

THE SEVEN DEADLY EXAM SINS

Chris Eyre

In Catholic theology, there are famously seven deadly sins. There are also seven virtues but human nature being what it is, we are more familiar with the sins. They just seem more interesting. This might explain why as an examiner, when people ask me about good exam technique and study skills, my mind immediately goes to the bad things – what commonly goes wrong. In some ways this is not unhelpful. If we can identify and eliminate the errors then the chance is, we will not be too far away from getting things right.

So I give you the seven deadly sins committed by Religious Studies students

SIN 1: IGNORANCE - THE LACK OF KNOWLEDGE

Sometimes when reading an exam answer it becomes obvious that the student is struggling on this topic. It is worth noting that this is not about exam technique – it's about understanding of the subject and preparation. There is no substitute for putting in the hard long hours and learning the content. Whilst I am able to write reasonably well, if you set me a question on the significance of Harry Styles or Billie Eilish I would struggle. If you asked me to write about the best car engines, I know I would get a U grade and it wouldn't be because of my technique.

When we know a subject in detail – our favourite football team or obscure demo versions of a favourite band's early material – we are able to write at length and in detail. Technique is important but nailing the content, knowledge and understanding of the issues and the subject, has to come first. So as hard as it is, put in the hours on those difficult topics, check in with your teachers on the parts you don't understand. Knowing the subject in detail is essential to exam success; technique can come later.

SIN 2: SLOTH AND SEEKING THE EASY REVISION

There are very few A level students who do absolutely no revision but it is true that as human beings we like an easy life, so we may default to doing the types of revision that are most comfortable. So we take out our highlighters or we re-read our notes for the fourth or fifth time whilst also scrolling through our social media. Active revision strategies such as transforming notes into a different format, or covering notes and trying to rewrite are better according to research. But these strategies are harder. If you are feeling really brave, you could always write some essays. Our desire for an easy life means most of us won't do this but think about it this way: there is only really one sure fire way of getting better at anything and that is practice. It's why footballers

train, it's why bands rehearse, and it's why your first attempt at making lasagne was a disaster. Writing good essays under timed conditions is a skill like all others and you will make mistakes, yet the more you do, and the more you take on board the feedback of your teacher, the better you will become. It won't happen overnight, there will be ups and downs but slowly and surely you will get better if you practice.

SIN 3: THEFT AND THE MODEL ANSWER

When people learn that I am an examiner, one thing they ask for is some model answers. In fact, you can even go online and find model answers on various sites. Be very careful: some students download model answers and learn them. The phrase 'model answer' might imply that this is THE way to answer the question. Yet RS questions are broad and open, there is never just one way to answer them. The model answer is in fact one possible answer to one specific question, it is almost certain that the question you are trying to answer will be slightly different. So, by all means read 'model' answers and try to understand why this answer is a good approach to the question that it addresses, but don't learn it so that you can create a virtual copy in the exam. It won't fully address the question.

SIN 4: PRIDE AND EVASION

Probably the biggest issue that candidates in exams have is that they don't actually answer the question. I have lost count of the number of times as an examiner that I have found myself asking 'what was the question again?' as I am midway through the essay. It may be that you are trying to use a model answer – see above. It may also be that you suffer from FOMiO (fear of missing it out): you have learned something really interesting about the topic – admit it you find Alvin Plantinga's Ontological Argument fascinating – and you are determined to fit it in. That's great if the question allows it but if not, have the courage to avoid it. It may even

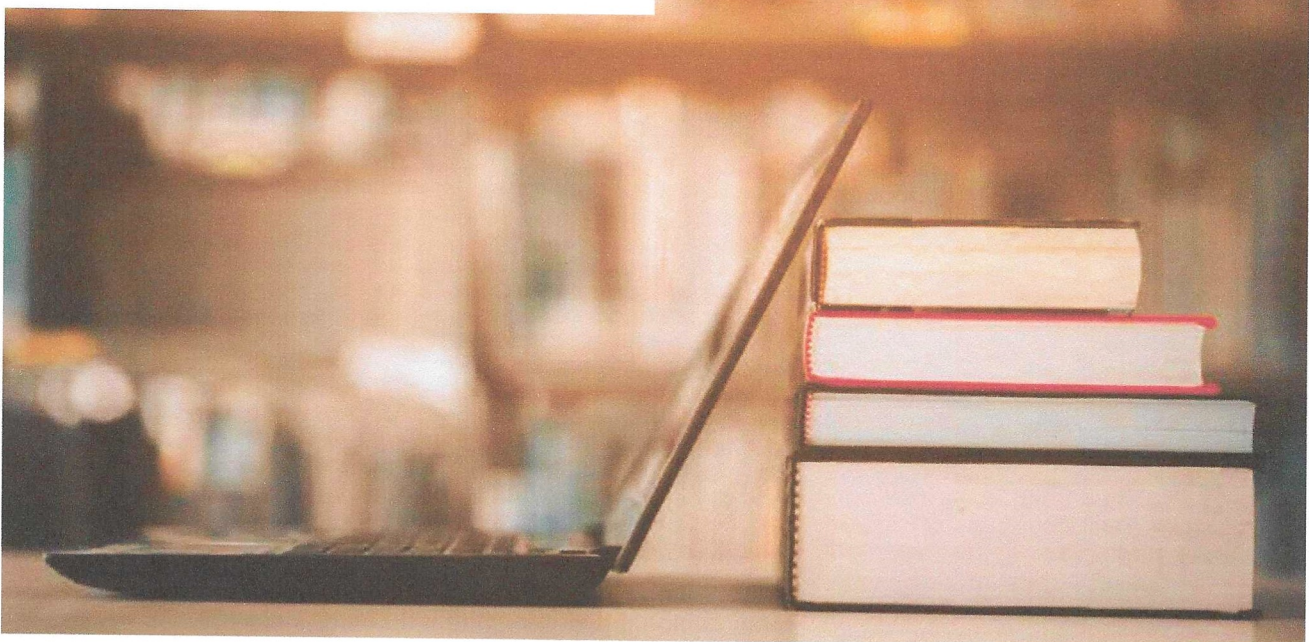
be that the reason you don't answer the question is more straightforward: you haven't read it properly. One way of making sure you do this is to **BUG** the question. When you get your exam paper **B**-ox around the command word, **U**-nderline all key words (don't miss a word like 'most' or 'best'), **G**-glance through just to check you haven't missed anything. It will take you less than 30 seconds and will hopefully ensure you are on the right track

SIN 5 : HUBRIS AND OVER CONFIDENCE – PLANNING

When we are in an exam we are very conscious of time and we won't want to waste it. This leads some candidates to skip the planning stage and just start writing. That is unwise; very few students can write high level stream of consciousness essays where they think about it as they go along. 99% of us mortals need to plan. There is also the opposite danger of a long elaborate plan that takes you 10 minutes and means you run out of time to actually write the essay. Here moderation is the key (the virtue is the mean according to Aristotle). A good plan is a series of words - perhaps one or two phrases per paragraph that jog your memory. What is your conclusion? What are your reasons? So a brief plan is usually helpful. Other things may come to you as you write and that's fine too.

SIN 6 : INDIFFERENCE – BEING A JOURNALIST NOT A LAWYER

According to the church there are sins of commission (actions) but there are also sins of omission – those good things you should have done but did not. For most essays (unless they are just asking for an explanation) you are



required to give an argument and reach a conclusion. So if you don't do this, there is quite a major omission; you have not actually answered the question. We might not realise we've done this: after all we've included the views of lots of different thinkers. However if you are asked whether the problem of evil can be solved and your response is to give a paragraph explaining Mackie's view, followed by one on Augustine and then one on Hick, you have not really argued in a high level sense; you have merely described the views – a little like a journalist or commentator giving an account of an event. You need to get out of the commentary box and into the courtroom. A lawyer in court would not just summarise what everyone has said and then sit down; they would tell you why the defendant was guilty or not guilty and remind you of the key points in their favour. So when you are asked a question – the word 'assess' 'discuss' 'evaluate' or such like will be featured. The question invites you to reach a judgement: does the design argument work? Is utilitarianism a good theory? You need to give an answer: What judgement or conclusion have you reached? The whole essay is an argument and arguments have a conclusion (what you want me to believe) and reasons (why you want me to believe it) that try to persuade the reader. Of course you are not in an actual courtroom so you will be a fair lawyer and honestly consider the other side before arriving at your conclusion

SIN 7 : STINGINESS AND UNDEVELOPED POINTS

One of Aristotle's virtues is the virtue of generosity. The corresponding vice or sin is meanness or stinginess. If we're not careful we can be mean in our development of points. It may be that we have got into bad habits at GCSE. At GCSE you might provide a list of several points within one paragraph and it might pick up some marks. However at A level providing just a sprinkling of an idea or 1-2 sentences is unlikely to get you very far; a high level answer develops

points fully. So most paragraphs will typically have one main idea – perhaps a strength or criticism of the idea that is being assessed.

The opening sentence may give some context - 'a second key weakness of the design argument is...' It tells the examiner what the paragraph is going to be about and how it is going to help answer the question. This main point will need some explanation or unpicking and then some consideration of how strong the point is - this might include a counterargument. The paragraph may end with a judgement about the ideas in that paragraph - 'so this can be seen as an effective criticism of design'. There are various acronyms available to explain how to do this: PEA (point, explain, assess), PACE (point, analyse, counterargument, evaluate), PEACE (point, explain, assess, counterargument, evaluative judgement), PEREL (point, explain, response, evaluate, link...) ... but essentially they are doing the same thing – a point is made, expanded upon and discussed. If you are doing this in most of your paragraphs you ought to be accessing higher levels. So be generous not stingy in your development of points

The good news, if we keep going with our seven deadly sins analogy, is that forgiveness and improvement are possible. Most of the issues above can be remedied by effort, reading questions carefully and by focusing on providing a clear and in-depth answer. I'm aware that last sentence makes it sound so easy but keep practising and I'm sure you will reach the promised land or at least a grade you are happy with.

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