

THE HUNTER COLLEGE WRITING CENTER

WRITING ACROSS THE CURRICULUM

Writing about Religion

The study of religion opens minds to profound questions and possibilities of human life encountered throughout history, and pre-history, and across geographical and cultural boundaries. It is an inter-disciplinary enterprise, motivating thinkers (which also means writers) to engage in a broad spectrum of ideas, critical analyses, and research activities. Religion as an academic discourse can enrich our knowledge of other disciplines—such as sociology, anthropology, and literature—largely due to the insights into human behavior, both individual and collective, that it offers as we investigate and contemplate the ways in which different groups of people have considered their lives, their mortality, their suffering, and their environment.

Writing about religion is an opportunity to intellectually engage the most telling primary sources of human existence, such as the *Bible*, the *Qu'ran*, and the *Torah*, among others. Keep in mind that although writing about religion can lead to personal reflection—and, so, informality in your writing process may seem to be quite natural—you will often be expected to adhere to the conventions of scholarly papers, being aware of such academic concerns as documentation, thesis development, coherence, and grammar and mechanics of writing. Unless your teacher asks for a personal response or journal entry, make sure, in your final revision and proofreading, that you have chosen an approved documentation format (for example MLA, APA, or Chicago Manual of Style; ask your teacher which one to use) and that you have correctly cited the sources referred to in your text.

To access the Writing Center handouts on [The Documented Essay/Research Paper](#)—including [Documentation Styles](#), [The Writing Process](#), and [Grammar and Mechanics](#)—click on these headings or go to the Writing Center Handouts section of the Hunter Reading Writing Center website at <http://rwc.hunter.cuny.edu>. Of course, you are welcome to visit the Writing Center at 416 Thomas Hunter to pick up handouts and/or to come in for a drop-in visit and review a handout (and your writing) with a writing tutor.

The following handout is a guideline. Always refer to your instructor's requirements first, and ask questions concerning your assignment.

Thesis Statement

Most academic essays seek to persuade readers to understand a specific issue in a specific way—the writer's way. The writer's thesis statement offers this substantial assertion of her/his understanding (usually in one to two sentences in the introduction or near the beginning of the essay), thereby providing an essay with its sharp focus (see the Writing Center handout on [Developing a Thesis Statement](#)).

In writing about religion, you might want to offer a well thought-out central idea rather than an overtly argumentative statement. For example, if you have decided to write about how a recurring image, e.g., the sacrificial lamb, in a religious text corresponds to a

particular meaning or set of meanings, you are organizing your essay around a central idea, in this case, one that establishes a relationship or developing set of relationships between symbol and meaning. Of course, you would have to elaborate on that relationship and demonstrate the validity of your idea in your writing.

The difference between a central idea and a thesis statement is in their degree of contention. The above example of a central idea, the relationship of image to meaning, could certainly be debatable, but disagreement would mainly arise if the writer does not adequately present and illustrate the idea through thoughtful evidence, and not necessarily because of the idea itself.

However, a thesis statement—such as, “The Religious Right’s prejudice against homosexuality has led them to interpret biblical passages in a way that is deleterious to the rights of gay people”—is explicitly argumentative. Therefore, it is likely that all readers would have a strong reaction to that statement because of the very nature of the claim itself, regardless of how well the writer supports the claim.

Different Types of Religion Papers

Exegesis expounds upon meaning by defending or challenging a prior meaning attributed to a religious text or passage, or by offering a new interpretation.

An **Historical Essay** discusses a specific religious period, movement, or event.

A **Comparative Essay** examines the differences or similarities between religions, religious sects, religious doctrines, etc.

Some useful verbs to keep in mind when you are writing a Religion paper (and that are often found in Religion assignments) are:

- *analyze*
a small section of a classic text;
- *reflect*
upon the meaning of a particular idea or image;
- *compare*
two or more religious leaders’ positions on a particular issue;
- *examine*
an influential religious idea and how a community of people has been defined by it;
- *interpret*
a religious text as literature, by examining recurring themes and characters;
- *explore*
a philosopher’s ideas in relation to a religious text.

Using Sources in your Writing

If you are asked to

- *write* a research paper—which means you will be expected to gather materials such as scholarly articles, essays, books, interviews, films, music, case studies, ethnographies, or photographs,
- *refer* to periodicals or essays that have been given to you in class,
- *analyze* the religious texts themselves—for example, the *Bible*,

you are using sources. In the examples above, both primary and secondary sources have been named.

Primary and Secondary Sources

A good research paper often includes both **primary** and **secondary** sources. Whether you are using primary or secondary sources, remember to explain and analyze the passages that you have chosen from texts, and what those passages mean in relation to your argument. You must also prepare your reader before using the words of an author (directly taken or paraphrased) by providing at least a brief background.

Primary sources

Primary sources offer evidence that is, or was, directly involved with the topic under research. For example, if you are writing about a religious leader, your primary sources may be the person's own writing, or interviews with the leader or followers, or the transcript of a sermon delivered orally.

Primary sources are the original materials (not what another author says about them), so for a religion essay, for example, you could be asked to interpret a passage from the *Bible* (a primary source) without referring to another writer's ideas. Keep in mind that religious texts require special citation methods. When citing the *Bible*, for example, you need to cite Book, Chapter, and Verse.

Interpreting a primary source on your own (with no secondary sources to guide you) can be challenging. Therefore, allow time to begin the writing process with a topic-oriented freewriting (sit down and allow yourself to react to ideas and subject matter with the freedom to write anything that comes to mind) and brainstorming session (see the Writing Center handout on [Invention Techniques](#)). After you have worked through this initial stage, including an outline, you will probably be ready to write a more focused first draft.

Secondary sources

refer to texts used in your research which provide information, ideas, opinions, and advanced knowledge about your subject. In many cases, you will be using books, collected essays, periodicals, etc., that offer you, as the writer, the opportunity to explore your subject through the understanding of published experts. Secondary sources are usually used to clarify, confirm, or challenge your own ideas. The use of secondary sources demonstrates your ability to interpret and incorporate the knowledge and opinions of others into your own writing.

Documentation Style

When you use sources, you will be required to document all borrowed material (direct quotations, paraphrases, and general references to an entire text). There are specific style manuals—such as *The MLA (Modern Language Association) Handbook* and *Chicago Manual of Style*—which provide guidelines for your documentation, but each academic discipline has its own preference, as do instructors, so it is necessary to check first with your instructor before using a documentation style for any piece of writing. (See the Writing Center handouts on [Quotation, Paraphrase, and Plagiarism](#), [MLA Documentation Style](#), [APA Documentation Style](#), [Chicago Manual Style](#).)

Internet Resources on Religion

Academic Info Religion: A Directory of Internet Resources for the Study of Religion.
<http://www.academicinfo.net/religindex.html>

Judaism and Jewish Resources.
<http://shamash.org/trb/judaism.html>

Religions and Scriptures.
<http://www.wam.umd.edu/~stwright/rel>