

Writing Good Essays

1. Read the question repeatedly and ask yourself: “what is the question asking me to do; what it is NOT asking me to do? Why does this matter?” Many of us have a tendency when writing assignments to work from an imprecise understanding of the focus of the question and then write down just about everything we think to be vaguely connected to the question, but has little bearing on it at all. No credit will be given either to waffle or to matters not strictly tied to the question, its content and intention. Therefore, you are wasting both time and marks by writing everything you know about something without continually asking yourself, “is this relevant to the question?”
2. Now that you know what the question is asking you to do, you will need to prepare well before writing anything at all. This will involve research and study across many sources, some of which will not necessarily agree with each other, even among Orthodox writers. Your content needs to be balanced and discerning between different approaches and insights. Often questions will ask you to conclude on a topic after showing that you have understood these different insights, emphases, and solutions. In a propositional question it will ask for arguments for and against the proposition before you come to your own conclusions. Some falsely think that there is always just one answer in Orthodox Christianity and that being a good Orthodox Christian is finding out what that is and then simply writing it down with the necessary evidence to support it. Sometimes this is the case, but more usually there are different angles, and you need to

show that you have understood what these are to navigate to your own clearly set out position. You cannot do any of this without thorough and wide-ranging research and study. This does not have to be at the great expense of buying books. Every parish should have a decent library. The internet gives us access to quality articles on many different subjects. Use what you have but use it well.

3. When you think you are ready to start writing, don't! First, you need to get your thoughts in your head in some sort of order to provide content for a structure, a scaffold if you will, that will give coherence and purposefulness to your essay. To get your thoughts into the right sequence, list them under five or six headings. The first will be an introduction in which will set out what you are aiming to show, strictly determined by the question of course, and the last will be the conclusion, which you should already have in mind before writing. The middle sections should be listed according to the line of your argument.
4. So, now you are writing ... but how should you write? This need not be the polished perfect prose of an English graduate, but it should be clear, written to the best of your ability, and with due attention to spelling, punctuation, and grammar. All sentences should have subjects and verbs with, if appropriate, suitable objects, adjectives, and adverbs. When it comes to content and argumentation, please make sure that you keep on-topic and that there is a natural and appealing flow in your writing that will

take your reader along with you to your conclusion.

5. Do not quote large chunks of text in the body of your essay. If you need to quote some references inline, try to keep the number of words to less than 100. The full reference cited should appear in a footnote using the Harvard referencing style. You can look up how to do this online. A bibliography of the main works used in the essay should be included at the end. Use primary rather than secondary sources if you can. Neither the footnotes nor the bibliography should be included in the word count (1500 to 2500 for E-Quip). When writing, always use your own words and never plagiarise the writing of others as your own work! We will know!

6. Finally, we must speak of editing. Please remember that the quality of an essay depends not only what you put in but also in what you cut out; material that is which is not relevant to the question, and which will only detract from your purpose and possibly only serve to annoy the person who is assessing your work. Successful editing and fine-tuning can only be accomplished by reading the draft repeatedly until you are confident that your essay is in the best shape it can be. You owe this to yourself. Be proud of what you have achieved and resolve to keep improving your work in the light of the comments and encouragement that the assessor will give you as you proceed. God bless you in your work! +

Archpriest Gregory Hallam

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