repeated use will usually give one a 'feel' for its perspective. Therefore, one should always try to use as many encyclopaedias as one has available in any one search.

One Built on Another

When you have tracked an entry through several encyclopaedias, you may notice that there is a very bad habit of one building upon another so that the same examples can be traced in a tradition spreading over decades. When you find this happening, find the earliest and ask why has no one challenged this version.

Secondary Literature Already Dated

While encyclopaedias attempt to be up-to-date at the time they appear, the production process is such that even a new encyclopaedia is frequently dated in its references to secondary works by one to two years. While this is usually not a problem except to the specialist – who has, by definition, already moved beyond the stage of encyclopaedias in the area – it is a factor to be borne in mind.

Using Older Encyclopaedias has a Value

Since encyclopaedias aim to give the state of play at the time of their publication, consulting older works and comparing these with later ones can often be the easiest way to build up a history of scholarship, to see how your field has developed, and how the pressures and fashions of a period have affected scholarship.

Accessing Encyclopaedias

While many can afford some basic reference works for their own shelves or a CD for their own computer, there are works which, in general, only libraries can afford, and which they assume to be permanently available and so place them in 'reference sections.' This means that they cannot be borrowed.

Therefore, when you are physically in a library, using these works is a most

efficient way to use your time. Moreover, since by their nature these works are short introductions, syntheses, or synopses, they are items that are easy and economical to photocopy and worth retaining in your file of photocopies. So even greater time-efficiency can be achieved by using your time in a library to identify those entries in reference works relevant to your task, and then copying those entries for study later.

Many reference works now exist on the Internet or can be accessed via the Internet from this University's Library.

TASK I

Encyclopaedia entry

Word Limit: 1,250 words

Pick a topic from your area of study:

Part 1

Make a list of the encyclopaedias relevant to your area of study arranging them in the order in which you would consult them to gain a working knowledge of a topic.

Part 2

Select an encyclopaedia from the list you have made. Write an entry as if for inclusion in this encyclopaedia, on a subject agreed with your tutor. In your entry you should follow the conventions of your chosen encyclopaedia, taking account also of the types of information included in entries and the structure of a typical entry.

Section 3:

Types of Textual Sources

Introduction

For the most part you will deal with literature published by recognised academic publishers. Academic publication takes place in a peer environment. This means that a community of scholars has looked at the work, and even if they, or some of them, disagree with the arguments it puts forward, they still consider the work to be an important contribution to the field. As a scholar yourself, you need to become familiar with the publishers of academic books and journals in your field. Students coming to academic study with a strong interest in their field may have read a great deal of non-academic literature, which although possibly quite worthy in itself, may not be of any relevance to Masters level study. Doing a Masters degree at university is about navigating and participating in a *recognised* academic field.

'Primary' and 'Secondary' Sources

Broadly speaking, **primary sources** are those that can supply evidence that has a bearing on the case you are trying to make. Depending on your field of study, this evidence could come in various forms, including:

- the sacred texts or foundational documents of a faith tradition, such as the Bible or the Qur'an;

- published texts by authors whom you are studying — for example, if you are writing on some aspect of Thomas Aquinas' theology, the *Summa Theologiae* is likely to be a major primary source;
- unpublished documents, such as correspondence, records and other archival material that contains historical information and evidence: for example an archive of letters;
- data from your own or others' empirical research, such as the transcripts of interviews, notes from ethnographic fieldwork or the returns from (your own) survey questionnaires;
- material from internet sites.

Secondary sources are works (usually academic books or journal articles) by other scholars that offer critical interpretations of your source material or of your field of study more generally. They might offer answers to the same questions that you are trying to answer, and you might agree or disagree with their answers, but their opinions do not constitute direct evidence either for or against the case that you are trying to make. It is important to refer to secondary sources for at least two reasons: first, because the opinions of other scholars can help you get to know the field and develop your own judgements; second, because almost any piece of academic research is a contribution to an ongoing conversation or debate, and you will need to show that you are acquainted with earlier contributions to that conversation or debate.

The distinction between primary and secondary sources seems clearer in some fields than others. In biblical studies, for example, a biblical text would be a primary source, while a commentary on that text would be a secondary source. Even here, though, things might not be entirely clear-cut: for example, if your research interest centres on the history of the interpretation of a particular text, then Patristic, mediaeval or Reformation commentaries on that text might be primary, not secondary, sources for you. It is also worth noting that a secondary

source in one field might be a primary source in another: if you are a New Testament scholar, Karl Barth's commentary on the Epistle to the Romans might be a secondary source, but if you are working on the early theology of Barth, it will be a primary source.

A primary source may also provide data which is first-hand evidence of an event or period. For example, D. A. Binchy's 'St Patrick and his Biographers' is an article about the evidence for St Patrick (hence a secondary source), but *Hood's St Patrick* (Phillimore, 1980) contains the Latin text and translation of St Patrick's *Confessio* and *Epistola*, which are primary sources. Another example of the primary/secondary debate may be seen in this example: A.C. Bhaktivedanta Swami Prabhupada's *The Bhagavad Gita As It Is* (1972) would normally be seen as a secondary source for the study of the *Gita*, because of its interpretive nature. However, in a study of Prabhupada's thought, or of the International Society for Krishna Consciousness, this text would be a primary source. *In general, however, the distinction between primary and secondary sources is that between the kind of work that provides evidence, and the type of work that provides interpretive, critical and analytical perspectives on that evidence.*

Using Primary Sources

At postgraduate level (though depending somewhat on your discipline) you will be expected to engage with primary sources. If you do not have access to such sources directly, you will at least need to be aware of the primary data they contain. For example, if you write a paper on Peter Glob's theory that the writings of the Roman writer Tacitus prove that bodies found in Danish bogs are those of priests as opposed to criminals, you must separate his interpretation from Tacitus' own words (which he cites). Arguably the best way to do this is to go and get a translation of Tacitus' *Germania* from the library and read it separately from Glob's book. It is worth making the effort to find out what the

primary source says, and how Glob interprets this source. This is one simple way of critically assessing Glob.

Quoting Primary and Secondary Sources

Academics quote much more from primary sources than from secondary ones. Primary sources are worth quoting because they are evidence, for example like a witness statement in court. Secondary sources are opinion and there is no need to quote them if you are only quoting something you could say in your own words. Hence there would be no point in writing out a quotation from a recent article which read: 'in 1059, the papacy embarked on a scheme to remove secular control over elections'. It is an *opinion* and if you were to cite it, you would say 'Davies has argued that the decree of 1059 was chiefly an attempt to remove secular control over elections' with a reference (e.g. Davies, 1979, 89). This is citation, not quotation inasmuch as you are referring to someone's interpretation, not repeating their words. If you get an idea from a reading, it is important to reference the secondary work from which the idea comes, but if it isn't primary evidence there is little need to quote it.

Monographs

A monograph is a book written on one central topic. Unlike a textbook/general book it is essentially an original critical exploration of a problem or question, like a longer form of an article, sometimes like several related articles on a particular theme. Monographs are the closest form of book to a dissertation – indeed many monographs were originally dissertations, rewritten slightly. Textbooks and general books are written to provide a narrative introduction to, or thematic survey of, a topic. They are not necessarily a model for any of the types of academic writing which you will perform as they are in general more descriptive than analytical. The style of writing in a monograph is the model which you will need to follow.

Articles

An article is essentially the same thing as an essay. It is a work of between about 3,000 and 12,000 words. It is usually not divided into chapters, though it sometimes has sections and sub-sections. It is referenced either with footnotes or abbreviated references in the text. Usually it is problem-oriented. Even if its title does not always ask a question, the article usually has a central question. An article submitted for publication in a major journal e.g. *Journal for the Scientific Study of Religion* would normally be accepted for publication only if it is passed by anonymous peer-reviewers. In many ways the style and format of the journal article perhaps comes closest to that of the academic essays you will be required to submit as part of your MA programme.

It is often noted that as one moves from study at undergraduate level to that at Masters level, one usually makes more and more use of journal articles. The real debates in scholarship most often take place at first in the journals. Journal articles are shorter than books, they present a particular argument rather than surveying a field, and they are published much more quickly. Students working at an advanced level therefore really need to be familiar with, and keep abreast of, the leading journals in their field.

Sub-Academic Writing

Popular books and magazine articles (e.g. *National Geographic*) are not intended to present a comprehensive, specialist, and in-depth treatment of a topic. They may contain bibliographies and references, but these will be selective, not exhaustive. They can be very uneven in terms of quality and it is important to consider who is writing them. Professional scholars sometimes write popular books to promote their subjects/themselves/their bank balances. Often popular books are authored by enthusiasts or professional writers and may be of

somewhat dubious quality in terms of their knowledge of research in the field.

Reviewing Academic Work

Academic work too can be a varying quality. How would you be able to distinguish between publications that make for sound academic reading and ones that do not? You can always ask your tutor, but also it is good to develop a 'nose' for what is likely to be good. Book reviews, a type of sub-academic writing, and often published in academic journals, provide useful pointers on how to evaluate the quality of an academic publication.

Reviewing and refereeing the work of other scholars is a standard academic task, with its own special skills. The writing of a review requires the reviewer to acquire more detailed knowledge of a work than may be possible through a quick reading. The task of writing a good review requires the balancing of a range of factors. A review should ideally highlight both the strengths and limitations of a work, but not disproportionately. Reviewers must be mindful of being fair in their criticisms and not simply flaunt their own expertise. Overly acerbic reviews may damage the reviewer's/review editor's relationship with author or publisher.

The way to acquire knowledge of the methods of reviewing is to read through the review sections of a major journal in the field. Note the proportion of space accorded by reviewers to different tasks: for example the summarising of the overall contents of the book, the discussion of individual points, the evaluation of key strengths and weaknesses, and the noting of typos/literals. Note also what information of a bibliographical nature (collation details, publishing information, price) is provided.

TASK II

Book review

Word Limit: 1,250 words (excluding bibliographical information).

You are asked to review a recent monograph (see section above on 'Monographs' for more information) in your field from a major publisher. It should include a discussion of how the author(s) review(s) material relevant to their field. It should also conform to the style of a major academic periodical which you will identify.

It is preferable not to review very general textbooks. Choose a book by at most one or two authors, fairly recently written, making a detailed, critical study of a topic. If in doubt, check with your tutor. One of the aims of this exercise is to get you to consider the special qualities of a monograph, as your dissertation will be comparable in style to such a work.

Section 4:

Surveying the Literature

Introduction

Reviewing not just an individual book or article, but the entire swathe of historic and current secondary literature on a chosen subject, is an important component of almost all essays and dissertations. Part of what a piece of academic writing attempts to demonstrate is that the writer has a grasp of the scholarly work done in a particular field of study. Even if the piece of writing in question is based on such methods of data-collection as questionnaires, interviews and field-observations, reading and engaging with the scholarly work on the subject area is absolutely crucial. The work of other scholars must inform the writer's understanding, both of the subject area, and the approach to it. Quite often, discussing what scholars have said about an issue can be as important as discussing the issue itself.

In some essays and dissertations it is appropriate to have a formal section entitled 'Literature Review'. In others the review of literature may simply comprise part of the flow of the essay, and the literature review itself (engaging with what has already been written) may take place throughout the whole essay. In the latter case, however, it is often advisable to devote a few paragraphs early in the essay to summarising the scholarly work that has been done in the field to date. If in doubt about the best approach to a particular essay topic, consult your tutor.

When researching a topic you will doubtless consult reference books, and also quite possibly the Internet. You are not normally expected, however, to include encyclopaedias and reference books in your literature review. You may well use them to help you 'get your head round' a particular topic area as has been noted previously, but they should ideally not form part of your literature review. Encyclopaedias, reference books, text books and introductions all rely on the scholarship that you are being asked to explore. It is best therefore to leave them out, and go straight to the scholarship.

The internet offers an excellent means to search for scholarly literature in a given area. Electronic gateways, and search engines like Google Scholar, are excellent means for sifting through huge databases in order to locate relevant scholarship on a subject.

Focus

When reviewing the literature in a field it is important to achieve focus. Your essay or dissertation may fit neatly into a discipline, or, more likely, it may cross the boundaries of two or more disciplines. You should not attempt to review ALL the literature in the relevant disciplines. You will need to make decisions about which items are relevant to your essay. It is sometimes helpful to mention the names of key scholars or seminal, defining, works in certain areas, because these works have spawned traditions of thought or approach. For example if the subject of your essay was contemporary approaches in the psychology of religion, you might mention Sigmund Freud and Carl Jung, and some of the titles of their relevant major works. You might perhaps make a short assessment of their contribution and comment on how their thought has influenced later theories. However, you would not spend a great many words on this, because this is not where your focus is located. You would spend your words on analysing

the work of contemporary scholars, who may well have been influenced in one way or another by Freud and Jung, but whose own work is the focus of your essay.

Charting relationships

When writing an essay it is always important to consider the title and the issues it raises from many different angles. The same is true when assembling the literature that will be reviewed in your essay. You will need to find out what has been written not only on the topic of your essay, but also on the different *approaches* to the topic of your essay. When studying religion, it is often tempting to base your essay on your own already-formed opinions about the topic in question. You need to 'step back' and become aware of the different theoretical and methodological approaches that are possible, and what their strengths and limitations are. A literature review enables you to show that scholarship offers a variety of perspectives on any issue. Scholars from different disciplines (or even from within the same discipline) will disagree with each other, and arrive at different conclusions based on different assumptions, points of departure and approaches. In assembling the material for your literature review you need to give thought to showing this diversity, and in writing you need to 'map' the agreements and disagreements. In other words, you will need to tell your reader who agrees with whom, who has been influenced by whom, who is at odds with whom, and why.

One purpose of a literature review is to demonstrate your grasp of the scholarly debates in a particular area. Another purpose is to show how your own arguments fit in with the debates in the field. Sometimes (though not always) a good essay offers a fresh perspective on an issue that has not been covered in quite the same way in the published scholarship. To show how your ideas are 'different', you need to show, first, what ideas are currently in vogue; second,

why these ideas are limited in their scope or explanatory value; and third, what new insight your work will contribute. To put it another way you need to engage critically with the scholarship that has gone before. This does not mean that you need to disagree with all that has gone before, just that you are able to 'position' your own arguments in relation to what has gone before. As well as showing who agrees with whom, who has been influenced by whom, who is at odds with whom, and why, you need to show whom you agree with, disagree with, are influenced by, and why.

For further information on writing a literature review, the following books are helpful:

Hart, Chris (1998) *Doing a literature review: releasing the social science research imagination*, London, Sage

Fink, Arlene (2005) *Conducting research literature reviews: from the Internet to Paper* 2 ed. London, Sage

TASK III

Word Limit: 1,250 words (excluding bibliography)

Write a Literature Review for an essay title taken from your MA Programme, or for any other subject area chosen in consultation with your Programme Coordinator. As discussed above, you will need to:

1. Determine the focus of the review
2. Identify seminal works in the general field
3. Identify works in the specific area of the essay
4. Map the scholarly debates - agreement, disagreement, different approaches

5. Differentiate between (and select from) different types of literature (monograph, journal article, ephemera if appropriate)
6. Hone your own analysis

N.B. Most of the work for this task lies in selecting and considering the literature for inclusion. You will need to include a bibliography. For guidelines on how to reference the work you cite, and how to prepare a bibliography, please read Section 5 below.

Section 5:

Using and Referring to Sources

Introduction

In postgraduate essays and dissertations, you will typically be attempting to answer a question, whether one that has been set for you (for example, a module essay set by the tutor) or one that you have identified for yourself (as you are expected to do in the initial stages of a dissertation or an independent project). In order to make a case for the answer that you are proposing, you will need to refer to *primary* and *secondary sources* (section 3 above).

To summarise that discussion, in constructing an argument in answer to your question, you will need to refer to:

- primary sources, to provide evidence that supports your case and to show how you account for any evidence that seems to undermine it;
- secondary sources, to show where you agree and where you disagree with the judgements of other scholars in the field, and to explain why you agree or disagree.

Critical apparatus

From the foregoing discussion of sources, it becomes clear why footnotes and references (often referred to as 'critical [or scholarly] apparatus') are so important. Critical apparatus is designed to show your readers what your primary and secondary sources are, so that they can assess the evidence for the claims that you are making and can see how you are positioning yourself in relation to the opinions of scholars in your field. To make this possible, it is vital:

- that you acknowledge all your primary and secondary sources;
- that you supply enough information for your readers to identify those sources, and reconstruct for themselves the route by which you have come to form your judgements;
- that you supply that information in a format that your readers can readily understand, which in practice means conforming to one of the standard conventions for referencing sources.

This is why you are expected to be careful about the presentation of footnotes and references in your assessed work, and why you will lose marks if you are not. This is not just pedantry on the part of examiners. The value of any piece of academic writing depends to a significant extent on the quality of its referencing. It is worth pointing out that professional academics are subject to the same discipline: other things being equal, a poorly-referenced article is much less likely to be accepted for publication in a learned journal than a carefully-referenced one.

When should critical apparatus be used?

You should include a reference:

- whenever you are directly quoting from a primary or secondary source, in which case you must make it clear that you are quoting, either by using quotation marks or by presenting the quotation as a separate indented paragraph (a 'block quote'), depending on its length;
- whenever you are making, in your own words, a claim that depends on evidence from a primary source — for example, the claim 'Aquinas held that human beings have three groups of natural ends or goals' would require a reference to *Summa Theologiae* I-II.94.3 to back it up;

- whenever you are presenting, in your own words, an idea that you have taken from a secondary source.

Since the purpose of references is to make your sources clear to the reader, you should make them as precise as possible. If you are citing an idea that is developed on pp. 147–51 of a 300-page book, it will be much more helpful to your readers if you cite those five pages specifically than if you simply cite the entire book.

Footnotes can also be used to insert incidental comments that are peripheral to the main argument, and points of clarification that would interrupt the flow of the argument if they were included in the main text. However, footnotes of these kinds should be used sparingly, and it is always worth asking yourself whether a comment that you are putting in a footnote could be included in the main text.

Formatting critical apparatus

As already noted, it is important to follow one of the standard conventions for referencing. Learning to do this accurately and consistently is an important academic skill. This is fairly mechanistic: it is a matter of getting to know the rules and then following them. But it is surprising how many students — and even some established scholars! — fail to do this, so it is worth spending a little time and effort learning the skill.

Two main systems of referencing are used in Theology, Religious Studies and related disciplines:

- the system in which references are given in *footnotes* or *endnotes*,
- the so-called *Harvard system* in which references are given in brackets in the text.

In any piece of work, you should choose one or other of these systems and stick to it consistently; it is not acceptable to shift from one to the other within one piece of work. In essays and dissertations, you are free to choose either. If you are writing for publication, your choice may well be dictated by the house-style of the journal or publisher for which you are writing. If so, you simply have to conform to their requirements: there are no prizes for originality or creativity in this respect.

Footnotes or endnotes

In this system, a number in the text after a quotation or citation (normally in superscript) directs the reader either to a footnote at the bottom of the page or to an endnote at the end of the essay, chapter or dissertation. Within one piece of work, you should use footnotes *or* endnotes, not both. Most word-processing packages have a function for inserting footnotes or endnotes. The note should contain all the information necessary for the reader to trace the quotation or citation: the author(s), title and publication details of the source, and where applicable, the page number(s) from which the quotation, information or idea has been taken. The information should be laid out according to one of the standard patterns, such as the following.

- (i) For a reference to a book: author(s), *title*, (edition if second or subsequent, place of publication: publisher's name, year), page(s) cited.

For example:

Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: a Study in Moral Theory* (2nd edn., London: Duckworth, 1985), p. 187.

- (ii) For a reference to a journal article: author(s), 'title of article', *journal title*, volume and part (year), page range of article (page[s] cited).

For example:

Franklin G. Miller and Howard Brody, 'A Critique of Clinical Equipoise: Therapeutic Misconception in the Ethics of Clinical Trials', *Hastings Center Report* 33.3 (2003), pp. 19–28 (p. 23).

- (iii) A chapter in a multi-author book should be treated similarly to a journal article, except that the editor(s) and publication details of the book must also be given:

William F. May, 'The Medical Covenant: An Ethics of Obligation or Virtue?', in Gerald P. McKenny and Jonathan R. Sande (eds.), *Theological Analyses of the Clinical Encounter* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1994), pp. 29–44.

When you refer again to a source you have already cited, it would be a waste of space to repeat all the bibliographical details, so a shortened citation consisting of author's surname, shortened title and page reference is used:

MacIntyre, *After Virtue*, p. 53.

Miller and Brody, 'A Critique of Clinical Equipoise', p. 26.

May, 'The Medical Covenant', pp. 33–4.

Various Latin abbreviations are also sometimes used to refer back to previous citations. Among the most frequently used are:

ibid. (short for *ibidem*, 'in the same place'). This is used to refer the reader back to the reference *immediately before* the present one, thus:

²⁴Alasdair MacIntyre, *After Virtue: a Study in Moral Theory* (2nd edn., London: Duckworth, 1985), p. 187.

²⁵*Ibid.*, p. 191.

id. (short for *idem*, 'the same'). This is sometimes used for citing a second work by the same author in the same footnote:

²⁶Duncan Forrester, *The True Church and Morality: Reflections on Ecclesiology and Ethics* (Geneva: World Council of Churches, 1997); *id.*, *Christian Justice and Public Policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1997).

op. cit. (short for *opere citato*, 'in the work cited'), usually used to refer the reader back to references *before* the previous one, thus:

²⁷MacIntyre, *op. cit.*, p. 192.

Others sometimes encountered include *loc. cit.* (*loco citato*, 'in the place cited') and *art. cit.* for articles. Note that some journals and publishers discourage the use of some or all of these abbreviations, on the grounds that they can be ambiguous or confusing. *Art. cit.* and *op. cit.* in particular are frequently discouraged in style guides.¹

¹ Numerous other Latin abbreviations are used from time to time in academic writing. For a helpful glossary of some of the more common ones, see David Hamilton, 'Latin Abbreviations', online at <http://www.liv.ac.uk/education/hd/latin.html> (accessed 24 July 2006).

When you are referencing older sources, such as ancient or mediaeval texts, that exist in several modern editions, they often have standard subdivisions (for example, into books, chapters, verses, etc.) that are sometimes used instead of page references in one modern edition. This has the advantage that your reader can trace your source even if he/she is using a different edition. For example, the citation from Thomas Aquinas given earlier:

Thomas Aquinas, *Summa Theologiae*, I-II.94.3

directs the reader to the *prima secundae* (i.e. the first subdivision of the second part), question 94, article 3 of this work. If you are writing for publication, some publishers will require only this kind of reference; others will also require bibliographical details of the modern edition that you have used. If in doubt, the guiding principle (as always in using critical apparatus) is *to supply enough information to enable your readers to re-trace your steps*. If you reference older sources of this sort, it is in any case good practice to state somewhere (usually when you first cite the source) which edition you have used.

If you are using the footnote or endnote system in an essay or dissertation, you should also give a bibliography at the end of the work in which you list, alphabetically by author, all the works cited in your text, plus any others that you have used significantly, even if you have not cited them directly. This enables the reader to tell at a glance what your main sources have been. In some fields and some kinds of work (particularly longer works such as dissertations) it is often good practice to give separate lists of primary and secondary sources. The format of the bibliography should be basically the same as that of the footnotes, except that it is often helpful to give the author's surname first:

MacIntyre, A., *After Virtue: a Study in Moral Theory* (2nd edn., London: Duckworth, 1985).

May, W. F., 'The Medical Covenant: An Ethics of Obligation or Virtue?', in McKenny, G. P., and Sande, J. R. (eds.), *Theological Analyses of the Clinical Encounter* (Dordrecht: Kluwer, 1994), pp. 29–44.

Miller, F. G., and Brody, H., 'A Critique of Clinical Equipoise: Therapeutic Misconception in the Ethics of Clinical Trials', *Hastings Center Report* 33.3 (2003), pp. 19–28.

Harvard System

In this system, all the works that you have cited or used are listed in a bibliography at the end of the essay or dissertation. The format is very similar to that described above, except that (for reasons which will become obvious) the publication date is often given directly after the author's surname:

MacIntyre, A., 1985. *After Virtue: a Study in Moral Theory* (2nd edn., London: Duckworth).

MacIntyre, A., 1988. *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (London: Duckworth).

May, W. F., 1994. 'The Medical Covenant: An Ethics of Obligation or Virtue?', in McKenny, G. P., and Sande, J. R. (eds.), *Theological Analyses of the Clinical Encounter* (Dordrecht: Kluwer), pp. 29–44.

Miller, F. G., and Brody, H., 2003. 'A Critique of Clinical Equipoise: Therapeutic Misconception in the Ethics of Clinical Trials', *Hastings Center Report* 33.3, pp. 19–28.

Where two or more works by the same author are listed, they are placed in chronological order, oldest first. If there are two or more works with the same author *and* date, they are usually distinguished using lower-case letters, thus:

MacIntyre, A., 1988a. *Whose Justice? Which Rationality?* (London: Duckworth).

MacIntyre, A., 1988b. 'A Made-up Article', *Fictitious Journal* 1.1, pp. 3–5.

When one of the works listed in the bibliography is cited, the source of the quotation or citation is identified by author's surname, date and page reference in brackets immediately following the quotation or citation:

According to one critic, Comte's opposition of altruism to egoism is characteristically modern: on the view of the human good that prevailed up to the seventeenth century, '[t]here is no way of my pursuing my good which is necessarily antagonistic to you pursuing yours because *the* good is neither mine peculiarly nor yours peculiarly' (MacIntyre 1985:228).

According to MacIntyre (1985:191–192), the virtues are qualities that we need in order to achieve the goods internal to practices; some virtues at least, including courage, justice and truthfulness, are essential to sustain any practice.

In this system, footnotes or endnotes can be used for clarificatory or incidental comments, as described earlier, but should not be used simply to cite sources: you do that in the text.

More detail can be found in the style guides produced by some publishers, journals and organisations such as the Modern Humanities Research Association.

There are many minor variants of both systems, differing in such details as punctuation and the precise ordering of information. Some conventions, however, are almost universal in English-language scholarly work in the arts and humanities; for example:

- book and journal titles are set in italics (underlining is sometimes used instead of italics; one or the other, but not both, should be used, and bold is almost never used);
- titles of articles and chapters in edited books are placed in inverted commas, *not* italicised or underlined.

Sometimes, a publisher's or journal's style sheet will specify details such as punctuation and layout, in which case you must simply conform to their requirements. If you are writing an essay or dissertation, you are free to make your own choices about these details, but it is important to *be consistent* with the choices you make. It is poor style and potentially confusing to the reader, for example, if you vary the order in which you give the information — if, for instance, in footnotes you sometimes place authors' surnames, but at other times their given names, first.

A relatively recent question, which offers almost limitless entertainment to the writers of style manuals, is how to cite internet sources such as websites. The conventions are less well-established than for print sources, though some of the same ones still apply: for example, book titles should be italicised, article titles placed in inverted commas. The guiding principle, as always, is to supply enough information to enable your readers to follow your tracks. For internet sources, in addition to author, title and publication date (if known), this information is likely to include the URL (the 'address' of the web page cited) and the most recent date on which you accessed it (since web pages are frequently taken down or re-located). The following examples illustrate the kind of information that should be

given:

United States Office of Science and Technology Policy, 'Federal Policy on Research Misconduct', online at http://www.ostp.gov/html/001207_3.html (accessed 5 August 2005).

Thomas Henry Huxley, *Man's Place in Nature: Collected Essays, Vol. VII*, (London: Macmillan, 1894), pp. vi–ix, online at <http://aleph0.clarku.edu/huxley/CE7/> (accessed 14 December 2005).

Examples of how to cite from other sources such as Electronic Sources or Audio Visual resources may be found in the UWL Undergraduate Study Skills online guide at: <http://www.lamp.ac.uk/trs/study%20skills/>

Acknowledging your sources and avoiding plagiarism

As well as enabling your readers to assess your arguments, it is important as a matter of both honesty and courtesy to give due credit to those authors who have informed your arguments and helped you to develop them. Some kinds of failure to do so can constitute *plagiarism*, which is in effect a form of academic theft. Plagiarism can be defined as *intentionally or unintentionally presenting the work of others as if it were your own*. Academics are experienced at detecting it, and because it undermines the very nature of the academic enterprise, it attracts severe penalties. Students in this School have in the past failed modules, and in the most severe cases been deprived of their degrees, on the grounds of plagiarism. (Remember once again that professional academics are subject to the same discipline: it has not been unknown for academics to lose their reputations and even their jobs when caught plagiarising.)

Plagiarism occurs, for example:

- when part or all of an essay is copied without acknowledgement from another source, such as a book or a website;
- when a student attempts to pass off as his or her own an essay, published or not, written in whole or in part by someone else;
- when words written by another author (whether published or unpublished) are presented as if they were the student's own;
- when a student presents an idea taken from another source as if it were his or her own, without acknowledging the source.

There is no excuse for deliberate plagiarism, and as already noted, it attracts severe sanctions. It is possible to plagiarise unintentionally, and some students get very anxious about this. There is no need for undue anxiety; the most effective way of avoiding unintentional plagiarism is to develop habits of good scholarly practice, such as the following:

- *never* use another author's exact words without presenting them as a quotation (in inverted commas, or for longer quotations, as a block quote) and identifying the source;
- when you have gleaned a significant idea, opinion or piece of information from another source, cite the source;
- avoid excessive quotation — try as far as possible to assimilate ideas from your sources and express them in your own words;
- develop good note-taking habits — for example, rather than spending hours writing very lengthy notes on sources, it is often more effective to photocopy the extracts you need (when this is permitted), highlight or underline key passages in the photocopy (NOT the original!) and note key arguments briefly in your own words;
- avoid undue dependence on one or a few secondary sources — if the entire structure and substance of your argument are dependent on one

book (even if you cite that book), your essay is likely in any case to receive a poor mark, and you will also increase your risk of unintentionally plagiarising words or ideas.

Section 6:

Writing Academic Essays

Introduction

Most modules offered by different MA programmes in this Department assess students on the basis of one or more essay. Essay writing therefore is a basic skill necessary for the completion of the MA. While most students already possess this skill to some degree, those returning to higher education after a fairly long gap may at first find the prospect of writing essays rather daunting. What follows is intended as a refresher on essay writing. It is important to bear in mind while reading this section that there is no single formula or format to suit all essays. This section provides general guidelines, not prescriptive and all-purpose formulae, on writing essays.

Usually each module gives you a range of essay questions to choose from. The first task before the student is therefore that of choosing one from the list. Ideally, your chosen question should be one that interests you, and kindles your interest and curiosity. Gathering information on an essay topic can be a long process. The module pack, the photocopied articles and/or books that accompany the pack, as well as the bibliography will normally serve as initial sources of information or as pointers to sources. Further searches in libraries and on the net will normally yield up more sources, and/or information on sources. It is important to familiarise yourself with the library and internet resources available via the university library in Lampeter; the library users' pack provided to all students is a valuable source of all the information you will need in this connection.

Presenting an Argument

The main purpose of writing an essay is usually to express an opinion or put forward an argument, which must then be substantiated by providing evidence. An essay is usually developed in three stages. It starts out with an introduction (which serves as a statement of intent), goes on to the middle section (which provides evidence to support the main argument), and ends with a conclusion (which usually draws the threads together and sums up the main ideas).

The Essay's Introduction

The introduction to the essay provides the reader with a clear statement of the aims of the essay. It tells the reader what it intends to argue, which sources it will call upon to support the argument and what it hopes to demonstrate. In other words, the introduction explains unambiguously the author's position on the chosen topic, and tells the reader what precisely to expect from the essay. Ideally introductions should not only provide a clear indication of the writer's central argument, but also show a firm grasp of the central issues or debates that lie behind the essay question or title.

It is of course important that the introduction is presented in such a way that it grabs the reader's attention. Some writers avoid the potential problem of dull and formulaic introductions by, for instance, starting their essay with an arresting quotation or a challenging statement. Others start with a short description of an example or theme central to the topic under discussion and use this to indicate the questions to be addressed in the work that follows. Even when using such devices, however, it is important to make sure that the introductory paragraphs have succeeded in providing the reader with a clear and unambiguous idea of what is to follow.

The Body of the Essay

In the body of the essay, the author develops the argument. In doing so, rather than presume that one is alone in reflecting on the topic, one must consider what other people have had to say about it. It is vital therefore to engage with the works of other scholars who have written about the topic at hand. By engaging with previous scholarship the writer is able to decide whether or not s/he is in agreement with particular scholars. The writer is also able to determine why it is that s/he agrees with some and not with others. The ability to demonstrate an understanding of competing positions or arguments, and to identify the main strengths and weaknesses of each, is an important skill in essay writing. This is the ability to be 'critical'. Being critical does not mean being negative about everything. It means standing outside the competing positions and looking for their limitations as well as their strengths.

The writer's own argument, however, is likely to derive from a particular perspective, such that s/he takes a side in an intellectual debate. To take sides does not mean of course that the writer then refers only to that literature or scholarship that suits his/her preconceived standpoint. It means instead that the writer takes an informed position on the basis of reasoned academic judgement while acknowledging the potential weaknesses of his/her own arguments. Since choosing between competing arguments involves making a value judgement, it is good practice to make explicit the orientation that underpins one's work rather than pretend that it is entirely 'objective'. This will alert readers to possible bias in the argument and help them make up their own minds about the merits of the writer's position.

It is important to support the arguments in the essay with appropriate examples and evidence. These examples will usually be drawn from primary and/or secondary sources. Using evidence to support the arguments in the essay

requires more than just reproducing or describing research findings. The writer also needs to explain exactly how these findings support his/her arguments. It is good practice to highlight evidence that has the most significant implications, to use more than one example, and to select evidence from a range of sources.

It must be clear from the preceding paragraphs that there are in fact three things we do in the course of writing an essay. Firstly, we present an argument. We take a position on the topic and argue for it, rather than engage in a purely descriptive exercise. Secondly, in putting forward the argument, we take into account the works of previous scholars who have commented on the subject, and engage with their scholarship. Thirdly, we present evidence in support of the argument. In providing evidence, we need to explain where the evidence came from, and why it is important for our argument. When we encounter convincing counterarguments to our claims, we do not simply ignore these but instead acknowledge them and explain why it is that we differ from them.

The Conclusion

The conclusion of the essay is usually retrospective in character. Here the writer gathers together the ideas developed in the course of the essay, weighs up the main arguments developed in the discussion, and provides the reader with a quick recap of what the essay was about, drawing the key points into focus one last time. This kind of conclusion is often referred to as a summary conclusion. This however is not the only type of conclusion that can be used in an essay. Another type of conclusion which can often be used to great effect is the discursive conclusion. Here the writer continues to develop the main ideas till the last line or word. This type of conclusion allows scope for inventiveness and originality, and it is often tempting to sign off with a grand flourish, usually with a bold statement which kindles the reader's imagination and forces him/her to think beyond the scope of the essay.

Tips on Good Essay Writing

Grammar, Visual Presentation, and Style

It is important, when writing essays, to re-read and revise drafts before making a final submission. The most obvious things to check for, while reading drafts, are spelling mistakes, typos and grammatical errors. However, it must be borne in mind that visual perspicuity in an essay is just as important as grammatical perspicuity. It is always a good idea to present your essay in a font and type size that is easy to read, with plenty of room along the margins, and adequate spacing between lines. It is also important to break overly long sentences into shorter sentences, and to break up large unwieldy blocks of text into neat paragraphs. In some cases, it might be useful to divide the entire essay into sections, and to head each section with a self-explanatory title so that the reader can understand, at a glance, your essay's contents and their arrangement.

It is also useful to pay attention to issues of style in academic writing. For example, non-English words should always appear in italics. The same is true for book titles. Long quotations should appear as a separate paragraph (as a rule of thumb anything 4 lines and over in length) and should be indented and without the addition of quotation marks. The previous section on 'Using and Referring to Sources ' provides a detailed discussion about referencing style, a topic of extreme importance for the proper presentation of an academic essay.

Structuring the Essay

Just as important as grammatical clarity, visual appeal, and style, is the logical structuring of your arguments and ideas. Essays must ideally demonstrate a clear progression or sequential development of thoughts such that one sentence or section leads smoothly into the next without giving the impression of being disjointed or unconnected. Often it is helpful, prior to writing the essay, to draw

up a scheme or map of the arguments and supporting evidence, in order to work out the best ordering or sequence for presenting these. Similarly, after writing a draft of the essay, it is helpful to go over it carefully, rearranging sentences and sections to improve the clarity of your argument and make the essay far more intelligible and coherent to the reader.

Using Quotations

When citing from the works of other authors, it is of utmost importance to be judicious in the use of quotations. Quotations should ideally be used only when the other author has expressed an idea in a particularly appealing way. It is important to be economical with quotations and not let the essay end up looking like a string of quotations with little by way of your own commentary. Where the idea in a quotation can readily be paraphrased and retold in one's own language, this would be the preferred option. While doing this, of course, it is important to indicate the source from where the idea was derived. Quotations should not be left to stand alone but should always be introduced to the reader, and their significance explained. All quotations should be supported by a reference. When quoting from the works of other authors, it is important to make sure that these quotations work to support, not replace, your argument.

Establishing Links and Signposting

In most essays, the overall argument is comprised of a series of smaller arguments. While these may be self-contained, addressing different points or themes, they all work together to establish the overall argument. If the smaller arguments or sub-arguments are not linked up properly together, the result can be an ungainly whole, with awkward transitions between sections, leaving the reader to negotiate what is, at best, a bumpy ride through the essay. The problem is not the sub-arguments, but the gaps between these. What is required is for you to build bridges between sub-sections so that the argument will not

appear disjointed. Often providing a recap of a section just completed and indicating where the essay is about to go next, serves as a useful bridging device.

Signposts are another helpful device for ensuring the smooth flow of the essay. Signposts are phrases or paragraphs which keep the reader informed about what is happening or about to happen, in terms of the overall argument and organisation of your essay. Signposts are particularly useful when we are about to change direction in the course of your essay. By means of signposts, you can tell the readers that you are about to change course. If you have not yet given them a chance to explore all the implications of what you have just been arguing, you can reassure them that you will return to this discussion in a while. Signposts can go a long way towards integrating the essay and polishing up the presentation.

Checking for Relevance and Avoiding Repetition

It is also always useful to check that every section of the essay is directly relevant to the essay topic or question. It is a mistake to treat the essay writing exercise as a means for demonstrating how much you know outside the essay topic when in fact none of this knowledge is of relevance to the main argument. Going over the essay with a fine toothcomb, and paring down to that which is directly relevant, is vital to developing good essay writing skills. Like the relevance test, the redundancy test too is an indispensable means for ensuring that an essay remains focused and to-the-point. An odd sentence or paragraph may contain ideas that have been expressed before, in which case it is entirely repetitive and does not add anything to the substance of the essay. It is always advisable to eliminate all such repetitive and redundant material and stay on course right till the end.

Understanding the Marking Criteria

It is particularly useful to spend some time going through the marking criteria provided in the programme handbook, in order to get a good sense of what it is that tutors look for in essays. You will notice that the bare minimum required of any essay of passable standard is that it presents an argument that addresses the essay question or title, engages with the works of other scholars, synthesises material, and shows an understanding of standard referencing conventions. As we move higher up the gradations to the class of essays that merit a distinction, we find that these essays show much more sophistication in the way they present their argument. They are extremely clear, demonstrate breadth and depth of research and good comprehension of the subject matter, demonstrate the ability for insightful critical analysis, show considerable originality in the way they present and substantiate their arguments, provide a logical progression of ideas, and use the standard referencing system accurately. It is important to bear in mind that all these are skills that you can develop through application. There is no better way to develop these skills than to engage in the essay writing process and keep at it till you begin to gain mastery over it. Tutors are always at hand should you feel there are areas where you require help.

Some Common Worries

Getting Started

One of the most common worries expressed by students on TRIS post graduate programmes is about getting started on the essay writing process. Writing the first essay is usually the most daunting; once one essay is written, subsequent essays seem slightly less nerve-racking. Usually the best way to overcome the fear is to embark on the writing process with the expectation that the result will be fairly crude and unfinished. Mostly it takes several attempts at drafting and re-drafting before the final version of the essay begins to take shape. It is useful

to start early in order to allow yourself plenty of time to make the necessary changes and adjustments. It is often also useful to give yourself a break between successive attempts. Returning to a draft after a complete break from it often helps you to see it from a relatively fresh perspective and notice its strengths and weaknesses more keenly than you would if you kept at it for long stretches without a break.

It is also often useful to run an outline of the essay past tutors for comments. Most tutors will be happy to give students feedback on essay outlines at least the first time round. The feedback given by tutors on essays that have been submitted for marking too can prove useful in terms of providing general guidance on how one's essay-writing skills can be improved for future submissions. It is generally expected that students will require feedback on drafts mainly in the early stages of their study programme, and it is useful to consult with individual programme directors about their expectations in this regard.

Keeping to the Word Length

Often students feel frustrated about the word limit on their essays, arguing that they could easily write far more on a given topic than the stipulated word length allows. However, keeping to the word limit is an important academic skill. It teaches the writer to condense material and select and communicate core arguments. It forces one to choose and prioritise material, and to communicate it in an economical and easily digestible manner. It is therefore important to stick to the word length as far as possible. Writing too much, as well as writing too little, may lead to a reduction of marks.

Referring to Personal Experience

Some essay questions will require you to draw on personal experience. Relevant personal experience may often add colour to an argument and catch the reader's attention. However, all such reference to personal experience must be related to the course and the essay questions, and all claims made on this basis must be substantiated using the usual methods. Unsubstantiated, it amounts to little more than personal opinion. However, if you are able to clearly demonstrate how the reference to personal experience is relevant to the question, and to substantiate any claims made on this basis, it can serve as a useful resource in the essay.

TASK IV

Attempt the following essay title but you can also move on now to the first essay of this module. Remember that you must reference the statements you make in your account through the use of one of the approved referencing schemes outlined above.

Essay Title

How far are we justified in treating 'religion' as a valid area of academic study?
Discuss in 1,250 words using the following sources. You may use other material
of your choice to supplement those listed below.

Cox, James. 2006. *A Guide to the Phenomenology of Religion: Key Figures, Formative Influences and Subsequent Debates*. London: Continuum

Fitzgerald, Timothy. 2000. *The Ideology of Religious Studies*. New York, Oxford: Oxford University Press.

McCutcheon, Russell T. 2003. *The Discipline of Religion: Structure, Meaning, Rhetoric*. Routledge: London and New York

Olson, Carl. 2006. 'Contested Categories and Issues in Interpretation' in Mittal, Sushil and Gene Thursby (eds) *Religions of South Asia: An Introduction*. London and New York: Routledge

Segal, Robert A. 2000. 'Categorizing Religion' in Geertz, Armin W. and Russell T. McCutcheon (eds) *Perspectives on Method and Theory in the Study of Religion*. Leiden, Boston, Koln: Brill

Section 7

Starting your Dissertation

Introduction

This final section offers a preliminary steer on approaching Part II of the MA (the dissertation). It is not relevant to students aiming to exit with a Certificate or Diploma. Those enrolled for an MA are advised to read this section initially at the start of the programme, and again when they are nearing completion of Part I.

Choosing a Topic

Probably from an early stage in your studies, you will be thinking about possible dissertation topics. The topic may emerge from something in which you have a long-standing interest, or it may be directly sparked off by something that you encounter when you are working on your modules. It goes without saying that the choice of topic is something to which you need to give very careful attention. Are you sufficiently interested in it to do the research necessary to generate a 15,000-word thesis, and is it practical for you to do it? Will you be able to reach libraries, archives or field sites? Does the topic lend itself to treatment at the appropriate length and depth? It is often the case that people start with topics that are too broad, and have to narrow their focus. For example, 'The religious ideas of the Buddha' would be far too broad. It could perhaps be narrowed down to his ideas about particular issues. Once again, as with your essay titles, you need to work on formulating a question. The most important thing here is for you to identify a topic suitable for treatment at this level, and produce a coherent and well-presented piece of work, giving you scope to work to the best of your ability.

Once you have come up with a topic, or if you want advice on possible topics, contact your Programme Coordinator, who will put you in touch with the member of staff whose own subject expertise relates to it best. If you are at a very unfocussed stage, the staff member will be able to talk you through various options, either in person or over e-mail or the phone. But do not expect him or her to give you a topic. An essential part of the dissertation process is identifying the topic, and formulating the research question, for yourself.

The Proposal

Once you are happy that you have come up with a topic which is more or less workable, you should write a proposal, and then send it to the proposed supervisor for his or her assessment. The proposal should contain a draft title, and explain, in clear and concise language what your thesis will be about, what specific problems it will try to address, and what specific sources or methods you will or might use.

Your approach to the proposal should resemble your approach to the dissertation, in that it should be very focussed, and should discuss specific analysis of specific sources of information. You should try to give as much detail as possible in terms of what primary sources (see above, Section Three, for primary and secondary sources) you will consult, and where you will find these, either published or unpublished. To this end, the proposal needs to contain a bibliography of primary sources, and, in its body, needs to make reference to particular items on this bibliography. If you anticipate problems with access to primary sources (for example, in terms of distance, or even language), you'll need to think about how these might be overcome, choose your topic accordingly, and be sure to address potential difficulties in your proposal.

You should also attempt a very brief literature review of secondary sources, that

is, of recent (more or less) scholarly work. This could be along the lines of 'This subject has been discussed in the work of A and B, and most recently by C. D has concentrated on x and E has focussed on y. This dissertation will consider the following...' The literature review of secondary sources immediately signals to the assessor that you have identified the academic discourse into which your proposed dissertation could fit, and that you are familiar (or will become familiar) with the work of those scholars who already work in this field. It shows that you are ready to join their debates, even if in a fairly modest way.

Your proposed supervisor will give you feedback on your proposal, and tell you whether he or she thinks that it is viable as it stands, or needs further refinement. You should not embark on detailed work on the dissertation until you have obtained the approval of the proposed supervisor, and he or she has indicated their willingness to supervise it. (Technically, the Programme Coordinator appoints the supervisor). It would also be wise to wait for confirmation that you have passed all your modules, as you cannot submit a dissertation unless you have passed the taught element of the course. You need not wait for your Part 1 work to be formally approved at an exam board unless your marks are very near the pass/fail borderline, in which case you should consult your Programme Coordinator about whether you should start on the dissertation.

Working on the Dissertation

Once your proposal has been approved, you can start on the research. Obviously, the study and research methods that have been outlined earlier come into play at this point and you may find that the research techniques outlined in the 'Optional' section are also useful. A well-organised and methodical approach to the research will pay dividends. It is important to keep in regular contact with your supervisor, both to discuss the way in which the work should develop, and

later on, to receive comments on drafts. You can stay in touch via email or telephone, or by meeting your supervisor face-to-face. All these methods are advisable, although personal meetings do have some advantages. The onus is on you to initiate contact with your supervisor, to give to your supervisor an indication of the level of supervision you will require, and to submit drafts or outlines of the thesis. When you start to write, you will find that 15,000 words will get taken up in no time, so it is vital not to get side tracked, and to remain focussed on the main question or questions. One good idea is to summarise your thesis in a couple of sentences or in a point-form outline on one page, and to keep this handy so that you can refer back to it regularly.

As we have stressed throughout this module, good presentation is very important. You should consult the University's guidelines about the practical aspects of presenting your thesis.

Your supervisor will set out at which point he or she would like to see written drafts. In all cases, enough time must be left for the supervisor to properly read drafts, and for such comments and requests for changes to be acted upon. In particular it is essential that your supervisor sees and approves the final draft.

EXERCISE

Write a research proposal for your dissertation. The proposal should be approximately 2,000 words in length. You should provide a working title; formulate the research question that the dissertation will attempt to answer; provide some background/ context to the question; discuss the methodology you will use; provide an overview of the primary sources you expect to use as well as a review of the secondary literature relevant to your research question; and append a bibliography of the main primary and secondary sources.

This proposal should be handed in to your Programme Coordinator in the first instance, and thereafter to your nominated supervisor, towards the end of part I of the MA programme. **This is a formative exercise and will neither be marked nor counted towards your credits for this module.**