

St Patrick's College Maynooth

Faculty of Theology

**Essay Writing Guidelines
for Students in BD, BATH and BTh and Higher Diploma in
Theological Studies**

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Introduction

This brief essay is intended to illustrate the basic skills of essay writing and the methodological conventions required by the Faculty of Theology, St. Patrick's College Maynooth. The text itself will serve as a simple model of writing. It should be consulted when doubts arise about researching and planning the essay, its layout, paragraphing, source citation, footnotes and bibliography. It is recommended that you familiarise yourself with, and follow, the guidelines of the Faculty. If you wish to follow another set of guidelines, you should do so consistently and be able to offer good reasons for your choice.¹

A good essay begins its life in the *library*. Once the topic for the essay has been chosen, the writer needs to identify the books and articles to be used as source material for the essay. It is useful at this early stage to compile a *bibliography* and systematically read through it. *It is important to realize that it is not necessary to read every book in its entirety*. However, the introductory and concluding chapters need careful reading. Any chapter pertinent to the essay topic should be studied in detail. The book's index provides easy reference to relevant information.² During this phase of study, it is vital to make careful and accurate notes of what one is reading, paying particular attention to quotations which may be used eventually in the essay. The same applies to articles in periodicals. When research and study is complete, a plan for the essay should be drawn up.

The following are basic directives for *text layout*. All paragraphs should be indented.

¹ A particularly useful reference book is: Kate L. Turabian, *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses and Dissertations*, 6th ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996). In the Maynooth Library, Turabian is located at REF 808.02 TUR.

² The following example is an important grammatical note on the use of the apostrophe. The apostrophe is normally used to indicate possession (genitive case). Accordingly, the **book's index** = the index **of** the book. Likewise, the **books' index** = the index **of** the books. The plural in English is not formed by the apostrophe. **Kings** means more than one king, while **king's** means 'of a king'. The most common exception to the rule is the word **it's** which

The text is to be double-spaced, except for block quotations, notes and long headings which are single spaced. Each page is to be numbered. Numbers, however, should not be shown on the *title page*, but nonetheless counted in the pagination.³ Arabic numerals, centred at the bottom of the page, are to be preferred. Roman numerals (I, II, III, i, ii, iii) are to be avoided in both pagination and footnote indication.

Note also the conventions of *spacing and punctuation*. Leave one space after a full stop or other punctuation mark at the end of a sentence, also, leave one space after any punctuation mark within the sentence. A space is never inserted *before* a punctuation mark.

Structure of the Essay

Like a good story, an essay needs a beginning, a middle and an end. In academia, these are referred to as the introduction, body and conclusion respectively. The introduction and conclusion to the essay should be the last sections to be written. Key considerations for the body of the essay are the unity and logic of its presentation. Unity is attained by the focus given to the specific topic selected. It may often be necessary to mention some of the issues that you are not addressing, in order better to focus on your particular subject. One common approach is to move from the broader statements of the earlier paragraphs to specific examples or selected texts for more detailed analysis. There are, however, no fixed rules about how the body of the essay should be structured. The basic principle is that there should be a logical arrangement of material held in focus by a controlling issue.

A good *introductory paragraph* identifies the topic, sets a direction and, awakens some interest. By the end of the introduction, the reader should know what *subject* has been

means ‘it is’; on the other hand, **its** means ‘of it’.

³ For instance, the title page of this essay does not have a page number, but the first page of

chosen, from what perspective it will be approached, and what the overall plan of the essay will be. The *introduction* may be the last part you write in the final draft.⁴

The second paragraph, is often broad in scope, scanning the general context of the selected issue(s). It might, for instance, present a brief historical survey of thinking on a given question, or explain the current understanding of an issue (the *status quaestionis*) in an ongoing enquiry, or again it might set down the two sides of a controversial debate.⁵

The *body* of the paper should indicate that you have engaged with the topic of research, allowing you to reach an adequate understanding of your topic. This section of your paper should allow you the opportunity to display the quality of your research, found from your sources and then use these sources to develop your insights. The text of the body may be divided “into well-defined divisions, such as parts, chapters, sections, and subsections.”⁶ This is the part of the work that should display the acknowledgement of authorities in the field of research; this should support your arguments.

The *conclusion* sums up the results of your study and may indicate scope for further enquiry. The concluding paragraph may be the place to offer your personal reflections on a given issue. These should not dominate in the earlier part of the work as your primary task is to present a study of acknowledged authorities in the given field.

full text is numbered as page 2.

⁴ In contemporary typography *italics* (not underlining) are used for emphasizing particular words or phrases.

⁵ In running text in English, foreign words must be *italicized*. This does not apply to foreign words which have become standard expressions in English or in academic discourse, e.g., denouement. Neither are entire quotations in a foreign language to be placed in italics. The phrase *status quaestionis* used here is a Latin term meaning ‘the state of the investigation’.

⁶ Ibid., Turban, *Manual for Writers*, 10.

Writing Style

The key to good writing is clear expression and coherent development of thought. Each new sentence within a paragraph should flow logically from the one before, developing and substantiate earlier statements. One can think of the individual paragraph as a path along which the writer is guiding the reader. There should thus be a sense of direction, of going somewhere, rather than of meandering aimlessly or changing from path to path.

Syntax is the way in which individual sentences are constructed. The best rule of thumb here is to *stay within your depth*. If you are doubtful about grammatical correctness, the clarity or the elegance of a long sentence, break it down into simpler structures. Particular attention needs to be paid to the use of the semi-colon (;). The semi-colon marks a break in the continuity of a sentence; it should be used between the parts of a compound sentence (one or more clauses) when they are not connected by a conjunction (words like ‘and’, ‘but’ etc.).⁷ A comma, by contrast, is used to indicate a minor break in the flow of a sentence.

With practice, it should be possible to vary the length and complexity of your sentences. An occasional, brief and clear statement can be both helpful and attractive to the development of your arguments. The only way to develop writing skill is to practise it by *drafting* the essay. This means putting down the ideas crudely at first, and then rewriting them with a view to eliminating obscurity, ambiguity or awkwardness of construction.

Spelling mistakes in a third-level essay can seriously distract from the argument that is being presented in an essay. Consequently, if there is any uncertainty about the way in which a word is spelled, it needs to be checked, either in a dictionary or electronically. Even good work is badly marred by careless spelling.

⁷ For example: John 6:35, “I am the bread of life; whoever comes to me shall not hunger, and whoever believes in me shall never thirst.”

The Conventions of Academic Citation

A key skill in any academic essay writing is the correct acknowledgement of sources. The conventions governing citation are available in the standard reference works.⁸ Only the basic rules for short essays will be examined here.

1. *The Citation of Sources*

The simplest form of citation is when the writer acknowledges the existence and/or use of a source without directly quoting from it. Say, I would like to mention a helpful book on writing method by Behrens and Rosen.⁹ Note the order in which the information is given about the text in the notes: name of author(s), title, name of editor, compiler or translator if any, number of edition if other than the first edition, place of publication, name of publishing agency, date of publication, page number of the specific citation.¹⁰ Note also the raised numeral, outside the full stop, which refers the reader to the footnotes. If you are not using a computer, endnotes may take the place of footnotes.

2. *Quotations*

The first decision to be made about actually quoting a source is whether to do so within the text of the essay, set off as a block quotation within the main text, or in the footnotes. This depends on the length and the immediate relevance and importance of the quotation. When it is judged that a quotation is directly relevant and makes an immediate contribution to the development of the argument it may be introduced into the text using “double quotation marks at the beginning and end.”¹¹ Quotations in this form should not be

⁸ Ibid., Turabian, *Manual for Writers*, 116-174.

⁹ Laurence Behrens and Leonard J. Rosen, *Writing and Reading across the Curriculum*. 2nd ed. (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1985).

¹⁰ Ibid., Turabian, *Manual for Writers*, 123.

¹¹ Ibid., 77.

more than two or three lines in length. If the quotation is longer, it is indented, formatted in single spacing and set off as a block quotation from the main body of the text:

Any omission of words, phrases, or paragraphs in quoted matter is indicated by ellipsis points . . . Since ellipsis points stands for words omitted from the quotation itself, they are always placed within quotation marks.¹²

If the nature of the quotation does not warrant insertion in the essay in either of these forms it may be put into a footnote in the manner outlined below.¹³

3. Footnotes

Footnotes serve many functions other than the above. Any matter which seems inappropriate within the text may be put into the notes. Thus footnotes may contain supplementary bibliographical references, translations, editorial comments, explanatory statements, definitions and so forth. References in footnotes to books,¹⁴ to journal articles,¹⁵ and also entries in encyclopedias,¹⁶ are given as illustrated in these notes.

As we have shown above, the first mention of a work is accompanied by the full biographical information. Thereafter it is clearly not necessary to repeat this information when referring to the work or quoting from it. If the subsequent reference is to the same page of the same work, the word *Ibidem* (Latin for “in the same place”) is used. More commonly, this is abbreviated to *Ibid.* Note that, although in Latin, *ibid.* is *not* italicized. If the subsequent

¹² *Ibid.*, 80.

¹³ “By definition, a research paper involves the assimilation of prior scholarship and entails the responsibility to give proper acknowledgement whenever one is indebted to another for either words or ideas”. *Ibid.*, 74.

¹⁴ P.W. Skehan and Alexander A. Di Lella, *The Wisdom of Ben Sira*, Anchor Bible 39 (New York: Doubleday, 1987), 250. Please note that series titles (e.g., the Anchor Bible Series of biblical commentaries) do not include the term ‘series’ in either bibliography or footnotes.

¹⁵ J.M. Baumgarten, “Some Notes on the Ben Sira Scroll from Massadah,” *JQR* 58 (1968), 323.

¹⁶ *The Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*, 1962 ed., s.v. “Apocrypha”. If the entry is signed then it is cited as follows: C.T. Fritsch, “Apocrypha” in *Interpreter’s Dictionary of the Bible*,

reference is to a different page of the same work, *ibid.* is followed by the new page number in the following manner.¹⁷ This is only possible, however, when no other books have been referred to in the meantime. When reference has been made to some other work, a new reference is introduced by the author's surname, followed by an abbreviated version of the title and the page number.¹⁸

4. Bibliography

All works, with the exception of the Bible, used in preparing a paper should appear in an alphabetical list of Selected Bibliography at the end of the essay.¹⁹ Books and articles are cited as in the sample bibliography at the end of this paper.²⁰ Where there are several works by the same author, the name in all entries after the first is replaced by a line eight spaces long, followed by a full stop.²¹

ed. George Arthur Buttrick, (Nashville: Abingdon, 1962).

¹⁷ *Ibid.*, 162.

¹⁸ *Ibid.*, Behrens and Rosen, *Curriculum*, 65.

¹⁹ If you are citing various versions of the Bible within your paper you must remember to cite this in a parenthetical reference formation: see pp. 175-184 of Turabian's guidelines. Citation example is as follows: (Lk 23:46 NRSV) or (Lk 23:46 KJV). The following heading titles for a bibliography are acceptable: "Select Bibliography, Works Cited or Sources Consulted". However, more accurately used is the heading "Sources Consulted" because it is inclusive of all possible sources consulted by the writer, including electronic sources.

²⁰ The standard way of referring to biblical passages is as follows: Exod 1:1 (reference to a single verse, citing book, chapter and verse), Exod 1:1-5 (reference to a number of verses, citing book, chapter and verses). V. 1 (reference to one verse, without citing book and chapter), Vv. 1-5 (reference to a number of verses without citing book and chapter). In abbreviating the names of biblical books, you may follow systematically any system of your choice, but a standard system, such as that used in the *New Revised Standard Version of the Bible* or in *The SBL Handbook of Style* is strongly recommended. Note that the abbreviated names of biblical books never have a full stop: Luke 2, Matt 14, Exod 24:1-3.

²¹ This line space, followed by a full stop, is achievable by striking the underscore key eight times.

Conclusion: The Final Steps

This short paper will have taught you some of the basic skills required in writing a theological essay. You may have further questions, especially if this is your first attempt to write an essay at University level. Answers to some of the technical questions can be found in manuals of style such as Turabian's *Manual for Writers* already mentioned; it is available in the College Library (REF 808.02 TUR). Your other questions may relate to the use of resources in the individual theological disciplines such as Systematic, Moral or Scripture. Your lecturers or tutors will be happy to answer these questions.

The final version of your essay is to be printed on white paper of A4 size. Please proof-read it carefully after printing: the spell-checker on your computer may not pick up all the technical terms you have used. Your essay is now ready for submission. Official essay cover-sheets are available from the Theology Office and essays will not normally be accepted without one. Unless individual lecturers make alternative arrangements, essays are submitted through the Theology Office where they will be date-stamped and a receipt issued. If a lecturer asks for essays to be submitted directly to him or her, you still need to use the official cover-sheet. Collect your corrected essay either from the lecturer concerned or from the Theology Office. The comments made are intended to help you to progress both as theologian and in the art of essay writing.

Selected Bibliography [EXAMPLES]

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