The Great Questions Requirement

I. Introduction

By the end of their junior year, students wishing to graduate with University Honors must have completed the Great Question Essay (described more completely below). This essay is the capstone to a program of study that begins with HONRS 120, Introduction to the Great Questions; proceeds through the three interdisciplinary University courses (UNIV 291, 292, 293); and culminates in HONRS 320, The Great Questions Tutorial, in which the student writes and submits for approval the final essay.

In other words, the Great Questions Requirement is more than the Great Question Essay. The classes you take will teach, model, and let you practice developing the knowledge, skills, and disposition you will need to write the essay. The essay, therefore, provides evidence that you have, in fact, learned these things, especially the requisite disposition towards the search for truth and understanding that will be the crowning achievement of this requirement.

II. The Great Question Essay Prompt

The Concept

The “Great Questions” essay is your opportunity to explore a “big question” of particular interest to you. By “Great Questions,” we mean the big questions every discipline at the university addresses in some way and no one discipline can fully answer. Some of these are old, frequently posed questions for which the answer has proven maddeningly elusive (e.g., the question of justice, of human agency and freedom, of our relationships with and obligations toward each other, other forms of life, and the physical world in which we live.) Others have emerged more recently, often provoked by new discoveries and developments in technology (e.g., questions of medical ethics, use of natural resources, including very powerful ones like nuclear energy, etc.). These kinds of questions lie behind many, if not all, of the more focused questions that drive our research and teaching. Behind every question you study—and therefore, every bit of knowledge you learn here—is a bigger question, which itself stands in front of an even bigger question, and so forth. Moreover, at an LDS sponsored university, Great Questions are the kinds of questions we wouldn’t dream of asking, much less answering, outside our understanding of the restored gospel of Jesus Christ.

The Basic Details

The Great Question Essay is a substantial, challenging, and exciting piece of work on a Great Question of your choice (and approved by the Honors Program). Please confine yourself to one Great Question, though it is perfectly fine—and sometimes necessary—to briefly consider other broad questions that bear on your discussion. The essay should be 15-25 pages, double-spaced. There is no template to follow, but the essay should meet the expectations and follow the conventions typical of high-quality academic writing: correct
grammar, clear sentence structure, effective organization, intelligent and accurate word choice (including the use of technical terms where needed or appropriate), mature awareness of and sensitivity to audience, proper attribution to and complete citation of sources, etc.

To give you the chance to represent the quality and breadth of your University Honors education, we require that the essay should examine your Great Question from a perspective that combines 3 different disciplinary perspectives. Select a discipline from each of the following 3 disciplinary groupings (broadly conceived):

- Arts, Communications, and Humanities
- Social Sciences, Business, and Education
- Science (including Nursing), Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics (the STEM disciplines)

We ask you NOT to treat these disciplinary perspectives as isolated from each other; that is, as separate sub-sections in the essay. We want you to integrate as much as possible the understanding that each has contributed to the approach you take to your Great Question. We know that there will need to be places where you discuss, for instance, the science behind or the cultural context of the issue you’re exploring. But you will best demonstrate your hard-won understanding of this issue in the way that you can synthesize and, where appropriate, evaluate what you’ve learned from your research. **The unity of your essay lies in this understanding of the Great Question you’ve gained, not in a summation of different discipline-based takes on the question.**

Think of it this way: borrowing terms from biology (who, in turn, borrowed them from non-biological usages), The Great Question Essay should be a hybrid, not a chimera. A hybrid is the child, as it were, of two very different kinds of parents. Shasta, the liger, with whom Dr. Parry grew up in Salt Lake City’s Hogle Zoo (he was in the next cage over) is a hybrid—one parent was a lion and the other was a tiger, two genetically distinct animals. Shasta was a liger, not exactly a new kind of animal, but one that synthesized the genetic pools from which she came. A chimera is an organism that has two or more genetically distinct cell populations in them. The two sets of DNA don’t mix, but are preserved as distinct in the organism. This can mean, for instance, that a chimeric animal might have one organ that has the DNA from one set, and another organ has the set from the other. Like the mythical centaur or griffin, it is a patchwork combination of its two parents. We want you to try to create a liger, not a griffin (and this time there are 3 parents?!).

**The Purpose**

Your purpose in writing the essay is to build understanding both with respect to how we currently think about certain aspects of your question, and also how we might think about those aspects in a better way. Further, your essay is not a call for a certain action, but rather a guide to lead us in the thinking and reasoning that we all need to do before we act.
As you already have learned or will learn from your experience in Honors, your choice of subject—your Great Question—is broad, complex, and inherently resistant to easy, simple answers. In fact, the answers that humans individually and collectively have offered to these questions never seem to outlive the questions themselves. The purpose of your essay, therefore, is not to provide a comprehensive answer to a big question. Nor is it necessarily to center your topic in the biggest and broadest version of your questions. The really big, big question is, rather, the top of a great chain of questions, with the biggest and broadest on the top moving down through an increasingly narrow series of questions that follow. We want you to narrow your question a step or two to, for example, “how or to what extent should we use nuclear energy to improve human life?” rather than, “how or to what extent should we use the physical material and resources of our world to improve human life?” But again, we’d like you to remember and keep in view the larger question(s) that—to use a different metaphor—form the horizon of the closer, more focused question you pose in the essay.

But again, even with a somewhat more focused Great Question, providing a comprehensive answer is still an impossible task. So your purpose in writing on nuclear energy, for example, would be to build understanding of how we currently think about nuclear energy, and also how we might think about those aspects in a better way. You might explore some of the many implications that result from the way we currently understand this issue. You may spend much of your time thinking about what’s at stake with the question you’ve taken up. You might explore the ways in which we don’t think about this question in any uniform or even consistent way—the question of using nuclear energy can’t really be asked outside of the different cultural, political, and generational contexts that surround it. The implications, the stakes, and the contexts need to be evaluated and understood, but you’ll probably have time to explore only one or two of them.

**The Audience**

Your audience is what we’ll call the “educated public.” By this we mean an audience who, through a college education (hopefully), post-high school or employment-based training, and/or self-education, have acquired the background, general understanding, and openness to intellectual inquiry that our contemporary society depends upon to discuss openly and deliberate together on matters of current interest and importance. This audience will not necessarily have much technical background or expertise on the subject you pursue, but they know enough to be able to tell if your thinking makes sense and if you have backed up your essay with solid research. To be sure, everyone in your audience will have certain attitudes and biases that make them different from each other. We expect you to respect the diversity of life experiences, cultures, family situations, and beliefs (religious and political), of your audience. We also remind you that you live in the kind of democratic society that does not require or even assume sameness of beliefs and backgrounds from its members, even granting the freedom of speech to those who aggressively insist (within the bounds of the law) that their beliefs should be everyone’s. We encourage and, indeed, insist that you be a fair, balanced, and intelligent voice in the human conversation.
The Timing

Ideally, you’ll complete the Great Questions essay during your junior year as the capstone to your Honors coursework. This essay will involve individual research, multiple drafts, and therefore a substantial amount of time. We’ve made time for you to do that research, writing, and rewriting by creating HONRS 320, the Great Questions Tutorial. Whatever preliminary research you can do before you take this class will be helpful to you, but we intend for this course to be the time you need to do most, if not all, of your work on the Great Question Essay. You will meet as a class only a few times, but you will be asked to check in periodically with the course instructor and our Honors Writing Consultants for guidance and progress reviews. You will also be directed to consult with faculty members who have expertise in the disciplines you’re exploring in the essay. But otherwise, you will spend most of your time for this 3-credit course (3 hours/week for every credit earned = 9 hours/week) researching, writing, and rewriting.

III. Advice and Admonitions

The Essay Genre

We’ve called this the Great Question Essay for a reason. We use the term “essay” at the university to talk about a variety of academic writing genres. Perhaps the most familiar one to you is the “5-paragraph essay” you were taught in high school and that many of your college instructors still require you to follow: the introductory paragraph that often begins with “Since the beginning of time” (or something similarly omniscient), narrows down to a definite thesis statement that you will prove in three parts (one for each of the following three paragraphs), and finally a concluding paragraph that reviews what you said more concisely and ends with a catchy or grandly profound last sentence. This is NOT the kind of essay we mean here.

By “essay” we want to signal that this form of writing is more about exploring a question or topic than proving an answer. The essay is an old genre. We often trace it back to the great French writer Michel de Montaigne who, in the late 16th century, wrote a treasure trove of “essais” — “attempts” at thinking through a variety of issues, both timely and timeless. But we can also see this type of writing-as-exploring in the kind of meditative writing that philosophers and religious thinkers were doing long before Montaigne. Nevertheless, Montaigne was a master at writing as a form of thinking — as a genuine attempt to reason intelligently through a question or problem to a more satisfying conception of or insight into not just the “is” of human existence (reality, how things work), but also the “ought”: what should we do, how should we change, what should we confront and critique in the lives and world we’ve made for ourselves. To be sure, the Great Question Essay is a search for meaning and truth. The key term here is search. Check out a few of Montaigne’s essays to see how he makes this approach work.
The Connections

You are, therefore, welcome, but not required, to convey this notion of seeking, looking for a way—perhaps a better way than we now have—towards truth and understanding in the very organization of the essay. However, the trajectory of this essay should by no means be random. The most interesting essays will be exactly that: interesting because the journey is as meaningful as the destination. What makes something interesting is that it rings true, or at least possibly true, and that this “something” enhances, rather than detracts from, the sense of wonder that is fundamental to learning. Now, we don’t bring Montaigne to your attention because we want you to simply imitate him (and there are many other essay writers we could also have brought up). Nor are we asking you to write a work of creative non-fiction, which is an important genre in creative writing. But we hope that your essay can, like Montaigne’s and others’, follow an itinerary through a topic that makes its way via often surprising and striking byways.

The byways we have in mind represent connections you have made between the disciplines you take up in the essay that led you to a new kind of understanding that is not possible without the contributions of each of those three different disciplines. The connections between these disciplines need to be compelling and logical. However, there is no one logic that determines all the ways in which we usefully and productively think through our questions. But we’re asking you to try, in the spirit of what we described above, to create a “hybrid” logic for your Great Question. The steps you take within this hybrid logic make connections possible that may, indeed, surprise many of your readers, but that is because they may have not looked where and how you have looked to find these connections. Moreover, you are going to show not only how your particular connections help us understand the Great Question you’ve chosen and its possible answers, but also how this kind of interdisciplinary search for understanding yields valuable results in its own right.

The Examples

There are, unfortunately, not many essays out there that completely exemplify what we’re asking you to produce. Nevertheless, there are many places to look that will show you at least one or two of the things we’re asking you to do. The writing that one encounters in some of the very elite magazines of today, like The New Yorker or Smithsonian Magazine, are wonderful examples of good, smart writing. There is much careful research behind the articles, and they are expressed in a sophisticated, but accessible kind of prose that makes reading them as pleasurable as learning from them. The articles in these kinds of magazines often present a kind of report of where we are (and why) in our understanding of current issues and problems that could serve as a model for that particular task in your essay.

The New Yorker and other quality magazines like it, such as The Atlantic and Harper’s, may often lean towards issues with a particular political slant, but readers of these magazines expect the writers to do their homework, to set the stage for whatever political or cultural commentary they perform with a sound, thorough, and factual account of the background
and context for the topic they address. *Smithsonian Magazine* tends to produce articles that examine an issue from a particular disciplinary perspective (and some of these issues, like climate change, have unfortunately been politicized). But it also is a good example of a kind of public scholarship in these disciplines—an approach that, like your essay, can talk about specialized, technical matters based on careful research, but do so with a style and vocabulary that is suited to the “educated public” audience we’ve asked you to target. As you know, science is perhaps the most difficult discipline to talk about without using a technical vocabulary, but you could, for example, take a look at the kind of science articles that *The New York Times* produces to get a sense of how people can talk about science in an interesting and accessible way. We highly recommend that you read several articles from these kinds of magazines and national newspapers (including those that might take a different political or cultural perspective than your own) to see good models of the kind of writing we’re asking you to do.

**The Disciplines**

We know that it is no easy task to do research in the discipline you’re still learning and then to do so in two others that you may only know at an introductory level. We don’t expect you to become masters of all three disciplines. But we anticipate that you will choose your own discipline as one of the three, and we know that this discipline may very well end up being a kind of anchor to your essay. You don’t have to spend equal time (pages) on each discipline. At the same time, with some careful work and guidance, we know that you will be able to engage and respond intelligently and substantively to the more unfamiliar disciplines. However, we discourage you from taking up a discipline only to contend with or dismiss it. Every discipline at the university plays a role in shaping our current understanding of the Great Questions, and every discipline can make an important contribution to helping us increase and improve that understanding.

**The Values-Based Approach**

Please avoid topics that are essentially matters of faith and doctrine, religious or political. This essay is not a place for activist politics. However, we hope that you—where appropriate—will advocate for the deepest values and morals that animate our doctrines and practices at BYU and in The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-Day Saints (and should animate our social beliefs and behavior), rather than advocating for our specific and unique doctrines, beliefs, or practices. At the same time, we recognize that many people politicize or moralize certain topics that are more properly questions for reasoned examination or debate, informed by a strong moral sensibility and grounded in careful, thorough analysis, review, and evaluation of evidence. Essays that help us think reasonably and intelligently through the ways in which our personal interests, our biases and prejudices, can skew or oversimplify our understanding of current issues and problems are very welcome.