

## Religious Studies: How to do really well at exams

As a Religious Studies teacher of 20+ years, a senior A level examiner of over 15 years, and author of various textbooks and revision guides, the question that I am most commonly asked will come as no surprise. I am regularly asked by students whether they can have help with exam technique. When I talk to groups of teachers, very often they also ask about technique. Here is an attempt to condense some of that advice into a 2-3 side handout!

### 1. It's not about the technique

Whilst technique is important, it is actually not the most important thing. When I have been asked to talk on exam technique, it is often as if students (and sometimes teachers) think this is some sort of magic wand that will transform their limited effort into a high grade. Unfortunately, this isn't the case. There is no substitute for putting in the hard long hours and learning the content. Think about it like this: I am able to write a decent essay. Yet suppose I was set a question on which was the most significant member of One Direction or asked the best way to put a car engine back together, I know I would get a U grade and it wouldn't be because of my technique.

Similarly imagine a subject you know in detail – your favourite football team or obscure demo versions of your favourite band's early material – you would be able to write at length and in detail. Technique is important but nailing the content, knowledge and understanding of the issues and the subject, has to come first. As an examiner I can perhaps overlook slightly awkward technique if the content is good but it is difficult to reward an essay that knows little, is confused or doesn't really argue no matter how well it is written

### 2. Let's stop talking about revision – let's talk about review

Whilst we are thinking about the content, one mistake students often make is to put the topic away in their folders once complete and not look at it again until Easter in the second year when revision begins. It is a mistake to think in terms of a revision period where, suddenly fuelled by energy drinks, you launch into manic activity. If you haven't looked at the past topics since they were taught, you won't be revising at this point, you will in fact re-teaching yourself. The longer you leave material the less of it remains in your head. (Google the Ebbinghaus forgetting curve) As you go through the course make sure that past topics are reviewed periodically – you could have a past topic of the week – so that the knowledge sticks and by the time you come to the final few weeks before exams you are fine tuning your preparation and practicing essays rather than being overwhelmed by two years of forgotten content.

### 3. Model Answers aren't really your friend

Another thing that I am often asked for is model answers. You can even go online and find model answers on various sites. Be very careful. Some students download model answers and learn them. The phrase 'model answer' implies that this is THE way to answer the question. Two problems might result here: firstly, RS questions are broad and open, there is never just one way to answer it. Secondly, the model answer is an answer to one specific question, it is almost certain that the question you are trying to answer will be slightly different.

So by all means read 'model' answers and try to understand why this answer is **one way of answering that specific question** appreciating the techniques used BUT learning it so that you can create a virtual copy in answer to a different question in the exam is not a good idea.

#### 4. Answer the Question – BUG

In continuing the theme of how not to do it, we perhaps come to the biggest weakness in exam answers. They don't actually answer the question. I have lost count of the number of times as an examiner that I have found myself asking 'what was the question again?' as I am midway through the essay or 'this is a really good answer to a different question than the one set.' Examiners want you to think, they are testing your ability to select and apply relevant material. If you have pre-prepared model answers you have to adapt them to the question set leaving out what doesn't apply and adding in things that do. One way of making sure you do this is to **BUG** the question. When you get your exam paper **B**-ox around the command word, **U**-nderline all key words (don't miss a word like 'most' or 'best') **G**-lance through just to check you haven't missed anything. It will take you less than 30 seconds and will hopefully ensure you are on the right track

#### 5. The examiner asked you a question...so give them an answer

It may seem odd but the first thing to consider about your essay is the conclusion. The examiner has asked you a question – the word 'assess' 'discuss' 'evaluate' or such like will be featured. The question invites you to reach a judgement: does the design argument work? Is utilitarianism a good theory? You need to give an answer, what judgement or conclusion have you reached. It may be helpful to think of yourself as a lawyer at this point. A lawyer in court would not just summarise what everyone has said and then sit down; they would tell you why the defendant was guilty or not guilty and remind you of the key points in their favour. As you study the subject it is important that you consider the issues you cover and come to your own conclusion – or if you really don't know, decide what you think you can best argue. The whole essay is an argument and arguments have a conclusion (what you want me to believe) reasons (why you want me to believe it); they try to persuade the reader.

#### 6. Planning – in moderation

As we begin to think about how to write the essay I am often asked about plans. Here moderation is the key. It is tempting to think that planning is 2-3 minutes wasted. You might see out of the corner of your eye that others are writing and feel that you just need to get started. That is unwise; very few students can write high level stream of consciousness essays where they think about it as they go along. 99% of us mortals need to plan. There is however an opposite danger that your plan is overly complex and elaborate and means you have taken 10 minutes or more off your writing time. So strike a balance; a good plan is a series of words perhaps one or two phrases per paragraph that jog your memory. What is your conclusion? What are your reasons? What counterarguments might you consider? (Yes – you may be a lawyer but you are a fair and honest lawyer and you need to weigh up both sides before reaching your judgement). So a brief plan is usually helpful. Other things may come to you as you write and that's fine too.

#### 7. The Lost introduction

Another thing that students often worry about unnecessarily is the introduction; sometimes 5-10 minutes can be lost as students look at the page in terror not quite knowing how to start. Perhaps the biggest weakness when it comes to introductions is that they can be long and include all sorts of interesting background material – where the thinker lived, a fun biographical fact. None of these things really show understanding of the subject or evaluation, they are just interesting pub quiz facts. You won't lose marks for this sort of material but you will lose time – time that could be spent properly addressing the question. So in terms of examination essays, it needs to be either short and sharp or non-existent – just start your essay. Julian Waterfield's **CBA** is as good as any in terms of

model. **C**-context – what is the question about, what are the key issues, **B** –brains – who are the key thinkers in this area, **A** – approach or line of argument – what will you argue. It shouldn't take more than 3 or 4 sentences.

### **8. The Law of Expansion: Points into Paragraphs**

Once we get into our main paragraphs, the step up from GCSE to A level becomes more apparent. At GCSE you might provide a list of several points within one paragraph and it might pick up some marks. Yet a list of undeveloped points is not likely to score well at A level – it doesn't persuade the examiner that understanding or analysis is deep. At A level high level answers develop points fully. So a paragraph typically has one main idea – perhaps a strength or criticism of the idea that is being assessed. The opening sentence may give some context 'a second key weakness of the design argument is...' It tells the examiner what the paragraph is going to be about and how it is going to help answer the question.

This main point will need some explanation or unpicking and then some consideration of how strong the point is, this might include a counterargument. The paragraph may end with a judgement about the ideas in that paragraph 'so this can be seen as an effective criticism of design. There are various acronyms available to explain how to do this: PEA (point, explain, assess) PACE (point, analyse, counterargument, evaluate) PEACE (point, explain, assess, counterargument, evaluative judgement) PEREL (point, explain, response, evaluate, link...) but essentially they are doing the same thing – a point is made, expanded upon and discussed. If you are doing this in most of your paragraphs you ought to be accessing higher levels

### **9. Write more essays**

And finally the bad news. There is only really one sure fire way of getting better at anything and that is practice. It's why footballers train, it's why bands rehearse, and it's why your first attempt at making lemon meringue was a disaster. Writing good essays under timed conditions is a skill like all others and you will make mistakes, yet the more you do, and the more you take on board the feedback of your teacher, the better you will become. It won't happen overnight, there will be ups and downs but slowly and surely you will get better if you practice. If you take on board the earlier points about review rather than revision, you ought to have plenty of time to really perfect your essay skills in the run up to exams.

### **References**

Aiming for an A in A level Religious Studies (Julian Waterfield)