



## *School of Theology, Religious Studies & Islamic Studies*

### *The Essay Travel Guide*

In beginning study for this programme, you will be asked to become skilled in writing an academic essay. You might already feel that you have managed to do this during your previous degree. Even so, it is perhaps good to be reminded!

So what is an essay? How do you begin to fulfil such a task? As someone new to this particular programme, how can you achieve this goal? This “Travel Guide” has been written for you to answer these questions and to help you to achieve your best over the course of this programme of study.

#### **1. What is an Essay?**

##### ***Key Insight: Watch Out for Your Opinions!***

An essay is your opportunity to demonstrate to your Module Ccoordinator what you know about the essay question.

Keep in mind that demonstrating knowledge is different from sharing opinions. It seems that everyone has an opinion on matters of religion! One of the reasons you came to this School may be because you have some strong opinions about religion and want to share these with others. However, an essay is **not** an opportunity to share your opinions or beliefs. In beginning study on this programme, you are being invited to enter a world of scholarship – to get to know and understand the ways in which academics research and argue in Biblical and Theological Studies. The new knowledge that you gain may strengthen your opinions and lead you to new realizations – or it may challenge your opinions. But developing these opinions is something that you do outside the essay or other written assignments. In the essay you prove that you know something about scholars and their arguments.

At the heart of your essay are accurate descriptions of scholars and their arguments. You will describe! Your descriptions will reflect that your knowledge rests upon solid sources and that you are aware of different viewpoints. You will also evaluate the

different arguments that you have accurately described. Perhaps you can see now that the quality of your essay will depend on your reading.

In writing an essay, you have an opportunity to do something so often impossible elsewhere in your life: to embark on a voyage of discovery, grappling with the insights of great thinkers and leaders.

## **2. Choosing a Subject.**

### ***Key Insight: Stay Focused!***

For most modules you will be given a choice of topics on which to write your essay. Choose a topic to which you are drawn. You might want to choose a topic in which you can push your existing knowledge deeper or you may want to strike out in a new direction. Whatever the case, pay attention to the exact wording of the set essay question – you can sometimes save yourself much grief as the question will often specify some boundaries so that you do not need to write too widely on the subject.

Be careful. Some students choose a topic they feel they know thinking that they can utilise past work and not do any further reading and research – but university essay writing requires a deeper presentation of description and interpretation. Merely repeating A-level material, for example, is never sufficient. Really to grasp a question will mean that you travel deeper and further than ever before.

You will need to read books from your module descriptor and the School's e-resources before you choose your topic. Read around each area before making your choice. Make sure you work through all the Units on the Moodle site as you will find information there which will be important for your assignments.

## **3. Getting Resources**

### ***Key Insight: Begin at the End!***

You can save yourself a lot of time by starting at the end – establishing your bibliography. Write this up first even though it might change later. You can always show your suggested bibliography to the Module Coordinator to see if you are on the right track. Of course you will want to start with books listed in your module descriptor.

Where do you begin? You can start small. Read, for example, a 2 page e-article from the online Encyclopedia of Religion. This only takes a half an hour. Then move on to a book. You are a traveller in a new land. As you read you might well find areas you do not understand and therefore will have to widen your search. Or you may discover that everyone is referring to a central text that you need to see – you can move on to this.

Understand the difference between primary and secondary sources – both types should be included in your essay. A primary text gives you direct access to the key

scholar or argument under investigation. In an essay on Gandhi, for example, you can read books about Gandhi (secondary sources) but an essay about Gandhi should include works by Gandhi himself. Textbook summaries are very helpful (these are secondary sources) but it is necessary to become familiar with the main thinkers, sacred texts and ground-breaking writings primary source).

If you cannot find sources, or have problems understanding the ones you have, contact your Module Coordinator. An essay must contain sources.

#### **4. Reading, Reflecting and Making Notes**

##### ***Key Insight: Go for a Walk!***

You are here at university to think, learn and reflect: you need to give yourself the time to write your essays. Far too often a student waits until the end of the term, borrows some books, opens up the computer and hastily thinks and writes an essay. Not only does this never produce an essay one can be proud of, you are actually robbing yourself of the privilege of learning.

Give yourself the gift of time to read. Then, give yourself the gift of the time to reflect. Go for a walk, climb a mountain, sit under a tree – then jot down some notes that relate to your essay.

Sometimes you need only read chapters within books rather than whole books. Do not forget the title of the assignment; keep your reading focused on this. Jot down any questions or thoughts that come to mind as you are reading. People make notes in many different ways; it does not matter how you do this as long as it works for you. Remember from where your information comes. You can contact your Module Coordinator to pursue these questions as you find your way through your reading.

#### **5. Developing a Structure**

##### ***Key Insight: Stick to Your Outline!***

Normally essays have a three-fold structure: **introduction, body and conclusion.**

The **introduction** (usually a paragraph or two in length) accomplishes 2 things: (a) that you have understood the set question and (b) that you have a brief outline of how you will go about responding to the question. You may find it helpful to write the introduction after you have written the essay, then you can reflect in the introduction what your essay actually has done.

In the **body** of the essay you will describe and interpret key academic approaches to the topics set. You will recognize and describe conflicting views and, through analysis and evaluation, reach an academic judgment on these approaches. Even if there are several parts to the essay, ensure that each part is related to the question set. A well-structured essay clearly follows from the outline of the introduction.

The **conclusion** seeks to summarize the conclusions already reached in the body of the essay. This is usually a paragraph or two in length. The conclusion is not a place to introduce new material. Neither is it a place to delve into your own opinions. A conclusion summarizes your findings in response to the question in a concise form. You may also wish to point to areas where further work could be done to more deeply respond to the essay question.

## 6. Style

Essays should be 1.5 or double spaced, and font size should not be smaller than point 12. Footnote text should be 2 points smaller than the main text.

**Short quotations** (up to 4 lines long) are placed within the sentence or paragraph, whereas **long quotations** (more than 4 lines long) are placed away from the main essay text and indented on each side. Even if your essay uses 1.5 spacing, the long quotation should be single spaced. Long quotations do not need quotation marks.

Each paragraph should begin on a new line with no indenting of the first sentence.

## 7. Perils and Pitfalls!

On the pathway to a successful essay there are common places where students fall down.

\* **Reading the actual essay question.** Sometimes students write an entire essay that doesn't really address the question asked. Slow down and ask yourself: What is the question asking? What are the key words in the question? Do you address all the aspects of the question? If you are unsure of any part of the essay writing, contact your Module Coordinator.

\***Reading.** The heart of your university education is your own reading. One simply cannot write a successful essay without time struggling to understand key books and articles.

\***Referencing.** Not to reference a key idea or thought that comes from someone else is a gross error. Consult the School's Plagiarism Guide for more about this.

\***Overuse of quotations.** Do not rely on too many quotations without using your own words. Quotations can be very effective when they are used sparingly. They are a way to give the reader a taste of the scholar and how that scholar verbalizes ideas that relate to your essay question.

\***Time management.** Make sure you begin work on your essay and other written assignments in good time to submit them on or before the deadline. This avoids the pitfall of rushed and inappropriate work submitted just before the deadline.

\***Statements that are too vague.** For example, "*people believe this*" Who? "*Many people think that...*" Who thinks this? When did they live? From where were they

writing? And what were the main themes in the culture they were addressing? What evidence do you have for this? Students who follow this advice avoid the particular pitfall of a mediocre and general essay.

**The Moodle-notes/Wikipedia essay.** You do not get anywhere by relying on course notes or Wikipedia---the Moodle-note/Wikipedia essay is usually a failed essay. These are starting points to warm you up for your reading. Use the books and articles on the module descriptor and the School's e-resources. Wikipedia should not be used as a reference in academic work.

**A Jumble of facts:** watch out that you do not merely string together a number of facts. Ensure that along with your descriptions you can say why things are significant. You have to engage in critical analysis which means that you look at more than one side of a question, reporting accurately on scholarly conflicts and drawing your own judgments on these arguments based on academic evidence.

## **8. Improving Your Work.**

Your essay is an opportunity for learning not just a means of getting marks! You and others will forget your grades in the years to come, but you may never forget the valuable things you learned.

Students who want to improve will:

- \* **Read more widely.** Students find it helpful not only to schedule reading time but to choose the best environment for their reading.
- \* **Read different points of view** on the essay subject.
- \* **Make sure your judgment and views are based on academic evidence.**
- \* **Make sure your work is thoroughly referenced.**

## **9. Final Check list:**

Look at this before you submit your work!

- ☐ Look over your spelling and grammar- proofread, proofread and proofread again. There is often an advantage in having someone else read your essay.
- ☐ Ask yourself questions about your spelling and structure: Did you respond to the actual essay question? Do your sentences make sense? Are the paragraphs coherent? Does your conclusion logically follow from the body of your essay?
- ☐ Ensure your title page has (a) a title—the exact one you were given (b) your student number and your name (c) a word count.

- ☐ Format your work: paragraphs separated by a line of space and no indentation of the first line. Footnote text two points smaller than the main text.
- ☐ Ensure your referencing follows the School rules as laid out in the *Referencing Guide*.

### **A Closing Word:**

Have pride in your work. Follow every lead that you have to improve your work: proof read, do some more reading, contact the Module Coordinator if you require help. Ultimately, the specific mark you have achieved is not as important as the good feeling of having done your best.