

# Writing Undergraduate Short Essays<sup>1</sup>

Writing an academic, scholarly essay is an important exercise. Writing helps us think more clearly and comprehensively about an idea, improve communication skills, and become more aware of (and evaluate) our own ideas, beliefs, judgments, and their implications. Writing a scholarly essay is, in other words, an exercise in organized, rational thought and communication.

In an ideal educational process, those entering college would already possess strong writing skills, but the reality is that two-thirds or more of the students entering college struggle to produce an essay much more advanced than a junior-high level book report (along with all of the structural, spelling, and grammatical errors). This isn't a failure on the part of the student as much as it is a failure on the part of our educational system. Irrespective of who is at fault, it presents a tremendous obstacle in research- and idea-grounded courses such as philosophy, religion, and similar. It is an obstacle because such subjects involve examining, discussing, and expressing meaningful thoughts about a specific idea *in writing*. The person who lacks solid writing skills is at a disadvantage here: even if he has good ideas about a topic, he is incapable of expressing this (in writing) in a clear, coherent, mature way.<sup>2</sup>

The guidelines below were developed after many years of evaluating thousands of essays. Following these guidelines can't guarantee an A on every paper, but they will help most students

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<sup>1</sup> This guide is intended to assist with essays in the two to ten page range. The same principles apply for longer essays, but longer essays require much greater planning, organization and editing. Shorter essays—ones that are just 1-2 paragraphs—generally do not require as much planning, they omit any introductory or concluding wording, and focus on providing a succinct answer to a narrow question.

<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, excellent writers—especially creative writers—often struggle with disciplining and structuring their ideas. They often write as if creative turns of phrase are the same as (or a substitute for) substantive, organized thought.

produce better papers and stay out of the F-zone. At the end is a sample paper that implements many of these principles, if imperfectly.

Keep in mind that writing is an art. There isn't any magic formula for successful writing. There are basic principles to employ, and it is only after thousands of hours of practice at employing those principles that one becomes a true artist. Until then, writing is work, *hard* work.

## General Recommendations

1. Carefully read and understand the assignment *prior* to doing the related readings. If there is *anything* that seems confusing or unclear about the assignment, ask for clarification far in advance.
2. Take *hand-written* notes while doing the readings (studies have shown that hand-written notes increase retention of information and contribute to understanding). Note items of interest, key points, confusing statements, and especially items that relate to the assignment. Be sure to note the page number for books or articles, or minute/second for videos.
3. After completing all the readings, reconsider the assignment. There is usually a primary question or topic to be addressed. Develop an outline of a few points *that are relevant to the main topic*, then arrange the notes into groups according to how they relate to this outline.
4. Write the outline at the top of the paper, and place the strongest, relevant quote (or paraphrases) in order under that outline, one or two per point. Refer to a source—quote or paraphrase—only in order to (1) support a main point or, (2) present a position to be analyzed/critiqued. If the quote does not do one of these two things, then it is likely unnecessary.
5. Then flesh out the key points so that there are one or two paragraphs each. Make sure that the points are clear and distinct from one another. These “key points” should be more than just restatements of the material, but an analysis of specific ideas with demonstration of how these ideas are true, false, good, bad, etc. “Flesh out” means to explain, support, critique or improve the concept under analysis.

6. Be sure to consider and address alternative, opposing positions.
7. Write a synthesizing paragraph or two that combine and analyze the paper's main points, then write (or re-write) the introductory and concluding paragraphs. The introductory and concluding paragraphs should introduce and summarize the body.
8. The first draft should be substantially *over* the target word count. If it is short, the paper probably lacks depth of analysis.
9. Enter and properly format any inline notes or footnotes. Also complete the Works Cited or Bibliography section.
10. Then read and revise the paper *several times*. This involves reorganizing and rephrasing ideas so as to make them more clear and powerful. It also involves cutting out materials that do not contribute effectively to the main argument. By the time redacting is complete, the paper should be reduced down close to the target word count (though it is okay if it is slightly over or under).
11. DO NOT PAD THE PAPER WITH QUOTES OR FLUFF TO MEET THE TARGET WORD COUNT.
12. Ask someone else to proofread the paper. If you are not a strong writer, get help from the writing lab or a tutor *before* turning in the paper.
13. Make sure that the paper meets the formatting expectations, below (or those provided by your class).
14. Finally, before turning it in, thoroughly check it for grammar and spelling. Most software like Google Docs and Microsoft Word have adequate built-in grammar and spelling checkers (these are deficient for advanced writers). Supplemental programs like Grammarly can also help.

## Formatting

Minor formatting errors are not a big deal. Major formatting errors may result in a lower grade or a refusal to grade the paper unless the formatting problems are corrected. All essays *must* be formatted as follows (see the sample paper at the end for an example):

- Use 12 pt serif font—Times New Roman or similar is preferred
- 1 inch margins on all sides

- Double spaced. No extra space between paragraphs. The first line of each paragraph should be indented approximately half an inch.
- Page numbers are optional for essays under three pages. If used, place them at the bottom-center or bottom-right of each page. Page count should start on the first body page—not the title page. (Some writing standards place the last name and page number at the top-right of every page. That is acceptable, too.)
- Use either a title page *or* less-formal first-page header. This must include at least the author's name, the class number and assignment identification. A date is normative, too, but assignments are automatically timestamped when uploaded. Longer, more formal essays should have a title page.
- All direct quotes or paraphrases of outside sources *must* be *properly* noted: inline, footnotes or endnotes are fine. The note must be sufficient so that someone can easily, quickly locate the source for your statement. Turabian/Chicago style notes are preferred, but MLA is okay, too. Whatever is used, be consistent. *Failure to identify sources of quoted or paraphrased material can result in complete rejection of the assignment.*
- Bulleted or numbered lists should be more closely spaced, as should block quotes. It is okay (but not required) to place an extra space between list items, as demonstrated in this section.
- Block quotes should be used if the quote is longer than two lines.
- A Works Cited (if using inline citations) or Bibliography (if using footnotes) section with properly-formatted entries is required.
- Essays should generally have at least two sources. Depending on the subject, at least one primary source and one secondary source are desirable. A primary source is directly related to the topic. A secondary source is someone else writing about the object of study. For example, if the topic of study is virtue-ethics, then Aristotle's *Nicomachean Ethics* might be a primary source, and a book about, critiquing or summarizing *NE* would be a secondary source.
- There should be a clear introductory paragraph (or two) which summarizes the essay's content.
- There should be a clear concluding paragraph (or two) which summarizes the essay's main points. *Do not introduce new ideas in the conclusion... ever.*

- A declared title is optional on short essays, but can be helpful (used only in the absence of a title page).
- Each paragraph or two should clearly focus on a single point. One or two references may be quoted or paraphrased to support that point.
- Upload the essay as a PDF or Word Document

## General Order of Elements

1. Title page or header—*not both!*
2. If using the block header—not a title page—place an optional title just before the introductory paragraph. It should be centered.
3. One or two sentence summary of main thesis or question (optional)
4. Introductory paragraph(s) outlining main points
5. Body consisting of one or two paragraphs per major point, with one or two succinct supporting quotes from relevant sources per point.
6. Synthesizing paragraph or two
7. Concluding paragraph(s) summarizing main thesis and key points
8. Works Cited or Bibliography section (starting on a new page)

## Recommendations

Much of this is just a restatement of the above.

- Many of the essays I receive fail to clearly address the assigned topic. Be careful to read and understand the assignment before starting and double-check afterward to make sure you have *clearly* addressed the main question.
- Read all of the assigned material, taking notes as you do, highlighting important or relevant ideas.
- Develop an outline of two to four key points related to the assignment.
- Identify relevant, supporting sources.

- “Spend” a paragraph or two on each point, incorporating relevant references *only as needed* to justify contentious claims.
- Clarify or define ambiguous or contentious terms (but please do so in a way more creative than “According to Webster’s Dictionary....”).
- Demonstrate understanding of the main points, but do not simply report what the materials presented. Comment meaningfully upon the ideas. Analyze them. Explain what you agree or disagree with and *why*. Analyze your own reasoning to discern whether it is sound. Consider alternative, contradicting positions. Ideally, extend and build upon the ideas from the readings.
- The introductory paragraph (and especially the first sentence or two) sets the tone for the entire essay. Roughly one-third of the essays I receive start with grammatical, spelling and punctuation errors or awkward, convoluted sentences. *Don’t do this*.
- Do not attempt to write in a more elevated, elegant style than you typically employ when talking.
- Avoid writing in the first or second person: avoid sentence structures where you refer to yourself as *I* or to the reader as *you*. If you (oops) must employ pronouns to articulate an idea, third person structures are generally preferred in scholarly, academic writing. Exceptions to this include creative, personal essays, biographies, and similar.
- Avoid repetition.
- Employ consistent, correct personal pronouns. Plural pronouns such as *they, them, their*, etc. should only be used with reference to multiple persons. *He* or *she* (or similar) should be used when referring to an individual male or female, respectively. The historical convention is that the masculine terms *man, him* or *he* are generic and inclusive, whereas feminine terms *woman, her* or *she* are specific, but there is some freedom here.
- Most colleges have writing centers which will help you with your essays *for free*. You can also find many tutors online who will do so for a reasonable fee. If you have struggled with writing in the past, consider asking your college writing lab to assist you.
- If a sentence is at all ambiguous or awkward, rewrite it.
- It is fine to bring in other, external sources, *but do not ignore the sources from the class*.
- Have someone else (ideally a skilled writer) proofread and evaluate your essay **BEFORE** turning it in.

- Read it out loud.
- It is generally better to address two or maybe three points with depth than to try to touch upon many in a shallow manner.
- Revise, rewrite, edit, revise, rinse, wash, repeat.
- For each sentence, ask yourself:
  - Does the idea expressed in this sentence really contribute to the essay?
  - Has this idea already been expressed?
  - Can this sentence be written more clearly?
  - Should this sentence be moved somewhere else?
- Turn in your assignment on time. Do not wait until minutes before the deadline. Something will often go wrong.
- Do not fail to turn in an assignment. A zero on an assignment is equivalent to getting an F on two.
- Avoid repeating the same ideas but just in different ways. (Ha! See what I did there?)
- Unless otherwise specified, most essays should have descriptive, expository and persuasive qualities.
- Perform both spell-checking and grammar-checking. MS Word, Google Docs, and similar programs all have adequate spell- and grammar-checking built in, but you may need to specifically activate them. There are also supplemental programs like Grammarly. These will help you catch basic mistakes. *Warning for **advanced** writers:* Many computer-based grammar checkers will “false-flag” your writing. I don’t use Grammarly anymore because it was incorrect in its flags and suggestions about 75% of the time. However, these were complex, advanced essays. Google’s grammar checking (incorporated into Google Docs) is more basic and makes fewer errors, but even it is sometimes incorrect.

## Grading

Essays in this class are evaluated on multiple dimensions:

- General structure and formatting
- Spelling, grammar, punctuation and similar

- Proper citation notation for quotes and paraphrases
- The degree to which the essay engages and demonstrates understanding of the materials and key principles
- The degree to which the essay addresses the assigned topic
- Does the essay merely report or summarize the materials, or does it substantively engage, analyze and extend them?
- Does the author demonstrate an awareness of weaknesses in the author's own position? Are these addressed?
- Does the essay demonstrate an awareness or understanding of contrary positions, or does it just presume that the author's (or material's) position is correct?

I have read and evaluated *thousands* of writing assignments ranging from short essays up to graduate theses and dissertations (and have written hundreds of papers, essays, stories and articles). When I read your work, I am thinking about where it fits relative to the other (comparable) essays I have read with respect to how well it meets the evaluation criteria and the course level. "Overall, is this one about average, a little better than the average, exceptional (top 10%), below average, or worse?" *The default is a C, or average.* If your essay is, overall, better than the average, it will receive a higher rating. An essay needs to be in (roughly) the top 10% of undergraduate essays I have reviewed to receive an A; such an essay is very well written, lacks any substantial structural, formatting, grammatical or other flaws, engages the materials and topic, and analyzes and extends ideas from the class in a robust way.

Writing skill is not the most important element here, *but it is still very important.* A very well-written essay might still get a very low grade if it fails to address the topic, engage the materials, etc. On the other hand, it is difficult to discern if an essay did address the topic, engage the materials, analyze ideas, etc. if it is poorly written. Hence, poorly written essays

rarely receive a grade greater than a C. (If the grammar, spelling, etc. are quite bad, I will often stop highlighting them after the first page so that your paper isn't just a bunch of red marks.)

Understanding is the primary goal. The writing process is one way of growing in and demonstrating understanding. However, try to avoid writing in a manner or making statements simply for the purpose of getting a higher grade. Rather, simply focus on understanding the material as best you can, and clearly expressing, analyzing and extending that understanding. I would really love to give every student an A, but it is your responsibility to produce material and demonstrate understanding that merits such an evaluation.

I generally ask a few questions as my “feedback” for your essays. These questions are intended to help point out areas in the essay or your thinking process which might benefit from greater consideration. Some students like to address these and enter into a conversation about them. That is fine, but not required.

## Things to Avoid (Common Mistakes)

- Phrases like “I feel,” “I think,” “I believe,” “in my opinion,” and so on (avoid *any* first person pronouns and sentence structures)
- References to the reader as “you” (avoid second person pronouns and sentence structures)
- The word *aspect*, which is almost always misused
- Unsubstantiated (and controversial) claims. There is nothing wrong with controversial claims, but do make sure they are well-supported.
- Simply summarizing the materials
- Being boring

- Punctuation errors, especially when quotes are involved. *In general*, punctuation should go inside of closing quotes. For example:
  - Correct: Sally said, “I like strawberries.”
  - Incorrect: Sally said, “I like strawberries”.
- Sweeping, ambiguous statements
- Multiple rhetorical questions
- Assuming that your grade is based on whether you agree with the material (I don’t even agree with the material much of the time)
- Assuming that the grading is “personal” or has to do with whether I agree with your position (I am not concerned with whether we agree, but with whether your idea is clearly expressed and rationally supported)
- Running headers (automatically inserted by some programs)
- Arguing about how you believe you deserve a better grade
- Totally failing to turn in an assignment (this is equivalent to getting an F on two assignments and WILL affect your final grade)
- Turning in assignments late
- Spelling and grammatical errors, especially in the opening sentences—there is almost no excuse for these given the automated spelling- and grammar-checking systems built into most word processors today.
- Awkward sentence structures (usually a result of trying to employ “high” language)
- Failing to proofread your work
- Lack of organization (spaghetti, stream-of-consciousness essays)
- Lots of filler-words and filler-phrases (things that add nothing to the substance of the essay). This includes repetitive statements.
- Section headings (in short essays)
- Uploading essays in a format other than PDF or Word
- Attempting to cover too many points (and being shallow)

- Writing in the first person. (As I did earlier... and am doing now. Are you still reading this? There I go again.)

Following is a sample paper in footnotes/bibliography format which demonstrates some of the above principles:

Student's Name

Professor's Name

Class Number and Name

Date

### Interpreting Water and Wine in the Divine Liturgy

The Divine Liturgy is the celebratory, active prayer engaged by Christians whereby they offer worship to God as they listen, remember, reflect, and re-present Christ's teachings, love, and self-offering. Every vestment, posture, action, furnishing, word, and silence is bristling with meaning. But what is that meaning, and how can we know it? Earlier (simplistic) hermeneutic approaches suggest a singular meaning grounded in the intention of the author and in keeping with some larger framework; later, phenomenological hermeneutics dramatically broaden this perspective to include many additional dimensions or layers of possible meaning, even ones unknown to or unintended by the author. This brief essay explores one of the priestly actions during the Divine Liturgy and how its meaning is disclosed.

At the beginning of the Liturgy of the Eucharist, the priest prepares the bread and wine for consecration. He pours some wine into the chalice, then blesses it and adds a small amount of water. This practice can be done well or poorly, with dexterity or without, with flourish or humble simplicity. As the priest mixes these elements, he also prays these words (in the Western rite):

By the mystery of this water and wine,  
May we come to share in the divinity of Christ  
Who humbled himself to share in our humanity.<sup>3</sup>

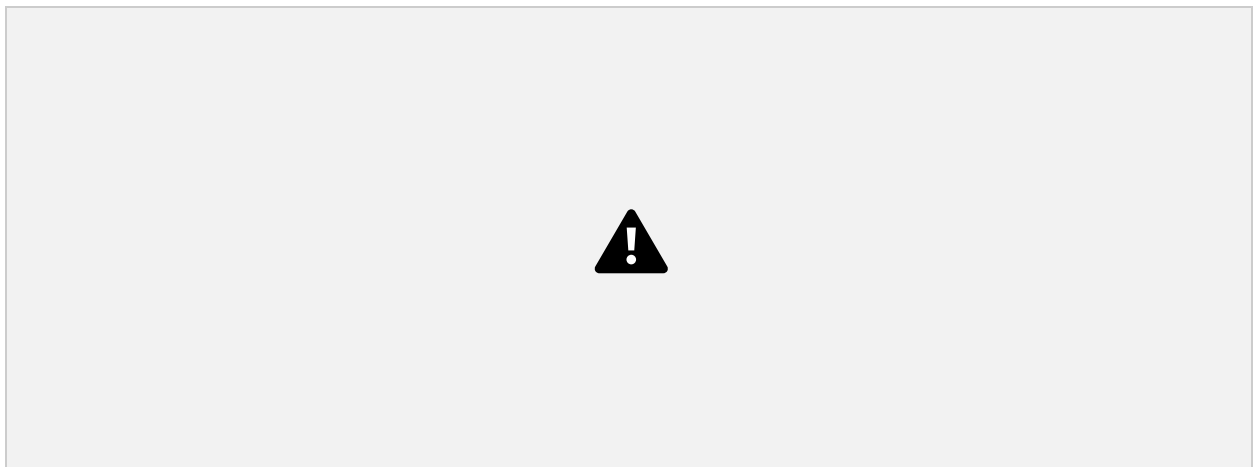
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<sup>3</sup> These or similar prayers are found in many liturgies. This prayer is from the current Roman Missal.

The contemporary words of the prayer suggest that the action symbolizes two dynamics: Christ's united humanity and divinity, and our hope to share in his divinity. This is symbolized by the wine in that, when water is added, we no longer have separate water and wine, but a single, unified mixture.

There have been hundreds of versions of the Divine Liturgy throughout history (and maybe six distinct ones are in practice today). These vary with the languages and cultures through which they came to be. However, in every known instance, this mixing of water and wine is present, which prompts curiosity about its origin and essential meaning. Researching and reflecting upon the origin and history of this action and prayer, and how these elements have been practiced or understood in the past may deepen our understanding.

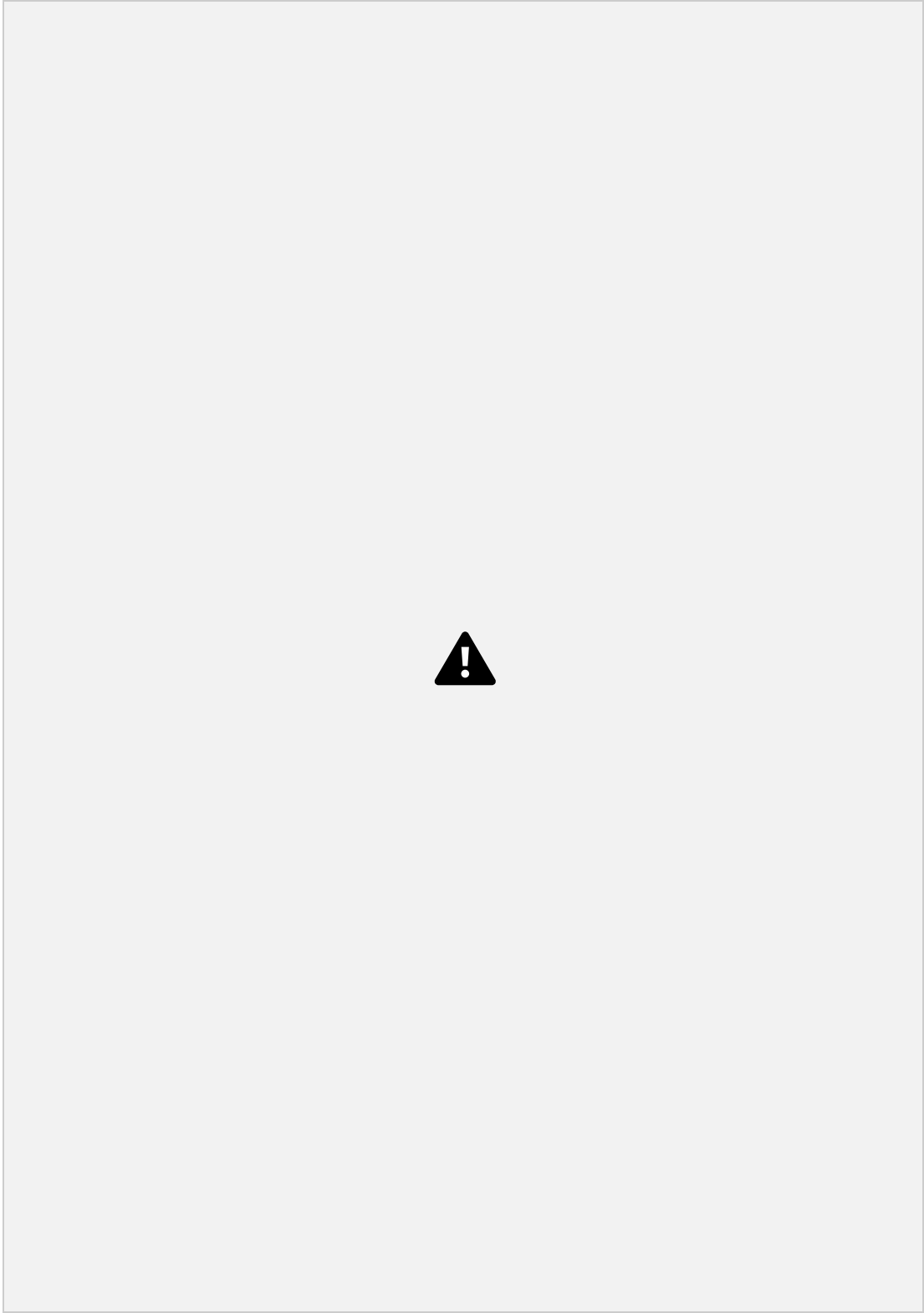
Our first stop is a Byzantine icon from the 15th century, showing the blood and water flowing from Christ's side<sup>4</sup> during the Crucifixion:



Excerpt from the complete, following image.

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<sup>4</sup> John 19:34.



Andreas Paviás, Icon of the Crucifixion  
Image from: National Gallery, Alexandros Soutzos Museum, Athens

In the Divine Liturgy, the wine (which is ideally red) symbolizes Jesus' blood. Pavius' icon in which the angels are collecting blood and water from Jesus' side suggests a connection between the blood and water which flowed from Christ, and the wine and water present in the chalice during the Divine Liturgy. Indeed, the priest's Eucharistic prayers later affirm that very connection.

Going back another millennium, the reference in the contemporary prayer to Christ's divinity and humanity prompts recollection of the hypostatic union declaration from the Council of Chalcedon (451 A.D.) which declared that Jesus has two natures, human and divine, united in the one person of the Son of God.<sup>5</sup> But it is also calls to mind the position of the miaphysites who reject Chalcedon, who have the same mixing action in their own Divine Liturgy (e.g., the Liturgy of St. Mark), and conceive of full humanity and full divinity perfectly and inseparably combined into a single nature, single person, in Christ.<sup>6</sup> Curiously, we have here two possible interpretations of the same act which seem to be in tension.

Continuing back through history, we discover a related comment that St. Clement of Alexandria wrote in 198 A.D.: "Accordingly, as wine is blended with water, so is the Spirit with man. And the one, the mixture of wine and water, nourishes to faith; while the other, the Spirit,

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<sup>5</sup> Council of Chalcedon, "Extracts from The Acts," Henry Percival, trans., from *Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers*, second series, vol. 14, Philip Schaff and Henry Wace, eds. (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1900), session 2, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/3811.htm>.

<sup>6</sup> "Miaphysitism," Orthodox-Wiki, accessed June 19, 2019, <https://orthodoxwiki.org/Miaphysitism>.

conducts to immortality.”<sup>7</sup> Here Clement seems to be speaking of God’s Spirit entering into and mixing or blending with man (who, himself, is a hybrid or mixture of body and soul).

Thus far we see that there are different interpretations regarding the meaning of this mixing, and even of the elements, themselves. Is only one of these interpretations correct? How can we know? Simple approaches to hermeneutics suggest that there is one correct or best meaning of a word, writing or action, and that this meaning is grounded in the knowledge and intention of the author. Let us continue our quest to see if we can find this source of meaning.

Rolling back to 155-157 A.D., the wine-water-mixing practice is found in Justin Martyr’s explanation of the Divine Liturgy to Roman Emperor Antoninus Pius:

There is then brought to the president of the brethren bread and a cup of wine mixed with water; and he taking them, gives praise and glory to the Father of the universe, through the name of the Son and of the Holy Ghost, and offers thanks at considerable length for our being counted worthy to receive these things at His hands.<sup>8</sup>

Justin doesn’t explain the meaning of the mixing or its origin, but only mentions that the water and wine are, in fact, mixed.

As we peer back farther into history, we are confronted by increased opacity: the mixing is mentioned, but without imputation or explanation of any meaning. (1) Of the many dimensions of the Divine Liturgy are those of remembering and re-presenting Christ’s words and actions at the Last Supper. Indeed, in every Liturgy, Jesus’ prayers are repeated. We see no instructions in

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<sup>7</sup> St. Clement of Alexandria, “Paedagogus,” William Wilson, trans., from *Ante-Nicene Fathers*, vol. 2, Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, eds. (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885), <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/02092.htm>.

<sup>8</sup> St. Justin Martyr, “The First Apology,” Marcus Dods and George Reith, trans., from *Ante-Nicene Fathers* vol. 1, Alexander Roberts, James Donaldson, and A. Cleveland Coxe, eds. (Buffalo, NY: Christian Literature Publishing Co., 1885), chapter 65, <http://www.newadvent.org/fathers/0126.htm>.

the Gospels, however, about this mixing of wine and water. (2) The Last Supper was a participation in the Passover observance instructed in Exodus 12, yet there we have no instructions regarding wine or water. (3) The simple instructions from Exodus 12 are elaborated throughout history and in Mishna Pesachim 10, where the participants are told to prepare four cups of “mixed” wine. Though there is great elaboration on the meaning of each action in the Passover, the text is silent regarding any meaning to this mixing.

It seems that, if there was an original, religious meaning to this act, the record thereof has been lost. However, it turns out that the origin of adding water to wine may actually be quite pragmatic and cultural rather than theological. Ancient wine was thick, sometimes syrupy or gritty, and water was added not for any religious or symbolic reason, but to make it more palatable, to avoid drunkenness, or to try to improve the taste. Some reports suggest that, among the Greeks, drinking undiluted wine was considered barbaric or imprudent, and that it was also customary among the Romans to dilute wine.<sup>9</sup>

Now, some may be scandalized to learn that this contemporary liturgical action and prayer likely has such a mundane, earthy origin, but does that *really* matter, and does it somehow negate the meanings which have since been imputed to the action? A narrow hermeneutic might look strictly at the origin or intention of the author and conclude that the subsequent discerned meanings were imaginary fabrications.<sup>10</sup> However, a more phenomenological approach recognizes that meaning and its discernment is a much more complex process. A word or action

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<sup>9</sup> Mark Cartwright, “Wine in the Ancient Mediterranean,” Ancient History Encyclopedia (26 August 2016), <https://www.ancient.eu/article/944/wine-in-the-ancient-mediterranean/>.

<sup>10</sup> Roger Lundin, “Hermeneutics,” from *Contemporary Literary Theory: A Christian Approach*, Clarence Walhout and Leland Ryken, eds. (Grand Rapids, MI: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1991), 154.

may have one (or little, or no) meaning in one time and context, but may come to have very different ones in other circumstances, times and cultures. The contemporary hermeneutical approach does not locate meaning solely or even primarily in the author or origin, but holds the reader, viewer or current participant to be as much a source (or “author”) of meaning; it further suggests that contemporary interpretations are the culmination and synthesis of a complete history, or collective consciousness, which led up to and participates in the moment of interpretation.<sup>11</sup> Consequently, a contemporary hermeneutic does not exclude the *sensible imputation*<sup>12</sup> of meaning to a word or action and, in this case, it is reasonable to conceive of the mixing of water and wine—something unnecessary for current wines, especially given the small amount consumed during the liturgy—as an analogy which informs us regarding some other Christian theological principle.

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid., 161-162.

<sup>12</sup> And precisely what constitutes “sensible” is exactly where people will differ.

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