

Planning on starting A Level Religious Studies next year?

Religious Studies is a great subject to help you build a wide range of skills, including improving your skills as a writer, speaker and thinker.

Even though you haven't been able to finish your Year 11 course this year, you can still practice and develop Religious Studies skills at home. You can read, watch and listen to interesting ideas and think about the opinions expressed. How far do they match your own views? What might someone say if they had a very different opinion? Keep up your writing skills by putting your ideas down on paper – try, if you can, to write by hand, just to keep up the practice so that your handwriting isn't completely illegible by the time you go back to school.

Reading good quality writing is the best way of improving your own writing. As you read a good writer, you will gain a better understanding of the meanings of new words and the ways in which carefully chosen words and punctuation can add real emphasis to someone's argument. Different writers express themselves in different ways, and by reading them you will develop your own 'voice'. Reading also helps with more basic skills such as spelling, because if you see a word written down often enough, you will know when it 'looks right' when you write the same word yourself.

Thinking skills can be developed if you try to take a questioning attitude to the things you watch, hear and read. Do you agree with what's being said? If you watch a film where people have different attitudes towards something, which do you agree with most, or least, and why?

Here are some different activities and exercises for you to try if you're learning from home. In Religious Studies, some of the topics can be quite sensitive, so if the activity involves an issue that might make you upset, choose a different one. These times are already difficult enough; nobody wants you to be upset when there's no teacher there to talk you through your feelings.

Reading activities

Here are some books and some online resources you could try, if you can get hold of them. Don't worry if they're not available or you can't get on the computer for very long – you won't be at a disadvantage.

Reading *anything* of good quality, even if it's a novel or a book about an entirely different topic, is always helpful for improving your skills, because you are practising your comprehension skills as well as practising understanding different ways in which writers express their ideas. Your own writing will improve, the more you read.

These are just *some* ideas – you don't have to choose any of these if you'd rather read something else, and there are so many good books in the world that this list could go on for ever, but it's a start:

***The Brothers Karamazov* by Fyodor Dostoevsky:** a huge and important 'classic' book, which takes time and effort and is well worth both. Raises issues of God, evil, rivalry, loyalty...

***To Kill a Mockingbird* by Harper Lee:** another classic that should be on everyone's 'must read' list

***The Puzzle of... series* by Peter Vardy:** this series of non-fiction books is about issues in religion and philosophy, very readable and you don't have to be an expert to enjoy them. You can dip in and out of different chapters rather than having to start at the beginning and work through to the end.

***Candide* by Voltaire:** another 'classic', this one takes a philosophical view of people's approaches to evil and natural disaster. It's a great book but the topics might be too difficult for you to cope with in the current circumstances, so try it if you want to but save it for more stable times if you don't.

Critical thinking skills

Here are a couple of activities to try, to start you off, and then a selection of other directions you might like to take.

Activity 1

This is the first episode of a documentary about attitudes towards homosexuality:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IMPI25oraVc>

This is the first episode of Stephen Fry's series 'Out There', where he explores attitudes to homosexuality in different parts of the world.

Here are some questions to think about and/or write about. Try to support your answers with reasoning.

1. Do you think there is a 'right' attitude and a 'wrong' attitude towards homosexuality? What is it that makes these attitudes right or wrong?
2. Some people might argue that different cultures have different ideas about morality, and that these different cultural beliefs should be respected even if we don't agree with them. Do you think we should always respect the beliefs and attitudes of cultures different from our own, or should we try to persuade them to adopt our own beliefs instead?
3. What do you think are the aims of this television series? Do you think they are good aims? Do you think this first episode is successful in achieving its aims?
4. What religious reasons do people sometimes give for opposing homosexual relationships? How would you support or oppose these views?

Activity 2

Watch this documentary, 'The Boy who Lived Before':

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=nhGX1YCsvAM>

1. Do you think the story provides convincing evidence for reincarnation? Why, or why not?
2. What do you think counts as 'convincing evidence' for life after death (e.g. scripture, near death experiences, nothing)? What makes evidence convincing or unconvincing?
3. Read the accounts in the gospels of the resurrection of Jesus (you could use biblegateway.com if you don't have a Bible at home).

Matthew 28:1-10

Mark 16:1-8

Luke 24:1-10

John 20:1-18

4. Do you find these stories convincing? Why, or why not?
5. Do you think the stories contradict each other, or are they just told from different points of view, in your opinion? What might account for the differences and the similarities between the stories?

Resources to help develop your thinking skills

Books

The Pig that wants to be Eaten by Julian Baggini

50 Philosophy Ideas you really need to know by Ben Dupré

Think by Simon Blackburn

The Blind Watchmaker, and/or The God Delusion by Richard Dawkins

These suggestions are only a few of the very many available, so don't worry if you can't get hold of these specific titles.

Online resources

The Philosophy Man (thephilosophyman.com)

This website gives you lots of different ideas to think about. Some are for younger children but you could try the 'brainsqueezers'. These are good if you don't have too much time, or if you're finding it difficult to settle to anything more concentrated.

The Philosophers' Magazine (philosophersmag.com)

Try the games on this website, and read the commentaries that go with them. Lots to think about!

Some things to watch and think about

All kinds of films and series have philosophical and religious ideas in them, so follow your own interests! You could try these, or choose something else, but try and use them as a stimulus for thinking and writing, rather than just sitting in front of them:

- The Good Place
- The Matrix
- Unorthodox
- Twelve Angry Men

TED Talks

These are usually wonderful, with plenty to stimulate your questioning and reasoning skills. Some favourites:

- Elizabeth Loftus – ‘How reliable is your memory?’
- Dan Gilbert – ‘Why we make bad decisions’
- Richard Dawkins – ‘Militant atheism’
- Chimamanda Ngozi Adichie – ‘We should all be feminists’
- Damon Horowitz – ‘Philosophy in prison’

There are loads of talks on here, so use the search engine to find topics that interest you. Practise note-taking; write notes as you listen, just as you would if you were listening to a real-life lecture, and practise the skill of jotting down key points at speed. Ask yourself questions when you get to the end: what were the speaker’s key messages? Do you agree with the speaker? What might someone who disagrees say, and what might their reasons be?

Research skills

There are all kinds of resources online and in books to help you, if you want to start to learn a little more about some of the philosophers you will meet in your A level course.

Activity 1

Use Wikipedia or a good encyclopaedia such as Britannica or the Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy as a starting point. Follow some of the links in the articles. You could do some research about:

- Plato
- Aristotle
- Aquinas
- Bentham
- Mill
- Hume
- Kant

Practice using a range of sources to find out about a single person. When you have gathered together a range of information, try to synthesise it into a single piece of writing of your own.

Activity 2

The BBC has some great podcasts available:

<https://www.bbc.co.uk/programmes/p01f0vzr>

They are quite long and heavyweight, so don't worry if this activity isn't for you.

Practice your note-making skills by pausing and writing a summary of what you've heard so far. Think about whether you agree with what the philosopher is saying.

Listen to whatever takes your interest. For RS specifically, you could concentrate on the starred topics and then move onto others from this list:

- Plato's Republic
- *Augustine
- *The Soul

- *Kant
- *Utilitarianism
- Nietzsche
- Al-Ghazali
- *St Thomas Aquinas
- The Ontological Argument
- *Redemption
- *Relativism
- William James
- *Duty
- *Good and Evil
- Altruism
- *Feminism
- *Evil
- Empiricism
- *David Hume
- Logical Positivism
- *Mill