

A Short Guide to Writing Research Papers in Biblical Studies and Theology

The following notes and references are meant to help you to organize and compose a traditional academic research paper in biblical studies or related theological topics. You may find the basic sequence and resources helpful in other disciplines, too, especially in religious studies, philosophy, and historical studies. Short or long, your research paper can be crafted in five steps:

1. Choosing a Topic

Your topic may be chosen for you, but, if not, aim for one that is (1) interesting to you, (2) manageable (with readily available sources) and malleable (so you can narrow in on an especially interesting or important aspect), and (3) arguable. Your research paper will essentially be an argument based on the available primary and secondary sources and authorities.

Specific topics might be suggested by points in the chapters of *The Rise of Christian Beliefs*, by questions posed in your classroom, by the further readings, by your own religious or historical interests, or others. For example, in the area of New Testament studies, such topics as these might suggest themselves:

Taxation in Galilee at the Time of Jesus

The “Teacher of Righteousness” in the Dead Sea Scrolls

The Roman Emperor Cult in the First Century

Resurrection Appearances in the New Testament

The Empty Tomb in the Gospels

The Activity of the Spirit in the Ministry of Jesus

Political Implications of Jesus’ Proclamation of the Kingdom of God

Paul’s Avoidance of the Terms *Repentance* and *Forgiveness*

Paul’s Concept of the Resurrected Body

The Q Community

Matthew and the Didache

Eternal Punishment in the Gospel of Matthew

“The Fall” in the New Testament

“The Resurrection Has Already Taken Place” (2 Timothy 2:18)

“Proclamation to the Spirits in Prison” in 1 Peter 3:19

“The Jews” in the Gospel of John

Sin as Enslaving Power in the Letters of Paul

Universal Salvation in the New Testament

Paul’s Vision of Jesus in Acts and in Galatians

The Designated Messiah in the Book of Acts

Justification by Works in the Letter of Romans?

Psalm 110:1 in the New Testament

Expulsion from the Synagogue in the Gospel of John

1 Corinthians 5:1-8 and Paul’s Sexual Ethics

Bishops in the New Testament

The “Woman Clothed with the Sun” in the Book of Revelation

Marcion’s Canon

Resources for Choosing a Topic and Beginning a Research Paper

Print resources

Booth, Wayne, Gregory C. Colomb, and Joseph M. Williams. *The Craft of Research*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995.

Kennedy, J. *Library Research Guide to Religion and Theology: Illustrated Search Strategy and Sources*. 2d ed. Ann Arbor: Pieran, 1984.

Luey, Beth. *Handbook for Academic Authors*. 3rd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.

Preece, Roy. *Starting Research: An Introduction to Academic Research and Dissertation Writing*. New York: St. Martin’s, 1994.

2. Researching Your Topic

Material about your topic may reside in a single text or an array of texts by several authors or in the conflicting opinions of contemporary theologians. In most cases, you can build your research by moving from general to specific treatments of your topic.

One caution: In your research, it is vital that you not allow your expanding knowledge of what others think about your topic to drown your own curiosities, sensibilities, and insights. Instead, as your initial questions expand then diminish with increased knowledge from your research, your own deeper concerns, insights, and point of view should emerge and grow.

A. Consult Standard Sources and Build Bibliography

Encyclopedia articles, biblical commentaries, theological dictionaries, concordances, and other standard theological reference tools contain a wealth of material-and helpful bibliographies-to orient you in your topic and its historical or theological context. Look for the best, most authoritative, and up-to-date treatments. Checking cross-references will deepen your knowledge. Some of the most widely used resources, available in most college libraries, are:

Encyclopedia of Religion. Mircea Eliade, ed., et al. 16 vols. New York: Macmillan, 1993.

Oxford Dictionary of the Christian Church. F. L. Cross and E. A. Livingstone, eds. 3rd ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 1997.

New Encyclopedia of Judaism. Geoffrey Wigoder, ed., et al. New York: New York University Press, 2002.

Encyclopedia of Early Christianity. Everett Ferguson, ed. 2nd ed. New York: Garland, 1998.

New Catholic Encyclopedia. Edited by the Catholic University of America. 18 vols. plus supplements. McGraw-Hill, 1967-.

Encyclopedia of Theology: The Concise Sacramentum Mundi. Karl Rahner, ed. New York: Seabury, 1975.

Multipurpose Tools for Bible Study. Frederick W. Danker. Rev. and exp. ed. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1993.

Anchor Bible Dictionary. David Noel Freedman, ed., et al. 6 vols. New York: Doubleday, 1992.

Women's Bible Commentary. Carol A. Newsom and Sharon H. Ringe, eds. Exp. ed. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998.

Harper Collins Bible Commentary. James L. Mays, gen. ed., et al. Rev. ed. San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 2000.

Harper Collins Bible Dictionary. Paul J. Achtemeier, gen. ed., et al. Rev. ed. San Francisco: Harper San Francisco, 1996.

Theological Dictionary of the New Testament. Gerhard Kittel and Gerhard Friedrich. Trans. Geoffrey W. Bromiley. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1985.

Theological Dictionary of the Old Testament. G. Johannes Botterweck and Helmer Ringgren. Trans. John T. Willis. Rev. ed. 10 vols. Grand Rapids, Mich.: Eerdmans, 1977.

Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible. G. A. Buttrick, gen. ed., et al. Nashville: Abingdon, 1976.

The New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible. Katharine Doob Sakenfeld, gen. ed., et al. Nashville: Abingdon, 2006–.

An excellent additional listing of “Aids for the Study of Theology,” including source collections, histories, major theologies from all periods, dictionaries and encyclopedias, and collections of creeds and confessions, appears in *Christian Theology*, after the Introduction.

Online: Although not all Web sources meet scholarly standards, some very good theological reference tools do appear online. Some of them are collected or linked here:

- “Glossary of Theological Terms” for student use from Blackwell Publishers: www.blackwellpublishers.co.uk/religion/glossary.jsp.
- “Dictionary of Theology,” from Christian Apologetics and Research Ministry: www.carm.org/dictionary.htm.
- “Dictionary of Modern Western Theology,” from Wesley Wildman’s site at Boston University: www.bu.edu/people/wwildman/WeirdWildWeb/courses/mwt/dictionary/mwt_theology.htm.
- Mark Goodacre’s “New Testament Gateway,” a wealth of links to the best NT-related sites: www.ntgateway.com.
- “Scholarly Collections” on the Web have been linked by Douglas E. Oakman at www.plu.edu/~oakmande.
- “Theologians,” short biographical and intellectual profiles: www.island-of-freedom.com.
- “Theologians,” with links to biographies, bibliographies, and online writings: www.theology.ie/theologs.htm.

- “Theology and Religion Resources,” a compendium of links to journals, bibliographies, and institutions, collected and reviewed by Alistair McGrath, Oxford University: www.blackwellpublishers.co.uk/religion.

It’s wise to start listing the sources you’ve consulted right away in standard bibliographical format (see section 5, below, for examples of usual formats). Assigning a number to each one facilitates easy reference later in your work.

B. Check Periodical Literature

Even if you are writing on a single biblical or historical text, you’ll be able to place your interpretation in contemporary context only by referring to what other scholars in this generation are saying. Their work is largely published in academic journals and periodicals. In consulting the chief articles dealing with your topic, you’ll learn where agreements, disagreements, and open questions stand, how older treatments have fared, and the latest relevant tools and insights. Since you cannot consult them all, work back from the latest, looking for the best and most directly relevant articles from the last five, ten, or twenty years, as ambition and time allow.

The place to start is the ATLA Religion Database, which indexes articles, essays, book reviews, dissertations, theses, and even essays in collections. You can search by keywords, subjects, persons, or scripture references. Other standard indexes to periodical literature, most in print but some now available on CD-ROM or on the Internet, include:

Religion Index One/Two

Religious and Theological Abstracts

Readers’ Guide to Periodical Literature (Net, CD)

New Testament Abstracts, 1956—

Old Testament Abstracts, 1978—

Dissertation Abstracts International (Net, CD)

Catholic Periodical and Literature Index, 1930-

Humanities Index (Net, CD)

Online resources are less systematically available and up-to-date. But you can find links and some full articles and bibliographies online. Guides to the many religious studies and theological websites are housed at:

“Religion on the World Wide Web”: www.virginia.edu/~relig/links.html.

“Wabash Center Guide to Internet Resources for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion”: www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/Internet/front.htm .

C. Research the Most Important Books and Primary Sources

By now you can also identify the most important books for your topic, both primary and secondary. Primary sources are actual historical sources that provide data for interpretation: the Bible, the Dead Sea Scrolls, the Pseudepigrapha, Philo, Josephus, and other classical sources, for example. Secondary sources are all the articles or books that analyze or interpret primary sources. Your research topic might be in a single primary source, with countless secondary commentaries, analyses, or interpretations. Conversely, your primary resources may be vast—the polled opinions of thousands of people, a collection of slave narratives, or all the instances of a philosophical term in medieval treatises—with hardly another researcher in sight who has cultivated expertise in or even expressed mild interest in your topic.

Apart from books you’ve identified through the other sources you’ve consulted, you can find the chief works on any topic readily listed in:

- Your college or university library’s catalog
- The Library of Congress Subject Index at catalog.loc.gov.
- Other online library catalog sites. Many theological libraries and archives are linked at the “Religious Studies Web Guide”: www.ucalgary.ca/~lipton/catalogues.html. Some of the best are:
 - Blais: Online Catalog of the Libraries of the Claremont Colleges: blais.claremont.edu/search .
 - Yale University Divinity School Library: www.library.yale.edu/div/divhome.htm .

The eventual quality of your research paper rests entirely on the quality or critical character of your sources. The best research uses academically sound treatments by recognized authorities arguing rigorously from primary sources.

D. Taking Notes

With these sources on hand—whether primary or secondary, whether in books or articles or Web sites or polling data—you can review each source, noting down its most important or relevant facts, observations, or opinions. Each point or cluster of points is put on a separate note card, keyed to a main bibliographical card for that source. As a memory aid for you, the main bibliographic card or entry for each source can also include a thumbnail sketch of its argument or import or point of view. Take notes only on the relevant portions of secondary sources, or you’ll quickly be stoned to death with minutiae.

While students still use index cards to record their notes, a carefully constructed set of computer notes or files, retrievable by topic or source name or number, can be just as helpful. Either way—cards or computer—you’ll need for each notable point to identify:

- the subtopic
- the source
- the main idea or quote

This practice will allow you to redistribute each card or point to wherever it is needed in your eventual outline.

E. Note or Quote?

While most of the notes you take will simply summarize points made in primary or secondary sources, direct quotes are used for (1) word-for-word transcriptions, (2) key words or phrases coined by the author, or (3) especially clear or helpful or summary formulations of an author's point of view. Remember, re-presenting another's insight or formulation without attribution is plagiarism. You should also be sure to keep separate notes about your own ideas or insights into the topic as they evolve.

F. When Can I Stop?

As you research your topic in books, articles, or reference works, you will find it coalescing into a unified body of knowledge or at least into a set of interrelated questions. In most cases, your topic will become more and more focused, partly because that is where the open question or key insight or most illuminating instance resides, and partly for sheer manageability. The vast range of scholarly methods and opinions and sharply differing points of view about most the ological topics (especially in the contemporary period) may force you to settle for laying out a more circumscribed topic carefully. While the sources may never dry up, your increased knowledge gradually gives you confidence that you have the most informed, authoritative, and critical sources covered in your notes.

3. Outlining Your Argument

On the basis of your research findings, in this crucial step you refine or reformulate your general topic and question into a specific question answered by a defensible thesis or hypothesis. You then arrange or rework your supporting materials into a clear outline that will coherently and convincingly present your thesis to your reader.

First, review your research notes carefully. Some of what you initially read now seems obvious or irrelevant, or perhaps the whole topic is simply too massive. But, as your reading and note-taking progressed, you might also have found a piece of your topic, from which a key question or problem has emerged and around which your research has gelled. Ask yourself:

- What is the subtopic or subquestion that is most interesting, enlightening, and manageable?
- What have been the most clarifying and illuminating insights I have found into the topic?

- In what ways have my findings contradicted my initial expectations? Can this serve as a clue to a new and different approach to my question?
- Can I frame my question in a clear way, and, in light of my research, do I have something new to say and defend—my thesis or hypothesis—that will answer my question and clarify my materials?

In this way you will advance from topic and initial question to specific question and thesis.

For example, as you research primary and secondary sources on the rarity of the terms *repentance* and *forgiveness* in Paul's letters, you might conclude that these terms do not fit with Paul's understanding of the human predicament and that, for Paul, what is needed is not forgiveness but deliverance. So you have:

- Topic: Paul's General Avoidance of the Terms *Repentance* and *Forgiveness*
- Specific question: What metaphors for salvation did Paul find most helpful, and why?
- Thesis: Paul's conviction that human beings are in bondage to sin, death, and the law was incompatible with the concepts of repentance and forgiveness. His metaphors of salvation speak of divine initiative—justification, redemption, deliverance.

You can then outline a presentation of your thesis that marshals your research materials into an orderly and convincing argument. Functionally your outline might look like this:

1. Introduction. Raise the key question and announce your thesis.
2. Background. Present the necessary literary or historical or theological context of the question. Note the "state of the question" or the main agreements and disagreements about it.
3. Development. Present your own insight in a clear and logical way. Marshal evidence to support your thesis and develop it further by:
 - offering examples from your primary sources
 - citing or discussing authorities to bolster your argument
 - contrasting your thesis with other treatments, either historical or contemporary
 - confirming it by showing how it makes good sense of the data or answers related questions or solves previous puzzles.
4. Conclusion. Restate the thesis in a way that recapitulates your argument and its consequences for the field or the contemporary religious horizon.

The more detailed your outline, the easier will be your writing. Go through your cards, reorganizing them according to your outline. Fill in the outline with the specifics from your research, right down to the topic sentences of your paragraphs. Don't be shy about setting aside any materials that now seem off-point, extraneous, or superfluous to the development of your argument.

4. Writing Your Paper

You are now ready to draft your paper, essentially by putting your outline into sentence form while incorporating specifics from your research notes.

Your main task, initially, is just to get it down on paper in as straightforward a way as possible. Assume your reader is intelligent but knows little or nothing about your particular topic. You can follow your outline closely, but you may find that logical presentation of your argument requires adjusting the outline somewhat. As you write, weave in quotes judiciously from primary or secondary literature to clarify or punch your points. Add brief, strong headings at major junctures. Add footnotes to acknowledge ideas, attribute quotations, reinforce your key points through authorities, or refer the reader to further discussion or resources. Your draft footnotes might refer to your sources as abbreviated in source cards, with page numbers; you can add full publishing data once your text is firm.

5. Reworking Your Draft

Your rough draft puts you within sight of your goal, but your project's real strength emerges from reworking your initial text in a series of revisions and refinements. In this final phase, make frequent use of one of the many excellent style manuals available for help with grammar, punctuation, footnote form, abbreviations, etc.:

Gibaldi, Joseph. *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*. 4th ed. New York: Modern Language Association, 1995.

The Chicago Manual of Style. 14th ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993.

Turabian, Kate L. *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*. 6th ed. Rev. by John Grossman and Alice Bennett. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.

Williams, Joseph M. *Style: Toward Clarity and Grace*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993.

Alexander, Patrick H., et al., eds. *The SBL Handbook of Style: For Ancient Near Eastern, Biblical, and Early Christian Studies*. Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1999.

Online, see "General Problems Encountered in Undergraduate Papers":
www.plu.edu/~oakmande

Closely examine your work several times, paying attention to:

1. Structure and Argument. Do I state my question and thesis accurately? Does my paper do what my Introduction promised? (If not, adjust one or the other.) Do I argue my thesis well? Do the headings clearly guide the reader through my outline and argument? Does this sequence of topics orchestrate the insights my reader needs to understand my thesis?

2. Style. Style here refers to writing patterns that enliven prose and engage the reader. Three simple ways to strengthen your academic prose are:

- Topic sentences. Be sure each paragraph clearly states its main assertion.
- Active verbs. As much as possible, avoid using the linking verb, to be. Rephrase using active verbs.
- Sentence flow. Above all, look for awkward sentences in your draft. Disentangle and rework them into smooth, clear sequences. To avoid boring the reader, vary the length and form of your sentences. Check to see if your paragraphs unfold with some short sentences, questions, and simple declarative ones.

Likewise, tackle some barbarisms that frequently invade academic prose:

- Repetition. Unless you need the word count, this can go.
- Unnecessary words. Need we say more? Such filler as The fact that and in order to and There is/are numb your reader. Similarly, such qualifiers as somewhat, fairly, rather, very take the wind from the adjective that follows.
- Jargon. Avoid technical terms when possible. Explain all technical terms that you do use. Avoid or translate foreign-language terms.
- Overly complex sentences. Short sentences are best. Avoid compound-complex sentences and run-on sentences. Avoid etc.

3. Spelling, Grammar, Punctuation. Along with typographical errors, look for stealth errors, the common but overlooked grammatical gaffes: subject-verb disagreement, dangling participles, mixed verb tenses, over- and under-use of commas, semicolon use, and inconsistency in capitalization, hyphenation, italicization, or treatment of numbers. Miriam-Webster Online contains both the *Collegiate Dictionary* and *Thesaurus*: www.m-w.com/.

4. Footnotes. Your footnotes will give credit to your sources for every quote and for other people's ideas you have used. Here are samples of typical citation formats in Modern Language Association style:

Basic order:

Author's full name, Book Title, ed., trans., series, edition, vol. number (Place: Publisher, year), pages.

Book:

Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza, *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins* (New York: Crossroad, 1984), 29.

Book in a series:

Mark William Worthing, *God, Creation, and Contemporary Physics, Theology and the Sciences* (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996), ch. 3.

Edited book:

Kristen E. Kwam, Linda S. Schearing, and Valarie H. Ziegler, eds., *Eye and Adam: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Readings on Genesis and Gender* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999), 129-55.

Essay or chapter in an edited book:

Anthony J. Saldarini, "Judaism and the New Testament," *The New Testament and Its Modern Interpreters*, Eldon J. Epp and George W. MacRae, eds. (Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989), 27-54.

Multi-volume work:

Karl Rahner, "On the Theology of Hope," *Theological Investigations*, vol. 10 (New York: Herder and Herder, 1973), 250.

Journal article: David Shepherd, "Violence in the Fields? Translating, Reading, and Revising in Ruth 2." *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 63 (2001): 444-63.

Encyclopedia article:

Hans-Josef Klauck, "Lord's Supper," *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*, ed. David Noel Freedman, vol. 2 (New York: Doubleday, 1992), 275.

Unsigned encyclopedia article:

"Tyre," *Encarta 98 Encyclopedia*, CD ROM (Microsoft Systems, 1998).

Website source:

National Conference of Catholic Bishops, "On Same-Sex Marriages," *Origins* 26: 132-33.

For a full listing of citation styles for internet sources, see "Citation Style": www.bedfordstmartins.com/online/citex.html.

CD-ROM source:

Helmar Junghans, *Martin Luther: Exploring His Life and Times, 1483-1546*, CD ROM (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998).

Bible:

Cite in your text (not in your footnotes) by book, chapter, and verse: Gen 1:1-2; Exod 7:13; Rom 5:1-8. In your bibliography list the version of Bible you have used.

Repeated citations:

If a footnote cites the immediately preceding source, use *ibidem*, meaning "there," abbreviated:

61. *Ibid.*, 39.

Sources cited earlier can be referred to by author or editor's names, a shorter title, and page number:

62. Koester, *Introduction*, 42.

5. Bibliography. Your bibliography can be any of several types:

- Works Cited: just the works-books, articles, etc.-that appear in your footnotes
- Works Consulted: all the works you checked in your research, whether they were cited or not in the final draft
- Select Bibliography: primary and secondary works that, in your judgment, are the most important source materials on this topic, whether cited or not in your footnotes.

Some teachers might ask for your bibliographic entries to be annotated, i.e., to include a comment from you on the content, import, approach, and helpfulness of each work.

Bibliographic style differs somewhat from footnote style. Here are samples of typical bibliographic formats in MLA style:

Basic order: Author's last name, first name and initial. Book Title. Ed. Trans. Series. Edition. Vol. Place: Publisher, Year).

Book:

Schüssler Fiorenza, Elisabeth. *In Memory of Her: A Feminist Theological Reconstruction of Christian Origins*. New York: Crossroad, 1984.

Book in a series:

Worthing, Mark William. *God, Creation, and Contemporary Physics*. Theology and the Sciences. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1996.

Edited book:

Kwam, Kristen E., Linda S. Scheering, and Valarie H. Ziegler, eds. *Eve and Adam: Jewish, Christian, and Muslim Readings on Genesis and Gender*. Bloomington: Indiana University Press, 1999.

Essay or chapter in an edited book:

Saldarini, Anthony J. "Judaism and the New Testament." In *The New Testament and Its Modern Interpreters*. Ed. Eldon J. Epp and George W. MacRae. Philadelphia: Fortress Press, 1989.

Multi-volume work: Rahner, Karl. "On the Theology of Hope." In *Theological Investigations*, vol. 10. New York: Herder and Herder, 1973.

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David Shepherd, "Violence in the Fields? Translating, Reading, and Revising in Ruth 2." *Catholic Biblical Quarterly* 63 (2001), 444-63.

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Hans-Josef Klauck, "Lord's Supper." *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*. Ed. David Noel Freedman. Vol. 2. New York: Doubleday, 1992.

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"Tyre." *Encarta 98 Encyclopedia*. CD ROM. Microsoft Systems, 1998.

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For a full listing of citation styles for internet sources, see "Citation Style":
www.bedfordstmartins.com/online/citex.htm.

CD ROM source:

Helmar Junghans. *Martin Luther: Exploring His Life and Times, 1483-1546*. CD-ROM. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998.

Bible:

The Holy Bible: New Revised Standard Version. New York: Oxford University Press, 1989. After incorporating the revisions and refinements into your paper, print out a fresh copy, proofread it carefully, make final corrections, format it to your teacher's or institution's specifications, and print your final paper.