

# On Essay Writing and Writing Workshops

## Materiality and the Religious Impulse Fall 2008

This is a long essay about writing short essays.<sup>1</sup> Read it before you write your first paper, and then read it again before you write subsequent papers. An *essai* (French) means to *try*, to *attempt*. In keeping with the spirit of the original meaning of the word, we urge you to keep trying and attempting to write a strong academic essay. Understand, though, that it takes most people a long time to master the skill of writing. Expect each of your essays to show improvement; use your fellow students' constructive criticism to make each paper better than the last.

In writing essays, the goal is to learn to *think on paper* – to assess ideas through writing. We call this “writing as thinking.” It keeps alive the intimate and fertile connection between writing and thought in an age in which it is often assumed that writing is simply a form of transcribing what’s in one’s mind, period. Nothing could be less true of either writing or thinking. The audience for your essays will be your peers in the program; your essays are an opportunity to pose good questions and develop sound arguments. To help you, you’ll engage in a weekly peer-review writing workshops. You are also strongly encouraged to make use of the tutors in the Writing Resource Center, located in the library.

### Why Write Essays?

Commercials and campaign spots push the average consumer and the average voter this way and that; but how do thoughtful and responsible people make up their minds? Such people read, write, and discuss arguments hoping to arrive at thoughtful supportable conclusions. They approach this work with an open mind.

An open mind isn't a blank mind. A person with an open mind is one who can examine his or her own opinions and those of others, and make judgments about their quality. It's not enough to say that everyone ends up with a different opinion because everyone is a different person. Insofar as people communicate (and writing is an especially thoughtful form of communicating), they figure out which opinions have more merit than others. This doesn't mean that there is one and only one right opinion on any given questions. However, some opinions based on factual errors or illogical reasoning or prejudice are less convincing, while more convincing opinions are factually more accurate, logically more compelling, and actually reach their intended audience.

So why write essays? To find out what one thinks and why. Essay writing is not the only way in which to reach this end. But it is a particularly powerful tool. For most of us, perhaps nearly all of us, really don't know what we think about something and why we think that and not something else, until we write it down. Writing practiced in this spirit is an act of inquiry and a process of discovery. Why write essays? Because in short, you make yourself own up to what you think. It is for this reason that skill in essay writing is so important in the study of important intellectual and political questions. Knowing what you think and study go hand in hand, and neither is compatible with being pushed this way and that by commercials and political ads.

### The Process of *Thinking on Paper*

Writing an expository essay, may not always have been a rewarding experience for you. It may have been a ritualized act of writing a “five paragraph essay”: Write it, give it to your teacher. You got it back with a few comments and a judgment of quality attached to it in a letter-grade.

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<sup>1</sup> Kirk Thompson wrote the original version of this essay in 1997; Matt Smith revised it in 1998; David Marr revised it in 1999; Matt Smith again revised it in 2000; Frederica Bowcutt revised it yet again in 2001 and Lisa Sweet and Paul Przybylowicz revised it in 2002 and 2005. Jean Mandeborg and Lisa Sweet revised it again in 2007. In 2008 Lisa Sweet and Elizabeth Williamson revised it for *Materiality and the Religious Impulse*.

You wrote it, but perhaps nobody ever really thought about it. This process doesn't have much to do with serious and interesting inquiry.

Evergreen encourages you to think on paper and this program gives you a writing group where you can present your essays/ideas. You read above that the kind of writing we're asking you to do is an act of inquiry, an act of figuring out what you have to say. Writing as inquiry is a process. The essay is the product of this process; to make the product good we have to acquire the habit of revision. It is almost, but not quite true to say that there is no such thing as writing; there is only revision. The point of this little maxim is that good writing is good because the writer has really worked at it. Really working at it in the context of a college program like ours entails learning from constructive criticism and suggestions gained in writing groups and then trying out a new versions, making a revision.

### **What's Expected?**

You'll be writing with your peers in mind as the audience. With this in mind, understand that we have all read the material on which you base your essay, therefore, it does not need to present information as if it is new to us. It won't be a book report, or a review of the book, in other words. We will be interested in your *interpretation* of ideas in the readings; your sense of what is *important* in the texts. Get at the "so what" question: why is the idea you explore in your paper important – "so what?"

You will be writing a fresh essay every other week in response to the seminar reading assignments that week. **Papers will be 2-3 pages long, typed and double spaced.** The limit on the length of the essay is not intended to limit your thinking; rather it is intended to get you to make hard editing choices about what's really important and what's not. *Do not expect to generate a paper by sitting down, writing three pages, and handing it in.* Budget your time so that you can write a draft or 'free write' for maybe four pages. Put it away for a little while. And then carefully outline and edit so that it poses an important and supported thesis. Leaving time to put aside the paper is important. It provides you with a constructively critical perspective toward your own work. Then return the paper and shorten it to the prescribed length by making hard editorial choices.

### **Conclusion and Thesis**

Your answer to "so what?" will rarely come easily – that is, if it is a well thought-out answer. It will take work, and when you've got hold of it, you've got the makings of what is called, in essay writing a *thesis*. In inquiry – including writing as inquiry – a thesis is the answer to the particularly open question you have developed. It is in short your conclusion. This previous sentence is unclear. It has to be a substantive statement, a statement with content, something that you're convinced is worth the readers' attention.

**Put your thesis into the first paragraph of your essay. Always underline or *italicize* your thesis.** Sometimes students are afraid to offer a thesis because they're not sure it is absolutely true. *You are not responsible for Absolute Truth.* What you *are* responsible for is a *nontrivial thesis statement*. If your thesis statement looks so obvious that no sensible person would disagree, then it's trivial. Instead, think of your thesis as just what it is: the result of an inquiry you've undertaken. It represents the best you can come up with now. You are open to suggestions and constructive criticism.

## **Argument**

Back to “thesis” and “conclusion.” To make the stew richer, add “argument.” When we say that so-and-so argues X about Y, we do not mean that so-and-so only gives her opinions (X) about Y. What we mean is that so-and-so gives her conclusion about Y. A conclusion is much more than an opinion. Everyone has opinions about all kinds of things. Not everyone has an argument. You can think of an argument as an opinion that you can defend with sound reasoning and ample evidence. You are writing “I think X about Y for the following reasons and in light of the following evidence.” The essay then unfolds, paragraph by paragraph, presenting those reasons and displaying and discussing that evidence.

## **Outlining and Organization**

You will find it useful to start the process of writing an essay by making an outline, and then re-outlining as you go along, up to and through final editing. Each item in the outline should be an identifying word or phrase for the topic of a paragraph (or group of paragraphs). It’s often helpful to put these on the computer screen as headings (take them out later). After the paper is written you almost always have to go back and make a new outline, because the arguments and their sequences tend to change as you see the implications of working them out. Ideally, the final outline consists of a series of clear sentences, each of which is the topic sentence of one paragraph of the paper. This might sound mechanical, but if you read a paper that’s been written this way, you are grateful for the clarity and are all the more inclined to give the argument a good hearing. Outlining and re-outlining as aids to coherent writing, forces the author to notice and cover all of these essential points. Remember that an outline tells you not only what you felt like including, but also what you might have left out. When you make the final outline, if you see that you’ve skipped any steps that the reader might need to see in the argument, go back and cover the point you omitted.

## **Evidence**

The enterprise in which we will be engaged will be interpretive. In essays we will be trying out our interpretations of the books/sounds/ideas we encounter. The arguments we make will be interpretive arguments – but no less rigorous for being interpretive. Indeed, owing to the nature of the evidence at the heart of our inquiry, the utmost rigor will be required.

Evidence doesn’t mean heaps of quotations. You’d be wise not to quote when you can just as well paraphrase. Quotations take up a lot of space. Please include them only when you want the reader to see the text, so that you can go on to explain what the quotation means or how you are interpreting its significance. If you don’t need to explain it, you probably don’t need the quotation – you could paraphrase.

## **Author’s Note**

Adding an author’s note at the end of your paper will make your reader aware of the strengths and areas for improvement as you perceive them in your own writing. The note should be brief (1 – 3 sentences) and may also direct the reader to comment on certain aspects of the writing that you want help with. By adding an author’s note to your essay you take the first step in analyzing the merits of your own work and you gain autonomy over the discussion of your work.

## **Peer Review**

Peer review of your essays will take the form of ‘Writing Workshops.’ At the beginning of these workshops, you will distribute about 11 copies of your essay to your workshop peers and facilitator. Each author will read his or her essay to the group and all the people in your group will critique the 5 or so papers submitted that day, one at a time, and offer feedback on content,

thesis development, evidence and general organization. The Writing Workshop group will consist of about half the members of your seminar and your seminar leader. You'll receive constructive criticism from peers on your essays. This commentary will be valuable to you as you prepare your revision for the following week. In your Writing Workshop, you'll take turns presenting your papers in a formal, "public-speaking" way, to develop some of the skills you're bound to need in the future. *The task is to read it as a persuasive communication to the other people in the room.* Then we'll ask you to listen while other people consider your ideas and writing. This manner of 'workshopping' writing is a traditional and effective method of helping writers improve their work and hone their communication skills. Artists and scientists submit their work to similar kinds of workshops or peer review. Scientists, too, submit their research to peers for review prior to publishing. In essence, having the support and feedback of peers is crucial in making progress in many fields.

### **Critique**

When you participate in the Writing Workshop as a constructive critic, be civil. One should offer one's commentary on the basis of careful reading of each paper during class. Papers with written comments will be returned to the author. Avoid talking only about what you "liked" in the paper (although support is important too). Saying what you "liked" dissolves the work into bits and pieces – work to assess the effectiveness of the paper and the integration of ideas. Trying on the author's argument for size, so to speak, is a respectful tribute and a real help to the person who will revise the paper. If you found the paper unconvincing, be sure to say so and to *say why*.

### **Revisions**

In the following week you'll use the comments collected from the workshop, and from your own revisions, to edit and refine your final paper which you'll submit a single revised essay to your faculty at the next Writing Workshop.

Late papers will not be evaluated by the workshop participants or by faculty.