

Academic Writing: Bridging the Gap

Dr Gareth Leyshon 17/9/2001

Introduction

As a seminarian, you will be expected to write essays, and to aim for high academic standards in doing so. The seminary sets out certain expectations, but for those unfamiliar with the art of academic writing, there is a gap between the two areas where guidance is given. This note should help you bridge that gap.

Mind the Gap

Firstly, the seminary reminds you¹ of a moral requirement: plagiarism must be avoided at all costs! Plagiarism is the passing-off of someone else's ideas as if they were your own. Clearly you cannot write an essay without drawing on the wisdom of those who have gone before - but in the limited space of 2000 words you want to minimise the text spent regurgitating someone else's ideas and give the maximum rein to your own conclusions: indeed, one of the criteria for a first-class mark² is "the capacity to formulate some well-sustained personal and original views of the issues involved".

Secondly, the seminary has a "house style"³ - a certain word-processor layout you are expected to use for your essays, and a particular way of listing the books in the bibliography at the end of the essay. The rules explain how to use quotations in the text (whether to use "quotation marks" or to use a separate indented paragraph) and state that references can be made using footnotes, endnotes, or "Harvard Style" notes in the text. (Most learned journals also have a "house style", and in academia you have to learn to present the work in the correct format for whichever publication you hope will transmit your *magnum opus* to the world!)

What none of the official texts provide, is any example of how to write concisely, avoiding plagiarism by using the correct citation style yet without wasting too many of your precious, rationed, words. Avoiding plagiarism does NOT mean writing out longhand:

¹ BTh Programme Handbook, Section 5.3, Page 4, Paragraph 6.

² BTh Programme Handbook, Section 5.1, Page 24.

³ BTh Programme Handbook, Section 5.3, Pages 4-8.

"Einstein claimed that nothing goes faster than light in his seminal 1927 paper but Tom, Dick and Harry disagreed with him...." - unless of course you want to highlight this fact because it is the central core of a history essay.

Quoting Without Quoting

The key to writing concise and original essays is to spend as little content as possible in reminding your reader - in the context of an assessed essay, someone who knows more than you about the subject - of what (s)he already knows. Never quote a source verbatim when you can summarise the idea that the quote would convey; and never explain directly facts that only need be referred to obliquely. Not only does this rein in the word-count, it also helps highlight which are the key concepts within your essay.

To avoid charges of plagiarism, it is sufficient that the key idea⁴ is clearly labelled with a footnote: it is not necessary to name the source document or author in the main text. Of course, sometimes the flow of the argument or good English style might require the author or text to be named: "Most students would like additional weekends off,⁵ but according to Bradley,⁶ regular retreats are essential."

Traditionally, academic texts are written in the passive voice. This means avoiding constructions like "Bradley says retreats are essential" in favour of "It has been argued by Bradley that retreats are essential" - or, if there is no strong need to highlight Bradley's role in this context, simply "It has been argued⁷ that retreats are essential."

The Art of Inexactitude

Often you need to refer to someone else's idea but you cannot pin down a particular paragraph which expresses the concept. This isn't a problem! If you need to refer to an idea which emerges from text spread over several pages or a whole chapter or book, don't worry. Conventions exist for dealing with this.

⁴ This is where you might mark the key idea in this sentence!

⁵ D. Mason, *Secrets of a Senior Student*, 265.

⁶ G. Bradley, *Collected Recollections*, 74.

⁷ Thus relegating Bradley to a footnote at this point, and thus out of the word count.

A specific sentence might be found in "J. Sherrington, *Moral Theology Made Easy*, 23". If your source is spread over two pages, use the italic letter "f." which means *following page*, e.g. "J. How, *Epistemology for Those Who Know Not*, 47f." For ideas spread over several pages, use "ff.", thus: "A. Milner, *Introduction to Scripture for Engineers*, 104ff.". If the concept suffuses a whole chapter, article, or book, use *passim* instead of a page number: "E. O'Shea, *Sixty Years and Counting*, Chapter 8, *passim*" or even "K. Haggerty, *My Life as a Rector, passim*".

It can also happen that you have adapted an argument found elsewhere for your own purposes. In this case, failure to cite the source would be plagiarism, yet a plain citation would suggest that the original part of your idea originated elsewhere. In this case the abbreviation "cf." is used, from the Latin for "compare": see the next footnote for an example.

"There are many things not written in this book ..." ⁸

The criteria⁹ for a first or upper-second class require the student to prove some knowledge of the wider debate in the field. Again, a 2000 word essay is just too short to rehearse the arguments of all the scholars whose work you have surveyed. On the other hand, you need to indicate somehow that you are aware of their contributions. Again, there are conventions which allow you to do this concisely.

If your line of argument reaches a broadly similar (interim or final) conclusion to someone else, *but you have not drawn on - and so cited - that person's work in your chain of argument*, you can refer to this person prefixed by "so", e.g.: "from the historical evidence it appears that Bishops became distinct from Presbyters in the 3rd century (so Barratt¹⁰)."

If your line of argument (or a source which you are summarising) clearly refutes the published argument of a scholar, you can acknowledge the defeated rival's work by using "*contra*" in the same way as "so". If your own conclusions (or source material) are still challenged or nuanced by other published work, this can be acknowledged by using "but see".

⁸ Cf. John 21:25.

⁹ BTh Programme Handbook, Section 5.1, Page 24.

¹⁰ A. Barratt, *Orders in the Early Church*, 101.

Other material which has a tangential connection to your essay but where the connection needs more explanation are best acknowledged using footnotes which can explain the connection, while being tucked away at the bottom of the page. This is a key reason why footnotes are preferred to endnotes (inconveniently several pages away) or textnotes (which clutter up the text and distract from the key argument you want to draw attention to, while inflating word counts).

A Sample Text

The text which follows on the next page has been written to demonstrate all the conventions listed above. Needless to say, all the books "cited" in it do not actually exist, and while based on real characters, a certain liberty has been taken to aid academic understanding.

Sample Text - for Illustrative Purposes Only!

St John's Seminary Staff - An Academic Description

The professors at St John's Seminary have before them the task of educating the next generation of Catholic priests for England and Wales. Its Rector operates an "open door" policy¹¹ for media requests to film on site, and wisdom has been proven right by her actions¹² (*contra* Strange¹³). The many activities undertaken by its students in the local community have been well-documented.¹⁴

Since the seminary celebrated the 100th anniversary of its presence at Wonersh,¹⁵ there have been various staff changes; the local opinion is that a healthy turnover keeps the community vibrant (so Ratzinger¹⁶). Among current personnel, the Professor of Scripture holds a definite view on whether there was a distinct author of the so-called Third Isaiah,¹⁷ while Fr Gerard Bradley, Director of Spirituality, takes as his motto, "Behold, I do all things badly!"¹⁸

¹¹ K. Haggerty, *My Life as a Rector*, 433ff.

¹² Cf. Matthew 11:19.

¹³ R. Strange, *Why Camera Crews Are Not Always Welcome in the Beda*, 27.

¹⁴ D. Morris, *Wonersh Pastoral Work Log*, Volumes 1-8, *passim*.

¹⁵ K. Haggerty, *ibid.*, 264f.; for a fuller history see E. O'Shea, *Sixty Years and Counting*, *passim*.

¹⁶ J. Ratzinger, *How the Vatican Would Like to Run Seminaries*, 53.

¹⁷ A. Milner, *On the Major Prophets*, 318; but see A. Graffy, *Ideas on Isaiah*, 849, for an alternative view.

¹⁸ G. Bradley, *Collected Recollections*, 22.

Further Reading

This document should give you enough guidelines to begin to write concise and clear academic essays. There are many professional texts and style manuals which give much more guidance in this area: some can be found in the Reference section of the seminary library (on the same shelf as the Liturgical Books), and borrowable books on academic writing exist at Dewey number 001, which can be found in the end-cabinet adjacent to the Pastoral (251-255) bay.

Relevant handouts and notes produced in the seminary include:

"Coursework Presentation" - ed. J. Sherrington, 2000

"Improving Writing" - J. How, 2000

"Researching and Writing Essays" - A. Milner, 1999

In addition, the B.Th. course manual contains information on the approved presentation format for degree material.

This document, contrary to good practice, contains no Bibliography! Of course, all texts referred to prior to this section are fictitious, except for Scripture and the B.Th. handbook.

Dr G. Leyshon, 17/9/2001