

Writing Essays Well

A Guide Written for E-Quip Students but with wider application.

by Father Emmanuel Kahn

Introduction: Getting Started

Let us join the Orthodox theologian Jaroslav Pelikan (1923-2006) in looking upon “writing as a means of grace.”¹ It has often been commented that “reading helps us to grow;” and that growth applies to us both as persons and as Christians. There is the further dimension for which E-Quip has been designed—to help you find the place that God has prepared for you in the context of your talents, your hopes, your prayers and the needs of your immediate family, the local community and the world.

The E-Quip course does require reading, reflection, prayer and writing, but it is quite manageable—financially and in reading and writing assignments. You can move at your own pace. Whatever your present commitments or hesitations, consider yourself called by Christ to “follow me” (Matthew 4.19), as were the original Apostles. St John Chrysostom has pointed out how God’s blessing was upon these “twelve uneducated men, who lived on lakes and rivers and wastelands.” Yet they were given “the idea for such an immense enterprise.” They set out “to do battle with the whole world.” They succeeded; and so can you, in this more limited challenge. For the apostles, as for each of us, the first step is the longest stride.

Helpful Tools

There are two books that are especially helpful: Father John Anthony McGuckin’s *The Westminster Handbook to Patristic Theology* (Westminster John Knox Press, 2004) and [Rev.] F. L. Cross and E. [Elizabeth] A. Livingstone’s *Dictionary of the Christian Church*

¹ Jaroslav Pelikan, “Writing as a Means of Grace” in William Zinsser, *Going on Faith: Writing as a Spiritual Quest* (Marlowe & Co, 1999), pp. 123-136.

(Hendrickson Publishers, 2007; ISBN 978-1-59856-250-7, not the more expensive *The Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church*, nor *The Concise Dictionary*). The first book, with its nearly 400 entries—all written by Father John—offers sound and concise Orthodox theology. The second book of 1,780 pages, with many entries written by Metropolitan Kallistos (Ware), offers a ready reference for Orthodox saints, councils and ideas. Both can be purchased from www.amazon.co.uk or second-hand in very good or good condition from www.abebooks.co.uk. Both books are reasonably priced and useful for all essay topics.

Many students who begin the E-Quip course will already know two books by Timothy Ware/Metropolitan Kallistos—*The Orthodox Church* (Penguin Books, 2015) and *The Orthodox Way* (St Vladimir Seminary Press, 2019)—with their profound insights into Orthodox life, theology and prayer. The saying, “Today a reader; tomorrow a leader” is rather trite, but often true.

Part I: How Should I Begin My E-Quip Essay?

It is your essay. You can decide what approach works best for you. Here are some guidelines:

- 1) For each set of ten lectures, you write two essays, selected from four or five options. Look at the options and narrow your choice to two or three possibilities linked to your interests. Then, as you read or listen to the lectures, be alert to information relevant to your essay choices.
- 2) Think and pray about each essay topic. Develop your own ideas and see how they relate to each lecture.
- 3) Read about the essay topics you choose and see how your reading links with the essay topic.
- 4) Take notes. Write down important points. Put headings at the top of each page of notes to help you find your material later.
- 5) Begin writing about something that interests you. You don't have to start with the first sentence. Begin where you have ideas.

- 6) You can either develop a tentative outline for your essay as you begin, or you can start writing freely as you have ideas. With either approach, when you have an idea, develop that idea into a paragraph organised around a key sentence, usually the opening sentence. Start a new paragraph when you begin a new idea. Often one paragraph will lead to another. Let your writing develop naturally. You can easily change the order of your paragraphs as the essay grows.
- 7) Start to form a general idea of your essay. Focus on two or three ideas at first and seek to communicate what you think is important.

Part II: How Can I Continue and Finish My Essay?

Move at your own pace in relation to the time available. Here are some tips:

- 1) When you are unsure what to write next, read over what you have written. Often, as when taking “a running jump,” this provides the momentum for the next idea or paragraph.
- 2) Read the essay question and answer it carefully. Do not include information that is irrelevant to the question. (This is by far the greatest mistake made by students in their early essays.)
- 3) At some point (either now or later) you will need to put your ideas in order. Write an introductory paragraph in which you explain to the reader what you plan to write. Make sure each paragraph holds together around one central idea. Enjoy forming what you have written into a coherent whole.
- 4) Be willing to revise what you have written. Think more about the subject of your essay. If necessary, read more to fill in gaps in your knowledge. Always place quotation marks when you quote the exact words of someone else and give a clear reference to the source, whether it be from a book or the internet. Plagiarism is immoral and will lead to failure. Short quotations are entirely appropriate but seek to be original as you build on the thoughts of others.

- 5) The word limit for each essay is 2,000 words. With a first draft you might be well below or even above that limit which is roughly six or seven A4 pages at 300 to 350 words per page. Make the necessary adjustments to the length of the essay before submitting it.
- 6) Each essay has to end clearly. State your conclusion in one or two paragraphs. Do not try to put too much into your conclusion. A link back to expand the opening paragraph is often helpful.
- 7) Check spelling, grammar and punctuation. Look back carefully over the essay and make sure each sentence has a subject and a verb. Add a few (not too many) adjectives and adverbs to strengthen your sentences. Develop your own style of writing, sometimes connecting short sentences with appropriate prepositions and conjunctions. Appendix 1 offers further help to improve English.

Part III: How Can I Improve My Study Skills and Write Better Essays?

The course tutors will offer occasional suggestions, but it is helpful to purchase and read a book about writing better essays. Consider purchasing and working through one of these two books: Bryan Greetham, *How to Write Better Essays* (Macmillan International, Fourth Edition, 2018) or Nigel Warburton, *The Basics of Essay Writing* (Routledge, 2007).

Greetham sets out five stages necessary for an outstanding essay: (1) Interpretation of the question; (2) Research; (3) Planning; (4) Writing; and (5) Revision. Several E-Quip students have found this comprehensive book quite helpful.

Nigel Warburton's *The Basics of Essay Writing* emphasizes that "writing is thinking" and "it is often in the act of writing that a subject comes into focus for the first time" (p. 8). He urges breaking the challenge of writing an extended essay "into smaller, manageable tasks," as you enjoy writing individual paragraphs (p.18). This is a very good book if you are new to writing essays or frightened about how to begin. It is also an encouragingly short read at 118 pages.

Part IV: Listening to the Lord as You Tackle the E-Quip Course

The E-Quip course involves more than writing good essays. One purpose of the E-Quip course is to draw you closer to Christ and His Church within the parameters (that is, the defining characteristics, the boundaries) of the course. In seeking your vocation, you might find it helpful to read Ann Mitsakos Bezzerides' *Christ at Work: Orthodox Christian Perspectives on Vocation* or William C. Mills' *Called to Serve: Readings on Ministry from the Orthodox Church*.²

In the midst of the challenges of life, it is important to understand the relationship between your own free will and the sovereignty (that is, the supreme authority of God). St Augustine offers helpful insights that can be linked to Psalm 67/68 which begins "Let God arise":

First, we had to be persuaded how much God loved us, in case ... we lacked the courage to reach up to him. Also, [2] we had to be shown what sort of people we are that he loves, in case we should take pride in our own worth and so bounce even further away from him and sink ever more under our own strength. So, [3] he dealt with us in such a way that we could progress rather in his strength; he arranged it so that the power of love should be brought to perfection in the weakness of humility.... As he said to the apostle Paul, 'My grace is enough for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness' (2 Cor 12.9). [4] So we needed to be persuaded how much God loves us, and what sort of people he loves.³

The saint is offering us here a path to follow in seeking God's will for each of our lives.... and we can bring this into the E-Quip course.

² *Christ at Work* is published by Holy Cross Orthodox Press; and *Called to Serve* is published by Orthodox Research Institute, 2010.

³ St Augustine, *On the Trinity* 4.1.2, cited by ACCS OT VIII, *Psalms 51-150*, p. 68.

Conclusion

To understand and pray your way through the many lectures of the E-Quip course and to write the essays is certainly a challenge. However, it is not a challenge that needs to be completed in any specific amount of time. Three years is the target, but what is more important is to find and follow the path that God has prepared for you. Charlotte Lieberman offers good advice if you become discouraged: “Don’t wait to be in the mood to do a certain task. Motivation follows action. Get started, and you’ll find your motivation follows.”⁴

Be encouraged by the words of Cyril of Jerusalem (c. 315-386) that can be linked to Psalm 52.8/51.8 LXX (“I am like a green olive tree in the house of God”):

You are being armed not with perishable but with spiritual weapons. The paradise in which you are being planted is the soul’s paradise, wherein you will be named (cf. Genesis 2.19) with a name you did not have before. You were a catechumen till now, but now you are to be called believer. Henceforth you are transplanted among the olives of that paradise or are being grafted on a good olive tree being taken from a wild olive (Romans 11.17-24). You pass from sins to righteousness, from defilements to purity. You are becoming part of the holy Vine. If, then, you abide in the Vine (John 15.1-8), you grow into a fruitful branch; but if you do not so abide, you will be burned up in the fire. Let us therefore bring forth worthy fruit... It is God who plants and waters, but it is yours to bear fruit; God’s to bestow the fruit, and yours to receive it and keep it forever. But do not esteem the gift lightly because it is given freely. Rather, receive it reverently and guard it with care.⁵

Be encouraged; the Lord is with You!

⁴ Charlotte Lieberman, “*Why You Procrastinate (It Has Nothing to Do with Self-Control)*,” at <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/25/smarter-living/why-you-procrastinate-it-has-nothing-to-do-with-self-control.html>.

⁵ St Cyril of Jerusalem, *Catechetical Lectures* 1.4, cited in *ACCS, OT VIII Psalms 51-150*, pp. 13-14.

Appendix: Improving Your English

Whether English is your first language or a further language, you can improve your use of English in: (1) spelling; (2) punctuation; (3) grammar; (4) vocabulary; (5) quotations and references; (6) style; and (7) seeking new ideas. Choose one topic below and then turn to other topics in whatever order you find most helpful. Consider suggestions from the two books previously recommended—Bryan Greetham’s *How to Write Better Essays* and Nigel Warburton’s *The Basics of Essay Writing*.

1. Spelling

Greetham lists some 70 common mistakes in spelling and grammar (pp. 268-270). Warburton invites you to create your own list of words you find it difficult to spell (pp. 79-82). Both authors warn that if you make spelling errors, the tutor will suspect you will make errors in other parts of the essay.

2. Punctuation

Greetham urges that punctuation should be used to write some long sentence, some short sentences, with an appropriate balance This requires that you understand how to use full stops (periods), commas, colons, semicolons and dashes correctly (pp. 189-190). Warburton focuses on the correct use of the apostrophe (pp. 67-68).

3. Grammar

Both Greetham (pp. 269-270) and Warburton (pp. 75-77) list common mistakes. A dictionary definition of grammar is “the accepted rules by which words are formed and combined into sentences.” A helpful guide is Joe Moran’s *First You Write a Sentence: The Elements of Reading, Writing.... And Life* (Penguin/Viking, 2018). This includes excellent advice on word order (p. 13-45), nouns verses verbs (pp. 46-83) and how best to join sentences together (pp.157-198), as well as an insightful analysis of how the Roman Catholic Cistercian monk, Thomas Merton, wrote so well (pp. 46-67).

If you know your spelling, punctuation or grammar is weak, a delightful learning tool is Angela Burt and William Vandyck’s *English Repair Kit* (Hodder, 2001), readily available second-hand for only a few pounds. Although this short book is aimed at children, it is often used by

adults to improve their writing because it is so reader-friendly and full of quizzes and jokes: “Spelling, punctuation and grammar. Who needs them? Well, YOU do... This book is different. It explains all you need to know—without sending you to sleep.”

4. Vocabulary

As you write E-Quip essays, you will expand your vocabulary, both by reading as you look up the meaning of words in the dictionary, as well by seeking the right words for your essays. Greetham explains that more complex ideas require a more careful use of words (pp. 193-194). Warburton does not deal with vocabulary directly. However, his balanced conclusion is helpful: “The basics of essay writing aren’t complicated. They are quite straightforward to learn. If you form good habits in this area, you can make significant improvements very quickly” (p.111).

One area in which it is helpful to improve your vocabulary is learning more transitional words and expressions to link paragraphs and ideas Victor C. Pellegrino’s *A Writer’s Guide to transitional words and expressions* (Maui arThoughts, 1993) offers many examples.

5. Use of References

Greetham offers extensive advice on references and bibliography (pp. 227-242) as well as on avoiding plagiarism (see the excellent index). You can cite references in one of three ways: (1) in numbered footnotes at the bottom of each page; (2) in the text itself with only the last name of the author(s) and date, which is then linked to the bibliography; or (3) solely in the bibliography at the end of the paper. Whatever system you use it is necessary to state the author(s), title of the book, publisher and date of publication.

Warburton focuses on avoiding plagiarism and points out that if you try to pass off someone else’s ideas as your own you are also losing “the opportunity of thinking things through for yourself” (p. 55).

6. Style

Greetham urges you to “find your own voice” (p. 149), seek simplicity in sentences (pp. 186-192) and words (pp. 193-196) and to be concise

(pp. 197-20). He focuses on using evidence thoughtfully (pp. 208-216). Warburton encourages finding an appropriate academic style (p. 65)

Phil Williams offers many helpful ideas on style in *Advanced Writing Skills for Students of English* (English Lessons Brighton, 2018). He begins: “There are three key ways to improve your writing, which you cannot neglect: 1. Read more; 2. Write more; and 3. Study more (p. 1).” For the E-Quip course a fourth guideline would be: “Pray more.” For academic writing Williams sets out a style that is “formal and direct,” not emotional (pp. 143-145).

The best-known book on style in writing English, with more than 10 million purchased, is William Strunk, Jr. and E. B. White’s *The Elements of Style* (Fourth Edition, Pearson, 2000). In less than 90 pages the authors give 11 elementary rules of usage, 11 elementary principles of composition, a list of many words and expressions commonly misused and an impressive 15-page closing chapter on style “in its broader meaning: style in the sense of what is distinguished and distinguishing” (p. 66). This small reasonably priced book belongs on the bookshelves of every E-Quip student; and it should be consulted often for helpful advice.

7. Seeking New Ideas

In the book, *Where Good Ideas Come from: The Seven Patterns of Innovation* (Penguin, 2011), Steven Johnson points out that new ideas and innovation “tend to happen within the bounds of the *adjacent possible*, in other words the realms of possibilities available at any given moment” and that “world-changing ideas generally evolve over time as slow hunches rather than sudden breakthroughs” [See: <https://medium.com/key-lessons-from-books/the-key-lessons-from-where-good-ideas-come-from-by-steven-johnson-1798e11becdb>] In the context of the E-Quip course “the adjacent possible” will be the essay questions each semester on which you have chosen to write, so keep alert to new ideas as you write your essays and recognise that new ideas may come slowly over time as you read additional E-Quip lectures and write further essays.

Nigel Warburton writes of how ideas on one subject will suddenly emerge from the unconscious mind while you are writing or thinking of something else; and how this can lead to increased creativity (p. 33).

Brian Greetham urges you to begin first with analysing your own ideas about the essay question and writing them down before reading the ideas of others. Then brainstorm your initial ideas and see how they might fit together in a synthesis—that is, “pulling together ideas, arguments and evidence that might have a bearing on the question’s implications” (p.40). If you turn too quickly to reading the ideas of others you will be tempted to include long quotations that are not relevant to the question posed in your essay, as well as lose the opportunity to express new, creative ideas (pp. 39-40).

Remember also that mind maps can lead to new ideas and improved essays,⁶ and that it is important to manage not only your time but your energy—physical, emotional, mental and spiritual.⁷

Draw from these many suggestions on how to write better E-Quip essays as works best for you.

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⁶ See Tony Buzan with Barry Buzan, *The Mind Map Book* (BBC Worldwide, 2000).

⁷ See Jim Loehr and Tony Schwartz, *The Power of Full Engagement: Managing Energy, Not Time is the Key to High Performance and Personal Renewal* (Free Press, 2003), pp. 3-18, 197-222.