

Writing 20 – Writing About Religion & Politics

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Academic Blogging

Over the course of the semester, you will be responsible for writing and commenting on a publicly available blog called “Religion, Politics, and Law.” You can visit the blog at <http://religionpoliticsandlaw.blogspot.com/> or through the link on the course Blackboard site.

I’m asking you to blog for a couple reasons. First, I think using the course readings and discussions will help you provide meaningful commentary on news about religion’s role in the current election. Second, the blog prompts will ask you to practice writing skills that you’ll be asked to demonstrate in your essays.

You will be responsible for writing **4 posts** running **300-400 words** each. You will write these posts at various points in the semester (see schedule on back). Each post should contain a reference to a recent news article, and you should provide a link to an online version of that article. In weeks when you do not write a post (excepting the weeks of fall break and Thanksgiving), you are responsible for writing a meaningful comment that responds to another post on the blog. This means you are responsible for writing at least **8 comments** running **50-150 words** each. You may comment on any other post on our blog, including those written by students in other courses. In your comments, try to respond substantively to one or more of the author’s points. You may either “forward” or “counter” the author’s points as you see fit (we’ll talk about those terms in coming weeks).

This is a public blog, and contributors will include students in another course I am teaching (Religion 185 – History of Religion & Politics in America), as well as students in courses about related subjects at Providence College and Drake University. So you will be writing for an audience beyond our classroom! I hope this prospect excites you (even if it makes you a little nervous). Writing for an audience expands your potential influence, but it also carries some additional responsibilities. Your posts must be accessible to people who are not in our course, even though the posts will relate to our course material.

I’ll say more about what I want you to write in prompts for each blog post, but at the outset I want to say a few words about style and tone. There is no universal “blog style,” but blogging is a medium that seems to encourage partisanship and even pettiness. We’re aiming for something different here. I’d like for this blog to be an extension of the conversations we have in class and the papers you write. I’ll ask you to practice writing moves and to exhibit academic skills in your blog posts. That does not mean, however, that your writing on the blog needs to become overly stilted or formal. Rather, I hope the blog provides a place for you to show your readers that academic writing can be lively, relevant, and sophisticated all at once. Good luck!

Technical Details: You need to know how to insert URLs in your post; fortunately, Blogger makes the process pretty easy. When you’re ready to insert a URL, hold down CTRL+SHIFT+A. A box will appear prompting you for a URL. Insert the URL and click OK. Then type whatever text you want readers to click on in between the “open” (<a href...>) and “close” () tags. You’ll end up with something that looks like this:

Visit the blog Religion in American History for a good discussion about this topic.

On the blog, it will look like this: Visit the blog **Religion in American History** for a good discussion about this topic. Clicking the underlined text will take you to the linked article.

Schedule

You will be assigned to group A, B, or C during the first week of the semester. In weeks when you have a post assigned, it must be up by **12:00 noon on Monday**. In weeks when you are assigned to comment, you must post a comment by class time **9:00 am on Tuesday**. Your comment can address **any** of the other blog posts, including posts written by students in other courses. And feel free to make multiple comments in a given week, but know that doing so doesn't mean you can avoid making comments in a subsequent week.

Week	Blog Posts	Comments	Notes
9/1	Group A – Blog Post 1	Groups B&C	
9/8	Group B – BP 1	Groups A&C	
9/15	Group C – BP 1	Groups A&B	
9/22	Group B – BP 2	Groups A&C	
9/29	Group C – BP 2	Groups A&B	
10/6	Group A – BP 2	Groups B&C	
10/13	FALL BREAK		
10/20	Group C – BP 3	Groups A&B	
10/27	Group A – BP 3	Groups B&C	
11/3	Group B – BP 3	Groups A&C	
11/10	Group A – BP 4	Groups B&C	
11/17	Group B – BP 4	Groups A&C	
11/24	THANKSGIVING		
12/1	Group C – BP 4	Groups A&B	

I am in GROUP ____, which means I have blog posts due on ____, ____, ____, and ____.

Note: I have found the following blogs particularly good at showcasing academic writing; feel free to model some of your posts on the posts written on the sites below.

<http://usreligion.blogspot.com> <http://religionclause.blogspot.com/>
<http://hnn.us/blogs/2.html> <http://religiondispatches.org/Blog.php>
<http://baldblogger.blogspot.com/> <http://www.brandsofffaith.com/>
<http://therevealer.org/> <http://www.spiritual-politics.org/>

IMPORTANT: After class today, you will receive an email inviting you to become an author on the blog. Please accept that invitation ASAP! You will need to sign up for a Google account if you don't already have one (don't worry, it's free). I *strongly* encourage you NOT to include your last name as part of your Google ID. Use your first name and last initial (e.g. Seth D.). That way I will know which are your posts, but your name won't be visible to the entire world. (If you already have a Google account with both your first and last names—or with a nickname—consider creating and using a new Google account.)

Blog Post 1

For your first blog post, I would like for you to locate an op-ed that comments on the role of religion in the 2008 elections (it doesn't necessarily have to address the presidential election, but it certainly can). Op-eds, as opposed to news articles or feature stories, clearly present an author's point of view and often appear in separate sections of a newspaper or magazine. The author might be identified as a columnist rather than a reporter. You may draw your op-ed from any source as long as it is:

- a) available online
- b) published by a media outlet (i.e. don't use someone's personal blog)
- c) of reasonable length (300-1500 words)

If you have questions about whether your source is OK, feel free to email me with a link.

Once you locate a suitable source, I ask that you read it and jot down initial reactions in the margins (I usually find it helpful to print out online sources so that I can scribble on them). Note the parts that you find interesting, compelling, or loathsome. Then, write a 300-400 word post that does the following things:

- a) carefully articulates the central claim of the op-ed
NOTE: it's OK to use a few quotes to illustrate your claim, but you should clearly state the piece's argument in your own words
- b) identifies the most interesting or notable moment(s) of the piece
- c) suggests reasons why this moment is interesting (does it indicate an otherwise hidden agenda? Does it suggest the author's religious or political beliefs? Does it provide important perspective?)

Please don't feel like you need to "prove" the author of your piece right or wrong; I'm not asking you to write an opinion piece of your own. Instead, focus on clearly summarizing the piece and noting a point of interest. These are crucial first steps in making an argument. We'll work on how to praise or criticize in future assignments.

Purpose: As you'll notice when you read the first chapter of *Rewriting*, this assignment is an exercise in "coming to terms" with another text – something you'll have to do in E1. At the same time, it's a chance for you to highlight a particular piece that you find interesting. So choose something that allows you to practice "coming to terms," but also choose something that will interest other people. After all, other people will be reading your work on the blog!

Logistics: BP1 should run 300-400 words. It must include a URL for the story you discuss. It must be posted on <http://religionpoliticsandlaw.blogspot.com> by 12:00 noon on Monday during the week your group is scheduled to post, as follows:

- Group A – Blog Post 1 due at 12:00 noon on Monday, 9/1 (Groups B&C comment)
- Group B – Blog Post 1 due at 12:00 noon on Monday, 9/8 (Groups A&C comment)
- Group C – Blog Post 1 due at 12:00 noon on Monday, 9/15 (Groups A&B comment)

Consider composing your post in a word processor rather than in a web browser. Although doing so will mean that you have to fiddle with the URL after pasting your text in Blogger, composing in Microsoft Word will help you think of your post as a formal piece of writing. Remember, I expect your blog entries to be **proofread**, and I also want you to take the time to read and revise your post before putting it online.

About Comments: You should post a brief comment (50-150) on at least one blog post in weeks when you are not writing your post. This comment can address *any* post on the blog (including those written by students in other classes). Use the "They Say, I Say" model to move the conversation forward with your comment. Comments should be posted on Tuesday morning of each week, no later than 9:00 am.

BP2 – Deepening the Conversation

Over the next few weeks, we'll be reading histories written by David Chappell and William Martin. You may also start looking at other historical texts in order to help you write your first major essay. As you engage with this material, I want you to think about (among other things) how the history of the civil rights movement and the religious right helps you understand facets of the current campaign.

In your second blog post, I'd like for you to *forward* or *counter* the work of a historian (Chappell, Martin, or another writer) in your analysis of an article about this year's campaign. Or, in other words: draw on your growing historical perspective to comment on the contemporary political scene. What has changed? What remains the same? How does the past shape the present? The connection between decades-old history and current events is not always easy to see. The civil rights movement, for instance, happened in a very different time and place, and it's tricky to figure out how that movement has shaped the twenty-first century political scene. Nevertheless, in your post I want you to connect your reading of Chappell or Martin (or another historical text) to analysis of an article about religion and politics in 2008. Choose an article that has not yet appeared on the blog, and try to look for articles that raise "big picture" issues, such as race, gender, family values, or class (there are other big picture issues; these are just examples).

Successful posts will come to terms with the article in question, forward or counter Chappell, Martin, or another historian, provide a link to the article, and close with some questions designed to stimulate discussion. I encourage you to broaden the conversation; try to address issues that haven't appeared (or haven't appeared very much) on the blog. The article you choose does NOT have to be an op-ed, and you may email me a URL if you have questions about whether your article is appropriate.

Purpose: This post asks you to practice *forwarding* or *countering*, moves you'll be asked to demonstrate in E2, E3, and ME1. It also provides you an opportunity to draw connections between the current election and the history you're reading in class.

Logistics: BP1 should run 300-400 words. It must include a URL for the story you discuss. It must be posted on <http://religionpoliticsandlaw.blogspot.com> by 12:00 noon on Monday during the week your group is scheduled to post, as follows:

Group B – Blog Post 2 due at 12:00 noon on Monday, 9/22 (Groups A&C comment)

Group C – Blog Post 2 due at 12:00 noon on Monday, 9/29 (Groups A&B comment)

Group A – Blog Post 2 due at 12:00 noon on Monday, 10/6 (Groups B&C comment)

About Comments: You should post a brief comment (50-150) on at least one blog post in weeks when you are not writing your post. This comment can address *any* post on the blog (including those written by students in other classes). Use the "They Say, I Say" model to move the conversation forward with your comment. Comments should be posted on Tuesday morning of each week, no later than 9:00 am.

Blog Post 3

For your third blog post, I'm not going to give a particularly directive prompt. You've had an opportunity to write a couple posts, and you've read many more, so I think you probably have a good idea of what makes a strong post: a coherent claim, good analysis of the linked article, a compelling historical reference, and a conclusion that offers thoughtful discussion questions. I encourage you to look for articles that deal with big issues related to religion and politics, particularly if they're not about the election (which will be hard to avoid these next few weeks). Please include a URL for the article you discuss in your post, and please avoid articles that have already appeared on the blog. Be creative – I look forward to see what topics you discuss!

Logistics: BP3 should run 300-400 words. It must include a URL for the story you discuss. It must be posted on <http://religionpoliticsandlaw.blogspot.com> by 12:00 noon on Monday during the week your group is scheduled to post, as follows.

BP4

As I did for your third blog post, I'm not going to give a particularly directive prompt for the fourth one. Your post should include a coherent claim, good analysis of the linked article, a compelling historical reference, and a conclusion that offers thoughtful discussion questions. I encourage you to look for articles that deal with big issues related to religion and politics, particularly if they're not simply re-hashing the election (though you're welcome to comment on an analysis of religion's role in the election if you find an interesting article about that).

I'll add another option: you may choose to write a post relating your research project to a recent article about religion and politics. Some of your projects lend themselves to commentary on contemporary issues. While I want the focus of your research paper to be historical, this blog post offers you an opportunity to tell readers about how your research informs understanding of current events. Don't offer too many details; give a quick synopsis of your project and tell us the relevance of it for understanding a particular issue. You should link the discussion of your research to a recent article.

Please include a URL for the article you discuss in your post, and please avoid articles that have already appeared on the blog. Be creative – I look forward to see what topics you discuss!

Logistics: BP4 should run 300-400 words. It must include a URL for the story you discuss. It must be posted on <http://religionpoliticsandlaw.blogspot.com> by 12:00 noon on Wednesday during the week your group is scheduled to post.