STUDY SKILLS FOR THEOLOGY

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A Resource for Theological Students
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Do you sometimes feel you are the only one in the lecture who doesn’t understand? Do tutorials make you anxious because you don’t know what to say? Here are some simple hints for getting involved actively in the learning process so that you get the most out of it.

What are the aims of tertiary level study?

‘Tertiary’ education is anything after high school and is usually for adults. Put simply, tertiary teachers aim to get their students

- **understanding** (knowing, absorbing content, theories and facts)
- **analysing** (discerning, criticising, pulling apart, evaluating), and
- **synthesising** (putting together, integrating, thinking originally, applying to life)

Ideally all three things happen at once and interact, with our reflection affecting our actions.

The interplay between reflection and action (labelled ‘praxis’) is particularly important in theology.

Come prepared

- Look at the course outline and see what the topic is for the day.
- Read anything you have been set. You will get lots more from the lecture if you have begun thinking about it.
- Get there in time; bring food or drink if you need it; sleep the night before!

Listening is active work

Active listening is the best way to learn. Research shows that those who learn the most are those who

- are interested in the topic
- process information rather than just store it
- have personal goals in mind
- develop their own ideas as they go
- put it into practice
- discuss it with others
- relate personally to their teachers
- share in the responsibility for learning
- work independently
- feel free to take risks
- see learning as a process, not an end product
- are aware of their own learning style and use it¹

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Taking notes in lectures

Take notes as clearly as you can. Sometimes, though, it is better to enter into a discussion fully and leave note taking until later.

- Label every sheet of paper, e.g., CT101 11/3 p.3
- Leave a margin for comments later.
- Use the lecture outline to help you keep track.
- “Full sentences not nec, as long as clear.”
- Use abbreviations to speed up note taking:
  
  **General:** & (and), / (which), w (with), c (about), ∴ (therefore), ∴ (because), → (led to), ↑ (increased), ↓ (reduced), 19C (19th century) and so on.
  
  **Theological:** NT (New Testament), Xny (Christianity), JC (Jesus Christ), † (the cross), theol/missiol/ecclesiol/eschatol (any “-ology”) and so on.
  
  **On the day:** If the lecture is on the environment you can write “env” or even “E” throughout the notes for that day.

- If lecturers mention in passing a book or theologian, and you can’t spell the name, ask them to write it on the board. It is your right to get details clear.
- If lecturers use big words, especially in first-level units, ask what they mean. There is no such thing as a stupid question. What you don’t know, others probably don’t know.
- If lecturers say “Fourthly” after five points, clarify where you’re up to.
- You can record lectures, if lecturers allow it, and listen more carefully later. Beware — it takes lots of time.

Question and engage

- In both lectures and tutorials at Whitley College you are encouraged to ask questions, clarify things, disagree or add brief comments.
- You learn better when you engage. As you listen ask:

  - What is being said?
  - Does it matter to me?
  - Do I agree?
  - How does it relate to what we learnt earlier?
  - What difference does it make in my life, my church or the world?
  - Is this something I will follow up later?

- In tutorials take a risk and take part. It’s the only way to gain confidence.
- Use tutorials to explore your understanding of things. That’s what they’re there for.
- Talk about it over coffee with other students.
- Share your notes with other students and check that you understood things.

Talk about it
**Follow it up**

- If your notes are scrappy or incomplete, edit them afterwards, filling in gaps or adding comments. Make sure they're clear. Poor notes are almost useless weeks later.
- Go and look up dictionaries or encyclopedias to fill yourself in on theologians or events you hadn’t heard of. The curious mind is a great asset.
- Do the reading the lecturer recommends. It may all become clear as you do (but then it might not …).

If you want to read a book on how to study, this one is easy to read and very helpful:


It can be found in the Whitley Library at 378.1702, alongside other books on study skills.
Do you sometimes feel overwhelmed by libraries? Do you wish you could find that book which is just right for your essay? How do you use the internet to get references? Don't worry. The Whitley Library is well set out and the librarians are helpful people. And the hints below will help you get going. Putting in a little time to learn how the library works always pays off later.

**The basics**

a. The ever-helpful Whitley College Library Manager is Lorraine Mitchell. Several library assistants also work in the library. When in doubt always ask for help. Make sure you obtain a borrowing card and pick up a copy of the Library Guide.

b. Bring coins for the photocopier in case you need them. Photocopying costs 10c a page and the machine accepts all coins except 5c pieces.

c. Be sure to check out the library web page at [http://whitley.unimelb.edu.au/library](http://whitley.unimelb.edu.au/library). It contains general information about the library and its collections. It also provides remote access to the library catalogue, links to a variety of useful websites and access to other online resources.

d. The library uses the Dewey system. Just follow the catalogue and the signs that are up, or ask a librarian if you are confused.

**Is it a book or a journal?**

The three most common types of references are

- books (by one author, or an edited collection),
- book sections (also called essays or chapters),
- journals (or periodicals or serials or magazines)

Can you tell what type the references listed below are? How can you tell?


Baker, John Austin. ‘Biblical attitudes to nature’. In *Man and


You look up books in the catalogue, but not journal articles. Journals are arranged alphabetically by title in the journals section. The latest issue of each title is placed in the “current periodicals” display area.

Finding a book

Go looking for these books in the catalogue. Find one or two of them on the shelves.


Where is the book shelved? _________


(Note: The second edition)

How many copies are there? _________

Where are they shelved? _________

Are any on reserve or out on loan? _________


The three copies are shelved in three different places — where? _________ _________ _________

How many can be borrowed? _________

A book on multiculturalism in Australia.

______________________________________________

A book on gambling.

______________________________________________

Find a book your friend recommended on megachurches, with the word “devil” in its title; you don’t know the author.

Title is __________________________
Finding a journal article in the Whitley library

Try to find these articles in the journals (which are arranged alphabetically by journal title in the journals section):

- Sider, Ronald J. ‘Has evangelism become politically incorrect?’. *Sojourners* 22.6 (July 1993): 12-16.

Finding a journal article not at Whitley

Suppose you are looking for:


Begin by seeing if Whitley has the journal. You can consult the online catalogue. Or there’s a list of Whitley journal holdings in a folder near the computer terminals.

If Whitley doesn’t have it, consult the book fondly known as AULOTS, *The Australasian Union List of Serials in Theological Collections*, a book listing which theological libraries in Australia hold which journals. Like the list of Whitley journals, it is kept near the computer terminals. You can also access it online, from <www.anztla.org/AulotsSearch.aspx>.

In AULOTS Whitley is coded as VUW, meaning we are in Victoria and a part of the University of Melbourne. The nearby libraries are the Leon Morris Library at Ridley (VUR) and the Dalton McCaughey Library at the Centre for Theology and Ministry (VDM). The Campbell Edwards Library at the Churches of Christ Theological College (CCTC) library in Mulgrave is coded as VCB. You can read and photocopy journal articles in most libraries.

The reference section

Have a look at the reference section, which is full of dictionaries and encyclopedias. It’s located behind the Reserve collection.

For example, if Augustine is mentioned and you don't know which century he lived in, look it up in the *Oxford dictionary of the Christian church* (3rd edition is found in the Reference section: Reference 260.3 CRO ODO).

If the Bangkok conference of the World Council of Churches is mentioned and you know nothing about it, look up the *Dictionary of the ecumenical movement* (Reference 270.8203 LOS DOT).

If you want to look up terms such as ‘dualism’ or ‘predestination’, try *A new dictionary of Christian theology* (Reference 230.03 RIC NDO). All these give you brief summaries, which is just what you need most of the time.
ATLA Religion Database

The library has online access to the ATLA Religion Database. This database indexes theological literature from 1949 to the present and provides citations to:

- articles in journals
- essays (chapters) in collections, and
- book reviews

You can search this database using the catalogue terminals. You can also access it from anywhere else that you have internet access by obtaining the appropriate username and password from one of the librarians.

Whereas ATLA just tells you where an article or chapter is, choosing ATLA-with-serials (ATLAS) will lead you to many of the articles with full text online.

When you have some time, try it out. If you need help, ask library staff for assistance. The trick is to be as specific as possible, or you will be swamped by thousands of article titles. Only some will be available in Melbourne. You need to check in AULOTS which library has which journals.

ProQuest Religion

The Whitley library also has an online subscription to ProQuest Religion. It is a religion database that provides full-text access to many journal titles.

Further information about these two databases is available on a separate library information sheet.
A library strategy for an essay

Here’s what you might do if you have an essay topic and don’t know where to start:

a  Search
   • Look for books and articles recommended by your lecturer. Search under the author, the title, or the call number if you have it.
   • Check out dictionaries for a brief overview of the topic.
   • Search in the catalogue for books and articles on the same topic.
   • When you have an item information screen, look for related references by following links on the left hand side under “Subjects”.
   • In each book or article may be footnotes or bibliographies leading you to further useful references.

b  Browse
   • When looking at a book on the shelf, browse nearby for interesting books.
   • Browse in recent editions of journals in the subject area. For example, in missiology you might find good articles in International Review of Mission, Missiology or Transformation.

c  Decide what to read
   • Usually there’s too much. Skim stuff first, noting whether it seems essential, good or not very relevant.
   • Decide how much you can read and choose your list.

d  Borrow or photocopy
   • Borrow what you can. If a book is already on loan you can “Request Item” from the item information screen — this makes you the next borrower and you will be notified when it comes in.
   • Where you can’t borrow, either read it in the library or photocopy sections.

e  Read
   • Remember, don’t just find it; read it! (Further hints on this later.)
Do you feel overwhelmed when you first look at a book? Do you have to read it all? How will you remember what you read? Here are a few hints for reading something and taking notes so that you will be able to remember it and even quote from it.

**You can tell a book by its cover**

- It is vital to decide first if you want to read a book or chapter. Ploughing in regardless wastes lots of time.
- You can get quick information from
  - the title and author
  - the blurb on the back cover
  - the table of contents
  - flicking through to see how hard it seems and what's in it
  - reading the first and last paragraph in each chapter for the main argument
  - reading the introduction or conclusion
  - scanning the footnotes to see its background
- Is it popular or academic? New or old? American or British? Liberal or fundamentalist? Too long? Boring?

**Try it on a book**

a. What is the book about?

b. How old is it?

c. What discipline is it in (e.g., history, theology, pastoral care, missiology, biblical studies, self-help, sociology)?

d. What do you know about the author or editor?

e. Would you normally read it all or only parts of it as reference?

f. Is there an index?

g. How hard is it (e.g., advanced, solid, quite accessible, easy reading)?

h. If you can tell, what perspective does it come from (e.g., Catholic, evangelical, ecumenical, mixed, Latin American, British)?

i. Write down the book's details in the way it would appear in a bibliography.
   
### Reading & note taking

There are different kinds of reading:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Purpose</th>
<th>Reading Type</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>For pleasure</td>
<td>Fiction, poetry, general interest</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>For information</td>
<td>We skim until we find what we want</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>To remember</td>
<td>We understand, analyse, take notes</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Read with a question in mind, e.g., “What are the arguments for and against this theory?”

See reading as energetic work. Stay critical and alert.

#### Skim it to get an overview

- If you are reading a chapter or essay, read the first and last paragraph and the first sentence of each paragraph.
- To get the structure, also look for section numbers, headings, italics and bold face.
- Do you still want to read it? Or some of it?
- Having an overview makes all the difference.

#### Read it without stopping

You don’t have to understand it all the first time. Keep going and take no notes.

Mark the main points as outlined below.

- Develop your own system. I might use a highlighter. Or:
  - Tick, highlight or underline main points.
  - Double tick things that get you excited.
  - Put a question mark beside things you don’t understand or quite agree with, or words you don’t know.
  - Put a cross beside things you disagree with.
  - Yes! Add brief comments, like ‘What about Jn 3:16?’ or ‘Very anti-intellectual!’.
  - Make the structure clearer by writing in numbers or heading words, as the author makes one point after the other, or sub-points under a main point.

If there’s not much there, don’t highlight it. Be critical.

#### If it belongs to you, mark it

- Leave no marks when you finish! Marked books are not fair to others.
- Either make very small and light pencil ticks, question marks and crosses in the margins and rub them out when you finish,
- Or on your own piece of paper write page numbers and the quarter of the page on which a main point occurs, with a word to jog the memory (e.g., ‘96a Barth story’, or ‘245d objections’).
After reading the chapter, take notes

a Do it then. It has to be immediate. Trust your memory while it’s hot.
b Always record the complete bibliographical details. You may not find the book later to get them. Note which library, reserve or not, call number, etc.
c Summarise. Begin by writing down what this piece of writing was and what you thought of it. For example, ‘An argument for missiologists to use anthropology more. Pretty obvious really, but well argued.’ This is the time to be bold, critical, informal and opinionated, for your own eyes only! Was it boring? Mumbo-jumbo? Life-changing? Inspiring? Say it.
d Page numbers. Down the left margin write the page number for anything you now write. This is vital, not only for quotations, but for going back and finding it again.
e Notes. Go through the chapter noting only things you found enlightening, from your ticks or whatever. Put in square brackets any running commentary you want to make on what the author says (e.g. ‘Shows his Reformed bias here!’).
f Put quotations in quotation marks and make sure they are accurate, right down to italics. Adapt for inclusive language later. Use diagrams or point trees as memory aids if it helps.
g As you go, look up new words or important people’s names if necessary. Only you can discern when to overlook them and when to delve.
h Use your own abbreviations, e.g., Xny, theol, missiol, JC. As long as you can understand them, that’s all that matters.
i Not too much! A very rough guide is to aim for one page of notes for every ten to twenty pages of text. Of course exceptions occur.
j What did you think? Finish as you began, jotting down reactions, evaluations, exclamations, comparisons, what mystified you, etc. Your reactions are like gold to you: They get you high marks in essays! Get them down while they’re fresh. Tomorrow it will be a blur.
k You can now let the book go. You won’t have to go back to it.

Be shark-like in approaching the text

Remember the author is only human. Be confident you can dismiss some writing as irrelevant or jumbled or written poorly.

Be confident you can attack writing, summarise it, conquer it, remember it.

Get it down on paper. To photocopy an article is not to have learnt anything; it is the reading, the grappling and the summarising that yields learning.

Feel good when you understand it. Feel even better when you can criticise it. Reading can be an adventure.
Try it on a short article


a Ask yourself some of the overview questions in “Try it on a book” above, to get a feel for where the article is coming from.

b What theological school does the author come from?

c From the middle box or the title, what does she want us to do?

d Write down in your own words, as briefly as you can, the main point of each paragraph. Usually you find this in the first sentence, though not always.

i ______________________________________

ii ______________________________________

iii ______________________________________

iv ______________________________________

v ______________________________________

vi ______________________________________

e Were there any words you would look up in a dictionary?


**TO SPEAK TRUTH to POWER**

Creating a holistic alternative to injustice.

by Rosemary Radford Ruether

A new holistic alternative for this time will need to incorporate new dimensions of critical consciousness that have developed in the last decades, particularly in relation to sexism and to environmental destruction. We need to make clear that the issues of women and of the environment are not isolated “causes” that are of interest only to an educated class of professionals. Sexism and racism structure the whole American social system across classes. If women professionals find themselves hitting a glass ceiling in their jobs, unable to enter the top leadership, sexist discrimination affects far more drastically the black woman struggling to feed her children on disappearing food stamps. Meanwhile, she is being told to find a job that either does not exist for her or else pays so poorly that she cannot house and feed her children—much less pay for day care to make it possible for her to get to this job. Feminism must be about seeing the connections between forms of sexist discrimination and creating movements of solidarity across class and race lines if it is to be more than tokenism for a few privileged women.

Likewise the environmental movement needs to be about more than saving seals and defending public parks from lumber companies, although these are worthy causes. It needs to speak of environmental racism and classism, about the poisoning of the environments where poor black, Latino, and indigenous people live—in inner cities and rural areas. By dumping their toxic wastes in these areas, companies maximize their profits while passing along the costs to those assumed to be most powerless. An environmental movement that does not make these connections across class and racial lines is an escapism for hikers, and not a serious call for change in the industrial system’s disregard of its ecological base.

To create a politically effective movement that can link issues of class, race, gender, and environment, we will have to tackle the serious questions of access to the public media. How do we once again break the hegemonic discourse of lies and denial; how do we once again speak truth to power, not only unmasking false façades, but creating a new imagination about alternative possibilities?

For that we need broad coalitions that will overcome the fragmentation of identity politics and connect groups concerned about diverse injustices. It also means creating a new and compelling discourse about genuine truth, values, justice, and well-being for all, that brings together the religious and ethical traditions of our culture. The new coalitions must bring together Buddhists and Christians, Jews and Muslims, ethical humanists and evangelical Christians around concrete projects for change in their neighborhoods, their regions, the nation, and the world.

Building a new critical discourse and vision of hope will not be easy. The forces that want to stifle it are powerful, but they are the minority of our society and of the world. The 358 billionaires that own 45 percent of the world’s resources may not be able to own the minds of the vast majority of humans whose lives are impoverished by their monopoly of wealth. As this majority in our country and across nations learn to link hands, there is hope for building a different world for ourselves and for our children in the 21st century.

**ACTIVITY**

Devis a method to gather information about the issues that face members of your church or small group. What might be the first step in addressing these challenges in a comprehensive way? How might you join with others in your community who have different priorities but share a similar desire for justice?

*ROSEMARY RADFORD RUETHER, a Sojourners contributing editor, is George Harkness professor of applied theology at Garrett-Evangelical Seminary in Evanston, Illinois, and the author of Gaia & God: An Ecumenistic Theology of Earth Healing (Hesperus/Franceco, 1992).*
Here is just one example of note taking:


This is the book of Gailyn’s doctoral thesis. I’m not persuaded by its conservative evangelical approach, which sees spirits as real but under God’s control. He rejects animism’s belief that they run life and are to be feared, placated or propitiated. He also rejects secularism’s denial that they exist at all. I think I’m still with the secularists, though I’ll admit I can’t explain many apparently supernatural phenomena.

11 “Animism is prevalent in every continent and is part of every culture, although it is more formative in some than others.”
19 Tylor: Animism is the doctrine of spiritual beings. Codrington added impersonal forces to the idea, such as mana.
20 “In this text animism is defined as the belief that persona spiritual beings and impersonal spiritual forces have power over human affairs and, consequently, that human beings must discover what beings and forces are influencing them in order to determine future action and, frequently, to manipulate their power.”
23 “The Judeo-Christian way is based on personally relating to sovereign God and giving to him glory and honor. … the animistic way is based on manipulating the divine to serve human needs.”
25 Stephen Neill has estimated that 40% of the world base their lives on animistic thinking (*Christian Faith & Other Faiths*, 1970, 125).
30 Animists are receptive to Christian faith because of their fear, their desire for harmony, their crumbling before technology, and their amorality.
35 GVR interpreted his hepatitis as affliction by Satan [?].
65 Through stories with contextualised applications low and high religions can be brought together.
98 “The church is impotent — without power — if she does not develop a perspective of spiritual powers and actively confront these powers.”
108 “The great issue is that nature of creator God and his jealousy for our allegiance.” [RL: Is jealousy an attribute of God we’d want to defend?] 
119 “In animistic contexts the concept of the triumphant Messiah is strongly appealing.”
145ff In Chap 7, his discussion of animistic practitioners is clear and helpful. Priest, prophet, shaman, medium, witch and sorcerer.
168 The missionary can come in as learner (at first), advocate of God’s sovereignty and then catalyst of a maturing church.
169ff In Chap 8, his discussion of divination, possession, animation, rituals, omens, astrology, ordeals, dreams, visions is moderately helpful. [Are they, as he suggests, good when they serve our god and bad if they don’t? I would be much more cautious.]
199 Chap 9 discusses impersonal powers such as mana, baraka, life energy, magic, curses, amulets, charms, mantras, the evil eye.
237 Chap 10 discusses personal spiritual beings such as animated phenomena, metamorphosis, possession, angels, saints, totemic spirits, gods and spirits, ancestors and ghosts, Satan and demons. 
11-11-02
What’s the difference between an essay and a tutorial paper? Knowing what is expected will help you to do well. Exams are scary, aren’t they? Well, no, not necessarily. Knowing how to prepare can make them much less stressful.

It is always good to ask lecturers what they expect from an assignment, especially if it is an unusual type. Often your course notes will outline what is expected.

a An essay is an extended argument for a position or strategy, in discussion of a question or a statement. It’s good to announce how you will tackle it, define your main terms, outline the background, refer to the literature as you go, argue your opinions and give attention to opposing views. It will be marked on its grasp of issues, the quality of the argument and its awareness of the relevant literature.

b A tutorial paper or seminar paper is similar to an essay, except that it

- is shorter,
- can be a little less formal (written in spoken English),
- may well raise more questions than it answers and
- should serve the class by opening up questions to discuss.

A tutorial discussion is led either by a tutor or a student. A seminar is like a tutorial, though perhaps longer and more advanced, with the discussion led by the person reading the paper.

c A book review is a critical reading of and personal response to a book. It normally contains three elements: summary, evaluation and personal response. They can be mixed in together or set out as sections.

The following guidelines might help, but are not prescriptive:

The summary could be about 400-600 wds (in a 1500 wd review) and should state the overall plot and message of the book. What is the author basically saying?

The *personal response* allows you to say how the book affected you personally. (Evaluation is analytical and outwardly-directed; personal response is feeling-oriented or action-oriented, and inwardly-directed.) Did the book motivate, inspire, bore or disgust you? Did it change you? Will it lead to any action? You might allow 200-400 wds for this section.

d A *research project* involves some deliberate gathering of information by the student, through, for example,

- empirical research (interviews, questionnaires, statistics, observation),
- use of primary sources (historical documents, not works about them),
- field visits and discussion with experts or practitioners, or
- the collection of a resource folder.

Its form is less important than the process. It can be presented in a creative form such as a submission to a church or a report to a denomination. It can have a strong practical orientation including strategies for action. It can include a folio of materials. It can describe the research process.

e An *exegetical paper*, in biblical studies, is a study of a Bible passage. It follows guidelines provided by the lecturer, including steps such as manuscript analysis, source analysis, form analysis, tradition analysis, theological (redaction) analysis, literary analysis, socio-political analysis and grammatical analysis, all contributing to an overall understanding of the passage. Not all of these methods will apply equally to every passage.

You may be asked in a workshop paper to focus on only one or two of these aspects.

f A *document study* is an exercise in using a primary source (often a historical document) instead of a secondary source (someone else writing about it). You will be given guidelines on how to comment on matters such as the document’s author, historical reliability, title, date, nature, context, transmission, content and historical significance.

g A *reading report* or reading notebook consists of summaries of (and responses to) what you read. It is usually completed an article or chapter at a time. Less is expected than from a book review. It may involve briefly summarising what is said and how you respond.

h A *journal* requires you to write a personal response to classes, field visits, readings or other interactions, charting what you are learning and how it feels. You need to make regular entries. It is a very personal type of assignment, and is designed to help you to be self-aware. You may be asked to submit the whole, unrevised journal, or to re-type sections of it, maybe with comments.
In the Melbourne College of Divinity the grades given are Fail (less than 50%), Pass (50-64%), Credit (65-74%), Distinction (75-84%) or High Distinction (more than 85%).

What do the grades mean? Lecturers will express it their own way, and different subjects require different things, but here are some frequent comments:

F  Doesn’t show understanding of the subject. Shows little insight or evidence of appropriate reading. Misses the point of the question. Hasn’t done what was asked. Expression so poor it is hard to understand.


C  A competent grasp of information on the subject, plus an awareness of some of the critical issues. Answers the question. Clear structure and expressed well enough to be understood. Has read appropriately.

D  A well-informed and clear grasp of the subject, with an independent perspective. Able to critique the major answers in the literature. Well argued.

HD  An excellent grasp of the subject, demonstrating wide reading, an independent perspective, awareness of broader issues and an ability to integrate insights from tradition, contemporary resources and personal experience. Contributing some original insights to the subject. Lucid, clearly argued, compelling and well presented.

Clearly other factors come into play as well.

- Answering a question which is not quite the question chosen will attract a lower grade.
- An assignment in which part of the task is completed well but another has been ignored or treated inadequately will also attract a lower grade.
- Poor expression or poor presentation (such as a missing bibliography or footnotes) may warrant a lower grade.
- Plagiarism will lead to a fail.

If we take a large sample of students Credit is the average result. HD is given in less than 10% of cases.

On all assignments submitted you will be given a descriptive response as well as a formal grade.
These hints apply to essays, but may help you on other types of assignments too.

a What is the essay topic getting at?

Talk with other students and with lecturers. Get it clear.

b Begin by jotting down any ideas you already have

This starts the process of focusing. It brings you to your reading with some questions already in mind.

c Decide what reading you need to do

*How do you find books?* Use references provided in class or on your handouts, listed under the topic in libraries, sitting on your own shelf or in recent journals.

Don’t forget the following categories of sources: the Bible, theological and other books, journal articles, chapters in edited collections, book reviews, dictionaries, encyclopedias and handbooks, commentaries, newspapers and magazines, TV programs, conversations, life experience.

Be specific and selective. Draw on varying viewpoints and compare them. Don’t read for ever. For a 2000 word essay you don’t need thirty references. Mind you, one or two probably isn’t enough either. Simply writing from your own experience or previous opinions is not enough. The length of the bibliography matters less than how much you actually learnt from the sources you used, and how you integrate it into your writing. Markers are not fooled by you dipping into a book and finding one sentence to insert into your essay.

d Read and take notes

e As you read, draft your essay outline, refining it as you go

This helps you to know what to leave out.

f Stop reading with plenty of time to write, rewrite and polish

g Write as much as you can as quickly as you can

Keep going; don’t stop. Get a draft, any draft. If you work on a computer, back up your work continually in different places — avoid disasters.
Writing assignments and doing exams, 19

h Redraft it

- Make it the right length.
- Check its clarity, spelling and grammar.
- Did it answer the question?
- Are your quotations and footnotes correct?
- Have you done your bibliography carefully?
- Does it make sense to your partner or friend?
- Are there weaknesses you can work on?
- When you are done, sleep on it and read it cold for the final touch up.

If your command of English is a problem, get a friend to read it for sense and grammar. Assignments are marked down if what you want to say is not clear, or if reading it is very difficult because so many wrong words are used.

Hints on the content of an essay

a Define the question carefully

Say what you are answering, and then stick to answering it.

b Define your terms

Discuss what the main terms mean, not necessarily at length, but making it clear how you understand them. Sometimes it is uncontroversial and a dictionary (or biblical) definition will do. At other times the meaning of the terms is the central point of the essay and you need an extended theological discussion mentioning different views.

c Summarise your argument or your structure

The old saying still holds: ‘Tell ’em what you’re gonna say; say it; and then tell ’em what you said!’ Although the summary comes early, you would normally write it last, when you know what you said!

These preliminaries shouldn’t take up a large part of the essay. Many students waste words circling in, limiting space for their main arguments.

d Launch into your argument

There are many ways to mount an argument. Here are some different structures as examples:

i Arguments for and against, with your view defended at the end.

ii What writers A, B and C say, and then which one you agree with and why (or your own original view).

iii How the question has been seen historically, and what we can learn from it.

iv A survey of biblical evidence or theological opinion and how you assess it.
v Several points to be made about the question.
vi One main point, made using various supporting references.
vii Outlining a view expressed by someone, and analysing or criticising it.

Note that common elements are
• the use of the literature,
• considering differing views, and
• presenting your own views.

In first level undergraduate units you need hardly do more than say which one appeals to you and why. At third level or graduate level you need to mount your case more rigorously.

You may use headings in your assignments to make the structure clearer to readers.

e It is OK in theology to be personal and practical

Integrating our learning into our lives is a high priority for theological study.

• Graduates in our society are expected to write proper and speak good (!).
• Part of tertiary study is learning to express yourself clearly. You will get better as you go.
• The main thing is to be clear, to say what you mean to say.
• A secondary thing is to avoid annoying the reader with mistakes, long sentences or using words that aren’t quite right.
• Don’t be sucked into an ‘academic style’. Be direct. Use plain language where you can. Lecturers hate essays that read like porridge.
• Lecturers do make allowances where English is not your first language; the main thing is whether they can understand what you are saying.
• Use a dictionary, spelling checker and thesaurus to help you.
• If you want high standards of expression, you can also use a style guide on English, or a grammar book. It answers questions such as:
  Can I start a sentence with “But”?
  When do I use a semi-colon?
  When do I use “will” or “shall”?
  Is it “first” or “firstly”?
  When does “its” have an apostrophe?

One good one is
Here, from William Safire, are some well-expressed “fumblerules”, mistakes that call attention to the rule:

- Avoid run-on sentences they are hard to read.
- No sentence fragments.
- It behoves us to avoid archaisms.
- Also, avoid awkward or affected alliteration.
- Don’t use no double negatives.
- If I’ve told you once, I’ve told you a thousand times: resist hyperbole.
- Avoid commas, that are not necessary.
- Verbs has to agree with their subjects.
- Avoid trendy locutions that sound flaky.
- Writing carefully, dangling participles should not be used.
- Kill all exclamation marks!!
- Never use a long word when a diminutive one will do.
- Proofread carefully to see if you any words out.
- Take the bull by the hand, and don’t mix metaphors.
- Don’t verb nouns.
- Never, ever use repetitive redundancies.
- Last but not least, avoid clichés like the plague.

(Readers’ Digest, April 1992)

Exams

How an exam differs from an essay

An examination gives you the chance to

- simply show what you’ve learnt,
- express opinions and mount arguments, but without slowing down to express them perfectly, or to document and footnote what you assert,
- answer a specific question from the top of your head, using what you’ve learnt during the course but applying it to a particular situation.

Some people prefer exams to essays and others prefer essays, which is one reason our assessment uses both. Exams require performance under pressure, in a limited time, and without the chance to revise what you write or seek help. The MCD requires exams at first level partly to make sure that students can submit work that is clearly theirs.

The standards are not as exacting as those of an essay. Correct English, elegance of layout, and neatness are less important in an exam. Clarity and originality are still factors that merit good grades.
b Revising

You don’t have to revise every single topic, but don’t prepare so narrowly that you depend on getting exactly the questions you want.

c Some hints for exam revision (these are just suggestions)

i Choose the topics you will prepare for.

ii Divide your time up so that you have equal time for each, e.g., eight topics, one a day for eight days.

iii In each case re-read your lecture notes, your notes from any reading done during the course, and at least one other reference that seems on the ball to you. Chat to others to help you come to a considered position, if it helps.

iv Formulate some thoughts in point form,

   e.g., Are there two common positions? What are the points in favour of each? What do I think? How do I justify my position?

   e.g., What are the main factors or elements to be considered when stating an opinion on this? Can I list four or even seven?

v Memorise the main headings, using any crazy system you want. You may not use the points you prepared, but at least they are there in your head ready to adapt.

vi Discipline is essential. If you spend three days on one topic and leave no time for the others, you may regret it. Be strict with yourself.

d Doing the exam

i Read the questions carefully, without panicking. You have ten minutes for this. What looks hard can often look better if you think about it for a minute.

ii Choose the questions you will do.

iii Decide on an order to do them in which suits you psychologically. I usually do my best one first (to get my juices going and get me going confidently), my second best one last (so I finish strongly), and my weakest in between (if I really run out of material on this, I now have more time for my last one).

iv Allocate time for each and stick to it. If you spend 50 min on one and 20 min on each of the others, you are not likely to get twice the marks on the good one. Again, discipline is essential in exams.

v Jot down a structure. It is worth spending up to three or four minutes on this. Don’t start without one.


      (Jot down a few single words under each of these headings.)
vi  If you wish, put times **beside each heading** to tell you where you should be up to, e.g., 7.10, 7.20, 7.30 etc, to help you not to get carried away on the first point. A common failing is to spend all your time on what others say, and leave no time for your own opinions, which get you the most marks. Weaving your own opinions into the body of the answer as you go is one good way to avoid this.

vii  **Use headings** and number your points, or at least signal your structure clearly. When under pressure it is hard to write in a logical and clear flow, so using these aids helps you and helps the examiner.

viii **Answer the question!** Read the question. What exactly is it asking? Answer that, not what you would prefer to answer.

ix  If time is about to beat you, and you won't be able to finish a question using proper English sentences, you may jot down your last few points in **point form**. It will get you less credit than writing in prose, but more than if you submit an answer that was going somewhere but never got there.