

A GUIDE TO PROPOSING AND WRITING A BACHELOR'S ESSAY (RELS 499) OR TUTORIAL (RELS 399) IN RELIGIOUS STUDIES

Guidelines for Submitting a Proposal for a RELS 399/499 Project

Your first task is to submit a formal proposal that will be reviewed by all members of the Department of Religious Studies at the end of the semester **prior** to registering for the course. If you wish to pursue a RELS 399 or 499 project for the Fall, for example, your proposal must be submitted to the Department for review **by the last week of classes** in the Spring. This deadline will be strictly adhered to, with exceptions only being granted in extraordinary cases. A draft of the project proposal may be submitted to an individual faculty member before this deadline for feedback and to ascertain whether that faculty member would be willing to supervise the project. (Visiting and Adjunct faculty and Lecturers in Religious Studies do not supervise RELS 399/499 projects). The faculty member's willingness to supervise the project does not mean that the proposal has been accepted, for the proposal must undergo review by the entire Department before it is accepted and the student can enroll for the course. A proposal that does not have the support of the individual faculty member as supervisor will generally not be approved by the Department.

The formal proposal should include the following: 1) identify the title of your project, the faculty supervisor, and the semester(s) during which you would enroll for the project; 2) provide a brief overview or summary of the topic that you wish to explore; 3) identify a set of questions that you intend to answer in your research; 4) explain how frequently you will meet with the faculty supervisor (and for RELS 499 proposals include a timetable for the project), and how your project will be evaluated (whether through written essay, report, test, oral exam); and 5) provide a preliminary bibliography of books and articles that you plan to read over the course of the semester(s). The proposal summary and research questions should be understandable to faculty in Religious Studies who are not experts in the specific tradition(s) identified in the proposal. The proposal itself ought **not to exceed one page**, not including the bibliography.

The second and third tasks mentioned above, namely of providing an overview of your project and identifying a set of questions that your research will address, is of course a challenge when you have not yet read your research material. Moreover, you may find that your questions will change once you progress in your research. However, it is important that you make explicit in your proposal what you hope to learn in your project, and what questions are motivating your research. You understand your research topic and its significance only through the questions you raise about it. These questions give your project some direction, and they are also helpful in articulating your thesis statement and an argument. Here prior training in the theories and methods used in Religious Studies becomes valuable, for the exposure to various theories trains students to learn how to ask important questions about religious phenomena, while the various interdisciplinary methods that are studied provide different means to address those questions.

The Department of Religious Studies reviews each project proposal and evaluates whether it is clear, well-organized, and understandable to non-experts; whether it is well written and typed (the Department will be biased against proposals that are carelessly written and poorly proofread); and whether the proposal shows familiarity in the bibliography with the scholarship that is most important to the proposed project.

To see an example of a well written RELS 399 and 499 project proposal, click **here**. [attach Diffendal's 399 proposal and Purvis's 499 proposal?]

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Developing a Thesis and an Argument for an Essay

Once your proposal has been submitted and approved by the Department of Religious Studies, and you begin your research, you need to think about formulating your argument for your paper. Your task as a writer is to write something that communicates something interesting and worthwhile about your subject. In other words, you need to explain not only *what* your topic is about, but also answer the more basic question of “*so what?*”

To answer this question you need to develop an argument in defense of a thesis statement. The argument and thesis statement will only emerge after you have immersed yourself in your research and you begin to write a rough draft. Near the end of your work you will know what it is that you have succeeded in arguing, and for that reason you should put off writing your introduction until you have finished the body of the essay. It is really through the process of writing and rewriting that you determine your precise thesis. The thoughts you had while researching your essay will have been somewhat random and scattered—as ordinary thinking usually is. The process of writing is what allows you to start systematically structuring these disjointed insights. Thinking “on paper” allows an artificial clarity you might not obtain otherwise. Essay writing helps teach you how to think.

In order to write a good essay you need to develop a thesis, which is a particular proposition to be argued. Essays are not general discussions of a topic, like you find in a textbook. They are arguments of a particular point that you consider to be correct and worth making. The introduction briefly outlines the issue your paper addresses then presents a clearly formulated thesis statement representing your understanding of the best solution. The body of the essay attempts to demonstrate the validity of your thesis through a narrative progression of arguments. The conclusion gives you an opportunity to synthesize your arguments (if there are loose ends) or simply to summarize what you have demonstrated.

Essays, then, do not just summarize handbook discussions of a particular topic, nor do they just repeat the traditional arguments of an established view. They are attempts to convince others that your way of conceptualizing a matter is the most adequate alternative available. The mode of presentation for an essay is therefore *analytical*: the strengths of your thesis and the weaknesses of the competing theories are demonstrated through discussion and analysis of the relevant social, historical, and literary evidence.

The position defended in your paper does not need to be original. It may be a variant or adaptation of one that you encountered in your research. That is, you may be arguing that a theory most closely associated with one group of scholars provides a better explanation of the data than the other theories you encountered. This argumentative approach is the standard format for a research essay. It is the format one comes across most often in articles published in academic journals. The argumentative essay is the best format to showcase your ability to think critically and independently. Having a thesis statement will engender better organization and clearer communication of your thoughts, for the structure of the paper will be determined by the progression of the argument and the discussions that substantiate your case.

Another acceptable approach is the essay that discusses the historical development of some aspect of a religion, for instance the evolution of the Hindu practice of *sati*, or the development of the Christian conception of Satan. Such issues usually do not lend themselves to the formulation of a single thesis statement because many disparate factors may contribute to a sequence of historical changes, and each must be analyzed individually. Moreover, these essays tend to be less argumentative, for it is not possible to analyze every factor in depth (which would take a book), and often there is little debate among scholars about the broader features of the

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development. Because the scope of these essays is broad and the basic contours of the developments being reviewed seldom are controversial, you might focus on one factor involved in the development of a tradition, particularly a facet about which there is some dispute.

In addition to these general kinds of essays, there are also more specialized types of essays that rely on the standard, argumentative approach. One might choose to do a comparative essay—that is, an essay that compares two religious traditions with respect to a particular subject. One might compare Buddhist and Christian understandings of the essence of a human. Or one might compare Israel and Pakistan as two religious states. Essays of this sort still require a thesis or at least a “point” to be made. Noting similarities and differences between two religions is a great waste of time unless something meriting argument can be demonstrated through this comparison. Thus the comparison must have a definite focus and the analysis of similarities and differences must substantiate some larger insight, which would be the thesis of the paper.

The exegetical essay is another specific type of essay. The word *exegesis* is derived from a Greek word meaning "to lead out." It refers to established means or methods of interpretation designed to bring the author's meaning out of a text. The systematic approach of exegesis is a means of countering the natural tendency of reading one's own presuppositions into religious texts (which is called *eisegesis*). An exegetical paper explains the meaning of a particular passage, or group of related passages, of scripture. Such essays are arguments about what the writer of the passage meant these words to convey. Again, these essays should have a thesis. Unlike commentaries on scripture, exegetical papers do not go sentence by sentence through the passage explaining every thought in order. Though that may have been the approach of your initial interpretation, the structure of your exegetical essay should correspond to the most compelling presentation of evidence and arguments that support your interpretation.

Least adequate is the descriptive essay that offers standard information about some static element of a religion. Remember when you were in sixth grade and your teacher told you to write a report on so and so, and you went to the library, opened up the encyclopedia, and tried to put the information into your own words? You should be past that now. A Bachelor's Essay is not a standard report that uses a few more books! Rarely will an essay that discusses “Judaism” or “Hinduism” or “What the Buddha Believed” be an adequate project.

For more guidelines and advice on how to write research papers and essays for RELS courses, see the [Resources](#) page on the Religious Studies Department webpage.