

Religious Studies: Literacy Skills

“How to write a **good** essay” - by Mr A Lewis, St Bonaventure’s

The essay is both a distinct and a capacious genre. The word derives from Latin meaning ‘weighing out’ and Old French meaning ‘to test’, ‘try’ or ‘make an attempt’. You’ll note it does not mean ‘answering correctly’ or ‘getting it right’.

One of the extraordinary things about writing essays is that drafting them is a form of thinking. As a result you never know what you are going to end up thinking by writing essays. If you are open to this process you will be amazed at the thoughts your brain thinks for you while you are writing. They’ll seem to pop out of nowhere (and they won’t only be about the topic in hand).

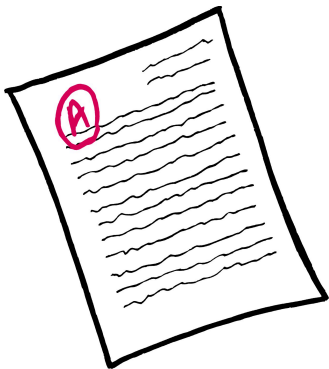
[Kings College London]

“Memory is the residue of thought.” Prof Daniel Willingham

You will remember the things you have thought deeply about in essays the best!

Writing an essay on a topic will help with recalling that information.

There are many ways to write a good essay. Different questions require you to adapt your style to suit the demands of that question. You should think about what structure suits the question that you are answering.



The different types of question for the Edexcel A Level Religious Studies are:

Section A

- 1) Explore... [Examine, scrutinise]
- 2) Assess... [Estimate or judge value of]

Section B

- 3) Clarify... [To make clear, free from confusion, to make intelligible]
Analyse... [Separate, determine, examine critically, identify essential features]

Section C

- 4) Evaluate [Justify, argue, defend, judge, weigh up, appraise]

The aim of an essay:

The aim of an essay is to **MAKE AN ARGUMENT**. You should present different views, use examples, evaluate the evidence all so that you can convince your reader that your point of view is correct. You need to write persuasively.

It might help to think of it in terms of a debate in which the speakers alternate and try to rebut or refute each other's points as well as making sound points of their own. Alternatively, you could think of it as a court case in which you are presenting evidence and calling witnesses to try and convince the jury.

A good essay will take the reader on *a journey*, you will guide them through both sides of the debate, before reaching a final destination in your conclusion. It needs to have a clear, logical *flow* - the journey should be informative but smooth!

Before you begin:

- **Think carefully** about what the question is asking - some students like to underline or highlight command words and key ideas. Too many students answer the question they hope is there, or think is there... not what is actually there.
- **Brainstorm** - What information about this topic are you going to include? Some questions (Q2) really demand that you are selective. You may remember things, but you may need the confidence to leave out.
- **Organise** - How will you structure the above information?

Introductions:

Your introduction is your first chance to impress the examiner and **first impressions count** (as do final ones in your conclusion).

Things like defining key terms can be useful - particularly if the terminology of the question is ambiguous - however, your introduction should not read like a page from the dictionary.

Likewise, biographical/contextual information can be useful if it is relevant. However an extended biography of the theologian whose views are mentioned is not useful. If their background is important in understanding their theology then it should be explained properly in a paragraph of its own. The introduction should be fairly short.

Set up the terms of the debate:

What this means is give a very brief (i.e. a couple of sentences) overview of the 'sides' of the argument. Try to be precise and avoid 'some people think...other people think...'

Suppose that the question was '*Women should be entitled to leadership within the church*' **Evaluate this claim.** You could set up the terms of the debate as follows:

The Roman Catholic Church does not permit women to have authority within the church however the Church of England has allowed women's ordination since 1992. Feminist theologians like Rosemary Radford Ruether support female ordination whilst Pope John Paul II rejected it and said that his decision was binding.

You could improve this further by giving an indication of the reasons why they have different opinions. Try to identify the crux of the debate.

The issue hinges upon different interpretations of key Biblical passages and debates about the significance of the maleness of Jesus and the disciples.

You have then 'set up' the debate and are ready to state your line of argument.

State your line of argument:

Your ultimate aim is to present a convincing case so it makes sense to make your intentions clear at the outset. You should avoid writing 'I think...' or 'this essay will argue that...'. All you need do is confidently state your argument as fact.

If we stick with our sample question above we could state our line of argument as follows:

The biblical evidence for women priests is ambiguous, however there are a number of other convincing reasons why women should be entitled to have leadership in the church.

Note that I have not given any of these reasons yet but I have made it clear which way I will be arguing. I could, potentially have signposted my essay more clearly and listed the issues that I will address. For example, I could also have

written.

There are three very convincing arguments for women priests;

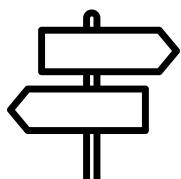
- the right to equal opportunities
- the importance of remaining relevant
- the evidence for women in significant roles in the Early Church.

If I chose to state my line of argument this way then I almost have a mini essay plan in my introduction.

If we put together what we have so far with a couple of other sentences we get the following introduction:

To say that women are 'entitled' to equal leadership within the church is to imply that women's ordination is an issue of rights. Currently, the Roman Catholic Church does not permit women to have authority within the church however the Church of England has allowed women's ordination since 1992. Feminist theologians like Rosemary Radford Ruether support female ordination as a matter of women's entitlement whilst Pope John Paul II rejected it and said that his decision was binding. The issue hinges upon different interpretations of key Biblical passages and debates about the significance of the maleness of Jesus and the disciples. The biblical evidence for women priests is ambiguous, however there are a number of other convincing reasons why women should be entitled to have leadership in the church.

'Signposting' your essay:



A signpost points the way to go. Signposting your essay means using sentences that make it clear where your essay is going. Topic sentences at the beginning of paragraphs should make it clear what that paragraph is going to be about. Concluding sentences should link back to the question. Link sentences should show how ideas relate together.

Topic sentences:

A topic sentence introduces a paragraph and makes it clear what that paragraph will be about. E.g.

One of the main arguments against women priest is based on the fact that Jesus only chose male disciples.

The paragraph would then go on to explain this point further.

You can adapt your topic sentences to make your own line of argument clear. Consider the way the following sentences make the writer's (i.e. my) own opinions clear:

- *Pope John Paul II attempts to argue that...*
- *It has been suggested that....*
- *One plausible but ultimately unsuccessful argument is..*

Versus:

- *Radford Ruether presents the convincing argument that...*
- *Schussler Fiorenza successfully challenged this point by....*
- *A powerful criticism is presented by...*
- *A subtle but important contribution to the debate was put forward by...*

Another thing you can use topic sentences for is to make it clear how one idea relates back to the other or how the ideas developed in time.

Concluding sentences:

Your concluding sentences are the sentences at the end of paragraphs. A concluding sentence should usually link clearly back to the question and make it obvious how what you have written addresses the question. It is often a good idea to reflect the wording of the question in a concluding sentence. For example, a paragraph explaining key arguments against women priest in the *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* might conclude:

Thus the arguments in the Ordinatio Sacerdotalis represent the official Roman Catholic reasons for arguing that women are not entitled to equal leadership in the church.

If you are writing a concluding sentence after a section of analysis and evaluation then you can use your concluding sentence to hammer home '*who wins and why.*'

Ultimately these problems mean that the arguments in the *Ordinatio Sacerdotalis* are not sufficiently persuasive to provide good reasons to deprive women of equal opportunities by preventing them from having leadership within the Church.

Depending on the structure of your essay, you might sometimes want to use a concluding sentence (or a topic sentence) to make show how ideas link together. For example, analysis of Paul's teaching about women's silence in Church might lead you to conclude that he was reflecting the views of his time. This might then link nicely to a paragraph on the gospels and speculation about the place of women in Jesus' ministry.

Accepting that the Biblical teachings about women are not the direct word of God but reflect the beliefs of the writers also leads us to question the apparent lack of female disciples.

Above all, remember that concluding sentences can be very useful for steering your essay back on track if you have gone off on a tangent. You just need to show how/why it is relevant! For example, suppose you had written a paragraph on motherhood rather than about ordination.

Although motherhood is not directly linked to the issue of ordination it is relevant to the issue. This is because the role of mother is not equivalent to the role of priest and so a woman's opportunity to be a mother cannot replace what should be her right to be a priest.

If you do go off topic don't panic. There is likely to be some relevant link back if you think about it carefully. A good couple of concluding sentences can make an irrelevant aside into a really good synoptic link!

Explaining clearly: (Q1, Q3a)

Explaining is not the same as just stating. To explain an idea you have to try to demonstrate how the idea develops, what premises it is based upon, what method of reasoning is used to arrive at it and - crucially - **what it actually means**. There are various stock phrases that you can use to help make sure that you are explaining something fully. These include:

- *This means that....*
- *The central claim here is....*
- *Another way to look at this would be...*
- *This implies....*
- *This leads to....*
- *This developed due to...*

Crucial to explaining ideas clearly is using examples, evidence and illustrations. You should aim to include sentences like:

- *An example of this could be....*
- *[N] used the example of.... what [N] meant by this was....*
- *An analogy for this could be....*

- *A scenario which illustrates this is....*

You might be able to use examples and illustrations actually used by the people whose ideas you are writing about. However, sometimes you might need to construct a scenario to illustrate the point.

Analysing and evaluating: (Q2, 3b, 4)

Analysing is breaking down the argument to see how it works and evaluating is the final 'passing judgement' and deciding how valid it is. In an A-Level essay there may well be some overlap between your explanation and your analysis as you might break down the claim in order to explain it fully. Q2 is an **Assess** question which is a mixture of AO1 and AO2, it is a short analysis and evaluation.

Analysing: (3b)

Imagine you were analysing the argument that Jesus only chose male disciples and thus the church should not have women priests.

- You could say that this argument is based upon the premise that the gospels are an accurate portrayal of what Jesus said and did.
- Furthermore, it assumes that what Jesus did is what the church should do for all time.
- The reason why Jesus' actions are presumed to be timeless and authoritative is itself founded upon the belief that Jesus was literally God incarnate and therefore was all powerful and could have done differently had he wanted (i.e. not limited to his own state and time).

Some of these claims can be challenged. You could challenge 1) by:

- Pointing out that the gospels were written by people who had faith in Jesus which might affect how they write (explain why). Furthermore, the gospel writers used earlier sources, they are not independent eyewitnesses. Breaking down an argument into its base claims makes it much easier to analyse.

Some useful philosophical terminology for evaluating arguments

- **Confusing necessary and sufficient conditions:** e.g. motherhood might be sufficient for a woman to feel fulfilled, but it is not necessary for fulfilment - she could be fulfilled in other ways. Or, a sense of vocation might be necessary in order for a person to become a priest but it is not sufficient - other things are needed too - like a certain amount of knowledge and learning.
- **Confusing correlation with causation:** Thinking that one thing causes another just because they often occur together.
- **Ad hominem attack:** Attacking the person rather than the argument (e.g. [N] was religious so his argument is biased and must be wrong).
- **Straw man argument:** Misrepresenting an argument in order to make it easier to argue against. (E.g. to say that Augustine thought that women were nothing more than a vessel for procreation is an inaccurate oversimplification of his views.)
- **Fallacy of the general rule:** Assuming that something that is often true is always true.

Assess: (2)

This questions demand quick thinking. You only have 18 minute and need to construct a short and coherent response. You need to:

- Decide how important, useful, valuable or effective something is.
- Identify merits and limitations.
- Justify your decision.

Evaluating: (4)

Put simply, evaluating is saying which arguments are good and which are not. However, evaluation cannot just be your opinions, you need to give good reasons for your evaluation.

You might find an argument convincing because:

- It is based upon sound premises.
- The evidence for it is convincing (i.e. there is a substantial amount of evidence from a range of objective sources. There are no other more plausible explanations etc).
- It is based on logical reasoning whereby the stages of the argument do genuinely follow on from each other.
- The person promoting the argument is a reliable source (be careful with this one though, reliable sources can be wrong!)
- The conclusions are coherent (i.e. fit together) and consistent with what we know already.
- It appeals to our intuitions and fits with how we see the world. (This one is a bit of a cheat as it amounts to saying 'it just seems right' in a slightly more academic way!)

You might reject an argument because:

- It is based on false premises.
- The process of reasoning includes illogical leaps or inaccurate conclusions.
- There is another, more likely, explanation of the same evidence.
- The source is not reliable.
- The conclusions are incoherent.

The “Extent-o-metre” (by @KKNTeachLearn)

How much?	How far do you agree?	How important?	What impact?
100%	Totally	Extremely	Radical
80%	Strongly	Major	Significant
60%	Quite strongly	Substantial	Considerable
50%	Undecided	Quite	Moderate
40%	Some extent	Somewhat	Partial
20%	Slightly	Minor	Little
0%	Not at all	Irrelevant	Not at all

Who wins and why?

'Who wins and why?' is a useful phrase to remember when evaluating. You will have presented contrasting views in your essay. You need to pass judgement and give a ruling (like a Judge) as to whose arguments are better.

If you do not reach a clear conclusion, it shows a lack of confidence in the topic. Some students try to conclude by saying there are strengths and weaknesses, but neither is convincing - this is called sitting on the fence!

“Don’t be a journalist, you need to be like a lawyer!”

Writing an introduction: Useful language

Introducing the topic

It is often claimed that...

Many people contend that...

We often hear that...

Linking ideas

While it is true that...

Not only does....but they also...

In fact....

Giving opinions

It can honestly be said that...

Admittedly....

In my view...

To what extent does Plato's analogy of the cave present convincing ideas? [40]

Plato believed in the importance of having a critical and philosophical attitude to knowledge.

What is the problem with this opening sentence?

To what extent does Plato's analogy of the cave present convincing ideas? [40]

Plato's **allegory of the cave** **successfully** argues for importance of having a critical and philosophical attitude to knowledge. This is one of the most **convincing ideas** in the allegory because **knowledge is essential in the quest for truth and meaning in life**.

Judgement – is it a convincing argument?

Question – link to the question?

Reason – reason for your judgement?

Translate these descriptive opening sentences into sentences which are more evaluative and linked to the question.

One idea presented in Plato's allegory is the existence of an immaterial World of Forms.

The ignorance of humanity when people do not engage with philosophy is a key idea explored by Plato.

Plato uses the analogy to argue that the empirical world cannot give us certain knowledge.

Judgement – is it a convincing argument?

Question – link to the question?

Reason – reason for your judgement?

Adjectives to describe strength or weakness of argument

Sound
Reasonable
Weak
Persuasive
Strong
Convincing
Successful
Unsuccessful
Flawed
Significant

Basic structures:

Thesis approach:

- **Introduction** (set out terms of debate and state line of argument).
- **Explanation paragraph** (you might need this, you might not - it depends on the question. You might be able to do all the explanation you need in your thesis).
- **Thesis (one view)** This could be the view that you agree with and you might then go on to defend it. OR you might want to start with the view that you want to oppose. If the question is about a specific claim then you might use the thesis to set out that claim.
- **Antithesis (alternative view)**
- **Who wins and why (analysis/rebuttal/defence).** The form that this takes depends on how exactly you've used the thesis and antithesis. You might be defending your thesis against the antithesis. You might be passing judgement on two contrasting views. You might be supporting the antithesis if that is the side of the argument you have picked.
- **Challenge to your view. (response to your who wins and why)** How might a person disagree with you?

Thematic approach:

- **Introduction:** Setup key areas of their thought.
- **Explanation/Overview:** Give brief overview of all the ideas and how they fit together. State an opposing view/different approach as contrast if relevant.
- **Claim 1:** Pick one distinct idea and explain that. Start with either the most important one or with the one that comes logically or chronologically first.
Analyse/evaluate it: You may well want to contrast it with other relevant ideas so you may want a separate paragraph to set out a contrast before you evaluate it or you might include several different responses and analysis in one paragraph.
- **Claim 2:**
- **Analyse/evaluate it:**
- **Claim 3:**
- **Analyse/evaluate it:**
- **Conclude:** Summarise whether the ideas work or not.

- **Rebuttal (to the challenge)** Defend your view.
- **Conclusion:** Sum up your case.

This way tends to work well when you are given a statement and told to 'discuss' it or asked 'do you agree?'
(Q3b)

If you are asked to 'critically evaluate [N's] ideas' or 'evaluate the arguments for [x]' then this way is less likely to work easily. You might want to use a more thematic approach.

These two methods should give you a good framework for most essays. See also [C Vardy's TRADE C approach](#).

HOWEVER, provided you fully explain a range of different views which you analyse and evaluate to create a clear line of argument then you have done the right thing. You can structure it how you like. It is worth developing your own style and 'plan' long before the actual exam rather than trying to do so on the day!

Things to avoid:

- **Unsubstantiated claims** - anything you claim you must justify!
- **Vague imprecise summaries of ideas** - especially if you have misrepresented views, you would be then giving inaccurate information
- **'Some people think...'** - This statement is far too vague. The 'some people' should be more precise at A Level. E.g. 'liberal feminists think' or (even better) 'Harriet Taylor argued...!'
- **Agreeing with two totally opposing ideas** - You might agree with PARTS of two opposing views but you cannot wholeheartedly agree with two things that contradict.
- **Any reference to 'I think' or 'this essay will argue'** - it won't lose you marks, but it is not a very sophisticated way of writing.

Things to aim to do:

- **Have a strong and convincing line of argument.**
- Make sure your conclusion actually follows on from your evaluation in the essay. You cannot talk about how convincing all the weaknesses are, and then agree with the statement in question!
- When rebutting challenges to your view make sure you engage with what is actually said and don't just ignore it. Try to show why the challenge is invalid or unimportant.
- Analyse ideas thoroughly to see how they work before you reach your final evaluation.
- Include technical terminology and quotations.
- Think for yourself. Examiners try to ask you questions which make YOU think about APPLYING what you know to answer the question. You are not necessarily supposed to be able to remember discussing exactly that issue in lessons. A Level lessons will not cover all the possible angles to approach a topic, not will you have practiced every possible question.
- Use your wider knowledge. Knowledge and examples from history, geography, English, politics, science, popular culture, the news etc. could all be relevant. The examiner would LOVE to see that you can make links and go beyond the syllabus.

Grammar points:

In an essay you should:

- Use paragraphs.

- Avoid starting sentences with 'And' or 'But'. 'However' should always be followed with a comma.
- Quotations should be in quotation marks.
- Exclamation marks should be avoided.
- Use rhetorical questions very, **very** sparingly.
- Capital letters should not be sprinkled at random through the essay but names should be capitalised. God should be capitalised when referring to Christianity Judaism or Islam but you should use a small g when referring to polytheistic religions. 'Bible' can be written with or without a capital, but be consistent.
- Make sure you can spell the names of the people you have studied (Feuerbach) and key technical terms (androgyny). There is no reason to get wrong words that you know you will have a good chance of having to use.

You do not get a separate mark for good use of English, however, top band marks are expected to be grammatically correct with few (if any) spelling or punctuation errors.

Useful Markers:

- **Adding:** and, also, as well as, moreover, too
- **Cause & effect:** because, so, therefore, thus, consequently
- **Sequencing:** next, then, first, finally, meanwhile, before, after
- **Qualifying:** however, although, unless, except, if, as long as, apart from, yet
- **Emphasising:** above all, in particular, especially, significantly, indeed, notably
- **Illustrating:** for example, such as, for instance, as revealed by, in the case of
- **Comparing:** equally, in the same way, similarly, likewise, as with, like
- **Contrasting:** whereas, instead of, alternatively, otherwise, unlike, on the other hand

This was created using the Philosopher Kings website.

With gratitude and thanks to the following resources:

- <https://www.kcl.ac.uk/artshums/depts/english/study/handbook/assessment/taught/JF-Essay-Writing-and-Assessment-Guide-Aug-2016.pdf>
- <http://www.ncl.ac.uk/students/wdc/learning/essays/understanding/instruction.htm>
- <http://www.philosopherkings.co.uk/A2Essayadvice.html>
- <http://www.learningspy.co.uk/english-gcse/essay-writing-style-and-substance/>
- <https://twitter.com/kknteachlearn/status/991044392822759424?s=21>