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Religious Studies

How to get an H1 in the Leaving Cert
Religious Studies Exam



by Paul McAndrew

Paul currently teaches Religious Studies in the Institute of Education and has 11 years of experience teaching the subject. Here he shares some tips on how it's done.

People tend to see Leaving Cert Religious Studies as an easy subject that you simply have to say a couple of rosaries to achieve a good grade, but this is not the case. It is as easy or difficult as any other course on the Leaving Cert but its main advantage is how interesting it is. You will be hard pushed to find a more diverse or thought-provoking subject!

This course will stimulate the mind and alter your opinions on many topics, and should be taken by any student who likes to think of themselves as a thinker.

20% of the course is completed as a coursework, which is completed by both higher and ordinary level students. The other 80% is then the written exam. The topic of the coursework is based on four prescribed titles from the Department of Education, of which you pick one to research. If completed properly, it will enable you to go into June's exam with most of that 20% in your pocket.

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Some Basic Advice

- **Know the Paper:** I really recommend **knowing the layout and history of the paper from year to year**. Both Studyclix and examinations.ie have an extensive examination material archive on their sites where you can access all exam papers from 2005-2016. Also, look at the marking schemes for each exam, this will give you a feel of what the examiner is looking for in answering the questions on the paper.
- **Answer the Question Asked:** This is the cardinal sin of every student, not answering the question being asked. **Read the question fully, understand what the examiner is looking for and answer the exact question that is being asked.**
- **Answering Questions:** Show that you **understand the question** in your answer. Define key words or phrases in your introduction. Write an accurate/worthwhile answer in regards to the question that you are being asked to answer. If possible, **show personal engagement** in your answer, your opinion can help when discussing or arguing a specific point.
- **Name, Explain, Example:** **Name** the answer to each point required. **Explain** how you have come to this conclusion and use a **real life example** to back up the point you are making.
- **Plan:** Make sure your argument is well presented and thought through. You can do this by **planning your answer before you write it out** fully. Take about 1 min to do this for each question on the paper.
- **Key Words/Phrases/Quotes/Statements:** Use key words/phrases/quotes/statements from the question in your answer. This is particularly important in this subject. Perhaps **use a highlighter to note the most important things in the question**. Refer to the question being asked as much as possible when making a point, this will show that you comprehend what the question is asking you to discuss.



How the Exam is Laid Out

- There are 3 sections to the written paper; Unit 1,2, and 3.
- Unit 1 – The Search for Meaning and Values (answer 1 question). There are two options and you are free to choose which ever question you want to answer. There is generally a philosophy question in this section of the paper.
- Unit 2 – Christianity, World Religions & Moral Decision Making (answer 2 questions) i.e. You need to answer the questions posed on any two of the above topics.
- Unit 3 – you need to answer any one of the questions under this unit, excluding the two sections designated for coursework. So there are four questions in this section and you have to answer one of them. The topics are Religion and Gender; Issues of Justice and Peace; Worship, Prayer, and Ritual; The Bible: Literature and Sacred Text; Religion: The Irish Experience and Religion and Science.



How to Get Your Timing Right

- The written paper is 80% of the marks and is 2.5 hours long. You will need to answer between 7-8 essay based questions in this time. H1 answers are usually about 2 pages in length.
- For the 80-mark question, you should be spending about 30-36 minutes to answer and write between 3-4 pages to ensure maximum marks.
- For the 40-mark question, I would spend 15-18 minutes answering the question and would write between 1.5–2 pages.
- With regards to the 20-mark question, you should spend around 7-9 minutes answering it and write 1 page to get maximum marks.
- **Never go over your time limit!** Go to the next question once you see you've run out of time and come back to the incomplete question at the end of the exam if you have time left.
- I would advise trying to practise answering questions in the shortest time suggested above. This will benefit you and give you more time in the real exam if you can get into the habit of answering the questions quickly.



How to Maximize Your Chances of Doing Well

- Study from the get-go. **Religion is not a subject you can cram for.** It requires a steady level of study so that a broader outlook can be gained on each topic in case a question strays from the norm.
- Study additional information which is not in the notes and **find your own examples.** In this way you are more likely to remember what is being studied and will be more than able to give your own opinion on the matter, something which is looked for in the Religion exam.
- If you are finding any particular points difficult to remember, **the use of acronyms or rhymes are quite useful** (e.g.) "S. T. I." - Separation, Transition,

Incorporation in regards to rites of passage in ancient societies in the Search of Meaning & Values section of the course.

- If you are a visual learner, YouTube videos can be very useful. When studying a question watch a YouTube video or read an article or look up pictures about the topic and this will make the information far easier to remember, because you will associate the information with a certain visual. In this way information will come back to you quickly when answering questions. You can find videos and other helpful learning resources for Religion in the resource box on the Religion subject page on Studyclix!



The Coursework

This section is worth 20% of your overall grade for Leaving Cert Religion and it needs to be taken very seriously! It's broken into 2 parts and each part is worth 10% of your overall grade.

Part A

This is a research essay based on the prescribed titles given by the department and should be between 1,300-1,500 words long. The titles change each year and are based on 2 of the subjects from Unit 3 of the course.

1st task: Choose the question you want to research; pick the one that you are most interested in.

2nd task: Define (use dictionary) the key terms in the title.

3rd task: Research using books, interviews, documentaries, websites, journals, newspapers, etc.

4th task: Put the coursework together.

4th task (explained)

Sources (use this heading)

- Here you must list the sources (minimum of 10) used to research the question/topic by category (e.g. books, websites etc.) & alphabetise at the beginning of Part A of the coursework.

Steps Taken & Skills Used (use this heading)

- Mention several steps taken (5) & skills used (3) and try to link a step taken to a skill used.
- The steps taken are the actions you undertook to research the title, e.g. "I went to the library", "I interviewed", "I read", etc.
- For each step mentioned, a point of information must be mentioned too.



- The “skills used” (see Key Skills below) are skills you used to research and write your chosen title.

Key Skills List

1. Information processing skills, e.g.:

- Accessing information from a range of sources.
- Choosing between sources based on their reliability and suitability for purpose.
- Recording, organising, summarising and integrating information.

2. Critical and creative thinking skills, e.g.:

- Examining patterns and relationships, classifying and ordering information.
- Analysing and making good arguments, challenging assumptions.
- Identifying and analysing problems and decisions, exploring options and alternatives, solving problems and evaluating outcomes.
- Thinking imaginatively, actively seeking out new points of view, etc.

3. Communication skills, e.g.:

- Expressing opinions, speculating, discussing, engaging in debates and arguments.
- Engaging in dialogue, listening attentively and eliciting opinions, views and emotions.
- Presenting using a variety of media.

4. Working with others (interpersonal), e.g.:

- Working with others in a variety of contexts.
- Identifying, evaluating and achieving collective goals.
- Developing good relationships with others and a sense of well-being in a group.
- Acknowledging individual differences, negotiating and resolving conflicts.

5. Being personally effective, e.g.:

- Being able to appraise oneself, evaluate one’s own performance, receive and respond to feedback
- Becoming confident and being able to assert oneself as a person.
- Developing personal qualities that help in new and difficult situations.



**For each skill you write about must show evidence of how the skill was used.*

Summary of Findings (use this heading)

- Answer the question in the title.
- Present evidence to support your findings.
- Summarise what you have learned with evidence to support it.
- Link with other sections of the course that you have studied in class.
- **800+ words** (the booklet that the coursework is eventually written into will fit roughly 1,300 – 1,500 words and as a result you will need to be concise in what you write and to focus on what the question/topic that you are answering/discussing).
- Conclusion (use this as a subheading at the end) and sum up your conclusions of your research.



Part B

Once you have completed Part A, you need to start writing Part B. It's a personal reflection on the learning, skills & experiences you gained through writing Part A.

- It should be approx. between 1,100 – 1,500 (max) words in length.
- Be honest and personal.
- You are required to answer **5 questions** to which each answer should be at least 275 words in length!
- You must mention **2 skills used** (see list from Part A) in answering this question. Key skills that are different to those mentioned in Part A are preferable.
- When answering each question make sure that the underlined words/phrases appear in the first line/sentence of that answer. This shows the examiner that you are answering this question.

The questions are as follows and I've given some small pointers about each:

Q1 - Why was the title of interest to you?

- Link your interest to the title to a personal story of how your interest was sparked in the topic.
- Be honest, personal & original.
- No waffle or blah, blah, blah!

Q2 - What different perspectives did you encounter in doing coursework on your chosen title?

- Discuss different perspectives or views encountered and different opinions on the topic from the different sources you researched, perhaps 2-3 opinions.
- One from a book, one from a website, for example.



Q3. What questions arose for you through doing coursework on this title?

- Write at least 3 questions that arose to you while writing/researching Part A or B. The format for this answer should be: question that arose, why it arose, followed by an attempt to answer that question.

Q4. What personal insights have you gained through doing a coursework on this title?

- What did you learn about yourself while doing this coursework? You could also include other insights gained.

Q5. What has been the most valuable part of doing coursework on this title?

- Talk about ultimately what was the most valuable experience or knowledge gained from researching & writing the coursework. Mention one significant example & maybe then a couple of less ones. Don't be afraid to repeat yourself here.

Aims of the Coursework

- To show personal engagement
- To develop skills & knowledge – critical thinking etc.
- Personal reflection

A very good coursework will have the following:

- A great range of sources
- A great depth of understanding
- Different perspectives
- A greater capacity for personal reflection & critical thinking



When you have finished writing Part A & B, you should review the coursework by asking yourself the following questions and include or adapt any information arising to what you have already written:

1. What did I know about the topic at the beginning of this process?
2. Why I chose this topic?
3. How will I show the steps and skills I used in the process of this coursework?
4. What issues arose in my investigation /research?
5. 2 perspectives I came across? From different sources e.g. one a book and the other a website
6. In my research did I encounter any bias and assumptions by authors or others?
7. Personal reaction to this bias?
8. My personal reactions to or feeling in relation to personal reflection?
9. How did I verify credibility of my sources?
10. Possible implications of this topic for 21st century Ireland?
11. What kind of conclusions can be drawn from my investigation?
12. Why does it matter?
13. How has the experience challenged my views opinions and beliefs?
14. How well informed am I now?
15. What further questions remain unanswered?
16. Did I show originality & personal engagement in the process of researching and writing this coursework?



General Comments on the Coursework

- With regards to the coursework project, I cannot stress enough how **important it is to start early**. This is essential so that 1. there is time to look over it and correct any mistakes, etc. and 2. you can get back to focusing on the actual written exam.
- It is *vital* that you **choose a coursework title which intrigues you**, otherwise you will most definitely find yourself losing interest half way through and your project may not be as good as it could have been.
- The **drafts of your coursework should be typed out and not handwritten**, only your final draft which is written into the official booklet needs to be hand written. In this way you can readjust and correct mistakes without having to rewrite the whole thing out each time.
- I will say it again, get the project done early. Once you have the majority of the project done or your main draft of the project which has been corrected, **it lessens the pressure** during “project weeks”, that busy period near the end of April in the year you are taking the exam.
- It takes a while to write out the coursework into the official booklet so **don't leave the actual work until the last second**, there are also orals and other projects due around that time so the more you've done in advance, the better.
- **Don't rush the project either**. When you're confident that you've answered your title and questions well and spent enough time on your project, it gives you confidence going into the exam.



Some Final Tips and Advice

I think it is so important to stress the fact that **getting an H1 in religion is not easy** (contrary to what some people believe). In order to break the H1 barrier, it is important to treat it as any other subject. It requires the same amount of time and effort as all subjects. Although everyone learns and studies differently, there are certain guidelines which worked well in the past.

1) **Listen well in class and participate.** Topics became memorable when you take a genuine interest in them and listen in class. Being open to different views from classmates and forming your own view on topics makes it easier to give a well-rounded answer in an exam and it's easier to remember if you've actually thought about it!

2) **Do a test each week!** Although a test every week in religion seems daunting at first, it can be really helpful in the long run. Study for about an hour or more for each test and write out notes for each test. By the end of the year you will have a folder full of written out notes for each section and topic. You can **use the Exam Builder here on Studyclix** to test yourself!

3) Since there is a lot to memorise for Religion, I advise you **record yourself or someone else reading the notes.** Therefore, if you get tired of reading or saying the notes out loud, you can listen to them instead. This is helpful for any subject that requires a lot of memorisation.

5) Lastly, I'd just suggest **being calm going into all the exams!** Take deep breaths and read the questions carefully. When answering a question, make sure you address all parts of the question and state clearly in the introduction/conclusion to each paragraph which part of the question you are answering. There's a temptation to write down everything you know if you are well prepared, so make sure that when you're answering you only write what is relevant!





Finally, I would like wish you the best of luck with the project and the exam! You will be fine. 😊

