THE RESEARCH QUEST:
The Search for a Thesis

Detail of a miniature of a hermit at work on a manuscript, from the Estoire del Saint Graal, France (Saint-Omer or Tournai?), c. 1315 – 1325, Royal MS 14 E III, f. 6v
Certainly, there will be dangers (like missing deadlines and discovering that you are actually a gnostic heretic) and drudgeries along the way, but you can always find help - librarians ready with insight and tools - to speed you on your journey.
And, like a quest or an adventure, the point of a research paper ultimately is less about the end product than it is the process of getting there - what you learn and how you change along the way.

Edmund Leighton, *God Speed*, 1900
IN THE BEGINNING . . .
Starting a research paper can feel like the beginning of the creation story – like the earth, your blank page is “tohu vabohu – without form and void” and full of darkness
You know that you need a thesis – and possibly divine intervention – to help bring order to the chaos, but where and how can you find a thesis?
A thesis is an assertions about *something*. So to argue a thesis, you first need to know what you are making an assertion about. This is a matter of finding connections or intersections among:

- What you want to know (your interests, values),
- What you need to know (your assignment, course, or task at hand), and
- What you can know (your access to enough credible sources)
It is, appropriately, Trinitarian.

If you are having trouble thinking of a topic – feel free to stop by the library. We are always glad to help you brainstorm.
When selecting a topic for a research paper, please make sure it is something that interests you. Because if you don’t like it now, you really won’t like it at 2:00 am the morning before it’s due to be turned in.

“I tried to warn ye. I told ye not to choose ‘Joseph of Arimathea’ as your topic. But oh, no! You wouldn’t listen.”
ONCE YOU HAVE YOUR TOPIC, START ASKING QUESTIONS

“Oh man! What happened? How am I ever going to explain this?”
A THESIS IS A QUESTION REPHRASED AS AN ASSERTION.

? ➔ ! = Thesis

1. Ask a question about the topic.
2. Rephrase it as a statement.
3. That becomes your working thesis.
FOR EXAMPLE:
HOW IS IT THE CRUSADES AND ST. FRANCIS ARE BOTH EXPRESSIONS OF MEDIEVAL CHRISTIANITY?
Frame your thesis so that it is an appropriate size for the number of pages your assignment requires.

Divide the time you have to complete the assignment by the number of tasks you have to do to complete it.
In order to ask the kinds of questions that will help you form your thesis, you need to know something about your subject.
RESEARCH REQUIRES SOURCES
(DIRECT DIVINE ILLUMINATION IS UNFORTUNATELY NOT A COMMON OCCURRENCE)

St. Bridget's Eucharistic Vision, from St. Bridget of Sweden, Revelations and other texts, in Latin, Italy, Naples, Late 14th century
As you are doubtless aware, direct divine illumination is unfortunately not a common occurrence.

The Almighty seems to be content working through more mundane means, which means that choosing appropriate, authoritative sources is essential.

St. Bridget’s Eucharistic Vision, from St. Bridget of Sweden, Revelations and other texts, in Latin, Italy, Naples, Late 14th century
Like a good conversation, research is a give-and-take process of asking questions, going to sources for information, which leads to further questions and additional research FOREVER (not really – that is why God has graciously given us deadlines)
REMEMBER:
YOUR THESIS IS AN ASSERTION *BACKED BY RESEARCH*
(BOTH THE ASSERTION, AND THE RESEARCH ARE ESSENTIAL)
“Oh yes. He is the bishop. I read it on Wikipedia.”
ASK (FOR HELP), AND YE SHALL RECEIVE

Your librarians are here to help!

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Contact us any time at libraryiq@austinseminary.edu with any questions.