

# Disputation Assignment Outline

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## Overview:

The Disputation is an argumentative writing style dating back to the early universities. It found its classic expression in the *Summa Theologicæ* of St. Thomas Aquinas. It consists of five parts:

1. A narrowly defined question, (I will provide these)
2. Summaries of the strongest arguments *against* the author's position,
3. Summaries of authoritative sources who agree with the author,
4. The author's argument and,
5. Responses to the counter arguments.

## Specific Requirements for my Class:

Disputations are to be of **no more than two pages in length**. They may be single- or double-spaced. No *Works Cited* page is required unless students makes use of sources that were not assigned for class. If this is provided, it may be on a third page. Citations of class resources may be done parenthetically and in brief [i.e.: (Russell, 47, Blackboard) or some other easily-read form].

## Evaluation:

Evaluation is made on five scales. Each Disputation is worth 100 points, 10% of the class grade.

## Rubric:

<b>Presentation</b>	1	2	3	4	5
This criterion evaluates writing style, clarity of prose, basic grammatical and spelling competence, sentence and paragraph flow.					
<b>Description of Sources</b>	1	2	3	4	5
This criterion evaluates the student's ability to describe in her or his own language the position of the theologians cited.					
<b>Comprehensiveness of Sources</b>	1	2	3	4	5
This criterion evaluates the student's breadth of sources used in composing essays.					
<b>Critical Engagement with Sources</b>	1	2	3	4	5
This criterion examines whether a student's work has taken the step beyond mere description and critically engaged with the sources she or he has drawn upon by subjecting them to a critical theological analysis.					
<b>Development of Position and a Coherent Theme</b>	1	2	3	4	5
This criterion determines not only if a student has critically assessed the sources and arguments present in an essay, but also if he or she has done this through the development of her or his own coherent position.					

**Example Disputation:**

*(This is somewhat shorter than what you will write, but gives an impression of the various parts of the disputation and their role in the piece).*

**Is God a Large Man with a Beard?**

**It would seem that** God is a large man with a beard because many pictures of God exist which depict him in this way. These pictures exist from many countries and centuries, so the idea is rather widespread.

**It would further seem** that God is a large man with a beard because he is depicted in this way in the book of Daniel. The depiction of the “Ancient of Days” in Daniel 7, he is a large, old man, seated on a throne. Further, St. Thomas Aquinas identifies the Ancient of Days with the Person of the Father (Summa Theologica III.59.1 obj 2, ad 2).

**On the other hand**, St. Thomas also claims that God is simple (I. Q3). If God is simple, than he does not have a body and cannot have a beard or be a man. Further, because God is eternal, he is not in time, and cannot be called old.

**I answer that** God is not an old man with a beard. The great Christian tradition insists on God’s distinction from creation. Because God is not part of creation, we must use analogous language for describing God, which means that we have to use images of God (like the Ancient of Days) to say things about God that while true, cannot be applied univocally. While St. John the Divine argues that Christians can make icons of God because of the incarnation, he maintains the prohibition on idolatry. To say that God is an old man with a beard would be to make God a part of creation who would be neither simple nor eternal. This would violate the prohibition on idolatry. To say that God is an old man with a beard is also to invite the ridicule of Christian faith. This is so obviously false that the fact that it appears that some Christians believe God to be such an old man is a regular objection offered by Atheists to the Christian faith.

**Response to first objection:** These images act as icons of God which point to theological truths about God without meaning to imply that this is how God actually looks. Because God chooses to be present to his people in the incarnation and the sacraments, such limited depictions can avoid idolatry, but must be considered to be limited.

**Response to second objection:** The same can be said of verbal depictions of God that is said of images. The Ancient of Days in Daniel 7 is a vision of God. It should be read as analogous language, not as a univocal description of God as an old man with a beard.