

WRITING ESSAYS & DISSERTATIONS

A first-class essay will exhibit most, if not all, of the following virtues: sound knowledge of the subject as a whole; control of the material; the ability to isolate problems and make reasoned and independent choices between possible solutions; incisive passages of close reading or analysis; the skilful use of particulars to illustrate general points; some quality of individuality; evidence of interest in the subject; a clear and elegant style; careful presentation; a sense of direction.

Students are encouraged to consult lecturers and submit a plan of no more than one A4 page at least one full week before the deadline for final submission. However, students cannot submit draft essays.

These notes should be read in conjunction with the notes on marking bands and criteria for assessment and with the presentation requirements for essays and dissertations. The marking bands and criteria for assessment provide broad guidelines on what will be looked for in assessing an essay and dissertation. To a large extent they outline a range of transferable skills which are applicable to the writing of any essay, but you should bear in mind that different units may require different approaches, and may have specific requirements which cannot be outlined here. These will be given to you by individual unit tutors. For example, a unit which is largely historical in focus may place more emphasis on the detailed presentation of factual material than might be the case in a unit in the philosophy of religion.

Presentation

Assessed work must be word-processed and submitted online in most cases Assessed work must have:

- adequate margins and spacing. Margins, usually of at least 2.5cm on each side of the text, are required for your marker's comments and corrections. The main-body text should be double-spaced (footnotes, endnotes and indented quotations require single-spacing);
- a legible font size (12-point for the main text, and 10-point for the notes is the departmental recommendation);
- pages numbered consecutively using Arabic numbers (1, 2, 3); **failure to comply with this regulation constitutes a deficiency in presentation and will normally result in the loss of marks;**
- the title of the essay at the top of the first page (your name must not appear anywhere in the text of your essay);
- a bibliography which indicates the works which you consulted; **failure to include a bibliography will result in the deduction of marks;**
- an exact word count when submitting essays; **5 marks will be deducted for any work that is more than 10% over or under the word limit set for that assignment.**

Content

Students understandably devote most of their energies to mastering a particular topic through reading and through taking notes in class. At the most basic level you will inevitably get a poor mark if your essay/dissertation shows a lack of familiarity with the subject matter and with the critical issues which it raises. **One of the most persistent weaknesses here is that staff put the most important and helpful books and articles in the short loan collection of the library of make them available via Blackboard, but it is clear from essay bibliographies that these works are often not consulted.** Students also tend to worry a great deal about whether they have come up with the "right answer" to a given question — presumably the answer which accords most closely with the lecturer's views. Remember, however, that most questions are complex, and that judgements often have to be made about the balance of probabilities given that much of the evidence is contradictory or capable of being interpreted in different ways. For example, if you are asked to discuss the proposition

that secularism cannot provide the basis for true religious pluralism, a good essay/dissertation could argue either for or against this view, and the fact that the student's approach did not accord with the lecturer's own opinion would not determine the mark awarded. What would be crucial was that the student presented and discussed all the evidence including especially that which could challenge whatever line of argument was adopted. If you are to sustain a critical argument, and not merely to regurgitate facts, you need to make sure that you have understood the full ramifications of the question, and therefore what can be said on both sides of a case. In order to do so you need to read widely and to attend the unit classes which are designed to tease out and clarify just these kind of issues.

English Grammar and Style

You will lose marks for poor English grammar and style. Students who find they are marked down because of their English grammar, spelling and expression are encouraged to make use of the Faculty of Art's on-line resource at <http://www.bristol.ac.uk/arts/skills/>. This resource includes on-line tutorials in grammar and punctuation.

Structuring Your Essay/Dissertation

Sometimes, too little time and energy goes into the presentation of the essay. Again and again students are told that the work that they have put in and the grasp of the subject which they exhibit deserve a 2.1 mark, but that the way in which the material has been presented pulls the essay/dissertation down a class. Here the main points to consider are the structure of the essay, grammar, syntax, spelling and punctuation, and the scholarly apparatus of footnotes and bibliography.

It is a good idea to structure an essay/introduction with an introduction, a main section and a conclusion, but students are often unclear about what ought to go into each. Introductions often contain a great deal of "background information" which is not relevant to the question, or some material which is felt to be important, but which the student is uncertain where to place in the essay. It is perhaps uninspiring but much safer to write a short introduction which states what the implications of the title are, and sets out the broad categories or issues which are going to be discussed in the main section of the essay. The introduction then functions rather like a table of contents in a book. Conclusions can also be tricky. It is not a good idea to use the conclusion to suddenly introduce some important new material or argument which has not previously been discussed. It is much better to review the main topics which have been covered in the essay/dissertation and to make sure that the conclusions contained in the final summing up refer directly to the question set out in the title. Clarity of thought cannot be divorced from clarity of expression. An essay/dissertation which is full of grammatical errors and spelling mistakes will not lose marks because the lecturer has some private fetish about correct English, but because these kinds of errors make it difficult to understand just what is being argued.

Footnotes and Bibliography

There is no universally accepted convention for footnotes and bibliographies, but whichever system you adopt must be used **consistently**. It is important that where you quote directly from a source this should be acknowledged in a footnote. Indirect paraphrases of an author's argument should also be given a footnote. Footnotes may appear at the end of an essay/dissertation or at the bottom of a page. There must also be a full bibliography of works used in writing the essay/dissertation which should appear at the very end. Below are the recommended departmental conventions which are based on those of the MHRA (Modern Humanities Research Association), and should always be used unless a lecturer has provided an alternative full system which is more appropriate to his or her subject. For further details please consult the *MHRA Style Guide: A Handbook for Authors, Editors and Writers of Theses* (Leeds: Modern Humanities Research Association, 2008), available on-line free as a PDF file from <http://www.mhra.org.uk/Publications/Books/StyleGuide/>

There are two principal types of referencing used in the Humanities: the **full-title/short-title** system and the **author-date** system.

1. Citation by the full-title/short-title system

1.1 Final bibliography

Books in the final bibliography should contain the author, title (in italics or underlined), place of publication, publisher and date of publication. Also note that bibliographies are to be in alphabetical order of authors' surnames:

Altizer, T., *The Contemporary Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 1998).

Chapters in a bibliography which are taken from an edited book should include the author and title (in inverted commas) of the chapter, the editor and title (in italics or underlined) of the book, the place of publication, publisher and date of publication, year of publication and page numbers:

Bankier, D., 'German Public Awareness of the Final Solution', in *The Final Solution: Origins and Implementation* ed. by D. Cesarani (London: Routledge, 1994), pp. 112–140.

Articles in a bibliography which are taken from a journal should include the author and title of the article, the journal title, volume number, year of publication and page numbers:

Shakespeare, J., 'Religion and Politics in mid-Tudor England Through the Eyes of an English Protestant Woman: The Recollections of Rose Hickman', *The Bulletin of Historical Research*, 55 (1982), 94–102.

1.2 References, footnotes/endnotes

References to your sources should be given in footnotes/endnotes or in brackets in the body of the essay as appropriate. Footnote/endnote reference marks should be placed after any punctuation marks:

... who exist in various hells because they do not comprehend the four noble truths.⁴

The first time you cite a particular book, or chapter, or journal article in the notes, use the above conventions but with the author's first name or initial first, and with the page or pages specified:

T. Altizer, *The Contemporary Jesus* (London: SCM Press, 1998), p. 4.

If you are quoting from one page from within an article or book chapter:

J. Shakespeare, 'Religion and Politics in mid-Tudor England Through the Eyes of an English Protestant Woman: The Recollections of Rose Hickman', *The Bulletin of Historical Research*, 55 (1982), 94–102 (p. 94).

Subsequent references to books, chapters, articles cited previously should **not** include full bibliographical details, and can be given either in a note or in the body of the text in brackets:

Shakespeare, 'Religion and Politics', pp. 7–9.

"According to Altizer (*Contemporary Jesus*, p. 37) ..."

If you are referring to **exactly** the same page referred to in the preceding note, you can use:

Ibid.

If you are citing a book, etc., that you yourself have not actually seen and checked in the original, you must cite **your** actual source:

Max Müller, *Selected Essays on Language Mythology and Religion*, p. 201, as quoted in Carol S. Anderson, *Pain and its Ending: the Four Noble Truths in the Theravāda Buddhist Canon* (Richmond: Curzon, 1999), p. 178.

Failure to do this could leave you open to the charge of plagiarism.

2. Citation by the 'Author-Date' system

Alternatively you can use the 'Author-Date' system of citation: works should be listed in the final bibliography and cited in notes according to author and date of publication:

2.1 Final bibliography:

Altizer, T. 1998. *The Contemporary Jesus* (London: SCM Press).

Anderson, Carol S. 1999. *Pain and its Ending: the Four Noble Truths in the Theravāda Buddhist Canon* (Richmond: Curzon), p. 178.

Bankier, D. 1994. 'German Public Awareness of the Final Solution', in *The Final Solution: Origins and Implementation* ed. by D. Cesarani (London: Routledge), pp. 112–140.

Shakespeare, J. 1982. 'Religion and Politics in mid-Tudor England Through the Eyes of an English Protestant Woman: The Recollections of Rose Hickman', *The Bulletin of Historical Research*, 55, 94–102.

2. 2 References in footnotes or endnotes:

Shakespeare 1982, 7–9.

Altizer 1998, 37.

Bankier 1994, 112–14.

Anderson 1999, 28.

Internet Sources

An ever increasing range of valuable internet resources are available for Religious Studies and Theology students, and unit tutors may put some of these on reading lists. It is important to bear in mind, however, that much that is available on the world wide web is of dubious value and has not been subject to the normal processes of scholarly peer review as happens in the case of books and articles. **In particular, students should bear in mind that using your own sources from the web is not an acceptable substitute for reading the material on the unit bibliography.** If you find a valuable internet source please draw it to the unit tutor's attention for assessment and inclusion in future bibliographies. Also remember that the normal rules about plagiarism apply to any sources which are taken from the internet.

Such material needs to be identified as in the case of all other sources which you use for an essay. You should begin by citing the author and written title of the source, then any sub sections within the source, then the full resource locator, followed by the date you last visited the site. This is cumbersome, but all of the information is necessary since sources may not be paginated and anyone trying to find a quotation needs the fullest possible information. **If you have simply accessed a printed source online, you should reference it as you would the original printed source.**