

Kinds of Writing Assignments

Students at Claremont, especially at the Master's level, can expect to encounter at least four different types of writing assignments. I categorize these broadly as thesis based essays, reflection papers, exegesis papers, and unique assignments. Before we look at each of these separately, I must issue the following warning: understand and follow the instructions given by specific professors for specific assignments. Professors often ask for specific features in certain papers, such as title page or no title page, parenthetical references or footnotes, or a supplied outline that is to be followed. Carefully read and adhere to the instructions given by the professor, keeping in mind that the most common reason for a poor grade on a paper is not following the professor's instructions.

Thesis based essays are the most common writing assignments. Thesis based essays have many purposes. Two of the more common tasks are to analyze a text (such as letter written by a sixteenth century Jesuit missionary in China) or to describe an idea (such as how Marjorie Suchocki understands the doctrine of sin). It is important to keep in mind that in such writing tasks the professor often does not want to know your opinion on the topic. Rather, the professor wants you to closely analyze what the text says (often following a provided formula such as "how does X understand Z and why does X understand it that way) or describe how a particular person understands a particular idea. The goal of such assignments is to demonstrate your ability to understand and explain clearly the texts or ideas of others. The opportunity to explain your own ideas will come later. The professors often want students to learn a format and style that is acceptable in the field (i.e. theology, biblical studies, history) before the students begin expressing their own theological, biblical, or historical opinions.

Such thesis-based essays usually follow a common pattern. First, a brief introduction includes a clearly stated thesis (even if it is merely descriptive). Then, each section of the essay is introduced with a topic sentence clearly stating the topic of the section. Finally, a concise summary concludes the essay. Often very strict guidelines in terms of topic, number of pages, and notation style (parenthetical or footnote) are also provided by the professor.

Reflection papers are a much looser form of writing than thesis based essays. In a reflection paper, a professor wants you to write about your ideas as you reflect on an assigned topic or text. As long as your reflections are directly related to the assigned topic or text, you are pretty much free to write whatever you want, but always keep in mind that someone will have to read what you have written. Reflection does not mean stream of consciousness. Basic conventions of form, style, and rhetoric still apply.

Exegesis is a technical form of writing in biblical studies. Generally speaking, exegesis is the disciplined examination of various aspects of a (usually biblical) text in order to determine the meaning of the text. Often each professor has specific guidelines for exegesis papers in terms of both content and outline, especially at the introductory level. In spite of the wide range of preferences and emphases in exegetical writing, there are some common characteristics in most exegesis papers. For example, exegesis papers do not always have a clearly stated thesis in the introduction. They tend to be organized by level of inquiry starting with textual issues, moving to literary and historical/cultural issues, and ending with theological issues. Each paragraph or section of the exegesis paper looks at the given text (called a pericope) through a different lens.

For example, one paragraph might examine the meaning of specific words in the pericope, the next might focus on a specific literary device (repetition, for example), the next might focus on a specific historical event that the pericope mentions. Each of these paragraphs (or sections in a longer paper) attempts to pull meaning from the pericope by examining it in a specific way or from a specific perspective. Rather than summary conclusions, exegesis papers tend to have conclusions which tie together the significant points of the essay to provide a somewhat unified meaning, interpretation, or application of the pericope to a specific context. That context might be the context of the original author(s) or redactor(s), or some contemporary context.

Unique assignments are those for which the professor gives specific instructions in terms of style or outline/rhetoric. For example, in a religious education or pastoral counseling course you may be asked to report on an experience or activity using a very specific format such as by answering three questions or by "dialoging" with the authors you have read in the course. It is important in such cases that you clearly understand the expectations of the professor and follow the instructions of the professor exactly. Keep in mind that what may appear to you as an arbitrary request may indeed have an important purpose. Even if the professor's instructions seem arbitrary, you should do your best to follow them.