Kalamazoo College
A Guide to Writing in Religion
Acknowledgements

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Introduction

A liberal arts education demands the ability to articulate one’s ideas in writing. This skill is also fundamental to the study of religion. What we think about religion (the topic) shapes our writing in Religion (the field), and thus the two tasks—writing about and thinking about religion—are inseparable. Good writing should therefore demonstrate a familiarity with the material, but it should also help you develop critical thinking and analytical skills. We learn about ourselves when we write; rarely do the words we envision in our heads flow effortlessly onto the page or the computer screen. We cast our ideas and thoughts onto the page, and when we see that what we have written is not what we intended to write, we learn something about ourselves and our processes of thinking and reflecting. An essay leads the reader through this thought process, demonstrating how the writer arrived at the paper’s central point. A well-written paper therefore engages with the materials of the course, to arguing with the sources, and taking ideas in new directions.

This guide is intended to help students in Religion courses think about writing as a method of study. The Department of Religion is committed to the “cultural engagement with the importance of religion and religious issues in public life,” and our mission statement reads in part:  

. . . we are committed to investigations of religion and religious experiences from a variety of angles, including questions of theology, history, linguistics, sociology, anthropology, texts, and philosophy. We examine religion in a comparative context, recognizing that religion reflects and is braided throughout economic, cultural, and political dimensions of human experience. The study of religion is challenging and invigorating because of the intersections and exchanges that unfold across different disciplines, traditions, and faith commitments.

This mission statement indicates that writing in religion is not limited to certain kinds of questions or analysis. The innovative nature of the field means that students may ask many kinds of questions from a variety of angles. In short, there is no single “right” kind of essay, research paper, or SIP in Religion, but there are guidelines that can help shape your writing and thinking.

All papers in the Department of Religion should adhere to the most recent edition of the Chicago Manual of Style (available online), unless otherwise stated.

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Part I: Thinking About Writing

Generating Questions

Most people think that writing is about showing that you have the right answers, or that one writes on a specific topic. In some sense this is true, but the right questions have to come before the right answers. Often, the right questions are even more important than the answers.

Your writing process should begin with a question that your paper will seek to answer. The difference between a topic and a question is that a question has a future. Specifically, you need to be able to answer this question based on evidence. Equally important, this question should not be a “yes/no” question; rather, it should inquire about the relationship between different pieces of evidence. Whether you are assigned a question to answer or have to generate a question on your own, this question should come from your own interest in or understanding of the topic.

What if you are assigned the question for the paper you are writing? Most shorter essays will assign a specific question or topic for you to address. Even in this case, you will have to generate your own questions, return to the data for answers, and identify tensions or puzzles.

Example: Analyze the theme of God’s love in Jonathan Edwards’ sermon “Sinners in the Hand of an Angry God.” How does this theme fit in with his strong emphasis on the torments of Hell?

In this case, you would begin by rereading the text with this question in mind, but along the way generate your own questions to supplement the main question. For example, how does Edwards define God’s love? Why does he see God’s love and God’s wrath as compatible ideas?
Freewriting and Outlining

After you have formulated your guiding question, how do you proceed? There is no set practice that must be followed, and in fact people have different methods for approaching this next step. You may even find that a method that used to work for you no longer does. The important thing is to experiment with different ways of beginning. Two of the most popular and time-tested techniques that writers have found useful are freewriting and outlining. Freewriting involves just writing without worrying about whether it makes sense or not. Just sit down in front of your computer for 10-15 minutes and write down the ideas that come into your head. In contrast, outlining involves mapping out different sections of an essay and main points you want to make in each.

What Makes a Good Question?

1. A good question asks “how” or “why” rather than “what”:

   Example: “How does the concept of satyagraha contribute to Gandhi’s overall philosophical framework?”

   Example: “Why does Augustine believe that evil is logically incompatible with an all powerful and benevolent deity?”

   Not: “Is it true that Rumi was a mystic poet?”
   (Answer: Yes)

   Not: “What is Geertz’s definition of religion?”
   (The answer is a statement of fact)

2. A Good Question relies on the evidence (data) you have available:

   Example: Why does Robert Orsi speak about the Saints as “real” in this text?

   Not: “How has Roman culture influenced Christianity in the first five centuries CE?”
   (The question is too big to handle in a single essay)

   Not: “What were the religious beliefs of prehistoric peoples?”
   (There is no evidence that could answer this question)

3. A good question often picks up on a puzzle or tension:

   Example: “Why does this author, who claims to believe in religious pluralism, spend so much time criticizing other religions?”
Each technique has different benefits. Freewriting is great for overcoming writer’s block, while outlining often produces a clear plan of attack. Each technique has its drawbacks, too. Freewriting is undisciplined and much of it gets cut. The ideas you generate may not be clear, or very different from one another. In fact, the key to being good at freewriting is deleting most of what you write. It may help you to identify your best ideas, but you must also learn how to recognize what is useful and what isn’t. With outlining, you might feel constrained by the outline. As you write, your ideas will develop as new problems or insights emerge. Instead, it may be useful to recognize that your outline is a hypothesis, not a life sentence. Your outline is a working map of how you might proceed with your writing, which will most likely change as you begin to write.

You might also find value in combining these two techniques. Freewriting will enable you to produce ideas, while outlining will force you to examine the possible connections between them. Again, those relationships will form the basic structure of your paper.

Finally, a word about inspiration and the ideas to which we may be very attached. We have a tendency to think whatever we write, especially if written at 3 a.m., is brilliant. But revising and deleting are critical. They require that you throw away old sentences and paragraphs and rewrite them completely (or delete them altogether). The quality of a paper is often measured by how much has been deleted. Reading what you have written out loud is one way of closely checking your writing. Getting used to revising your own work is one of the most important skills you will develop as a writer.

**Part II. What Every Good Essay Needs**

**Thesis**

An academic paper without a thesis would be like a mammal without a spine. You may have heard “thesis” defined as the main idea or argument of your paper. In some cases, this basic definition makes sense. But in many writing assignments, especially longer research papers, the stakes for a good thesis go up. In more ambitious papers such as your junior research prospectus, a good thesis must meet three criteria: it should be original, arguable, and interesting.

*When we say a thesis must be original, we mean that it is your own work and your own question. It is a matter of authorial voice: originality in a thesis means that the question is uniquely yours. The thesis may reflect similar questions you have run across in your reading—and should reflect questions asked by other scholars—but the particular phrasing and structure of your thesis is unquestionably yours. You should not take your thesis directly from something you have been reading, and you should never plagiarize a thesis. Your thesis is your answer to questions you are asking of the material in your essay; no one else can create/compose/write the*
particular query you are pursuing because it is your question. Good scholarship comes out of your own personal experience of the material, and the best thesis statements draw deliberately upon your questions and interests. In this regard, a thesis must be original because it is yours.

In addition to being original, your thesis must be arguable. Another way of saying this is that there must be evidence for your thesis. Some theses are very interesting but not supportable without contracting the services of a medium or reading three libraries’ worth of material. Here are two examples of theses that are not arguable because they would require mountains of data:

- Example: “Hindu views of the divine are more nuanced than views of the divine in other religious traditions.” (The problem here is that proving this statement would require an immensely complex comparison, with data drawn from many different traditions. This would be an impossible task.)
- Example: “The Great Awakening in America was one of the most profound moments in our religious history.” (Again, the scope here is too broad. Demonstrating this thesis would mean showing that all other moments were less profound.)

In both of these examples, the thesis is far too broad and supporting it requires too much information. An arguable thesis is focused, carefully constructed, and lays out the direction in which the essay will move. Another way of thinking about an arguable thesis is to think of it as a proposition to which the reader will assent by the end of the essay. The argument that you lay out in the paper should flow logically from your thesis. After reading your thesis, the reader should be able to say “Oh, this is what I’ll learn in this essay.” An arguable thesis, however, is not a “road map” thesis, as in the following example:

- In this paper, I will argue that sex education in America reflected tensions between conservative Christians and liberal approaches to sexuality by showing that the 1960s brought sex into the public realm, that Anita Bryant was instrumental in shaping the resistance to liberal sex education in schools, and that the Guttenberg Institute shaped sex education in schools in the 1980s. (This thesis is too long, too detailed, and contains too much information. Further, the thesis doesn’t tell us anything about the relationship between the different items in the list.)

Another way to think about whether or not your thesis is arguable is to realize that your reader will not agree with your thesis until the end of the essay, after you have offered all of your evidence and arguments. A thesis statement that seems immediately true is a thesis statement that isn’t worth arguing.

Finally, a thesis must be interesting. How do you make it that way? You must begin by knowing the material well enough to generate insights into the topic. Your thesis
must concern a topic worthy of consideration, and your essay must attempt to convince the reader of a conclusion that casts fresh light on that topic. Often, a thesis is interesting because, if shown to be true, it would require modifying or changing conventional views of the subject. In other words, your thesis should say something that is in some way controversial—but the argument should not be a “straw man” argument or a false controversy. (A “straw man” is a dummy position, usually one that no serious person would really hold. A writer sets up a straw man merely to knock it down, and straw man arguments lack depth and authenticity.)

Therefore, to make your thesis interesting, you need to pick an approach or a line of analysis that is substantive and evocative for your audience.

An interesting thesis also carries a certain significance for the reader. In order to see what you have to offer in your essay, your introduction needs to lay out why your thesis is interesting and significant. In other words, it has to address the “so what?” question that critical readers always have in the back of their minds. Why is this thesis important? What will the reader learn by reading this essay? One common way of doing this is to lay out the conventional view of your topic so your thesis stands out as interesting against that conventional view. We should note that what counts as “interesting” may vary among subfields, so be sure to refer to the sections at the end of the guide on writing in specific areas.

All of the points we have laid out here are useful for any thesis statement in any length of paper, but are perhaps more relevant for advanced writing tasks such as research papers and senior individualized projects. However, these principles are applicable to any thesis.
Here are some examples of good thesis statements generated for a shorter five to six page paper with an assignment:

- “thesis-as-thoughtful-answer”
  *The assignment:* “Discuss how Rudolph Otto’s and William Proudfoot’s ideas of religious experience differ from each other.”
  *A good thesis:* “The difference between Otto and Proudfoot on the issue of religious experience can be explained by a larger difference between them: Otto is an insider and Proudfoot is an outsider.”

- “thesis-as-interesting-arguable-and-original”
  *The assignment:* “Discuss how Arundhati Roy’s essays reflect larger questions about religion, empire, and activism.”
  *A good thesis:* “Despite Roy’s sometimes inflammatory rhetoric in *Ordinary Person’s Guide to Empire*, she has an implicit argument that “empire” is a contemporary phenomenon that requires individual resistance wherever people encounter empires.

Here are two more examples of good thesis statements for a longer paper:

- “Romans 1:26-27 must be read with a fuller knowledge of the author, Paul, and the environment in which he lived. Homosexuality was one of many sins which people of the time had committed, according to Paul, but for generations people have focused on homosexuality as the most serious offense against God. In this paper, I suggest that homosexuality was not at the heart of Paul’s message in this passage; instead, homosexuality was used as a vehicle to condemn a series of more serious sins.”

- “The elements of the Nagas absorbed into Buddhism during its Indian period took on different meanings and representations as the image of King Vasuki moved east into China. The image of King Vasuki contained in *The Buddha Scroll* is a representation of the melding of two cultures, each of whom internalized the deity to create a unique symbol within two different religious traditions.”
Finally, a few practical notes:

First, essays should not read like mystery novels; that is, you should not reveal what the essay is arguing only at the end, even though this structure might mirror your own process of drafting. This “mystery novel” structure happens to all of us in early drafts, and the solution is to take the end of the early draft, where you finally discovered what you wanted to argue, and make it the starting point of your revision. A good essay is structured as a circle: the thesis lays out the premise and hints at the direction, and the conclusion arrives back at the point where the essay began. Second, your thesis does not necessarily need to be contained in a single sentence—despite what you learned in high school English class. In shorter papers, it is best to have a concise thesis is no more than two sentences generally toward the end of the first paragraph. Sometimes you might want to begin your paper with your thesis in order to focus your argument and avoid unnecessary details. In longer papers, however, the thesis can be a bit more expansive in the first two or three paragraphs.

Second, the thesis should be carefully worded and crafted, with direct and straightforward language. Avoid broad generalizations, complex terminology, or unnecessary details that can confuse the reader. In all cases, there is an art to identifying the thesis sentence(s) without using such phrases as “As I will show,” or “It seems to me”—phrases like this tend to weaken your argument because it sounds like you haven’t actually thought the paper through or that the argument is based on your opinion, not on an argument. Be clear and concise, and stick to the substance of your approach and to the topic of the essay.

The Body

Using and Interpreting Evidence

A good thesis shows that you have a claim worth arguing; to prove that claim requires evidence. But providing evidence means more than studding your own claims with quotes from what you have been reading. Using evidence effectively means more than repeating texts—it requires interpreting texts. To illustrate this, let us ask you a question:

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2 Many of the points made in the body section are taken from Carla Marie, Travis D. Smith, and Annie Brewer Stilz, The Student’s Guide to Writing in Government 10 (Cambridge: President and Fellows of Harvard University, 2002).
“A pig,” you say? Wrong: it is an aerial view of a man wearing a sombrero and cowboy boots. As with this picture, you should not take the meaning of a passage to be self-evident—you need to explain what you think the line or passage means (and, if necessary, your reason for rejecting more obvious readings of it).3

Interpreting a quotation involves two things: first and briefly, you need to summarize what the author said, i.e., re-state what you think the author is saying (and this might take a few sentences if the ideas in the quotation are complicated). But second and more importantly, you need to analyze what the author is saying. Unlike when you summarize, when you analyze you are adding something to the text, not just repeating it. You analyze a passage by noting something in it that is not on the surface: most dramatically, a contradiction in it or a subtext that the author did not intend or less dramatically (but more commonly), an interesting ramification it suggests or an implicit connection between it and other points. Quotations should not be self-explanatory (just as self-evident thesis are not really theses). Finally you need to link this interpretation back to your own argument: analysis is merely a digression if it does not connect with your own claim.

Your interpretation of the quotations you use should satisfy three aims:

• you should clarify in your own words what the author means in the quoted passage;

• you should analyze the quotation; and

• you should explain precisely how the passage supports your argument.

Let’s turn to an actual example; you will see that it takes quite a bit of space to do justice to a piece of evidence.

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3 This cartoon and the use of it to illustrate new ways of seeing comes from the Vermont writer Geoffrey Stokes; Pat Kaim, who teaches in the Expository Writing Program at Harvard University, has used this in her handout, “Idea and the Academic Essay,” to which this explanation is indebted.
This sympathy that Kampan expresses toward the character of Surpanakha comes to full flowering in the next rather lengthy passage (twenty verses in length), in which the raksasi fervently pines for Rama all night long.

When [Rama] had gone, she felt her life falling away, leaving her body. With her senses stunned, shrunken into herself, she stood there and could hardly breathe. “He has no affection for me at all,” she thought, “no room in his heart for me” . . . she felt that if she did not embrace his chest this very day she would die . . . as the sky turned red . . . she grew weak and anguished while the moon, high and firm in the sky, troubled her with its long light . . . her precious life was burning at the touch of the cool wind to her large, soft, sweet breast and she was seething. She scooped up handfuls of ice, miraculously cool and placed them down on her young, radiant breasts but they were no better than butter that would melt away laid out on a hot ledge, with fire blazing around it . . . though it seemed as if she were caught in the blazing fire that consumes a universe, that mindless woman did not lose her life[,] saved by the drug of her desire to have that man with his body the color of the dark ocean and then to live! (Kampan 99-102; 3:5:70, 71, 75, 77, 78, 85).

With the coming of evening and the rising of the moon, the nighttime neytal (seashore) landscape of Tamil akam poetry is established, which, for the Tamil reader, immediately expresses the emotions of a lover’s lamentation at separation from her beloved. In this fashion, for the reader versed in akam aesthetics, the very landscape screams out the same fervent lament that Surpanakha experiences in these verses. Kampan also employs abundant similes to emphasize the intense longing of Surpanakha for Rama, a longing that causes her to become weak, to physically waste away, and to burn so strongly that not even the coolest substances on the earth can alleviate it. By all of these aesthetic techniques, Kampan helps us to experience viscerally the agonizing personal emotions of the raksasi, thus giving us the opportunity to truly identify with this creature, upon whom we now take pity. We realize that Surpanakha’s longing is beyond her control—just as we sometimes cannot control with whom we fall in love—and we thus grow more sympathetic to her plight. In the reader’s eyes, Surpanakha is no longer simply a bag full of lust, but rather, she is the victim of those emotions which even the very disciplined cannot always control.
We will end with some nitty-gritty tips about using quotations.

- Define key words and explain important ideas. Often a quotation contains terms and concepts that won’t be familiar to the reader; before you do anything else, you need to explain them.

- If you reformulate another person’s ideas in your own words, drawing them from a text without quoting it directly, it is still necessary to include a citation.

- Do not use quotations out of context.

- Try to avoid splicing too many sentence fragments in quotation marks into your own text. Use quotations when assembling textual evidence, but use your own words whenever you can.

- Individual words do not need to be placed in quotation marks, except perhaps the first time that you use and define them—or if that particular word is distinctive or noteworthy (or if the word or phrase you are using are someone else’s).

- Use ellipses sparingly. Never use ellipses to cut out a piece of text that is inconvenient for your thesis. And never use ellipses (…) to unite into a single quotation passages that are significantly separated from each other in the original text.4

A note on the mechanics of using quotes in an essay: if you have a direct quote that is more than three lines long, indent it five spaces, align it to the left (not centered), use single-spaced lines and do not use quotation marks (see the many examples in this writing guide). When returning to your analysis after an indented quote, do not indent as if you are starting a new paragraph unless you are starting a new paragraph. Finally, it is unusual to end a paragraph with a quote, or start a paragraph with a quote: always embed quotes firmly in your analysis and explanation, as discussed above.

**Anticipating and Refuting Counter-Arguments**

A strong argument demonstrates an awareness of possible objections or counter-arguments. As Marie, Smith, and Stilz explain:

Once you have laid out your argument and integrated textual support, go back to the step in which you assembled what you thought was the most important textual evidence. Examine the bits of evidence that were difficult to reconcile with your argument. Consider counter-arguments and alternative interpretations and try to refute the most forceful objections to your thesis. Where is your argument weakest or most vulnerable? What

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4 This list is taken from Marie, Smith, and Stilz, 16-18.
criticisms might a smart reader raise? What evidence would these people have on their side? Why is their position less convincing than your own? You will want to analyze briefly the passages that seem to indicate an alternative explanation, and then show why these passages are less representative than the ones you have chosen, or why those other passages are taken out of context, or why they do not present an adequate view. If you have been asked to compare and contrast two authors and you have taken one author’s side, consider how the other author might respond to the criticism you have put forward.5

Using Topic Sentences

How do you write so that your sentences and paragraphs can support the ideas you are trying to convey? For paragraphs, use topic sentences. A topic sentence functions in a paragraph much as a thesis statement does for the argument as a whole, in this case announcing the overall point of the paragraph. As you write, and particularly as you rewrite and edit, make sure that each paragraph contains an identifiable topic sentence, usually close to its beginning.

Example: “In describing religious experiences, Proudfoot wants to be true to the person having the experience; he wants to describe it in the subject’s terms.

Example: “Platinga responds to this point about fairness by . . . .”

If topic sentences indicate where that particular paragraph is going (and where it just was), “signposts” indicate where the whole paper is going, summing up where it has been in the process. They most often come at turning points in the essay, the moment before you are about to talk about a more subtle similarity between two thinkers or consider a qualification to your argument.

Example of a “signpost”: “To sum up, the major weakness of exclusivism is that it implies that adherents of the true religion are privileged in some way; yet this claim cannot be fair.”

Both topic sentences and “signposts” orient your readers, preventing them from getting lost.

5 Marie, Smith, and Stilz, 18.
Concluding Your Essay

By this point, you have done a lot of work, and you may be running up against the assigned page limit for the paper. (Actually, it is great to be somewhat over the page limit when your first draft is finished, since a paper that must be edited down is always improved in the process.) Do not just tack on an extra sentence or two and go to bed. A good conclusion is one your reader will remember. You may want to recap the main point, but do not merely summarize the whole paper. You may want

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to go on to explain how your paper does something that other arguments have not. You may want to say that you have uncovered some particularly elusive bit of evidence. You may want to place your own thesis in a larger context. Ultimately, the conclusion should leave the reader with a significant insight to take away from your specific argument. Make sure that readers know what is important about your paper in the conclusion, and stick to the question you have posed.

It is our hope that we have effectively demonstrated how a consideration of aesthetics is vital in determining the moral intentions of our three authors, and the moral significance of the stories they tell. There is of course a seemingly endless amount of work to be done—we have analyzed only two passages thus far!—but this study suggests the possibility of a general interpretive method that may be applied to these texts. Valmiki locates the reader at the aesthetic distance demanded by rasa-theory: Kampan brings his readers into the landscape and close the experiences of the characters, while occasionally allowing for a distanced, cosmic perspective whenever such a perspective is required; Tulsi consistently adopts the most distanced perspective of the three, allowing for a combination of impersonal, didactic moral instruction and a glorious vision of the vastness and bliss of Rama, the Lord of the universe. Taking a hint from the Abhinavagupta, many modern scholars and commentators take such aesthetic considerations into account as they attempt to interpret the moral significance of these three Ramayanas. At the same time, they may realize that, before the modern period, Indian tradition never viewed ethics as a category to be considered by itself, for to pre-modern Indian minds, ethics is inextricably intertwined with every aspect of human existence. Thus by (re-)introducing aesthetics into the ethical debate, we hope that the world may begin to see again how all of our modern "categories of knowledge" are really profoundly interrelated—a point which Indian tradition has always affirmed.

(The strength of this conclusion lies in the way the author recaps the argument in the topic sentence, indicates that there is more work that lies outside the scope of the current paper, and opens up the significance of the author's analysis for a particular way to examine the role of aesthetics in relationship to ethics when reading Indian literature.)
Review of tips for successful writing

Do......

• reread the text/evidence before writing
• examine the assignment question for clues about what kind of thesis it requires
• discuss the project with the instructor well before the due date but after you have concrete ideas and evidence
• come up with an interesting question your essay attempts to answer
• clearly state your thesis in the introduction. If it is a long essay (15 pages or longer), mention the main points you will use to defend the thesis in the first few paragraphs.
• carefully choose evidentiary quotes from your sources and interpret them for the reader in the body of the paper
• make sure that every point you make follows logically from the preceding one, leading logically to the next point, and that all of your points ultimately support your thesis
• make sure that your thesis and argument reflects a comprehensive understanding of the issues, not just those points that you think are important
• tie your conclusion to the thesis
• consider possible objections to your argument
• write at least one early draft of the paper and revise it

Do not......

• attempt to write without a careful review of the text
• select an argument that restates what is straightforwardly obvious in the sources
• quote the professor's comments from lecture
• ignore all or part of the assignment or question
• write an introduction that does not include a thesis statement
• use textual quotations without interpreting them for the reader
• write a conclusion that merely restates the body of the paper
• forget to consider objections to your argument
• use generalizations at any point in the paper
Part 3: Different Approaches to Writing in Religious Studies

Using Historical Methods in Religion

Formulating a paper from a historical point of view should follow the same guidelines already given in this handbook. You will need to find a topic (First Great Awakening) or an idea (historical concepts of no-self in Buddhist texts), generate a set of questions about that topic (e.g., What role did specific figure X play in changing attitudes on Y), and examine the evidence needed to answer these questions: documents, letters, newspapers, artifacts—essentially anything that can tell us about life in the past. If you are writing about a concept, the same rules of evidence apply: bring together different sources and writings or artifacts that shed light on your topic.

What distinguishes a history paper from other kinds of writing? What are historians interested in? Historians study the past, but they study it with particular questions in mind. They are interested in explaining how events or ideas in the past changed over time, why they happened in the first place, what other trends they were connected to or what their significance was.

How should you proceed once you have fixed on a particular question? Many historical essays are inspired by the secondary literature: how have particular historians interpreted the topic at hand? In other words, you might proceed “backward”—to go from secondary literature to primary. If your topic is evangelical revival in the 19th century, for example, you will want to know what other historians have said about this subject so that you can fit your paper into those debates. Once you have a sense for how others are thinking about this topic, you might want to start looking yourself at the primary sources (evidence) they are arguing about. What do you think about this evidence? Have you found other evidence for this period that might help your view or critique what they are saying? Do you have another interpretive angle from which to understand this evidence? Do you see a connection that others have missed?

Here is a step-by-step process for thinking about the research and writing process from a historical point of view:

1. Read and understand scholarly interpretations of your topic.
2. Study and take notes on the debates that scholars are having about this topic.
3. Study and take notes on the primary sources you have read related to your topic.
4. Think about the questions, problems or contradictions that remain for you. What kinds of questions have scholars not asked about these primary sources? When and why have scholarly interpretations clashed? Do you have a slightly different reading of these primary sources—a reading that
might resolve contradiction or puzzles in the secondary sources? Do you have a reading of the primary sources that might add to how we understand these events? Do you have primary evidence that has not been used before—or not been used specifically to speak to these problems? Perhaps your reading of the primary evidence could change or shed light on our interpretations of the past?

Yet sometimes you will want to begin not with secondary sources but with primary ones. If you know about primary sources that are under-used (sometimes a faculty member can suggest primary sources to you) you can begin with these. Study them and take notes. Then read secondary interpretations on these sources or other sources related to your topic.

Whether you go from secondary to primary sources or *vice versa*, the key point is that you show your reader what is interesting, new or significant about your argument. One good way to do this in history papers is to argue that you are contributing something specific to the scholarly conversations about your topic—that you have a new or slightly different answer to problems, puzzles or questions that historians have struggled with when encountering past events.

**Analysis of Textual, Visual, or Material Sources**

When writing about a textual, visual, or material source—or a small number of sources—your main task will be to develop an argument about that source and to provide evidence to demonstrate your argument. What counts as a source? The distinction between primary and secondary sources may be artificial when the goal is to analyze a source. While in one context Peter Berger’s *The Sacred Canopy* might be considered a secondary text, if one is engaged in an analysis of that text itself, it becomes a primary text. That is to say, the issue of what is a primary and secondary source has to do with the kind of question being asked, not anything inherent about the source itself. A primary source serves as the main object of your analysis, while a secondary source tells you about the main object of your analysis.

When approaching a writing assignment that analyzes sources, you should read and reread the source or closely inspect the material object with careful attention to detail. If you are writing about a limited number of sources your topic may be sufficiently narrow, but you will still need to develop some questions that will guide your analysis. In interpreting a text or artifact, you might ask: What is this text or artifact arguing for? Who is it trying to convince and why? What is at stake in making the points that it is trying to make? If you are analyzing a text, some details that may be important are specific use of vocabulary or themes, repetition, logical development of an argument, assumptions made by the author, and how the author locates his or her argument against other positions. For material sources, you might consider what an image is trying to depict, or how the arrangement of space constrains or produces certain possibilities. These questions should help guide you
to developing a strong thesis statement, namely one that answers a question someone might bring to a source.

There are a number of possible arguments that you might make. For instance, you might

- Argue for a particular interpretation of a source (especially if there is a plausible, competing interpretation that you can imagine)
- Defend a position developed in a text
- Argue that an author’s position has certain weaknesses or problems, or that there is an apparent or real contradiction in the author’s position
- Argue for an explanation for why the author holds a certain opinion
- Argue for a particular explanation about sources or circumstances that influenced an author, or how the source influenced some other author or historical event.

As you develop your questions, and reexamine your source, you will need to find supporting evidence for the argument you will make. Depending on the kind of argument you make, you will need to provide different kinds of evidence. For instance, if you are arguing for a particular interpretation of a text, you will need to provide specific quotations that support your argument, and anticipate and defend against competing interpretations. Sometimes you will discover that the evidence for your argument is not particularly strong. You may choose to change the focus of your question, but you might also consider arguing against your previous hypothesis. If, however, you are arguing that an author’s position has certain weaknesses, you would need to provide your reader with clear explanations of your argument. This might involve pointing out internal contradictions, unjustified presuppositions, or problematic consequences of the position.

**Writing a Paper Based on Fieldwork**

Anthropologists study the lives that people make for themselves and for each other in particular circumstances. One distinguishing way that anthropologists go about this study is through fieldwork. Fieldwork is embodied learning—you go out to live alongside a particular group of people because you believe that some question about human experience is best explored by attending to these lives in this place at this time. Writing a religious studies paper based on fieldwork entails abundantly detailed accounts of three things: 1) how this group of people live (with a special emphasis on the kinds of bonds they form with each other); 2) the very specific circumstances of their lives; and 3) the religious idioms they have made, found, inherited, or improvised as they live in these particular circumstances. Writing based on fieldwork is above all else the art of disciplined description, with a clear argument and thesis.

Writing the paper is only one of the kinds of writing involved in a fieldwork project. You take notes in the field on what you are seeing and experiencing; you record
what the people you are living with say to you in response to your questions about their lives and to your presence among them; you take notes on what you are feeling in the field, your fears, angers, hopes, and desires. The paper you write eventually should be based on this prior writing in the field.

Fieldwork means entering other people's lives; writing what you learned in this process poses ethical questions. How will you represent the lives of the people you have lived among, their understandings of the world—in their voices, in yours, in some combination? How will you protect their anonymity? How will you handle events or circumstances that may be less than flattering, perhaps even downright ugly, especially if these are people to whom others are inclined to be hostile or suspicious?

You will have handled some of these questions when you filled out the necessary forms for research with human subjects, but other questions will come up in the circumstances of the field. There is no single answer to these questions about poetics and ethics. Different anthropologists have experimented with different ways of writing about their experiences seeking to honor their own view of the field while respecting the integrity and autonomy of the people with whom they lived. The key is to be thoughtful and intentional about such matters. Above all, fieldwork as practice and writing is transparent, meaning that you never use quotation marks unless you had written a statement down when you heard it; you do not use composites; you give the context and circumstances of your conversations; you do not ask leading questions. Maintaining this honesty requires a sharp and clear introspection, too. You must be attentive to your expectations and assumptions about the people with whom you work, your fears of them, what it is that brought you to this project in the first place, the ways that your own life informs the questions you are asking and the relationships you are making in the field.

In sum, the necessary components of a paper based on fieldwork are: an account of the questions you brought to the field formed by reading about the subject; some discussion of why you wish to explore this group of people in this venue; the most detailed description of those aspects of people’s lives and relationships relevant to your study; the inclusion of their voices and perspectives, especially when they disagree with what you expect to see; and reflection on yourself as a fieldworker; and your conclusions. Finally, what do you know now that you did not when you went out into the field and what do other students of religion learn from our own work from your experience and reflection?

**Compare and Contrast Papers**

Making comparisons between two or more things is a fundamental part of critical thinking and writing. No two things are identical, but attention to what is similar and what is different between them can help to clarify what we can learn from them. The method for comparison seems to be obvious: one presents A, then presents B, then explains the similarities and differences between A and B. In comparing two or
more ideas, events, or processes, you should try to move beyond simply describing what is distinctive or shared about them. A strong comparison argues for what we can learn from those distinctions or commonalities besides that they exist.

You should begin by reading and rereading your sources, paying attention to details in the concerns expressed, vocabulary used to describe the issue, assumptions made about what is important, and the historical or social circumstances in which the text is written. Like other types of writing, you will want to formulate questions that guide your reading. Ideally, the act of comparison is useful for learning something that one might not have noticed otherwise. By comparing A and B, we should come to notice something about either A, B, or both A and B that we might have missed had we just read one alone. An effective comparison then makes an argument about what the comparison illuminates.

As discussed in the section on writing a thesis statement, your thesis statement for writing a comparison paper should clearly alert your reader to your argument. When you are making an argument, you are not just listing details, but using the details as evidence for your claim. Consider the differences between a strong and weak argument.

**Strong:** The concern for ritual purity in one of the sources for the Noah story is absent from the other, revealing how the worldviews of the authors shaped the telling of the two stories.

**Weak:** There are many similarities and differences between the two sources for the story of Noah.

The first thesis argues for a specific difference between the two, despite their similarities. One also might argue the inverse of that structure, that in spite of the apparent differences, a comparison reveals that the two A and B share some important similarity. In both cases, attention to both the similarities and differences helps to reveal why some are important for consideration. In the less effective example, the thesis statement simply states a fact, and the resulting essay will likely just be a list of similarities and differences rather than an analysis of them.
Part 4: Guidelines for Writing Projects in Religion at Kalamazoo College

Junior Seminar: Research Prospectus

Formulating your topic as a question, or series of questions also sets you up to discuss how you propose to go about researching and answering these queries. Although it is likely that you do not have a fully formulated thesis statement at this stage of the process, you should indicate how you intend to undertake the research that will help you to make an argument about the issues you have raised. What methodologies, or approaches will you use in your research? Will your project be based upon close, textual analysis? Will you be conducting ethnographic interviews? Will you be observing rituals? Comparing various historical phenomena? These are the kinds of questions you will want to ask yourself as you draft your prospectus.

The prospectus should also indicate how your thesis topic and the questions it generates relate to broader issues in the study of religion. What kind of contribution to the field of religious studies do you hope to make? Which conversations within the diverse field of religion relate to your project? What kind of voice do you want to use? What kind of an argument do you hope to make—analytical? theological? ethical? historical? sociological? Please remember that these categories are only suggestions, and certainly neither exhaustive nor mutually exclusive.

Additional questions that you may find helpful as you formulate your prospectus include:

- Are you beginning with a question that is unresolved? What puzzles you? What do you want to find out? Are you clear about what you are asking?
- What observations have led you to ask this question? What hunches do you have about possible answers?
- Do you care about the question? Is the topic interesting? What interests you about it? Can it be made interesting to others?
- Can the topic be researched? How can it be researched? What kinds of information are needed to answer the questions posed?
- Does the topic present problems that can be explored or solved with analysis? Does it provide you with an opportunity to do some creative original thinking?
A good prospectus includes the following: an introduction, literature review, methods and theories section, chapter outline and conclusion. This prospectus should be between 12-15 pages and will serve as the basis for your SIP should you choose to write it in the Department of Religion. The introduction introduces the reader to your topic and explains why this topic is compelling. The literature review focuses on secondary sources that have already addressed this topic and should state how they influence you and how your work expands on theirs. The methods and theories section explain the method you will use to further research your topic/question. It will also outline the various primary sources you plan on using for your research (interviews, newspapers, books, visual sources, and so on). Finally, the prospectus will explain which intellectual theories frame your research. The chapter outline is a hypothesis of how you plan to organize your research. In other words, based on initial research, what will be the order of the chapters, how do you plan to organize your writing, and what will be in each chapter? Finally, your conclusion will connect the prospectus to the project’s thesis and remind the reader why your work is important.

**Intellectual Autobiography**

Your intellectual autobiographical essay should be a written map of your time at Kalamazoo College. Looking back at your classes here (inside and outside the Religion Department), at your study abroad experience, at your extracurricular activities, at your volunteering and at your friendships, what have you learned? This is not some “willy-nilly” story of your time at Kalamazoo College, but rather a structured reflection on how you have changed, how you have grown and what you have learned by being here, and more specifically, being a religion major/minor. This paper should be between 10-15 pages double-spaced and organized in a meaningful manner. Your essay should have a thesis and well-defined structure in accordance with the good writing practices discussed in this handbook.

**Senior Seminar: Critical Review Essay**

Your academic review essay should survey 4-6 academic books or articles that revolve around a focused topic/theme within religious studies. This topic will be chosen in consultation with the Senior Seminar instructor, and should be a topic that interests you, but that does not fall completely within the realm of your SIP topic. This essay should be between 12-15 pages double-spaced.

A good review essay not only summarizes and critically discusses all the books or articles, but also weaves the arguments of each together. Thus, a review essay is both objective and subjective. For example, what common ideas do the different arguments share? Where and why do they diverge? What is your overall sense of the subject based on these sources? Which issues do they leave out, and how does that influence the scope of the field?
Your introduction should not only present the pieces that you will be discussing, but also it should have a coherent thesis. You also need to give the reader a good roadmap of the essay so that the direction of your essay is clear.

The body of your essay should consist of two parts: summary and critical discussion of the academic works you are reviewing, and a synthesis in which you discuss how all of these works collectively shed light on your central topic or theme.

- A good summary and critical discussion not only recaps the author’s argument, but also contextualizes the book/article (author background, time book was written), and points out weaknesses and strengths of the piece. The transition between the discussion of each of your reviewed pieces should not be disjointed and choppy, but rather seamless - remember you are writing an essay, in which all the pieces should have a place and fit together.

- The synthesis is the place where you collectively discuss all the arguments of the books/articles in relation to one another. How do the works agree or disagree? How are their approaches similar or dissimilar? Which do you find most compelling and why? This section may be somewhat or even fully integrated into the previous section, but nonetheless, at some point in the essay, you have to tell the reader why you have chosen these works to review and how they relate to one another. If you cannot explain this point, you don’t have an essay.

As in any essay, the conclusion should restate your thesis and your key supporting arguments. You should also use this space to expand your argument. Where are the holes in the scholarship? What direction would you like this sub-field take? Why is it important to know this area of the discipline and why should scholars continue to study it?

**Senior Individualized Project in Religion**

The SIP is (usually) an essay that deals in a sustained way with a topic of particular interest to the student and that raises broader questions for the study of religion. In addition to these criteria, students should keep in mind that the paper should exemplify what the word *essay* means: a careful effort to develop and test the writer’s analytical and interpretative powers. The SIP is not to be a small-scale Ph.D. dissertation. An exhaustive command of the topic is not required. Ideally the project should address a significant question that has a future, i.e., that is capable of sustaining interest and generating dialogue among scholars over an extended period of time. An effective thesis, however, will address such a question by focusing on a specific, manageable aspect of it. The subject matter of SIPs will naturally vary widely. In every case, however, the subject should be specific enough to allow for depth of treatment. At the same time, it should not be so narrowly and technically construed that the writer to loses sight of its relationship to broader issues in the study of religion. Students are strongly encouraged to build on projects they have already explored in a junior tutorial or other coursework. The senior thesis is the
capstone of the undergraduate curriculum in Religion, and has the potential to be a significant experience of intellectual and personal growth.

The final SIP in Religion is usually a minimum of 45 single-sided pages and (preferably) no longer than 60-70, including bibliography and notes. The critical feature of a SIP in Religion is not length, but acuity of insight and keenness of observation. We expect each SIP to go through at least two and more often three drafts; SIP advisors will read the second draft carefully and offer their feedback at that point. It is expected that students will consult their advisors during the writing process so that no surprises will be in store for either the advisors or the students by the time the second draft is completed. The final draft is due at the end of the first week of the winter. Students should check with advisors by the end of the sixth week of winter term to receive their grades.

**Resources for Writing**

K Writing Center
[https://reason.kzoo.edu/writingcenter/](https://reason.kzoo.edu/writingcenter/)

Chicago Manual of Style
[http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/home.html](http://www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/home.html)