

Essays and Other Written Assignments

PURPOSE

Written assignments – and essays in particular – are the most commonly used form of assessment. Their purpose is to enable you to demonstrate your ability to engage with specific questions, construct coherent arguments and respond appropriately to particular problems and issues. In the process of preparing and writing your assignment you will deepen and broaden your knowledge and understanding of the subject area of a module.

In writing assignments you will

- learn to apply your knowledge effectively and appropriately to a particular question or task: normally this involves constructing an argument and supporting it with evidence from your studies, showing that you have understood the assignment question or task in the context of the module and different scholars' approaches to it.
- become familiar with theological literature and learn to make discerning use of theological (and, where appropriate, other) resources, demonstrating that you have read and understood an appropriate and relevant range of texts by interacting with them in your assignment.
- learn to summarise, synthesise, analyse and evaluate the knowledge and understanding you have gained from your classes and your reading, articulating the strengths and weaknesses of the scholars and authors that you are engaging with.
- learn to write clearly and fluently, structuring your thoughts in a way that is easy to read and follow.

The discipline and skill of writing essays is an important tool for developing your independence as a learner. You will need to gather and read theological texts, mount a response to a question or statement (or text or case study), using and evaluating what you have learned through reading your sources as well as from the learning you have undertaken in your module, including your independent reading and study. Although an essay will have a particular focus defined by its title, it is important to place it in the context of the other learning in that module – and, where appropriate, to make connections with the learning and experience from other modules or disciplines.

CONTENT

Although the most common form of written assignment is the so-called 'academic essay', you will come across a number of other assessment tasks that fall within this category. Your tutor will indicate whether your assignment is targeted towards a specialist or a non-specialist audience. Examples of written assignments for specialist audiences could include:

- an exegesis
- a gobbet

- an article in an academic journal
- a briefing paper
- a written response to a case study

Examples of written assignments for non-specialist audiences could include:

- the text of a sermon or talk
- an article for a popular magazine
- a letter

Much of the guidance here is written with an essay to a specialist audience in mind, but many of the suggestions made are likely to apply to the other pieces of work listed above.

A written assignment is essentially a response to a question or statement (or text or case study) that is often set by your tutor. It is likely to contain the following elements:

1. The title

Make sure you have spent some time really understanding it and the kind of response it requires. This is one of the most important steps in writing an essay. Look for one or two key words and make sure that you maintain them at the forefront of your studying, planning, thinking and writing.

2. An introduction

This usually sets the context of your essay within the subject (or context) area and is likely to outline the approach you plan to take. It gives the reader an indication of the road map for the rest of the assignment. It is a good idea to write this after you have written the other parts of the assignment.

3. The main body of the essay

This contains the main argument of your essay: it needs to give a response to the title of the essay. It is likely to involve an analysis of the essay question or title and of different scholars' approaches to it. While you will draw heavily on the work of scholars, you will also want to evaluate their work in order to draw your own (tentative) conclusions.

Make sure you follow the 'plan' that you set out in the introduction and that each new element or section flows logically from the previous one.

4. A conclusion

Here you are likely to offer a clear statement of your own nuanced response to the question or task expressed in the essay title: this response must flow from the arguments that you set out in the body of the assignment. It may be that in so doing, you also summarise the 'journey' that your essay took.

5. A bibliography

This will contain a list of all the sources that you used to write the essay. Within the text itself, you will have referenced these texts using the conventions stipulated by your TEI wherever you have interacted with (or quoted from) one of them.

WHAT WE ARE LOOKING FOR

First and foremost, we are looking to see whether your written assignment has answered the question or addressed the task set by the title of your assignment. We are also looking to see how your written assignment demonstrates that you have met the relevant learning outcomes of the Module Outline. In your written assignment you need to:

1. demonstrate that you have read and understood an appropriate and relevant range of texts ...by interacting with what you have read in your assignment and by including them in your bibliography and references.
2. demonstrate understanding ... by showing that you have understood the assignment question or task in the context of the learning of the module and different authors' approaches to it.
3. critically evaluate the contributions of different scholars and authors ...by articulating the strengths and weaknesses of the texts that you are engaging with and, in particular, in relation to the task / question of the assignment.
4. construct an argument ...in response to the assignment title or task, making use of the learning that you have done through your reading for the assignment and for the classes in the module.
5. write clearly and fluently ...making your assignment easy to read and follow; this will involve having a clear structure and paying attention to grammar and spelling as well as adhering to academic conventions.

TECHNICAL MATTERS

For the tutor:

- All beginning students should have had access to essay-writing skills for theology.
- The questions, titles and tasks of written assignments should be carefully designed to maximise fulfilment of learning outcomes and to minimise the possibility of simply summarising others' works or of plagiarism.
- It is good practice to indicate to the students which learning outcomes of the module the assignment is intended to fulfil.
- Bibliographies for written assignments should be given to students, but these may become less prescriptive and exhaustive at higher levels, in order to encourage students to carry out their own literature review to develop independent study skills.

For the student:

- Written assignments should be written in a concise style, following the style guidelines for essay writing stipulated by your TEI.
- Direct quotations from authors should be used with discernment. Normally for undergraduate essays these should be brief and limited to one or two short ones: it is important that your argument is carried in your own words.
- It is important to adhere to the word count for the assignment: a piece of writing invariably improves upon pruning!

MARKING CRITERIA

The questions that your marker will be considering when assessing your work are as follows:

1. How does your written assignment demonstrate that you have acquired the knowledge, understanding and skills of the relevant learning outcomes of the module?
2. Does the work answer the question or address the task set by the title of the assignment?
3. To what standard have you fulfilled these? These standards – by which your work will be graded – are described in the **Assessment Criteria for Essays and Other Written Assignments** for the level of your module. The criteria against which your work will be marked fall into five categories:

Knowledge and understanding: Does your work demonstrate a thorough and accurate understanding of the relevant subject matter?

Use of sources and evidence: Have you used a good range of appropriate sources in your work?

Have you used your sources effectively as evidence in your argument and reasoning?

Critical thinking, reasoning and analysis: Does your work show your ability to identify issues and think critically about them?

Are you able to make relevant connections between different points or aspects of the question?

Argument: Is your response to the question/task and your case for the points you make well argued?

Is the structure of your assignment clear and does it mirror the structure of your analysis and argument?

Presentation: Is your writing clear, using appropriate vocabulary, correct grammar and spelling?

Is your work presented and referenced well, using the conventions stipulated by your TEI?