

Writing Topic Essays

Purpose: This assignment gives the student an opportunity to interpret the Bible by *applying what is being modeled and learned in class* regarding the broader message of the Bible, and the distinction between exegesis (what a text *meant* in biblical times) and hermeneutics (what a text *means* today).

Note: ***These directions are required, please read them carefully before requesting further information on this assignment.*** Failure to follow these directions will result in an essay of poor quality and in point deductions for the assignment.

A. Getting Started

1. **Select each topic early** in the semester so that you can begin looking for biblical material and other resources that pertain to the assignment. Read the selected Topic Essay question thoroughly, making sure you fully understand every part of it. **Read** the entire Scripture passage (or passages) that pertain(s) to the question. Sometimes this is a chapter or less, at other times it is several chapters. When reading the Bible assignments, **take notes** on all passages or verses that bear directly on the question. **Reread** the passage(s) if necessary. Since the NRSV is the required text for the class, the passage is to be read and cited in the essay from this translation (see below for exceptions).
2. **Research the passage.** Select resources that interpret the passage or the specific verses that you have determined answer the question. It is important to note that research makes an honest effort to understand the passage. Sources should not be simply selected for their usefulness in supporting one's previously held interpretation.
3. **Writing the Essay.** The essay will begin with a good topic paragraph that incorporates the question, and how you propose to answer it. Each paragraph will present evidence from the primary Bible passages that support your argument. Bible references are required. It is not necessary always to *quote* passages (and the quotation of long passages are often "filler" which contribute little or nothing to the essay), but at least indicate the *biblical reference* of the material referenced in the essay.
4. **The first draft** of the essay should be completed at least two days before it is due. Proofread it *slowly* (out loud works best) at least twice for grammar and format, logical coherence, and for how well it answers the question. Have someone else proofread your work (NOT a current student in this class). Don't wait until the last minute to write or print it, the quality usually suffers.

B. Technical Matters

5. **The essay will be written in formal style**, that is, it avoids clichés, slogans, colloquial language, and current popular expressions. While such expressions may occasionally make an oral presentation more engaging (and may sometimes be used by the professor!), they are not appropriate in a research paper. For example, "huge" will be considered incorrect if it is used in place of "significant," "important," "essential," etc. Other examples of words that are (mis)used in popular speech are awesome, cool, all about, and totally. The essay will also avoid inappropriate language, such as remarks which stereotype or demean people or people groups. Inappropriate language also applies to words or expressions which have originated in profane contexts, or are "euphemisms" for profane expressions which can still be considered rude.
6. **Cite all sources.** All consulted sources must be credited by a *proper* citation and bibliography entry, even those with no point credit (see below). Use In Text citations only (*not footnotes*) in the body of the essay. All utilized sources must be listed in the bibliography including study Bibles like the NOAB (which are *cited by author*, Contributors' names are found for essay or each section article [e.g., p. 6] and biblical book introductions and notes [e.g., p 11], see list on p. v of the NOAB). Sources which are used, but are not counted as one of the four (e.g., PC and class lectures) must be cited and included in the bibliography. Major Bible versions (not paraphrases, e.g., TLB, TM, CEV) may be used for these essays *only* after the NRSV has been cited, and *only* if the student cites the research supporting the suitability of this translation, and explains the reasons for the differences from the NRSV. When *quoting* scripture, the student will give the Bible reference followed by the Bible version (NRSV, *not* NOAB or the name of another study Bible) in parenthesis, e.g., (Gen 12:1, NRSV). If the passage is referred to but not quoted, then the reference is given but *not* the version, e.g., (Gen 12:1-9).

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7. **Good resources** include *recent* commentaries, Bible Dictionaries, and Journal Articles. All essays will contain at least four appropriate and vetted (scholarly, relevant, and recent) sources. Note that some frequently reprinted (and often used) “classics” such as the commentaries of Matthew Henry and Adam Clarke are several hundred years old, and will be considered weak sources in this assignment. You will receive credit for no more than **TWO appropriate** study Bibles, including the NOAB (i.e., if you use the NOAB *notes*, this counts as one Study Bible). If you only cite the Bible translation in the NOAB (or other study Bible), this does not count as a source (see below). Bible Dictionaries or commentaries that are required in other classes may count. Each article in a Bible Dictionary counts as a separate source (remember to cite by author!). Bible Survey textbooks (books like *People of the Covenant*) do not count – although they may be used as *extra* sources, and must still be cited. *Randomly searched (googled) internet sources will not be accepted.* The only internet sources that will be accepted are *appropriate* sources in the ATLA database, accessible through a College Library Link. (ATLA sources that are *not* appropriate include book reviews or magazines.) Weak sources such as magazines, popular literature (or devotional study Bibles), etc. will receive reduced or no credit. It is the student’s responsibility to select proper sources – please ask (in a timely manner) if you have any questions regarding a particular resource. Since the Bible is the basic text, or starting point, Bible translations are not counted as one of the four interpretive sources.
8. **Bibliographic Data.** A reference or bibliography always states **who** wrote **what**. Cite all sources by *author*, not by the editor of the book or simply as “such and such Bible Dictionary.” Next, give the title of the article or commentary, followed by the title of the book. Sources are cited by *in text citations* (not footnotes), giving the **author** and **page number(s)** of the source. See the directions (examples) in the [Stylesheet](#) on my website regarding how to cite various materials in the bibliography. Since the ATLA is a database of previously printed journal materials, sources cited from there will be in the standard journal format, and other data, such as ATLA and the URL, will not be given. *Only qualified sources that are cited or referred to in the essay will count toward one of the four.* When an idea is borrowed from a source, it must be cited, even if it is not quoted. When lecture material used, it must be cited as Braaten, class lecture (title), and the date; e.g., (Braaten, Class Lecture, 9/4/2009). When used, class lecture notes must be listed in the bibliography, but *they do not count as one of the four sources.*
9. **Format.** These essays will be typewritten on 8.5” x 11” paper, *Times New Roman 12 font, one and a half spaced, .75-1” margins and headers* (for exceptions see below), *and a minimum of 500 words (2-3 standard pages).* Pages will be stapled, not loose, placed in folders or fastened with paperclips. The Top Matter includes three lines: The student’s name, course name (OTS) and assignment and topic (abbreviated essay title). The content of the essay will begin after a blank space. Example:

Jayne Doe

OTS - Topic Essay

Was Jehu Justified in his Actions?

There is no title page, and bibliographies are not placed on a separate page. There are no excessive spaces at the top of the essay, there is only one space between the Top Matter and essay content. Page numbers are placed at the bottom of the page, and the student’s name will *not appear* in headers or footers on every page. Paragraphs will not have extra spaces between them, it may be necessary to turn off this feature in the word processor (MS Word: right click → Paragraph → Indents and Spacing tab → Space Below 0). An exception is the Bibliography, which is single spaced, with a small blank space between entries. In no circumstance will papers have three lines or less on the last page. Please tweak the margins and/or headers slightly to avoid this (even if it means going under the .75 requirement.) Students are always encouraged to “reuse” by printing on the backs of good previously used paper.

10. **Grading.** The essay will be graded 60% on content, and 20% on grammar, style, format, and other mechanics (see the correction key in the syllabus), and 20% on sources. It is important to note, however, that if the grammar and logical coherence of the paper are poor, the content may be difficult to understand and so the content grade may be affected as well.

See the syllabus and refer to class instructions for additional information regarding this assignment.