

ON THE NATURE OF THIS COURSE¹

Reading maketh a full man, conference a ready man, and writing an exact man.

Sir Francis Bacon (“Of Studies”)

These pages introduce the main components of this course—reading, conversing, your own work (projects, writing, assignments), and grading; each of these components is intended to encourage our progress in understanding the subject matter addressed by the texts from which we are here to learn.

READING

READING EXPOSES us to the thoughts, concerns, and values of an author or teacher. It lets us interact with “teachers” long dead, or inaccessible due to time or place or culture or language. We should not be surprised that his or her thoughts differ from ours in both contents and expression, even to extent that they seem foreign—they are! They come from another age, another culture, through another language, and in genres that we rarely meet in our own literature or everyday life.

In the case of the Bible, its alien nature tends to be obviated by familiarity; we assume that we know what it is about (and what it says about its topic) before we even begin reading. Although we should know more about the Bible as a result of our reading in this class, we are not reading merely to increase our “Bible knowledge” quotient—in order to be able to win, e.g., “Bible trivia” contests—but rather that we might understand that content, consider its relevance, and ponder the continued significance that has caused it to be preserved.

Furthermore, if it is valid to say that only one or two real geniuses are ever alive at one time, then we read others in order to understand their thoughts, to weigh their insights and suggestions against our own, to appropriate what we find valid and helpful (and what is valid must be helpful, be it ever so disquieting)—in a word, we read because in doing so we have the privilege of studying with great teachers whom we cannot meet or know except through their written words.

On Reading Scripture

Few of us are sufficiently familiar with the content and meaning of the biblical text itself to discuss it profitably. Nor do we have more than a rudimentary understanding of our topic, its issues, and the history of its study; nor are we able to converse in a manner that leads to understanding. We also find it especially difficult to read with a listening ear, and even more challenging to listen to one another so that we actually hear each other. We need more time in the text itself, more time in conversation, and more time in thought before we begin to consider the accumulations of scholarship, much of which is in fact not “secondary” but “tertiary”, in that authors often spend their time interacting with each other, describing and critiquing the views of other scholars, so that the text is often a pretext for bolstering their own view(s). N.B.: This may not reflect their actual method, which may well begin with a text, but the normal mode of presentation consists of an argument with what has been already said. To step into an argument without having ourselves wrestled with the text or idea in question is indeed to “seize a dog by the ears” (a dreadful mixing of metaphors).

This is not to either deny or decry the contributions of academe to our understanding. Monographs, commentaries, articles, papers, dissertations, &c. often offer a great deal of help in understanding what we are reading, and need to be consulted at some stage in our study. That stage, however, comes after we have pondered (not merely glanced at) the text; that stage is the end, not the beginning. Our own study of the text must be the background against which we read the suggestions of those who have gone before us, lest the weight and force of centuries of scholarship becomes blinders that nudge or bludgeon our thinking into *its* channels.

At the same time, we ignore the insights of others at our peril, too easily becoming puffed up with “our” ability to interpret and understand on our own. This is an exceedingly fine and difficult line to walk; we can but try. (This

¹These notes were written for students in courses which I teach; permission is hereby granted to use and distribute them.

conundrum, by the way, is not unique to biblical studies, but rather is common to academe, and is perhaps the main reason that scholars seem to spend their time within the guild seemingly talking only to each other.)

N.B.: These considerations apply, *mutatis mutandis*, to all disciplines, not merely to biblical studies.

Reading in this Course

The first step in understanding any author's thoughts is that we must *want* to understand, which will encourage us to read his or her works actively and attentively, listening carefully in order that we might hear what they are saying *in order* to figure out what they say and mean, so that when we *then* turn to criticism and evaluation we are interacting with their actual thought itself (or, at least, as much of it as we can understand), not merely reacting and rejecting without insight. And we must do both before trying to determine the continuing significance of a passage or idea *for us*. We read them assuming that they are preserved because earlier generations have found them worth passing on, and that they are therefore capable of doing us good (positively or negatively), even if we do not clearly understand what particular good they intend (and even if their particular "good" is evil).

We read not merely for our own benefit, but so that we can ponder what we have read in order to discuss it with our colleagues and friends in a way that increases their understanding and ours. Our goal is not to persuade but to understand, not to teach but to learn, not to exhort but to encourage, not to win arguments but to gain insight, not to attack but to critique, and to do all of this thoughtfully and carefully, in a manner that befits the God who has made and who is redeeming us.

Reading as "Conversation"

Reading is therefore not passively receiving or absorbing someone else's thought, but rather a conversation with someone who just happens not to be physically present. We interact with what we read by asking questions about what it is saying, what it means, what it assumes and implies. The author cannot respond (of course), but our questions can help us test how well we understand what we read, assuring us that that we are hearing what the author wanted to say rather than merely reading ourselves or our circumstance (whether historical, cultural, personal) into it. We constantly ask, e.g., "What does this mean?", "Why does he or she say this (and why does it appear at this point in the argument)?", "Do I agree? Why or why not?" and "How does this fit with what I read in ...?"

This is not arguing for its own sake, or in order to prove our superiority over the author—we are, after all, reading his or her work, which implies that we are his or her student (for the moment, at least).

We *are*, on the other hand, deliberately attending to the author's thoughts so that we follow his or her train of thought. Knowing (in the setting of an academic class) that we will be discussing this passage with our fellow learners does not excuse us from this responsibility; the more carefully we have read and thought about the text before our conversation, the more profitable our contribution to that conversation.

"CONFERENCE"

ALL LEARNING entails three types of conversations—our interacting with what we are reading or studying (see "Reading", above), our own ruminations, and our interaction with others who are reading or studying the same or similar things. Those "others" may be our peers or more experienced learners, The latter are often called "mentors", "teachers", "profs", or the like. When we pursue research, they are called "authors" or "scholars" or (impersonally) "sources".

Discussion is crucial to the process of understanding. When we read by ourselves, we may fool ourselves into validating our own understanding. We may be misled by something that we have heard, or by our own misunderstanding, or by a preconceived notion of what it says. A conversation in which we explain our understanding of the text to our fellow learners helps us overcome these limitations in at least two ways.

First, we hear ourselves say aloud what we may previously have only thought. The simple physical act of voicing and hearing our own thoughts can make us realize their weakness (their strength is for others to assess). Insights that seem bold or wise in our mental "conversations" may reveal their paucity in the open air.

Secondly, setting our reading of the text before others who have also read the same text implicitly invites them to evaluate that reading, which requires humility on both our part and theirs. Furthermore, since we are all seeking to understand this author or idea, they will have formed their own opinions about meaning and significance, which they too will weigh against our contributions and thoughts.

Conversation is a public step toward understanding, in contrast with the private nature of the act of reading; in it we both help others and find ourselves helped by them. Our companions sharpen our understanding by asking what we mean, or if we have thought about this implication or that, or how our conclusions are supported by the text, or whether or not we realize that we just contradicted our own argument of just a moment ago. In an ideal setting, conversation would spill out of the classroom into the hallways and sidewalks, cafés, shoppes, and even athletic fields as we continue to hone our understanding of the matter before us. Life is learning.

Can this sort of conversation happen? Yes. I have participated in many such conversations.² Will it happen for us? Perhaps.

On the other hand, it is far more common for our attempts at conversation to fail. Why does this happen? Let me suggest a few behavioural patterns that tend to destroy genuine conversation of the type that we seek.

1. Speeches & explanations. Many “comments” merely reiterate lessons absorbed from parents, pastors, former teachers, &c. This does not mean that they are wrong or invalid, but rather that repeating something that you “know” rarely helps others, and merely reinforces in our own hearts the value of what we say.

This tendency grows out of the (good) desire to understand the Bible correctly, a desire which, however, tends to lead to the need to instruct and teach—i.e., correct—the rest of the class (or, at least, the previous speaker), based on the assumption that it is “my” responsibility to make sure that everyone gets the “right” answer, and that no “wrong” opinion is allowed to escape unchallenged or unrefuted.

We forget that understanding comes from questioning and more questioning, not by learning “the” answer; we also forget that the best answer to a question is (almost always) another question.

This pattern of thought—that to “converse” means to explain—leads to “comments” or “thoughts” that are really lectures, speeches, sermons, &c., all of which quickly degenerate into harangues that can intimidate others. Nothing kills a conversation quite as effectively as a three-minute speech, especially one delivered out of the strong conviction that one is right.

It also leads to “devotional” statements, or “mini-sermons” (e.g., “So we all need to ...”), to which there is no valid response beyond simple agreement—who can argue against the importance of the ministry of Christ, or the need for faith, prayer, &c.?

All of these end conversation by implying that “This is the way it is”, i.e., by implicitly defying others to disagree or raise further questions, because they implicitly assert the speaker’s authority and right to define what is true.

2. The failure (or, more often, refusal) to read the text as a literary work. We often refuse to try to think *into and through* the text as a text, either because we are satisfied with our understanding (or explanations that we have heard). We therefore have no need to question, probe, or imagine, since we “know what it means”. The last of these—the failure to imagine—destroys any attempt to understand. It often entails reading the story (e.g.) as though our immediate response to what its characters say and do is valid because (it implies) “This is why I would have said/done what he or she did”, with little or no attempt to read with a text-based sympathy; we are not ignorant!

It also reflects the failure (or even refusal) to believe that the details of any text are worthy of our time and thought, even though it is through those details that the text says what it does.³

This reflects an inability to think beyond what one has been taught, and tends to reflect a dichotomous view of things which implies that there is only one valid answer to any question, i.e., the speaker’s.

²As have most people (I suspect), although rarely when we are being intentional—more often when we are arguing about the best screen version of a particular book, or which is a performer’s best CD or song, or the merits of various actors.

³Reading a text in translation, of course, raises questions and leads to observations that may be invalid in light of the original, but this is a problem that we cannot avoid in the case of biblical studies, without requiring Hebrew and Greek of all tutors and students.

3. Quite frankly, some students assume the rôle of teacher because others defer to them; this is a self-reinforcing (and self-validating) cycle that (a) intimidates quieter or more reflective participants; and (b) quashes conversation and therefore the opportunity to learn.

How can we avoid being conversational obstructionists?

1. First, and primarily, by assuming that we are present to learn, not to teach, and that we can and will learn from those around us, whether we respect them (and thus expect to learn from them) or not. This means that we see our selves as Socrates (who recognized his lack of understanding), not as Jesus (who needed no teacher); as fellow disciples, not as rabbis.
Without teachable, humble hearts we will not listen well, and we will not learn. We will only leave the “conversation” convinced of our superiority, with the self-assurance that is the root of folly.
2. By *asking, not telling*.
 - a. Ask open-ended questions about the previous speaker’s question, suggestion, or statement, rather than responding with a statement of our own. The desire to be understood is a far more powerful motivation than we want to admit—we are far, far more concerned that others understand us than we are to understand them. We are convinced that if we can just get them to understand us, they will agree with our point of view. (And then we can move on.)
 - b. Ask open-ended questions that further the conversation, which can include a request for clarification, but—and this is *crucial*—not in order to better prepare our objection, critique, or attack on what they are saying.
 - c. Refuse to answer someone else’s question with anything but a *helpful* question.
3. By rephrasing the previous speaker’s question, thought, observation (&c.), asking them if that is what they meant, or by asking them to say it in some other way. *And then stopping* and letting *someone else* pick up the conversational thread.
4. By thinking about what we say so that every comment/question responds to the previous one. (This will also help us stay “on track”).
5. By being willing to think beyond the surface of the text, to read with sympathy and imagination, to press the boundaries of our own knowledge and understanding (so-called) by asking “What if ...” or “Could it be ...?”

N.B.: None of this is meant to imply that everyone who wants to understand, rather than to explain, argue, or reiterate will come to the same conclusions.

Life in this Classroom

Out of respect for the text and topics, and your fellow learners, please come to class prepared to discuss assigned readings in a thoughtful and helpful manner. Class sessions will consist primarily or solely of conversation between the teacher (the absent author) via his or her text and the learners (who are present).

The classroom is in essence a “sacred space”—a space and time set apart from “ordinary” life—in which we gather in order to help each other understand that which is before us.

This classroom is an absolutely *safe* place because we can say anything as we test our understanding of and ideas about the text(s), and seek to understand (or help others understand) it, knowing that our suggestions and comments will be heard and weighed, and that any critique has as *its only goal* either clarification of what is being said, or a better understanding of the text; we will not be attacked, only supported in our attempt to understand. We assume a hermeneutic of trust, not of suspicion or defensiveness.

This classroom is also an intentionally *dangerous* place: everything that we know or think we know—our interpretations, assumptions, codes of behaviour and conduct, beliefs, &c.—is open to examination, challenge, and reinterpretation.

The kind of conversation I’m interested in is one which you start with a willingness to emerge a slightly different person. It is always an experiment, whose

results are never guaranteed. It involves risk. It's an adventure in which we agree to cook the world together and make it taste less bitter. (Zeldin 2000, 3)

Our goal is to learn to recognize the way things are and to recognize (some of) the limits of and limitations on our understanding, growing in humility before God, each other, and the text.

One goal of this ongoing conversation is to learn to recognize the way things are and to recognize (some of) the limits of and limitations on our understanding, growing in humility before God, each other, and the text.

To say this another way, since **the conversation is the course**, our goal is *think together* about the meaning and significance of the text and, in so doing, learn how to read, think, evaluate, and understand. We will spend some time discussing our own conversations in class, so that we can increase our ability to help each other (and thus ourselves) understand. Above all, I hope that we will learn to ask questions that are “worth knowing”, as Postman and Weingartner suggest:

Part of the process of learning how to learn is the rephrasing, refining and dividing of a worth-knowing question into a series of answerable worth-knowing questions. It is a fact not easily learned (and almost never in school) that the ‘answer’ to a great many questions is ‘merely’ another question. (1969, 68)

In order to pursue these goals, we will use these “conversational rules”, or points of “classroom etiquette”, and any others that the group agrees on. I highly recommend that you read Barr, Zeldin, or both (below).

1. This classroom is a democracy. All voices are equal; any point of view may be raised; any aspect of this course may be discussed, critiqued, changed.
 - a. There are no privileged questions.
 - b. There are no privileged answers.
 - c. There is no privileged voice.
2. This classroom is a *sacred space*, set apart for the consideration of things that matter. Please treat it as such.
3. Be *courteous*; treat others as you would be treated.
4. There will be *no ridicule* of persons, statements, viewpoints, questions, or any other aspect of the conversation. NB: To ridicule is to make another person look ridiculous. This standard does not forbid humour, but rather its use *against* others.
5. *Listen* as you would be heard.
6. *Speak* as you would be spoken to, and about.
7. Be sure that you have *understood* the previous speaker(s). Make sure that you have *heard* their questions and statements, and *respond* as you hope to be answered. This requires listening to others in order to hear and understand what they are saying rather than formulating your response or your next point. This is *extremely difficult*; few achieve it in this life.
8. The purpose of each contribution to the discussion is to *further* the group's *understanding* of the text before us, not to instruct or teach or harangue your classmates. This purpose may create periods of *silence*, because we often need to reflect on what we have heard before responding. Silence is not bad.
9. The discussion will open with a question, which may address an aspect of a text that we have read beforehand, or of something that we read on the spot (e.g., a handout); it will nearly always be tied to a text. Understanding that text is the point of asking the question.
10. **This is *your* class, and *your* education!** If you are frustrated by the conversation, feel free to *pull it back* to the text in question, or to challenge its direction, always remembering the rules of courtesy and timeliness.
11. *No laptops, text-messaging, or cell phones*, unless you are expecting an emergency call. Please tell me before class if this is the case, and put your phone on “silent” or “vibrate” mode. Please leave the room immediately and answer the phone *in the hallway*.
12. Bring a *physical Bible* to class; you may bring a Bible on Kindle® or a PDA, but not one that requires you to be on the internet.
13. *Minimal note-taking*. If you are taking notes, you are not listening. Human beings cannot multi-task. Jotting down thoughts, words, phrases, &c. is okay, as is doodling, if it helps you pay attention.

14. Please use the *bathroom*, get a drink, and so forth, before class begins. We will schedule our *breaks* by common consent, usually one every two hours. Please allow time after class to get to your next *appointment*. Class will end on time.
15. Please, *please be present* and *be on time*. Participation is essential to learning in this course. The rest of us need you (every student) to participate in each class.

These many rules condense into one:

Treat everyone else as you would like to be treated :
in hearing, in thought, in word, in tone, in heart.

Keeping On

Please do not be misled into thinking that this sort of conversation is easy. *It is not*. It's like trying to play the piano, run a marathon, do a *plié*, and sink a free throw ... all at once and without instruction or practice. As we all muddle along together there will come moments—unplanned and unforeseen—when, by the grace of God, “it” happens(!), and then we muddle further; our hope is that the moments of grace increase in number and length so that the periods of muddling decrease and even vanish (for which (I suspect) we await another life). So we are learning to converse by conversing—and, every once in a while, by having a conversation about our conversations. And thus we learn.

RESEARCH

RESEARCH IS another form of “conference”; it is the process of using the wisdom of others to help us think about the question that we ask, primarily those who are unavailable for personal conversation, either because we have no access to them or because they are dead (in which case they are also out of our reach). James Schall talks about “teachers I never met” (1995), i.e., authors whom he has read (e.g., Plato, Aristotle, Aquinas). He adds (quoting Leo Strauss), “We are lucky ... if one or two of the greatest thinkers who ever lived are alive during the same time in which we are alive”.

Here are some of the primary reasons for doing research: (1) to learn things that we would not—could not—otherwise know (e.g., historical data, technical information); (2) to learn what has been said, thought, and dismissed—i.e., to see if there is any support for conclusions that we have reached “on our own” (on the one hand) and to save ourselves from going down blind alleys (on the other); (3) to see what we may have overlooked or taken for granted. And so we turn to others who have wrestled with the same questions that perplex us, to see whether or not their strivings may help our attempt to understand. In other words, we research a question in order to learn from those who have gone before us, *without* letting them do our study and thinking for us.

Research yields information, but writing about it should also interpret, or interact with, it. After all of that digging, what shall we do with what we have uncovered? Thinking through the implications of our research, and its relationship to our discoveries changes a mere chronicle into historiography, or a mere list of opinions into a considered essay (for example).

The issue of research raises at least three further questions: (1) How do we know that we are reading “good” teachers? (2) How do we know when we have done “enough” research? (3) What do we do with the fruits of our research? These are questions, in other words, of quality, quantity, and use.

Quality. How do we know that the “teachers” that we are reading are being genuinely helpful, that they themselves have thought well about the question that has engaged our attention? At first, of course, we do not—in fact, we cannot know this. We are working in the dark, seeking some foothold on which to stand as we try to peer into our own perplexity. And so we often find it helpful to begin by turning to some reference tool(s): a dictionary or encyclopedia,⁴ realizing as we do so that everything that has been written entails the assumptions and prejudices of

⁴Commentaries are not reference works *per se*, but rather a form of secondary or even tertiary scholarship (“tertiary” when they mainly survey or review the work found in other commentaries, and in articles, monographs, &c.). And some “reference” works are really just commentaries in disguise, presenting as objective fact the opinions of their author(s). Nor are

its author(s), so that we need to use these tools with care, trying to see what they assume, what they leave out and do not say, as well as what they explain.

Now this step, which may seem impossible at first glance, is best carried out by reading several reference works and comparing their answers, seeing where they agree and disagree, and attempting to discern the reasons for their disagreements. There is, of course, another resource that will help you get started—your teacher! But he or she has just as many biases as any author; *please* do not assume that her or his recommendations are neutral and “true”.

Simply scanning the shelves in a library will often turn up books that seem to be related to your topic; reading their tables of contents will help you choose those that are more germane. Thus begins the process of reading in earnest, taking notes, checking footnotes for promising articles and books.⁵

In your reading, you will want to be careful to avoid merely reading things from our own time; the “latest” is not necessarily the “best”, and will of necessity assume our own cultural prejudices; reading books from an earlier day—from before, say, the nineteenth century—will at least alert us to the possible errors our contemporaries, and will often suggest approaches that have come to be either assumed or neglected. (See Lewis 1944/1970.) At the very least, reading old(er) works often illuminates the current discussion, since later writers tend to assume that their readers are familiar with those to whom they are responding.

It is also helpful to remember that fashion in scholarship is just as changeable as makeup, hem lengths, and shoe and hair styles. What were “hot topics” in the 1940s or the 1570s may have been overlooked or ignored by previous or following generations of scholars.⁶ Again, a good teacher can offer guidelines for working with and assessing what you discover.

Quantity. How do we know when we are finished? When have we done “enough” research, so that we can now focus on the tasks that are part of any good research paper: organizing, analyzing, critiquing, and synthesizing the information that we have uncovered in our reading?

We may be tempted (or even told) to think about this question in terms of quantity. Course syllabi often include specific directions like “use at least five books and eight articles, no more than three of which can be from the internet”. Some may say that these sources must have been written by “at least five different authors”, or that they must include “at least one source contemporary to the event” (in, e.g., a history course).⁷

It seems that a valid answer to the question of how much is “enough” is that we need to do enough research (NB: *not* “use enough sources”) to be sure that we have realized at least four goals: we are fairly confident that: (1) we have a clear understanding of the question, including its nuances and implications; (2) we have some idea of the history of the discussion surrounding the question; (3) we have gathered enough information and opinion to offer a well-rounded discussion of our own; and (4) we can respond to some of the critique of our (tentative) conclusions.

So the answer to the question of quantity is not a number of sources, but the depth of our understanding. We do not need to track down every book, article, dissertation, thesis, paper (&c.) on our subject. We do need to be sure that we understand the question and what is being (has been) said about it. This is the goal of research.

You may have heard that the main purpose of research is to be sure that you are not merely repeating what someone else has said. Although it may be one purpose of some research, this restriction tends to apply primarily to dissertations, books, and academic papers, not to coursework.

textbooks works of reference; the “information” that they contain tends to be filtered, strained, and homogenized to the point of banality, their pedagogic goal being to communicate that “information” and those “facts” that students need in order to meet certain mandated standards or pass certain standardized tests. (This seems to be more true of textbooks in the humanities than in the “hard” sciences.)

What about the internet? There are many worthwhile on-line resources, although (as with any resource) we need to be cautious about depending on them without checking and double-checking the information that they offer.

⁵Each earlier than the work that refers to it; the “footnote trail” always works chronologically backward.

⁶In the field of Old Testament/Hebrew Bible, for example, the wisdom books (so-called) of Job, Proverbs, and Ecclesiastes were virtually neglected by much of twentieth-century scholarship, only being “re-discovered” beginning in the early 1970s. Furthermore, archaeological data must be used with extreme care, since it is always prone to being reinterpreted in light of what is uncovered by the next shovelful of dirt. And in the field of theology, I recently read an early 17th-century book, in which the author carries on debates of which I am entirely ignorant.

⁷In the field of religious studies (including biblical studies), students may be told that they must include sources hostile to their own faith tradition. This is, of course, a different question.

Even seasoned scholars preparing papers for conferences may discover that their hypotheses reiterate something said tens or hundreds of years ago. There is nothing wrong with this, but it does bring added responsibilities: The author needs: (1) to distinguish his or her “own” conclusions from what was gleaned from others; and (2) to take careful account of any critique of that position, since (if it has been in print for centuries or even decades) there will often have been some further discussion of the issue. To say, “I agree with Plato (Aristotle, Aquinas, Vasari, Delitzsch, Rodin, Brahms, Mendelssohn)” is not an intellectual crime, provided that you have honestly thought (first!) about the question.⁸

Finally, read carefully and thoughtfully, the work of those who have gone before us in exploring “our” question can help us evaluate our own explanations and interpretations—our own “take”—if we are willing to let them critique us by confronting our assumptions, our reasoning, and our conclusions.

Use. What do we do with all of this reading? If we have been taking notes (and I hope that I have), how do we mold them, along with the illustrations that we have gathered into a coherent and cohesive whole? This is a question to which there is no easy answer, because we all take in, think about, and use information in slightly different ways. Some people may have taken notes electronically; some of those will want to print out all their notes, cut them into slips of paper, and arrange them in some sort of logical or chronological order.⁹ This order needs to make sense to us as authors, but it also needs to make sense to our reader(s). And we need to remember that we will rarely be present to explain “what [I] really meant by that”. “Pity the poor reader!”¹⁰

First, those notes may help us organize our own discussion of the question by showing how others have approached it. If, on the other hand, we are working from the basis of an “inductive” essay (below), this will not apply.

Secondly, those notes can provide quotations which we can use in our paper. We must, however, observe four brief rules of quotes: (1) we must be sure that we understand the quotation, and are using it appropriately; (2) we must be sure that the quotation supports or illustrates the point that we are trying to make; and (3) we must not use too many quotations. Our reader(s) are reading in order to learn what *we* think; they are not reading to find out what everyone else said or thought. I have read (and written) far too many papers that consist of nothing but quotations strung together with “Mr Smith says, ...” or “But according to Jones ...”. These are sets of reading notes, not papers. We also need to be sure that we are quoting accurately, and that we provide the proper information about the source of the quotation, so that our reader(s) can refer back to the original to see the quote in its context, or for more information (e.g.).

Furthermore, we need to remember that whether we agree or disagree with someone else’s “take” on an issue, we owe him or her the courtesy entailed by the Second Great Commandment, to “love our neighbour as ourselves” (Lv 19.18b; Mt 22.39). We must represent their views as fairly and honestly as we can, just as we would like our own to be explained by someone else. We must also avoid the arrogance of dismissing their objections and concerns. I have read undergraduate papers which include statements such as “[name] is obviously wrong here, because ...”, when I knew that the student was ignorant of the complexity of the issue, or of the historical background, or of the reasons for the statement that he dismissed in such a cavalier manner (this tends to be a male thing).

But First ... the Need to Reflect

A separate step, however, precedes *any and all* research in this course: the attempt to answer our own question before studying what others have said. This process is, *mutatis mutandis*, what John C. Taylor describes as learning to “define [our] own immediate experience in confronting” the question (in our case):

In the presentation of each of the arts, it has been a guiding premise of the course staff that all study, whether critical or historical, logically begins with the work of

⁸Statements like “[a]fter reaching this conclusion, I became aware of [title of book] by [name of author]” are not unusual in scholarly writing.

⁹On writing academic essays, see Crider 2005; on writing in general, see Trimble 2001.

¹⁰I thought that I first read this plea in a book by William Zinsser, but cannot find the citation; it is, however, the title of an e-book by Charles Haddad, *Pity the Poor Reader: A Pirate’s Manifesto on Writing Well*. (<http://pitythepoorreader.synthasite.com/cover.php>) (accessed 8 January 2013).

art itself. This in no sense means, as becomes clear during the progress of the course, that the study of a work stops with what can be immediately seen or heard. This is only the beginning. But unless the student has become critically aware of and has learned to define his own immediate experience in confronting a work of art, the superstructure of history, critical theories, and other elucidating systems (including those of purely formal analysis) may effectively smother the all-important spark of vitality that separates the meaningful study of art from a routine academic exercise. Seeing, we have found, is sometimes more difficult for the student of art than believing. (Taylor 1981, ix)

Pursuing the thoughts of others before thinking (“seeing”) for ourselves far too often smothers that “spark ... that separates ... meaningful study ... from a routine academic exercise”. Keeping that spark alive and glowing, ready to burst into flame, is our first responsibility if we are to honestly and openly engage the issue.

An “inductive” essay, in which we muse on paper about the question and how we might develop our treatment of it, or which of its aspects might merit exploration, can be a great boon to the process, because it accomplishes several things: (1) it tests our formulation of the question itself, since an essay that “refuses” to be written, or that comes out “half-baked” suggests that we have not (yet) framed the question in a helpful way; (2) it reveals (quickly!) how much or how little we have thought about the issue, since we may run out of things to say after only a few sentences; or (3) it may also reveal that what we think are good ideas are not easily related to each other, and may even be mutually exclusive. It also lets us test our thinking by sharing it with others, although this is helpful only if we are willing to hear their critique.

Finally, the difficult work of thinking long and hard about the question—its formulation (“What is the real point at issue?”), its implications (“What does my question assume or imply?”), and possible answer(s) and their implications—and organizing our thinking in writing *before we begin* our research inoculates us against “falling for” the first explanation that we read. I cannot over-emphasize the importance of this sequence, and have years of students’ testimonies to support it.

At the same time, however, the question that we are asking may require us to do some further reading in order to help us think about our question. We may need to read, e.g., about lexical semantics, biblical poetry, or the “Synoptic problem”; we may need to study and compare several works of art portraying the same scene. The work of art in question could be visual (two- or three-dimensional), aural (music, drama), literary (drama, poetry, narration), architectural, &c. We may need to read about pedagogy, literary criticism or narrative or poetic theory, or theories of translation; we may need to read something on the history of doctrine or of hermeneutics.

This is where a good teacher will be helpful, pointing us toward works that will help us think more clearly about our question. It may also turn into research that feeds into the final form of our writing, but *at this point*—in the beginning of our work, its main purpose is to help us understand our own question by locating it within a larger theoretical “frame”.

Once we have this sort of frame, we can reflect on our question from a position of some knowledge, and we can begin to write about and research it with some greater confidence.

When we pursue the step of research, we enter a larger conversation, a conversation with others who have thought about the same question, and we often discover that they have approached it with different biases and assumptions, have reached different conclusions, and have drawn different implications. So we need to read their works asking the same questions that we do of the original text (above), as well as some additional questions: “What prior argument(s) is this author assuming?”, “What prior argument(s) is he or she responding to?”, and “How does this line of evidence (logic, &c.) stack up against what I have read and thought to this point?”

PROJECTS/ASSIGNMENTS

THE MAIN FUNCTION of an assignment is to offer you an opportunity to reflect on some aspect of our reading and conversation—or some thought(s) that may have sparked by those readings or conversations, whether the readings were assigned or the conversations took place in class—in a manner and medium that you find enjoyable and helpful.

Unless explicitly stated otherwise, you are free to complete your assignments in nearly any way you can imagine.¹¹ Your work needs to relate to or address some aspect of the course—some question, issue, reading, or topic, even the course itself or its pedagogy—in a way that helps you think further about it, and that will be helpful (you hope) to anyone else who interacts with your project. The one requirement is that it be accompanied by a written statement that explains what you are trying to accomplish, and how your work realizes that goal.

You can pursue a project on your own, or in a team with one or two classmates. If you would like to work in a group larger than three students, please *consult with me first*, so that we can consider the logistics of your project.

Assignments/Projects: Some Examples

You may work in the medium of your choice (words, paint, photograph(s), drama, literature (prose, poetry), music, dance, physical (3-D) model, CGI model, &c.). Here are a few examples that may help you think about this.

1. A brief instrumental composition, “Sigh”, which he recorded it with his garage band, and submitted as an mp3 file, along with a brief essay (c. 250 words) relating it to our discussion of the book of Ecclesiastes. (The Hebrew word usually rendered “vanity” actually means “breath” or “vapour”).
2. A board game, complete with spinner, path, markers, and “hevel cards”, based on the book of Ecclesiastes and a brief essay (c. 350 words) explaining how it was shaped [sic] by Ecclesiastes.
3. Three students wrote three skits based on individual sayings from the biblical book of Proverbs, which they then acted out, filmed, edited (added titles, credits, music, &c.), and submitted. There was no need for additional writing, since the skits were directly based on the texts.
4. The next several examples come from a seminar on “Bible Translation”
 - a. Three students watched the film *Lost in Translation* (two had seen it before—all watched it for the project). All three then wrote brief essays (c. 500 words) on some aspect of the film in light of our conversations about translation. They shared their essays with each other, and each wrote a brief response (250-300 words) to the other two essays, and got together to discuss the film and what they had written. Each student then wrote a response to the other two responses in light of their conversation; they collated all of their writing, along with a brief description of their conversation and turned in the result. At each stage, they cited materials that we had read as part of the course.
 - b. Three different “versions” (translations) of a biblical text, one “interlinear”, one “literal”, and one “free”, along with a paper explaining the philosophy that he had used for each, as well as explaining specific translational choices that he had made.
 - c. A comparison of three different published versions of a biblical text that analyzed their differences, evaluated them in light of the (Hebrew) text, and explained each one’s philosophy of translation.
 - d. Two students worked together to describe and compare the Hebrew, Greek, and Latin (Vulgate) versions of a biblical passage (one had studied Latin, the other had studied Greek, both had studied Hebrew).
 - e. A paper outlining a philosophy of translation, complete with a list of “rules” for translation, that he attempted to apply to a biblical text, along with an analysis of what “worked” and what did not.
 - f. An extensive essay on a novelist’s success in “translating” the experience of African-American women in North America, which then gave them a “voice” so that they could feel that they were being heard. She then compared this to the power—the vindication—that comes with having the Bible in one’s own language.
5. A dramatic monologue based on the epistle to Philemon, which she memorized and performed while a fellow student videotaped her. She then edited it, adding titles, &c.
6. Lengthy poems (or several brief ones) about questions or issues raised by the course.

N.B.: This kind of project is very difficult—sincerity and emotion rarely produce good poetry. Poetry that is worth reading (i.e., poems that do not merely spill emotions onto the page) requires thought; most of these have required a good deal of “back and forth” while we worked together to strengthen the poems beyond the merely devotional or soul-baring.
7. A student cut and glued coloured construction paper into exquisite pictures illustrating some principle, poem, or story that we had read. She included a brief explanation of the colours, design, &c.

¹¹Some, however, may be specific, e.g., “Please write an essay in response to our conversation about ...”, or “Please prepare a brief bibliography relevant to [this] topic/question/conversation”.

N.B.: Other students downloaded Sunday School pictures, which they then coloured with highlighters or crayons. This is *not* acceptable.

8. Essays compared Veggie Tale “Bible stories” to the biblical text and discussed how the videos changed the content and theology (“point”) of the stories. Her research then asked why we tell stories, and how changing the form of a story can change its subject and its point.
9. A series of fairly large, non-representational paintings, which he tried to explain in writing; “tried”, because words were not his gift, and I am rather obtuse when it comes to abstract art. Although I thought that his attempts were sincere, they were not as helpful as (he and) I had hoped. Like a well-written essay, works of art ought to encourage us viewers (or hearers, in the case of music) to reflect on what they portray or describe. (I realize that not everyone shares my prejudice.) See the *caveat* about poetry (#6 above).
10. A student read a number of works on poetic theory and criticism, and then wrote a paper on how reading the Beatitudes (Mt 5) as a poem (i.e., rather than as theological or moral “message”) affected her understanding of them.
11. A number of students created collages by clipping images and words out of magazines and gluing them together to create large posters along with mini-essays that discussed the relationship between the images and the biblical passages.
12. A brief series of Sunday School lessons dealing with biblical passages that we had read (some of which we had discussed).
13. For a course in linguistics, a student analyzed the previous month of text messages, looking at the relative frequency of words, syntax, the use of abbreviations (&c.), in order to see in “texted English” was really a different “language”.
14. A student in a class on poetry assigned a colour to a poem and then relate that colour to the poem’s form and content. No artwork was involved, although her extraordinary artistic talent probably encouraged her to think about the poems in this way.
15. A student examined a number of musical settings of a (non-poetic) biblical text, composed one himself, and asked others to listen to them and discuss their responses; he then reviewed their responses in light of some of the findings of psycho-acoustics.
16. A student composed a chorale (SATB) and recorded it in a midi-file.
17. A student composed four pieces of chamber music; his research could be on the use of music to portray (biblical) events, or on how different settings of a biblical text (e.g., the Beatitudes, a psalm) change our perception of and response to that text.
18. Students have written short stories, dramatic monologues, and short plays based on (built around) a biblical narrative, parable, poem, and even (once) a genealogy.
19. Students have written a series of letters to and from biblical characters.
20. A student wrote a series of papers on the “gender of God”, investigating in turn: (1) biblical references; (2) cultural implications; and (3) further avenues for possible reflection and research.
21. A student wrote a paper analyzing the architecture and art of a local church, asking what the architecture symbolized, and how it related to that congregation’s life and ministry.

Many of these could also be the result of a small group working together, each member contributing according to his or her strength (although I would prefer well-integrated “product”, since group projects can easily end up as mere “collections” of individual projects, none of which relate directly to the others. This could easily have been the case for #4 (above), but they wove together their final discussion, so that the initial papers and responses served more as appendices to, or illustrations of, the actual essay.

Nor do you need to present something with which you agree. You may choose to investigate a question or issue or text from the “other side” (or “another” side) in order to figure out how well you understand it, or simply to see how well you can play the devil’s advocate. And in doing this you may well come to think differently!

The *how* of an assignment does not matter nearly as much as its *what*. What is most important is that whatever is turned in demonstrate some depth of thought and consideration, and show how the project relates to or is inspired by the material of the course.

Research Projects

Can any of the above become, or be part of, a research project? Of course! The word “research” does not mean WOA (“Words Only Allowed”).

For example, if you create one or more paintings or drawings illustrating a biblical parable, proverb, story, psalm prophecy, or metaphor (&c.), you could research its interpretation (via commentaries, monographs, articles), or its cultural, ethnic, geo-political aspects of its background (via the same tools, but also encyclopediae, dictionaries, &c.), and incorporate your findings into a second “edition” of the artwork, or into a brief commentary on the artwork.

And many of these types of projects could be combined; you could visit, e.g., the Philadelphia Museum of Art, study works related to persons or events in the material of this course, and write a paper of art criticism, comparing the works to each other and to the biblical text. Or you could visit the University of Pennsylvania Museum of Archaeology and Anthropology for ancient Near Eastern artifacts, and discuss their relationship to and implications for understanding the text; or the Academy of Natural Science to see how they explain the origin of life (relative to, e.g., Gn 1); or the Kimmel Center for a performance of “The Planets”, by Gustav Holst (relative to, e.g., Gn 1, Ps 104, Jb 38). One of the advantages of studying so near a great city is its plethora of opportunities for pursuing your interests.

Or you could look for literature (poems, novels, short stories) based on biblical texts or themes (ideas, &c.), such as comparing poems or sonnets on the incarnation by, e.g., Herbert, Donne, Rossetti, and Updike (*Seven Stanzas at Easter*), and other poems on the same theme with 1 Cor 15 (or with your own poem), or even with psalms of lament.

Some questions and topics, of course, require such specialized knowledge that we cannot investigate or hope to answer them. A valid treatment of translation style or theory requires some degree of fluency in at least two languages, preferably in the language(s) to be discussed;¹² detailed analysis of “biblical” art (e.g., of events or parables) assumes that we know something about art and art history;¹³ interpretive questions that hinge on the language(s) involved require a degree of familiarity with that language as well as with at least some of the rules of hermeneutics; and so forth.

At the same time, however, we may have time to read enough basic material on a subject to allow us to discuss it with some validity.

WRITING

YOU MAY PREFER words to music, art, drama, &c., and so want to write an essay or research paper. And (especially) if you are considering graduate school, you will need to learn to produce written work that meets the standards of academe. (Whether or not those standards are reasonable, realistic, or even worth consideration is not the point here, although I would be happy to discuss that with you, if you like.)

Papers are not a “teacher’s revenge”, but an opportunity to strengthen your ability to apply what we study. Writing is “thinking on paper” (Howard & Barton 1986, *title*); furthermore, as thought made visible, it can help us think more carefully.

Writing is a further step in gaining insight into the text; conversation sharpens our ability to hear our own thoughts, writing lets us *see* them as they appear on paper [screen] in front of us. Writing helps us see whether or not we really understand something (and how well we understand it) by enabling us to present our understanding in more detail and with greater precision than conversation affords; it is a mechanically slower process of self-expression. (See “On Writing”, below).

¹²A paper that uses commentaries based on the original language of a text (whether or not that text is biblical) cannot evaluate the interpretive suggestions of those commentaries, unless we know those languages well enough to be able to assess the validity of their claims. Lacking this knowledge, we can only “prefer” one reading or another—either because it conforms to or supports what we already think, or because it agrees with what we have been told by some other source. The ability to work in this way is sometimes called “controlling one’s sources” (a phrase that can also refer to the use of appropriate “authorities” and sources).

¹³In a researched paper, a statement such as “I like this painting (illumination, &c.) because ...” is only valid as a starting or ending point—a note of personal explanation as to why we chose it. An analytical discussion requires the language (terminology) appropriate to analysis of its subject.

One purpose of writing is to “think [further] on paper” (Howard & Barton 1986). Writing helps us learn (Zinsser 1988), since trying to express our thoughts in writing reveals how much [or how little] we understand, and forces us to try to make sense out of our thinking. Ideas that sound brilliant in casual conversation or the shower can be thin and weak in print,¹⁴ and this weakness becomes more obvious when we read our own words (fuzzy thinking yields fuzzy writing); the clarity of our written words is directly proportionate to how well we understand what we are trying to say. By writing we become more “exact” men and women (Bacon). Good writing requires discipline, because good writing, like clear thought, is hard work. Writing is:

... an intellectual activity, not a bundle of skills. Writing proceeds from thinking. To achieve good prose styles, writers must work through intellectual issues, not merely acquire mechanical techniques (Thomas & Turner 1994, 3).

Writing is therefore a tool by which we can gain some degree of insight into the text. Just as conversation can sharpen our ability to listen to and hear others’ thoughts as well as our own, writing lets us *see* our thinking as it appears on the paper or screen. Writing helps us see whether or not we really understand something (and how well we understand it) by enabling us to present our understanding in more detail and with greater precision than conversation affords; it is a mechanically slower process of self-expression.

Furthermore, because we usually write in order to share our thoughts, we tend to write more carefully than we speak, seeking to say what we mean as clearly and concisely as possible. Knowing that our papers—essays (below)—will be read by someone else also encourages precision and care, and, when that person has had more experience and spent more time studying the same texts, we realize that we are submitting our papers so that he or she can critique and thereby help us evaluate the validity of our thoughts and their felicity of expression.

This brings up the idea of our audience: for whom do we write?

It is strongly tempting to think of writing papers “for the teacher” (“my [insert name of prof *here*] paper”) or “for the course” (“my [insert name of course *here*] paper”) or—and this is even more inimical to writing well—for a grade. This is deadly to good writing because it makes the production of the paper the goal; to fulfill the assignment by writing the requisite number of words or pages (along with other requirements and expectations) becomes the purpose of the entire project. Our involvement is thus reduced to our ability to produce something, rather than growing out of our emotional and intellectual involvement with a question. Only the latter than fosters the best writing, because this emotional and intellectual involvement brings all of the resources of our person to bear on the task.¹⁵

Our writing will also improve when we write something that we would like to share with, e.g., classmates, colleagues, friends, and relatives; all the better if we aim to produce work that would be suitable as a writing sample when applying for a scholarship, fellowship, job, opportunity for further study, &c.

Writing well is *such hard work* that we ought to think about how we can make our time, effort, and energy pay off as broadly as possible. Good writers always write with an audience in mind, often specific people, but this is not the same as thinking of a paper as something that “I have to write for Dr So-and-so”, unless you can think of your paper as part of an ongoing conversation with your teacher: your paper continues or opens the conversation, the prof’s comments are his or her response, and you can then ask for a conference to discuss both the paper and the faculty member’s response to it.

Essays or Research?

Writing for some courses consists of *essays*—relatively brief, inductive, textually-based explorations of the meaning and significance of an idea contained in, or arising from, the text, or the attempt to explain an enigmatic or unclear passage.

¹⁴The special effects of layout and typeface offered by the computer can mask poverty of thought, since everything *looks* so good.

One cure for this is to print out what we have written in plain text and then read it aloud—preferably to someone else—before submitting it. Often more embarrassing, but even more helpful, is to ask *them* to read it to *us*.

¹⁵I feel the need to add that this sort of temptation is not limited to students. Scholars want other scholars (especially those whose opinions they respect) to endorse their opinions and scholarship, and so are tempted to write what will prove popular; faculty want their books to sell, and often need to publish for tenure or promotion.

What is an essay? The “... personal essay is a most creative form of human expression when it comes to reaching out to the reader. It is natural, authentic, and unique, and it cannot be easily faked, like a poem or a story. When read aloud, an essay touches our emotions directly and makes us think more clearly.”¹⁶ It may help to think of an essay as an “attempt” (the French verb from which the word comes, *essayer*, means “to try” or “attempt”) to understand something by thinking about it more carefully than we tend to do when musing about it to ourselves or discussing it casually with friends. They are thus not an exercise in “spilling one’s brain” onto the paper or keyboard—a good essay invites someone else into a conversation by showing that your topic deserves their consideration and attention because you have taken the time to consider how to approach it in a way that is helpful.

Their relative brevity (c. 350 – 550 words) does not imply that they are unimportant, or that they can be written quickly or easily. Length does not necessarily correspond to excellence, but is determined by the number of words needed to address/explore the topic. And most written work—papers, books, articles—can be shortened by 20-25% without too much pain; even people who have done a lot of writing find that reading their work aloud to someone else quickly reveals things that (1) aren’t needed; or (2) aren’t clear; or (3) don’t fit their context, and that can therefore be deleted. It is not easy, of course, to change what we have done; it is especially difficult to delete entire sentences or paragraphs. This surgery is, however, very often necessary for two reasons: (1) it helps your paper say what you want to say; and (2) it helps your reader by reducing the number of words that he or she has to read, and by (it is to be hoped) clarifying and streamlining your work.

Essays are not research papers (and so *no secondary sources* are allowed; your “bibliography” should consist of a list of the primary texts that you used to write your paper, such as “Joshua”, “Isaiah”, “Abraham Lincoln’s Second Inaugural Address”, the *Iliad*, “James”, “Matthew”, or “Augustine’s *Confessions*”).¹⁷

At the same time, however, they are *not* “response” papers, in which you merely react to, or report your impressions of, the text, but rather thoughtful attempts to extend your understanding of the meaning and significance of the text in a way that allows you to evaluate the relative validity of your interpretation.

Other courses entail finding answers to questions that cannot be answered by merely reflecting on the text—questions of fact (e.g., “How wide was the Jabbok?” or “What evidence is there that Paul was or was not married?”) and opinion (e.g., “How does my thinking about [this issue/question] compare to the conclusions of the world of biblical scholarship?”). Our approach to research papers entails two steps:

1. When you are satisfied that you are addressing a question that is “worth knowing” (Postman & Weingartner) or that “really matters” (Gatto), write an **inductive** study of a passage, text, question, &c. that has arisen during the course of the term; these may come directly from the text in question (e.g., Ecclesiastes 7.1-3; Matthew 5.48; “Pathedy of Manners”), from issues raised by conversations in or outside class, from something that you have read in response to, or in pursuing, some issue or idea raised in your mind by something related to the subject of the course, whether general or particular. When you send this to me I will respond by raising questions about both content and presentation (i.e., grammar), suggesting avenues to pursue, &c.

N.B.: This “edition” is entirely inductive, with no outside sources apart from those used in the course itself (e.g., lexica, concordances, assigned or suggested readings).

2. Then write a **researched** study of the same question, passage (&c.), based on further reading which you have done. This second edition can be (and has been) presented in various ways: (1) as a “supplement” or appendix to your inductive paper; (2) as a series of interjected paragraphs (often visually or typographically distinct) or footnotes that offer, e.g., comments on, quotations about, corrections or other perspectives on, points in your first “edition”; (3) as an entirely rewritten/revised “edition” of the first paper, incorporating your research into the “flow” of the whole. (There may be other formats as well, such as parallel columns.) You may begin researching your question as soon as you turn in the first edition.

(Further, below.)

¹⁶James Finn Cotter; downloaded from <http://www.morec.com/schall/chestert.htm> (accessed 3.iii.MMIX).

¹⁷Looking up definitions in a dictionary or comparing different translations of a passage of a text is not research in the traditional sense.

Purposes

Essays for this course have at least four purposes:

1. They allow you to identify and pursue a topic that interests you, a question about which you would like to think further, or some other subject that arises out of the text;
2. They will help you learn to identify and frame questions that are raised by and about the text in your reading of it;
3. They afford you opportunity to explore in more depth something mentioned in our discussion(s), or something raised in subsequent conversation(s); and
4. They develop your ability to explore the meaning and significance (or implications) of an aspect of the text.

Your *goal* in writing ought to be to **reflect thoughtfully** on the text in a way that **helps someone else understand** it, and **encourages** them to **think** about it. In light of this goal, your *responsibilities* are several, *viz.*:

1. to choose a topic or question by discerning and addressing a question raised by the text itself, or to explore the meaning and significance of issues raised or addressed by the text of the particular book;
2. to study the passage or work in which it is addressed, and think about their meaning and its implications;
3. to suggest an interpretation (meaning) and the significance and implication(s) of that interpretation;
4. and, finally, to do all of this in a way that *helps your readers* think about the question, and encourages them to continue to think about it after finishing your essay.

Some Mechanics for Papers

Format	MSWord (preferred) or rich text format (filename.rtf). Word count is important due to the volume of papers that I have to read; margins, spacing, and font size are not, since I read them on screen.
Submission	as e-mail attachments to fred.putnam@gmail.com only.
Font style	Please use a “normal” font for <i>text</i> (i.e., Times New Roman, Goudy Old Style, Bookman Antiqua), to be reasonably certain that my program will recognize it; you may use any font you like for titles, subtitles, your name, &c., recognizing that they may not appear the same when I read them.
Bibliography	Include a list of the resources that you used, which should always include both primary and secondary texts. Some assignments may limit your resources to texts read for this course and primary reference works (encyclopediae, lexica, concordances, theological dictionaries, &c.).
Comments	In responding to your papers I use two functions of MSWord: (1) “comment” (“alt-I” > “m”) and (2) “track changes” (“alt-T” > “t”). Comments appear in “balloons” in the right margin; changes or corrections will be in the text itself, with automatically generated notes (also in the right margin) that identify what was changed.
Referring to the Bible	<p>The Psalter</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none"> a. When referring to the book or to a particular psalm with its number, use capital “P”, for example: “The book of Psalms ...” or “In Psalm 34 ...” b. When referring to psalms as a <i>genre</i> or to a <i>particular psalm</i>, but <i>not</i> by number, use lower-case “p”, for example: “... as we see in this psalm, ...” or “When reading a psalm, ...” or “The poetry of the psalms ...” c. The word “Psalter”, an alternative title for the book, is always capitalized; it is never used with a numeral to indicate a specific psalm, for example: “In the Psalter, ...” or “... as we find at the end of the Psalter”, <i>but not</i> “Psalter 35”. d. When referring to an individual psalm with its number, use the singular, not the name of the book, for example: “Psalm 128”, not “Psalms 128”. This is the only biblical book to which this rule applies. e. At the beginning of a sentence, write out the word “Psalm” or “Psalms” (“Psalm 98 calls the

reader to join creation ...”); within a sentence, feel free to abbreviate as “Ps” (“As in Ps 87.1, so also in Ps 136.4, ...”) or “Pss”, to refer to more than one psalm, for example: “In Pss 34, 35, and 42, ...”, or “... as in both Ps 36.2 and Ps 48.12”).

This sounds complicated and overly-technical; it is, however, a great help to your reader(s), who will expect you to follow this format.

The above rules do not apply to, e.g., the book of Proverbs. Each proverb is still called “Proverbs 3.12” (not “Proverb [singular] 3.12”).

Other Biblical Books

1. Please use abbreviations for the names of books.
2. The last book of the Bible is either “The Revelation” or “Revelation” or “The Apocalypse”, not “Revelations” (i.e., it is singular, not plural).
3. If you refer to an epistle, you will need to be careful to distinguish (for your readers’ sake), e.g., the people of city of Rome from the Roman Christians to whom Paul was writing, and both from the *epistle to the Romans*; all three are called “Romans”, but they are not the same.

Evaluating Your Work

Clarity, thoughtfulness, and textual fidelity are the touchstones. Here is a brief list of the sorts of questions that determine the validity and value of a paper:

Does it say something meaningful about [some aspect of] the text or question? Does it help the reader understand the text more fully? Does the paper show that its author has thought about and understands his or her topic? Is it textually based and textually (and contextually) valid? Does it accord with the way that things are, in both the text and life? Is it clear and easy to read? Is the main argument set forth clearly, pursued logically, supported textually?

If this is a research paper, does it use appropriate resources, and use them well—fairly and in a way that furthers the point of the paper? Does it treat other authors well? Does it summarize positions accurately?

Every well-written, thoughtful text raises questions in the mind of the careful or thoughtful and engaged reader; this what we mean when we call something “thoughtful” or “thought-provoking”. Some questions are factual or informational, e.g., “What does ‘nomism’ mean?” or “Where is Persia in relation to Judah?”, and can be answered, more or less, by a reference work (e.g., *The Oxford Companion to Philosophy*, an atlas); questions such as these are not the bases of essays or other forms of extended thought. Other questions, however, *are* worth pondering, or thinking about on paper, e.g., “Why does the author say, ‘A wise king winnows evil with his eyes?’”, “What does Job mean when he says that his friends are like a treacherous wadi?”, or “Why does the poet compare the blessed/happy man to a fruitful tree and the wicked to chaff?”, or “What do we mean by ‘literal meaning?’” This means that we are trying to let the text that we are reading raise questions in our minds, questions that arise *out of that text*, whether or not the text itself suggests how we might go about discovering an answer.

To answer the question about trees and chaff (for example) “textually and contextually” means that we cannot merely consider the differences between trees and chaff, but need to be sure that we understand (1) how they are being used [what they mean] in Ps 1.3 and 4, respectively, and how “tree” and “chaff” support and help create the message/meaning of Ps 1. There are obvious differences between trees and chaff; we want to know which of those differences the psalmist has in view, as evidenced by the text of Ps 1, as well as the significance of those differences. This means that we are not free merely to “make up” or “invent” answers based on our experience or instinct or other “response”, but rather that we are trying to understand what *this author* means by saying *these things* in *this text* in *this way*—it is not, i.e., a time for “I think” or “I feel” or “It seems to me”, but rather a time for “he says” and “this means” and “therefore”.

1. Does your paper address a *textual question*? I.e., would your fellow students, or some other reader, recognize the question as coming from that passage (movie, song, play, &c.)?
2. Is that question *worth knowing*? And have you determined the *answerable* “worth knowing” questions that an answer to the main question requires? If you are not sure what this means, or how to answer it, please read the chapter “What’s Worth Knowing” in Postman & Weingartner 1969.

3. Is your paper *well-rounded* and *resonant*? Does it explore the text beyond the superficial level reading so that it avoids a merely *prima facie* “answer”?
4. Does your paper have a *clear point of view*? If you argue for a particular interpretation, are you kind and thoughtful toward other positions, so that their proponents would feel understood and well-used? If you argue two sides (or more), are they all “equally” supported (or, e.g., is one a straw man for the other)?
5. Is your paper *well-organized*? I.e., are its organization and structure clear?
6. Are your arguments *compelling*, and do the examples *support* your points? Do your textual arguments use the text in accord with its content and genre?

Warning! If you find yourself using words like “obviously”, “no doubt”, “clearly”, “surely”, “certainly”, &c., please stop and check the textual or logical support of what you are saying, because your point will almost never be obvious or clear, sure or certain, and will nearly always deserve as much doubt as possible. [This is also a good warning to keep in mind when reading, e.g., any text.]

7. Are your observations and conclusions *valid*? I.e., do they accord with the way that things are, in both the text and life?
8. Is your paper *thoughtful*? I.e., does it say something worth reading, something worth thinking about?
9. Is your paper *helpful*? I.e., does it help the reader understand the text more fully?
10. Is your paper *interesting*? I.e., does it compel the reader’s attention, involve the reader in the search for understanding?
11. Is your paper *well-said*? I.e., are its grammar, syntax, and vocabulary appropriate to the question that it addresses and the nature of the answer that it suggests? N.B.: This is not a way to sneak in the expectation of “standard English”, but rather a question about clarity of expression (word choice, sentence structure, grammar, &c.) and thought (logical, well-structured, appropriate, &c.).
12. Are other authors represented accurately, and treated fairly and with respect?
13. Are *quotations* apt and accurately cited (i.e., are they valid)?
14. Are *quotations* properly referenced?

Plagiarism

To plagiarize is “[T]o steal or purloin and pass off as one’s own (ideas, writings, etc., of another)” (*Webster’s New Collegiate Dictionary* 1953). Plagiarism is theft. Not putting the definition above within quotation marks, not crediting Webster’s dictionary (via the text note)—in other words, using someone else’s material without giving that person credit. Other forms of plagiarism include mixing unmarked quotations with your own words and putting a single reference at the end of the paragraph, buying a paper from a term paper service (from any source, including one of those online), turning in a paper written by a student who already took the course, or getting someone else to write your paper. If in doubt, ask someone—me or another professor *before* turning it in!

Any paper containing plagiarized material will not count toward your grade. You may appeal to the faculty, who could forgive you, or discipline you further by, e.g., directing me to fail you for the course. Many schools permanently expel first-time plagiarizers. Outside academe, you could be sued. I know a minister who lost his position for plagiarizing on-line sermons. (Please see the university’s *Student Handbook* for further information.)

My Paper Just Came Back: Now What?

Papers are an attempt to think (see “On Writing” in the course syllabus); one of my responsibilities as a faculty member is to try to help you think more clearly by expressing your thoughts more cogently, eliminating jargon, illogic, mere appeals to authority, and unneeded words, while encouraging you toward clarity and (even) elegance. My goal is to make sure that your writing says what you mean, and that it says it well.

Returned papers therefore tend to be speckled with blue and pink cross-outs, insertions, corrections, and comments (just blue on hard copies). You are free to ignore or respond to these as you will. None are mandatory, nor do I track what you do differently (or not) from one paper to the next. You may resubmit a paper as many times

as you want; I will review it as often as you send it to me, until we are both satisfied that it is ready. Occasionally a paper comes back with few marks or none. This does not mean that it is perfect, merely that I didn't see anything that required correction (and I am far from infallible—read anything that I've written!).

Papers are not graded. Despite all the rubrics no one really knows why one paper gets or “deserves” an A- and another a B+ (a difference of as little as 0.1% that factors into a staggering difference in cumulative gpa). Nor (to bash the point a little more) can “A” (or even “A++”) possibly mean “Improvement Impossible”.

Marks on returned papers address three main aspects of your writing, which are not differentiated by their colour or location (in text, in margin, and end of paper). And individual marginal comments may contain more than one type, depending on what you said, how you said it, and how my synapses were firing.

Corrections & Suggestions

It is not true that “anything goes”; a paper filled with typos and other sorts of errors quickly becomes both tiring and annoying to read. I will probably correct (1-2) and make suggestions about (4-6) several aspects of your papers.

1. *Grammar & spelling*: “it’s for its” (and *vice versa*), “may/might”, maintaining the same tense in a historical summary. These tend to reflect “well-formed” English, as it has come to be defined by, e.g., Strunk & White, *Elements of Style*, or Fowler, *Modern English Usage*, both of which I highly recommend (a dictionary is also helpful).
2. *Facts*: “David was Israel’s first king” (it was Saul); “Psalm 73.4 says” (it was Psalm 73.2).
3. *Syntax*: This usually consists of my guess at the meaning of a sentence or clause, and usually has a comment such as “I don’t know what this means”, sometimes followed by one or more suggested interpretations. The text may be “corrected”, but this is usually my attempt to figure out what it is saying.
4. *Logic*: I am trying to determine if the conclusion (following, e.g., “therefore”, “and so”, or preceding “because”) logically follows the premise, or if the evidence adduced supports the conclusion. I find it fairly often necessary to ask, “Where/How does the text support/suggest this?”
5. *Lexicon*: I may suggest different words in quotes with (!), and sometimes even explain why.
6. *Form/”Style”*: These too are based loosely on Strunk & White or Fowler (I try to suppress my idiosyncrasies), most are attempts to clarify the meaning of the text, and might address a clause, sentence, or word.

I do not want to change your paper’s “tone” or “voice”—it is, after all, your paper, and I am not trying to make you imitate me. So if you find yourself saying, “I just wouldn’t say it that way”, you might want to check a dictionary or manual of usage or style, and then “To your own self be true” (Polonius to Laertes, *Hamlet* I.ii).

Comments/Discussion

I often comment on points in papers (via MSWord’s “insert comment” feature), and confess that I can get carried away into more-or-less extended discussions of various points, along with questions about the content of the paper itself, the meaning of the [biblical] text that the paper is discussing, or ideas that your paper raises. These are signs that something you said either sparked a train of thought, raised some question or doubt, or anything else that might happen in a conversation. I am “talking” to you about your paper, the text, or the idea that is at hand. I do try to credit insights by saying “Good thought” or the like, but I fear that I don’t always succeed.

On the other hand, I may not comment much, if at all, especially if your paper is largely a first-person narrative or family story (e.g.), since there is usually little that I can say apart from “Sounds like fun!” or “I’m sorry to hear this”.

Finally, *I do not make intentionally sarcastic, rude, or nasty comments*, nor do I ask rhetorical questions, offer “advice” in the form of put-downs, or try to “score points” by being “clever”. Please trust that this is true, and if anything seems to violate this rule, *call me on it immediately*. I try to keep all papers on my hard drive through the course, and so have them available, with my comments, for discussion. My hope is your success and satisfaction. I look forward to learning from and discussing what you have written.

GRADING

ALTHOUGH NOT USED until the late eighteenth century, grades are now embedded in academe. Record-keeping computers are voracious, and require a steady diet of grades so that they can compute the numbers that are used to represent your “learning”. Their appetite for numbers and letters—the desire for “objectivity”—is encouraged by accrediting and licensing agencies and state departments of education, as well as by the admissions offices of graduate schools, by professional accrediting agencies and licensing boards, and by the Office of Financial Aid. The name of this particular game is “Grading”.

Why Grades?

Although grades as we know them now seem integral to academic life, grading itself (both percentages and letters) is relatively recent, coming to the States only in the late 18th and early 19th centuries.¹⁸ Grades¹⁹ are, of course, inevitable, whether they are formal (recorded by a registrar on a transcript) or informal. Everyone in a Sumerian scribal school or Plato’s “Academy” would have known who the best and worst students were, just as first-graders know almost instantly what it means to be labeled a “Giraffe”, “Elephant”, or “Donkey”, or “red”, “blue”, or “yellow”.

Nor is grading confined to academe; your life and work will be watched and weighed, examined and evaluated, formally or informally, by everyone around you all the time. This includes your boss and coworkers, your children, your neighbour(s), your parishioners (if you are a “professional” “minister”); it also includes our personal self-evaluation—you have probably said more than once “I really blew that one” or “I worked hard and it shows”. Numbers or clauses like “fails to meet/meets/exceeds expectations” replace the familiar A, B, C, D, F, and they tend to be called “performance ratings” or “annual evaluations” rather than “grades”.

Assigning value to things seems to be an aspect of being human, whether those things are cars, schools, hot dogs, friends, someone’s performance (our own or others’), or nearly any other aspect of reality. A formal grading system is simply an attempt to standardize the results of that natural and oft-informal human process.

“A student’s grade represents the extent to which the student has accomplished the goals of the course”. This sentence, found in syllabi, on transcripts, and in the academic section of student handbooks, would be even better if it were true. As you may suspect, it is not.

Students who learn a lot may well receive a grade lower (even much lower) than someone else who did not learn as much. A student who has excelled may be taking an exam (50% of the grade for the course) while sick or in the throes of dealing with bad news, or right after having broken up with a significant other, or having worked all night, or just before or after taking another such exam. To compare their performance on a test with that of a student who takes the test without any trauma beyond wondering how well he or she will do on the test is as unjust as expecting every student to do his or her best on any “standardized” test, which by definition cannot take account of individual strengths and weaknesses, learning styles, level of interest, commitment, &c.

A grade is, therefore, a more-or-less arbitrary assignment of value based on idiosyncratic standards; it may or may not be competitive (i.e., a paper can be compared to other students’ work or it can be compared to some standard external to the particular group of students via, e.g., a “rubric” (below)). It is random because the teacher or professor chose the questions, their format and order, their weight, and the value of the exam (quiz, paper) toward the grade for the course. A faculty member (or testing agency) may point to years of “consistent” results in order to validate a particular assignment or examination or grading system. Consistency, however, is just what we should expect from a standard procedure applied to consecutive, roughly similar groups (twenty years of seventh-graders or first-year graduate students). Consistency of results does not validate the process or its outcome.²⁰

Furthermore, what is the real difference between a paper graded “87.9%” and one graded “88.0%”? Can the teacher even tell, two weeks after returning the graded papers? And when a “B” (88.0%) and a “B-” (87.9%) turns into 3 and 2.7 points, respectively, on the standard four-point gpa scale, a difference of 0.1% becomes one of 10% (2.7/3) that will affect the student’s gpa, which determines in turn such “important” statistics as class rank, and

¹⁸For a brief survey of the beginnings of “grades” as we know them, see Durm 1993.

¹⁹The word “grade” comes from the Latin noun *gradus*, or “step”; cf., e.g., “graduation”, “gradual(ly)”, “graduated” (referring to a container that is marked (“stepped off”) for quantity, such as a measuring cup or a graduated lab cylinder).

²⁰This conclusion might encourage us to question the validity of any standardized test results.

eligibility for academic scholarships or membership in various honour societies (which may in turn affect a student's finances or employment).

This ought to lead us to ask, "Where is justice?" (Although I fear that it never does, and any such question raised by a student tends to be brushed off as whining by faculty. And I say this to our shame.)

Despite their random and arbitrary nature, however, admissions offices want standards by which to determine which applicants are more likely to complete their programs, licensing agencies want the assurance that students have learned what the agencies want them to know (and to know how well they have learned it), parents want the reassurance that their money is being well-spent, and schools want "objective criteria" by which to determine whether or not students are eligible for continued financial aid or have fulfilled the requirements of their degree program.

Learning Style

It is often helpful to understand how we learn, since this allows us to tailor our study patterns to our learning style. I highly recommend a website that many students have found helpful; it offers a free "quiz" designed to discover and explain your learning style.: <http://www.vark-learn.com/english/page.asp?p=questionnaire> (cut and paste into your browser). It offers concise hints that should help you understand why you learn some things more easily than others.

N.B. Having a particular learning style is *not* an excuse for doing or avoiding certain types of work.

Self-assessment

What shall we do with this situation in which we find ourselves? We can become cynical, dismissing grades as worthless irrelevancies, an attitude that lasts until we can't get a job or a scholarship or into the grad school of our choice. We can become absorbed with beating the system, working as hard as we can in order to "accomplish the goals of the course", and we may succeed, getting "straight As" or a 4.0 gpa. What then? What purpose do grades serve once we are out of school or in a career, and what have we sacrificed for the sake of a grade which neither we nor anyone else will remember or care about in five or six years?

And if we are in school to learn (not to "get good grades"), what is the relationship between learning and grades? Do grades tell us how much we have learned, or how well we have learned it? To answer this question we must first know what it means to learn, which is a question almost entirely distinct from that of evaluation and grading.

In this course, you and I will together determine how to reflect the extent and quality of your work over the term. We will do this by using the rubrics (below) *as guides*, and then compare and discuss our evaluations, although only you can apply the rubric on "preparation" to your own work. You have a significant voice in your final grade for the course, although I am assigned the responsibility of actually deciding upon and recording the grade itself.

On Rubrics²¹

The term "rubric" is educationese for a grid that (in theory) helps a teacher grade papers and general performance with some degree of consistency.

Below you will find three rubrics—preparation, participation, writing, each with six columns, headed "Grade" and "A" through "F". Columns headed "B" and "D" are intentionally blank. The columns "A", "C", and "F" are filled in in order to describe what that grade looks like for that aspect of the course; you should infer that "B" and "D" fit between them (e.g., "D" might mean "rarely"—between "occasionally" and "not [at all]" or "none").

²¹The word "rubric" originally referred to red earth or clay in Latin; the term was then used for letters written in red ink (think: "ruby") that marked the beginning of a section of a manuscript or directions to the congregation in books of prayer, (to distinguish them from the words that are to be read aloud). It was first applied to education in general by Mel Grubb, *Using Holistic Evaluation* (Encino: Glenco Pub. Co., Inc., 1981).

N.B.: These rubrics are for *your* use; *do not turn them in*. They are not absolute standards; merely suggestions that offer some guidance for your self-assessment. Use them as guides.

“Never” in these statements does not mean 0%, nor does “always” mean 100%; they are merely to help you think about the *pattern* of your engagement with and involvement in the course.

No one can be 100% prepared for every class or think through every possible implication of every word before he or she says it. We might even ask what “fully prepared” might mean: can anyone be *fully* prepared for anything? Can a person have read and thought through everything that might possibly have some (any!) bearing on the issue at hand? Obviously not.

On the other hand, it is easy to imagine someone not thinking about the material of the class until he or she walks through the door of the room; or who zones out for the entire hour, sleeping or dreaming with his or her eyes open; or who forgets the discussion once class ends.

Feel free to use plusses and minuses (e.g., “D-,” “C+,” “B-”). Remember that the self-assessment that leads to grading yourself is an attempt to “take sober account” of “how well” you have done in this course.

If any of this is not clear, please ask, remembering that your schooling to this point—regardless of what point that is—has taught you at least three lessons with regard to grading: (1) that your first and main responsibility is to please the person at the front of the room; (2) that he or she is the only person competent to tell you how well you have done (something); and (3) that you cannot trust your own judgment. You have been taught, above all, to acquiesce to whatever you are told.

The function of high school, then, is not so much to communicate knowledge as to oblige children finally to accept the grading system as a measure of their inner excellence. And a function of the self-destructive process in American education is to make them willing to accept not their own, but a variety of other standards, like a grading system, for measuring themselves. . . . (Jules Henry; quoted in Derrick Jensen 2004, 69)

FURTHER READING²²**On Study**

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*Postman, Neil, & Michael Weingartner

1969 *Teaching as a Subversive Activity*. New York: Delta.

Schall, James V., S.J.

2000 *A Student's Guide to Liberal Learning*. Wilmington: ISI.

1995 "On the Mystery of Teachers I Never Met", in *Modern Age: A Quarterly Review* 37 (Summer), 366-73.

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1998 *The Intellectual Life: Its Spirit, Conditions, Methods*. Foreword by James V. Schall, S.J. Washington: CUA.

Strauss, Leo

1968 "What Is Liberal Education?", in *Liberalism: Ancient and Modern*. New York: Basic Books.

Taylor, Joshua C.

1981 *Learning to Look: A Handbook for the Visual Arts*. Second edition. Chicago: U. of Chicago/Phoenix.

On Conversation

*Barr, Stringfellow

n.d. "Notes on Dialogue", together with notes by Frederic Clarke Putnam and Ali Schwab. (available from me; Barr's original essay is available at www.sjca.edu).

*Strong, Michael

1997 *The Habit of Thought: From Socratic Seminars to Socratic Practice*. Chapel Hill: New View.

*Zeldin, Theodore

2000 *Conversation: How Talk Can Change Our Lives*. London: The Harvill Press.

On Writing

Brann, Eva

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*Crider, Scott E.

2005 *The Office of Assertion: An Art of Rhetoric for the Academic Essay*. Wilmington: ISI.

Howard, V. A., & J. H. Barton

1988 *Thinking on Paper*. New York: Harper Perennial.

²²Works marked (*) are good starting points.

Thomas, Francis-Noël, and Mark Turner

1994 *Clear and Simple as the Truth: Writing Classic Prose*. Princeton: Princeton U.

Strunk, William, Jr, & E. B. White

2000 *The Elements of Style*. Fourth edition. Needham Heights: Allyn & Bacon.

*Trimble, John R.

2001 *Writing with Style: Conversations on the Art of Writing*. Third edition. New York: Prentice Hall.

Zinsser, William

1988 *Writing to Learn: How to Write—and Think—Clearly about Any Subject at All*. New York: Harper.

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Durm, Mark W.

1993 “An A is Not an A is Not an A: A History of Grading”, in *The Educational Forum* 57.

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On Reading

Jacobs, Alan

2011 *The Pleasures of Reading in an Age of Distraction*. New York: Oxford.

Lewis, C. S.

*1944 “Introduction” to Athanasius, *On the Incarnation*, translated by Sister Penelope Lawson. Crestwood: SVS Press. Reprinted as “On the Reading of Old Books” in *God in the Dock: Essays on Theology and Ethics*. Edited by Walter Hooper. Grand Rapids: Wm. B. Eerdmans, 1970, pp. 200-207.

*Jensen, Derrick

2004 *Walking on Water: Reading, Writing, and Revolution*. White River Junction: Chelsea Green. (Includes a chapter on grades and grading.)

On Education

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*1996 *The End of Education: Redefining the Value of School*. New York: Vintage.

1993 *Technopoly: The Surrender of Culture to Technology*. New York: Vintage.

2000 *Building a Bridge to the 18th Century: How the Past Can Improve Our Future*. New York: Vintage.

Also see Jensen 2004, Kohn 1999, Postman & Weingartner 1969 (above).

APPENDICES

A: RUBRIC ON PREPARATION

Grade:	A	B	C	D	F
General	I came to class well-prepared, having read the material and thought about it (at least a little), and ready to discuss it.		I was “in the middle”—sometimes prepared, sometimes not; I occasionally reviewed a reading assignment before class; I was not so interested in learning as in passing the course.		I was usually unprepared; I did not try to prepare for the course as a whole, or for individual classes
Reading	I completed all of the reading assignments on time; I thought about the content while reading; I kept notes while I was reading; I pursued ideas by looking up and reading other works.		I completed most reading assignments, but often by a combination of reading and “skimming”; I sometimes considered what the author might have meant; I occasionally jotted a note or question.		I did not do any reading for this course <i>or</i> I passed my eyes over the page (so I could say I “read” it), but without thinking about, reflecting on, or retaining any of what I “read”
Discussion	I came to class prepared to discuss the text(s) that were assigned		I occasionally found something worth discussing in the text		I was not prepared to discuss the reading (which I had not done)
Value	My reading helped me contribute to the conversation		Some of my comments related to what I had read		There was no connection between the assigned reading and my comments (if any)
Follow-up	I often returned to the passage after class in order to check up or follow up on something that had been said		Once or twice I looked up something that I thought I had seen in the text		I didn’t read the text before or after class
Prayer	I regularly prayed for my classmates, our tutor, our conversation, and our growth in understanding		I occasionally prayed for some aspect of our class		I didn’t think of the class beyond the classroom

B: RUBRIC ON PARTICIPATION

Grade:	A	B	C	D	F
Amount	I contributed regularly to the discussion, I was mentally involved and focused, even when I was silent.		I contributed occasionally to the discussion		I did not contribute to the discussion; I did not answer any questions; The conversation was not affected by my presence.
Quality	I thought carefully about what I was going to say, and tried to consider my comments and questions before speaking; My comments and questions were helpful, not argumentative or domineering, and helped move all of us toward the goal of understanding the text.		Some of my comments were thought-out, some were merely blurted out without thinking; I'm afraid that I said things that were less than helpful—jokes, attacks on others.		My remarks were sarcastic, teasing, or otherwise snide comments on other students, their ideas and views, or on the class as a whole
Listening	I tried to use my comments to be sure that I was hearing and understanding others in the class		I occasionally tried to be sure that I had heard what others had to say		I didn't really try to follow the discussion; I was more concerned to speak my piece than to listen to what others had to say.
Relevance	My contributions were relevant to the text or topic and to the point being discussed when I made them		Some of my comments related to the text or topic; some were random or unrelated		I wasn't concerned about relating to the conversation
Value (Helpfulness)	My comments helped move the conversation closer to our goal of understanding; My comments helped keep the discussion focused and on track.		Some of my comments proved to be helpful (although I wasn't always sure why); My comments occasionally distracted others or sidetracked the conversation.		My remarks did not help us understand what we were considering (text, question, idea, problem)
Non-verbal	I was physically responsive (body language) to others and their comments		I tended to drift in and out of the conversation		I didn't care about what the class was discussing or who was saying what, and I didn't care if everyone else knew it

C: RUBRIC ON WRITING

Grade:	A	B	C	D	F
Question	The question addressed by my essay rises out of the text (movie, piece of music, work of art, &c.)? Anyone reading my essay would see the question in the text		The question addressed by my essay were more-or-less related to the text (&c.), but the relationship is neither obvious nor necessary.		I wrote about whatever I wanted, without paying attention to the text (&c.).
Point of View	My point of view is obvious and clearly stated		My point of view can be figured out by a careful (and patient!) reader		I do not have a point of view—I just write
Arguments	My arguments, evidences, and logic support the point(s) My essay develops [uses] the text in order to answer the question It uses the text in accord with its genre; Although I present a particular reading or interpretation (point of view (above)), I try to consider arguments and evidence that might critique or undermine it; When I discuss two (or more) approaches to understanding the topic, I try to do so equably (no “straw men”).		My arguments and evidences are often not directly related to my conclusions; My essay mentions the text It notes the genre of the text, but I’m not sure that it really deals with this; I rarely consider other possible readings or points of view; When I consider other ways to read the text, I may or may not represent them fairly.		I can’t tell if my arguments really prove my point; My essay does not interact with the text; It ignores the genre of the text; I do not consider other possible readings or points of view.
Organization	My essay is well-organized, with a clear sequence of thought from one point to another, and from introduction to conclusion		My essay has some structure, but it may not be obvious or clear		My essay is pretty random; I’m not worried about structure
Thought	My essay is thoughtful: it explores the meaning of the text and its greater significance in order to lead the reader to reflect on the question		My essay mainly deals with the surface of the text All of my essays end up in the right place: “God” or “Jesus”		My essay is pretty superficial I just write; I don’t really think about the topic
Creativity	My essay is creative: it approaches the question in a way that will interest the reader and foster his or her desire to think about the issue more carefully		My essay is cut-and-dried; it’s the reader’s job to be interested I tend to use clichés and trite or pious sayings		My essay is predictable and—to be honest—pretty boring
Language	My essays are well-written Their vocabulary, grammar, syntax, and (style) are appropriate I tested their diction by reading them aloud or by getting a friend to read or listen to them		I think they sound okay I ran spell-check, but nothing beyond that		What’s style? I just typed and turned them in
Value	My essay will help readers think about the issue that it addresses; Writing this essay helped me think more carefully or deeply about the issue: I learned by writing it.		My essay may or may not help someone; I’m not sure how to evaluate this; Writing this essay gave me some ideas about the issue.		I’d be surprised if my essay helps anyone—my goal was to get it done; It didn’t help me.

SELF-ASSESSMENT
Required of all students for all courses

Please email this form to fred.putnam@gmail.com
before the last day of final exams.

Your name:

Course:

Grade (letter grades only, please):

Rationale (what you considered when giving yourself this grade):

Four or five things that you consider significant that you learned in, through, because of, or despite this course.

1.

2.

3.

4.

5.
