Harvard University Extension School  
Fall 2004  
RELI E-1015/W  
Comparative Religious Ethics

**Things to Keep in Mind While Writing**

**General:**

(a) All essays and research papers—no matter how long or short—must have a strong *thesis statement* that articulates clearly the argument of the paper. The thesis statement should appear early in the paper and should indicate something of your own thinking on the topic at hand. In other words, the thesis statement should *argue* a particular point of view or lens of interpretation rather than merely state the obvious or indicate topics to be covered in the paper.

   **Weak thesis statement:** Hindu moral thinking is very complex.

   **Weak thesis statement:** This paper will explore the complexities of Hindu moral thought.

   **Strong thesis statement:** Hindu moral thought assumes a complex view of the human being as an eternal and ineffable soul ensconced in a body that is morally marked according to gender, caste, life-stage, family, and personal characteristics.

(b) In the case of a specific writing assignment, the thesis statement—and the entire paper—should *answer the specific question being asked*. Each paragraph should, in one way or another, relate directly to the question(s) at hand.

(c) All essays and research papers must have a *title* that indicates something of the argument or focus of the work.

**Grammar/Syntax:**

(a) Avoid beginning sentences with conjunctions (“And,” “But,” “Or”) and ending them with prepositions (“to,” “from”).

(b) Avoid beginning sentences with “Because.”

(c) Avoid the use of split infinitives: “boldly to go” or “to go boldly” rather than “to boldly go.”

(d) Avoid the use of contractions in formal academic writing: “cannot” rather than “can’t.”

(e) “Which” should be used only in the case of nonrestrictive or descriptive clauses; the “which” clause, in other words, could be dropped without changing the meaning of the sentence. The clause in which “which” appears should be set off by commas: “The *Laws of Manu*, which is a very long text, describes codes of human behavior.”

(f) “That” should be used in the case of restrictive clauses, where the clause limits or restricts the reference of the noun. No commas are used: “The text *that* describes most completely human codes of behavior is the *Laws of Manu*.”

**Punctuation:**
(a) A comma should be used to separate the parts of a compound sentence only when an independent clause follows the conjunction. In other words, if what follows the “and,” “but” or “or” is a complete sentence that can stand by itself, a comma must precede the conjunction: “Hindus believe the body to be marked by caste and gender, but most Euro-American philosophers assume the body to be morally neutral.”

(b) A semicolon is used to separate two closely related independent clauses. In other words, what follows the semicolon must be able to stand alone as a sentence: “Hindus in Bhaktapur generally follow varnaṃyaṣṭramadharma; yet individual Hindus continually engage and resist such cultural norms.”

(c) Generally, periods and commas should be placed within quotation marks; colons and semicolons should follow quotation marks.

(d) When using parenthetical citations, punctuation marks should follow the citation: As Manu notes, “A man who befriends (all creatures) is called a true priest” (Manu 188).

Underlining/Italics:

(a) All foreign words and phrases that are not capitalized proper nouns should either be italicized or underlined: dharma, varṇa, Vedas, Upanisads. Some words are so commonly used in English that they may or may not be italicized: dharma, karma.

(b) Titles of books should be underlined, with the exception of certain sacred canonical works: Bible, Vedas, Upanisads.

Miscellaneous:

(a) All pages but the first should be numbered.

(b) Define all foreign words and phrases upon first usage.