

Writing Assignment Guidelines

Religion and Society

Fall 2009

Stephen Beck and Char Simons, faculty

Religion and Society is a writing-intensive program. Stephen and Char enjoy working with student writers, and we encourage you to take your written work as seriously as we do.

We are emphasizing quality of writing over quantity of writing. You will be required to write brief seminar responses for every class meeting at which we meet in seminar, and you will be required to write quality papers to fulfill a series of short assignments throughout the program. By quality, we mean writing that has depth, is clear and concise, well-focused and supported, and free of errors in spelling, grammar and punctuation, has received insightful peer editing and well-executed revision. Further guidelines for your written work:

- **Text-focused writing.** With the exception of the religion memoir, all written work should be text-focused, with a central question, thesis or quote from the assigned reading. You will then support your main idea or assertion with quoted examples from assigned texts. Personal experience may be included in your conclusion only. When discussing personal experience, you may discuss how the assigned text and the idea you discussed in your paper influenced your own learning or understanding of the issue.
- **Titling your work.** All papers, except seminar responses, must include a creative title that reflects the focus or theme of your paper, rather than the title of the assignment. Crafting a specific title will further help focus your thinking and writing on the assigned topic.
- **Formatting.** All written work is to be typed, 12 point type, doubled-spaced and, if more than one page, stapled (not corners folded over).
- **Spelling, punctuation and grammar.** Faculty will give appropriate feedback in a timely manner on your writing. In order to focus more fully on the content of your writing, faculty will not proofread/correct papers for spelling, grammar or punctuation. Should your writing be problematic in those areas of writing mechanics, faculty will refer you to Evergreen Writing Center for individual tutoring.
- **Timing is everything.** All assignments are due at the **beginning** of the class session. Plan for computer breakdowns and printer glitches by printing early in the day if possible. Murphy's Law kicks in the less time you allow before class starts or, heaven forbid, expect to print out your assignment during break.
- **Peer editing and revision** of expository and argumentative papers. Your first draft of both papers needs to focus on content, as opposed to style or how fluidly you present your ideas. Your first draft needs to be as complete in length as your final draft – the first draft is not an outline, or partial paragraphs or

incomplete sentences. Your first draft is as complete as you can make it. Your first drafts will then be reviewed by a peer editor (classmate) and your seminar faculty. Both will provide you with written and oral feedback through critique groups.

****And now for the fall quarter assignments:

Seminar Responses:

Beginning on October 7 and for each seminar, you will bring a seminar response. This is to be brief: ½ to one page in length. Your responses are to have three parts: (1) quotation; (2) description; (3) response.

- (1) **Quotation:** Choose a one- or two-sentence quotation from the seminar text that is at the heart of your topic of interest for the paper. Your quotation need not capture the whole of the topic (that generally requires you to quote too much), but it should be central to that topic.
- (2) **Description:** Describe the topic in the text that interests you. Often, this means giving a *restatement* of a position from the text. Sometimes, it means giving an account of central concepts. Sometimes, it means describing an image or a character. In any case, the goal is to represent, as faithfully as possible, your topic *as it is present in the text itself*. Focus on specific passages and details; avoid broad generalizations about the whole of the text.
- (3) **Response:** Present your own thoughts about your topic. You may be interested in your topic because you don't understand a concept or a position, or because you object to the position it takes, or because you think that a position, image or character can be helpfully applied to some other situation, or for other reasons. Whatever the source of your interest, make this clear to the reader. It is OK — in fact, it is a *very good* thing — to be tentative, to try out ideas that you haven't fully worked out, to experiment with new thoughts. You do not need to have a definite conclusion; rather, you should aim for a paper that will provide good, focused ideas or questions for further discussion in seminar.

Remember, this is a very brief paper. The description and response should be a paragraph each.

Paper Assignments:

1. **Oct. 7: Religion memoir (3-4 pages) and map.** Whether atheist, agnostic or practitioner of a specific religion or multiple religions, we each have a story to share about how we got to where we are in terms of how we think about religion. In this paper, discuss your own experiences, including people/events/organizations/institutions that have influenced your thinking on the topic of religion. Your paper should include a summary of where you are today and how you got here, as well as conclusions you draw from your experiences. The paper will be based mostly on your own experience. However, you will also need to include quotes from 2-3 text sources that have influenced your thinking on religion and to demonstrate your ability to incorporate quoted text into your writing.

You will also need to include in this memoir a map (hand-drawn OK) illustrating the main influences on how you think about religion. Include a key word or phrase describing how the person, group, event, book, film or institution influenced you, and your approximate age at the time. Be as specific as possible.

2. **Oct. 10 (first draft) and Oct. 28 (final draft): Expository paper (2-3 pages each).** Explain two of the different religious conceptions (for example, Vedic religions, Zoroastrianism, early Israelites' belief in Yahweh, Buddhism, Greek philosophical religion) that are treated in Armstrong chapter 1 and Foltz, and explain either a central similarity or a central dissimilarity between the two. To do this, you will need to integrate quotes from the texts as well as paraphrase or condense central ideas.
3. **Oct. 10, 24, Dec. 2: Writing critique groups.** Each student will participate in a writing critique group, giving both written and oral feedback on the first drafts of your classmates' expository, argumentative and final position papers. As the author of your paper, you will provide copies of your first draft to your seminar faculty and your small group (4-5 students). Each person in your critique group will read and review the papers of everyone in the small group, and giving each other typed comments which the peer editor will then review orally in the critique group while the author of each paper takes notes. In order to receive full credit for a multi-draft writing assignment, final drafts of the expository, argumentative and final position paper must include:
- ✚ First draft copy reviewed by your seminar faculty with his or her written comments
 - ✚ All typed critiques from members of your critique group
 - ✚ Your notes from the oral discussion of your work in critique group
 - ✚ Final draft

- Oct. 24 (first draft) and Nov. 11 (final draft): Argumentative paper (2-3 pages each).** In *A History of God*, Karen Armstrong presents a definite thesis about why cultures develop the ideas of God that they do, and she supports this thesis throughout the book. Explain Armstrong's thesis, examine some part of the evidence that she presents in favor of that thesis (through chapter 2), and take a position on whether Armstrong's thesis is sound and well-supported. Support your own position with good reasons. Your goal is not only to make clear to your reader *what* your view is but also to *convince* your reader, through good logical argument, that your view is justified.
5. **Nov. 18: Writing in character (2 pages).** Choose a character in Tariq Ali's novel, *The Book of Saladin*. Write a response paper to the novel in the voice of your chosen character. Options for how to write in your character's voice include:
- a. Describing a significant scene that your character is involved in
 - b. Writing a monologue of what your character *really* thinks about another character(s)
 - c. Writing a dialogue between your character and another character
 - d. Continuing the story with what your character is doing after the book ends (must fit in with your character's nature)
 - e. Other

- 6. Nov. 21 (first draft) and Dec. 9 (final draft): Position paper (6-8 pages).**
Either:
(1) Choose an era from the Axial Age to the Reformation and develop a position on the historical relationship between religion and society during that era,
or
(2) Choose a religion that we have studied this quarter and develop a position about its relation to a historical society. . You will need to support your thesis through quotes, paraphrasing and attributions to program texts. While this paper may draw on earlier assignments, it should also demonstrate some development and growth in your thinking in comparison with them (i.e., it should be evident from a reader of all of them that you learned something this quarter!).

Due dates (excluding responses)

Oct. 7 — Religion Memoir and map

Oct. 10 — Expository paper, first draft

Oct. 24 — Argumentative paper, first draft

Oct. 28 — Expository paper, final draft

Nov. 11 — Argumentative paper, final draft

Nov. 18 — Writing in character

Nov. 21 — Position paper, first draft

Dec. 9 — Position paper, final draft

You will notice that the due dates for first drafts and revisions are staggered. This is intentional, in that it allows you to have plenty of time to receive faculty feedback and respond to it in revising your paper. As a result, the revisions are expected to be substantial (much more than fixing a few spelling errors and adding a sentence here or there). Your revision should demonstrate serious rethinking that reflects continuing engagement with the topic of the paper. Further, since you will have continued to learn and develop ideas about religion throughout the quarter, the later paper will most likely show a more sophisticated view on your topic.