



Critical Writing Skills *Some Quick Pointers*

1. Make a case

When you are asked a question offer an argument for your particular response. This is sometimes called persuasive writing. The reader wants to know clearly what you think about the given issue and the primary sources and scholarship you are engaging. Imagine you are arguing a case in a court of law or in the pub with some skeptical friends!

2. Always answer the question directly

This is particularly important in a short response paper. If in any doubt, simply ask yourself, 'does this paragraph directly address the question?' If not, delete it!

3. Offer no additional words

Apply a ruthless editorial eye to your work. If what you are saying adds nothing new to the argument you are making, delete it. One more illustration illustrates nothing new, it just annoys the reader!

4. Define your terms

If the question contains words that need clarification (e.g. eschatology) then claim the understanding you want for those words by defining them concisely. Do not be afraid to be very direct: e.g. 'in this essay I will utilize a narrow definition of eschatology as the ethical eschatology that seeks an end to the present socio-economic order'.

5. Substantiate your points

Support the points of your argument with evidence. This can be from primary sources (e.g. biblical texts) or from the secondary reading you are looking at or other material. Anecdotes from your own experience or life can be helpful but they do not substantiate your case as directly as the scholarship and sources you are being asked to deliberate on.

6. Engage the texts

Avoid the temptation of making your essays book reports. Do not spend time telling your reader what the reader can read for themselves (e.g. what Isaiah or N. T. Wright think). Rather, tell your reader what you think of what you have read by offering a critical analysis rather than a description of primary sources and scholarship.

7. Answer your own questions

Don't leave a series of rhetorical questions hanging in an essay. If you pose a question in your writing then offer an answer. Don't leave the reader guessing.

8. Leave no room for doubt

That is not a theological hope, it is a principle of academic writing! Never leave your reader in any doubt as to what your answer is to a particular question set or what your case is in response to reading or discussion. The best way to be sure is to know what you want to say before you start saying/writing it. Don't think that you will arrive upon an answer by meandering toward it. You won't; you will lose the reader along the way.



SCHOOL FOR MINISTRY
The Episcopal Diocese of San Diego

9. Trust your ability as a theologian

Your readers want to know what you think. Don't be afraid to assert yourself as a thinker. Often, you will find that your first instinctive answer to something has a great deal of merit. Do not dismiss it out of any fear of 'being wrong'. As Nicholas Lash, former Chair of Divinity at Cambridge University said, 'there is no such thing as an expert theologian'.

Edition: 2/14 - 1
Simon Mainwaring, PhD
Dean of Studies
simon.standrewspb@gmail.com