# Religion Studies Subject Assessment Advice

## Overview

Subject assessment advice, based on the previous year’s assessment cycle, gives an overview of how students performed in their school and external assessments in relation to the learning requirements, assessment design criteria, and performance standards set out in the relevant subject outline. They provide information and advice regarding the assessment types, the application of the performance standards in school and external assessments, and the quality of student performance.

Teachers should refer to the subject outline for specifications on content and learning requirements, and to the subject operational information for operational matters and key dates.

# **School Assessment**

Assessment Type 1: Sources Analysis

By analysing various sources, students apply their understanding of the concepts, theories, and definitions of religion and spiritualties; the nature of ‘the sacred’ and ‘the profane’; case studies of religion in society; religious issues; or contemporary trends that have been studied.

The more successful responses commonly:

* used a range of sources, including visits to sacred sites, art, contemporary religious cartoons, appropriate audio-visual film clips or extracts, contemporary religious articles, photo essays and stimuli from appropriate texts which enabled students to meet the assessment design criteria
* were designed for students to respond to a maximum of two or three sources; contained a few questions beginning with questions to elicit knowledge and understanding, then included questions to elicit higher-order skills of analysis and evaluation; and did not ask for too many specific features to be demonstrated in the students’ evidence
* showed (as moderators noted) that, when students had visited sacred sites away from their own religious culture — such as the Quaker centre, a mosque, a Buddhist or Jewish temple, an Anglican cathedral, or one of the Orthodox churches — the students were clearly interested in responding to what they saw in great depth and detail and included evidence that met the criteria of analysis and evaluation. These instances were predominantly from students undertaking the 20-credit subject, given that this Assessment Type will deal only with the “Core Topic” for the 10-credit subject.

The less successful responses commonly:

* originated from questions which required students to respond to five or more sources, to respond to cartoons of a political rather than a religious nature, to respond to old sources from past examinations or outdated articles
* were focused on describing what was in a source rather than higher-order thinking skills like analysis and evaluation
* included superficial, often dictionary, definitions of religion and spirituality rather than engaging with scholarly (and competing) definitions, interpretations and explanations.

Teachers need to ensure that any videos, songs, or articles used, allow students to address the assessment design criteria, which should also be selected sparingly to allow students ample opportunity to meet each performance standard in depth, rather than attempt several superficially.

In previous years, when Religion Studies was assessed through examinations, the questions were allocated marks. This is no longer appropriate because teachers and moderators are making holistic judgments about the students’ evidence using the performance standards from the current subject outline. The evidence for each assessment type is viewed as a whole, rather than assessing each question separately.

Assessment Type 2: Folio

For a 10-credit subject, students undertake at least two folio assessments, one on the core topic and one on an option topic. For a 20-credit subject, students undertake at least three folio assessments, at least one on the core topic and at least one on an option topic. By far the most popular option topic was Christianity or specific denominations thereof. Assessment tasks were varied but generally included essays or reports.

The more successful responses commonly:

* focused on one specific feature. A task such as a well-designed essay question that focused on just one specific feature seemed an almost foolproof way of ensuring that students provided evidence above the C level. Some of these essay topics centred on school community service programs, the place of religion in Australian history, or visits to places of worship of various traditions
* targeted just a few specific features. Well-scaffolded tasks that targeted just a few of the specific features of the assessment design criteria were the most successful in eliciting responses in the higher grade bands. This was especially evident when teachers had structured questions that required an analytical response. Many of these tasks also included a question that directed students to examine religion in local and global contexts and these were answered very well
* demonstrated “insightful” and “clear and in-depth” knowledge and understanding by accurately referencing appropriate authorities, or sacred texts
* demonstrated considered reflection. Some of the strongest evidence in demonstrating reflection was based on appropriate investigation into a religion or spirituality through listening to a guest speaker, visiting a religious site, or watching a documentary or YouTube clip, and then reflecting in a considered way on the personal meaning of that experience to the adherents
* featured well-designed questions that facilitated analytical responses. These responses required a reflection on a school liturgy that explained how the liturgy nurtured the religious culture of the school, affecting the participants in a visible and tangible way.

The less successful responses commonly:

* consisted of responses to mainly short-answer questions that were assessing all of the specific features of the performance standards and gave little opportunity to demonstrate depth of knowledge and understanding and/or analysis in the responses
* relied on generalisations, stereotypes, or in some cases, misconceptions in demonstrating the student’s knowledge and understanding of aspects of a particular religion rather than appropriate authoritative sources
* did not go beyond narrative, recount, or description. Often this was the result of poorly designed tasks which did not demand evidence of analysis or critical evaluation. Assignments that led to narrative, recount, or description often limited students’ achievement to the C grade or less
* were simply narrations of a student’s involvement in a liturgical event, rather than demonstrating features of the performance standards. Whilst some “liturgy tasks” did address the appropriate performance standards, there were also numerous tasks that were limited to a description of the student’s involvement in the liturgy, or that included superficial analysis as to why certain features of a liturgy were included
* Misinterpreted the assessment design criterion of Reflection. Moderators saw that the assessment design criterion of Reflection was misinterpreted to mean ‘reflection on the student’s own personal experiences or opinions’. The performance standard at the C grade for the first specific feature of Reflection is ‘Considered reflection on the personal significance of religions and spiritualties in traditional and contemporary societies’, which goes beyond the personal opinion of the student and asks for an explanation of the personal significance of religion or spirituality to adherents of the particular religion being studied.

Assessment Type 3: Investigation

Students are to choose a religious or spiritual phenomenon, or a religious issue linked to Australian or global society for investigation. Students are required to conduct research, referring to authoritative primary and secondary sources, to address their question/ topic in full. Students must provide evidence of Knowledge and Understanding, Investigation and Application, Analysis and Evaluation, and Reflection.

The more successful responses commonly:

* posed a specific question to investigate with an explicit religious focus. This approach facilitated full coverage of each of the performance standards
* seemed to have an independently chosen investigation topic/ question, rather than a question derived from a list of suggested topics generated for the class. This allowed explanation of why a topic was chosen, communicating either a deeper knowledge and understanding or a heightened awareness of the social ramifications or significance of the chosen topic, in Australia
* framed the investigation question well, avoiding simplistic questions that could be answered with limited investigation. Successful questions included wording such as “how” and “to what extent” rather than “what is”
* selected topics which lent themselves to depth of analysis, evaluation and reflection, rather than just Knowledge and Understanding through investigation
* demonstrated relevance to Australia in order to address AE2 and R3 rather than topics which had little to no link with Australian religious communities
* demonstrated a depth of understanding whereby intelligent and reasoned conclusions could be drawn
* used focus questions throughout the investigation to avoid repetition and to sufficiently address performance standards. Subheadings generally led to well-written, relevant and structured Investigations rather than essay style Investigations which at times lost focus
* made direct links back to the investigation question throughout the Investigation
* included skilful use of subject/ topic specific vocabulary
* linked effectively to sacred texts and doctrine of relevant religions, demonstrating evidence of understanding and cross analysis
* explored the investigation question/ topic in full, including a range of responses with support
* featured analysis of a range of sources, both primary and secondary sources, and a range of perspectives
* synthesised sources, comparing the perspectives of interviewees with evidence provided by sound, current, and expert secondary sources
* conducted a number of interviews with professionals/ experts in the field or topic area, many of whom were in the wider community rather than the immediate school community
* did not survey class peers unless pertinent to the question
* used reputable and relevant websites as secondary sources, with the inclusion of books and published journals, not just blogs
* adhered to the structure given in the current subject outline
* used capital letters when referring to religious texts (e.g. ‘the Bible’, ‘the Qur’an’)
* included a bibliography. The best evidence submitted was correctly referenced using one of the approved referencing methods
* used consistent referencing
* adhered to the word-limit
* did not rely on teacher-generated formulas
* were carefully drafted and edited to ensure the effective communication of ideas, knowledge, analysis, and conclusions.

The less successful responses commonly:

* focused on aspects of society rather than aspects of religion or spirituality. This resulted in information that could not be appropriately assessed against the performance standards. Popular social issues with this problem included terrorism, euthanasia, abortion, same sex marriage, and sport
* centred their topic on history only (Aztecs/Greek Mythology). This limited Analysis and Evaluation and Reflection, particularly AE2 and R3
* posed an unclear question, lacking purposeful direction
* included key findings that lacked any sort of development
* attempted to cover too much breadth, particularly for 1000-word investigations. (e.g. four different religions and their views addressed with regard to a particular topic)
* were written in the format of a descriptive text
* overused certain sources (referring to the same source numerous times throughout one paragraph)
* contained paragraphs that made no reference to religion or spiritualty
* contained errors in writing; this included contradicting points within paragraphs
* did not address all of the required assessment design criteria. Knowledge and Understanding were generally covered well; however, evidence for the other criteria was often limited in the less successful responses
* failed to answer the investigation question and recounted research, as opposed to analysing and critically evaluating their research
* consisted of personal opinion. Critical reflection on the personal significance of religion clearly indicates that there should be more than simply personal opinion
* described a range of secular practices associated with their investigation topic, showing limited evidence of aligning these to religious concepts
* included tables and graphs that were placed out of context, or failed to include any discussion of, or link to the question
* detracted from the flow of the Investigation by including information that had no relevance to the question
* included limited evidence of referencing, using websites with basic information
* did not use religious experts as primary sources
* contained limited primary research
* quoted from sources with no explanation as to their relevance. Some students quoted sources and interviews but provided no reasoning as to why that person was an authoritative source
* relied on a teacher-generated formula of response. Heavily scaffolded tasks can be limiting for students
* relied too heavily on surveys as primary sources of information, which led to a lack of sophisticated levels of knowledge and analysis
* did not adhere to the maximum word-count
* were significantly below the maximum word-count.