WRITING THE THEOLOGICAL ESSAY WELL

Starting Points

Adapted from Chapter 4 of Writing Theology Well: A Rhetoric for Theological and Biblical Writers, Lucretia B. Yaghjian
WHAT IS AN ESSAY?

• The essay is a purposeful prose composition on a particular subject, with a structure that is divisible into a beginning, middle and end, written for a specific audience in a style appropriate to that audience.
WHY DO PEOPLE WRITE ESSAYS?

• The essay forms
• “the basic structure for making sense to others” on paper.”

Howard and Barton, *Thinking on Paper*
WHAT ARE THE TRADITIONAL ESSAY STYLES?

• The personal essay
• The formal essay
• The academic essay
THE PERSONAL ESSAY

• Michel de Montaigne— the author as amateur, the essay as “an attempt” (essais)

• “I am offering my own human thoughts as human thoughts to be considered on their own, not as things established by God’s ordinance, incapable of being doubted or challenged; they are matters of opinion not of faith; what I reason out secundum me, not what I believe secundum Deum . . . in a lay not a clerical manner but always deeply devout.” —“On Prayer,” in Essais, 1580
Francis Bacon – the author as “authority”:

“Read not to contradict and confute; nor to believe and take for granted; nor to find talk and discourse; but to weigh and consider. Some books are to be tasted, others to be swallowed, and some to be chewed and digested; that is, some books are to be read only in parts, others to be read, but not curiously; and some few to be read wholly, and with diligence and attention.”

-- “Of Studies,” Essays, 1597
THE ACADEMIC ESSAY

• JOHN LOCKE – the author as philosopher
• “First, I shall inquire into the original of those ideas, notions, or whatever else you please to call them, which a man observes. Secondly, I shall endeavor to show what knowledge the understanding hath by those ideas . . . Thirdly, I shall make some inquiry into the nature and grounds of faith . . . whereby I mean that assent which we give to any proposition as true . . .

An Essay Concerning Human Understanding, 1689
WHAT IS A THEOLOGICAL ESSAY?

- PAUL TILLICH first defined the genre:
- A theological essay is an extended theological reflection or argument that deals with one question, problem or situation.
- In contrast, the theological “summa” deals with “all actual and potential problems, and the theological “system” deals with “a group of problems in a particular situation.”

*Systematic Theology, Vol. 1, 1951*
WHY DO THEOLOGIANS WRITE ESSAYS?

• GORDON KAUFMAN identifies two purposes and corresponding essay styles:

  • Theologians write expository essays to explain/elucidate theological subject matter.

  • Theologians write constructive theological essays to critique inadequate theologies and construct more adequate contemporary theologies.

*Essay on Theological Method, 1995*
WRITING THE THEOLOGICAL ESSAY IN FOUR STEPS

• Theological Summary (WTW 65-66)

• Theological Book Review (WTW 68-70)

• Theological Critique/Critical Essay (WTW 70-71)

• Constructive Theological Essay (WTW 71-79)
A summary digests and condenses a source text in one’s own words.

Summaries are used in reading reports, reviews of research, book reviews, and theological and biblical research papers.

A good summary should paraphrase the thesis/claim, supporting points, and conclusion of the source text clearly, coherently, and concisely.
WRITING THE THEOLOGICAL BOOK REVIEW

• A book review *summarizes* and *critiques* a recent or otherwise relevant text.

• A good book review should include
  ― a brief *summary* of the text’s narrative or key points
  ― a well-documented *critique* of the strengths and weaknesses of the book
  ― a concluding critical assessment of the text, from the reviewer’s perspective.
WRITING THE CRITICAL THEOLOGICAL ESSAY OR THEOLOGICAL CRITIQUE

• The *critical theological essay* critiques a theological author, text, issue, or position.

• It includes a *problematic*, exposition of the problematic, *criticism*, and *interpretation*.

• A *theological critique* focuses on interpretive analysis of a theologian and his/her work.
FROM “CRITICAL” TO “CONSTRUCTIVE” THEOLOGICAL ESSAYS

• “Systematic theology is not a historical discipline; it is a constructive task [that] tries to give us an interpretation of the Christian message which is relevant to the present situation.”
  
  --Paul Tillich (1951)

• “Theology [is] primarily an activity of construction . . . of a conception or picture of God, of human life, and of the world.”

CONSTRUCTING A THEOLOGICAL POSITION: FOUR ELEMENTS

• Exercise of the theological imagination
• Critical, reflective conceptualization
• Horizontal dialogue and mutual criticism of positions
• Drawing out consequences of the position for Christian praxis/spirituality

See Roger Haight, *Dynamics of Theology*, 207-212 in Course Documents/handout.
WRITING THE CONSTRUCTIVE THEOLOGICAL ESSAY

- The *constructive theological essay* is an essay in which one constructs a theological position in writing by
  - Identifying the theological question/thesis
  - Establishing a theological correlation with the Christian tradition *and/or*
  - Engaging a dialogue of critical suspicion
  - Completing the theological construction

I am indebted to EDS Prof. Christopher Duraisingh for permission to adapt his constructive theological essay assignment in *Writing Theology Well*, 77-79.
“A novel has a story, a poem rhyme; but what art can the essayist use in these short lengths of prose to sting us wide awake? He [or she] must know how to write.”

• Write about what matters to you, or it won’t matter to your readers.
• Write from the strengths of your own style and voice.
• Provide a preliminary “map” of your essay to make it reader-friendly.
• Write simply, for “the essay . . . least calls for . . . long words” (Woolf).
WRITING THE THEOLOGICAL ESSAY: CONCLUDING CHECKPOINTS (II)

• Write precisely, using language that is “exact”, not sloppy.
• Write truthfully, for “Truth will give it authority” (Woolf).
• Write coherently and connect the parts of your essay.
• Revise your writing until you get it right.
“The instructor said,
Go home and write
A page tonight.
And let that page come out of you.
Then, it will be true.”

Thus begins Langston Hughes’ poem, “Theme for English B” (in Course Documents /handout).

After reading his poem, which is also an essay in miniature, please write your own response to this assignment in a theological essay-poem of your own. (You may submit it as next week’s Theological Memo if you wish.)