Research Papers 101

Overview

So you have to write a paper. Maybe you are thinking "I don't even know where to begin." Fear not! Here is a brief guide, or map, of the research process.

- Understanding Your Assignment – *What are you being asked to do? What kind of paper is this?*

- Identifying Your Topic and Working Thesis – *What are you going to write about? What do you want to say about it? Why does it matter?*

- Noting Types of Sources – *What can you know about this?*

- Finding Sources – *Where can you find this information?*

- Using Sources – *How do you use the information you found?*

- Citing Sources – *Where can your readers find the information you used?*

Understanding Your Assignment

What are you being asked to do? What kind of paper is this?

Seminary requires writing different kinds of papers:

- Exegesis papers – critical, close reading of a text (usually the Bible) to discern author's intent, and how the text might have been read and understood in its original context

- Research papers/argument papers – thesis-driven papers argued primarily on the basis of primary sources

- Reflection papers – thoughtful, orderly assessment of one's experience

- Book reviews – summary and evaluation of a book

o Sermons – (yeah, you probably know what these are)

It is important to know what kind of paper you are being asked to write, since each requires a different kind of argument and different kinds of sources (though the other steps outlined here broadly apply to most kinds of research)

For additional information, see

Understanding Writing Assignments (Purdue OWL)

describes some steps you can take to better understand the requirements of your writing assignments

Research Paper (University of Minnesota)

takes you through the entire process of writing a research paper, including selecting a topic and drafting your thesis

Identifying Your Topic and Working Thesis

What are you going to write about? What do you want to say about it? Why does it matter?

- Your *topic* is what you are writing about (duh). This could be First Corinthians 3:1-11 (if you are writing an exegesis paper) or "Augustine's Understanding of Original Sin."
    - o Sometimes a topic may be assigned to you – write an exegesis paper on 1 Sam 6:1-3 or write a book review of *Being as Communion*
    - o Sometimes you need to find your own topic; this is a matter of triangulating
        - Something you **need to know** (e.g., something about church history)
        - Something you **want to know** (basketball)
        - Something you **can know** through research (we do not really know whether St. Jerome was good at dunking or making 3 pointers)

- Your *thesis* is the main point you want to make about your topic, stated as an assertion that answers a question about your topic:

    o "What does 1 Cor. 3:1-11 tell us about Paul's relationship with other apostles?"

    o *In 1 Cor 3:1-11, Paul makes clear that although the Corinthians used association with various apostles as a basis for factionalism, Paul himself happily commandeered the efforts of other apostles under his overarching vision of the gospel*

- Your *working thesis* is sort of like a hypothesis: it's an initial hunch that you will test against evidence (your sources)

For additional information, see

Brainstorming (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill)

outlines several different brainstorming strategies to help you begin researching.

Choosing a Topic (Purdue University)

helps you to choose a topic so you can more effectively research.

Choosing and Narrowing Research Topics (YouTube - peakdavid)

This short (6:33) video discusses how to choose and narrow your topic.

How to Write a Thesis Statement (Indiana University)

describes the importance of, and explains how to construct, a strong thesis statement

Weak and Strong Thesis Statements (YouTube - Kate O'Neill)

uses examples from Harry Potter to demonstrate the qualities of strong and weak thesis statements.

Noting Types of Sources

What can you know about this?

There are three types of sources:

- Primary sources – first-hand accounts, original documents, artifacts from the relevant time and place
    - The text you are studying
    - Works written by your subject or a close associate or at the time an event took place
    - Artifacts and objects from that time/place
- Secondary sources – later interpretations based on researching primary sources (e.g., a commentary)
- Tertiary sources – dictionaries, encyclopedias, indexes – things that help you find and contextualize primary (and secondary) sources

Finding Sources

Where can you find this information?

Guides on Using Specific Research Tools

Sophi Search: Books, e-books, articles, and more

- [Sophi Search help page](#)
- Books
    - [Library maps](#)
    - [Finding books by topic](#)
    - [How to find books in other libraries](#) (PDF)

- o Link to information on borrowing and renewing books on Using the Library page
- o Link to page with information on ILL?
- E-books [NB – these may need to be revised]
  - o Downloading and using e-books (PDF)
  - o Finding and reading e-books online (PDF)
  - o E-book FAQ

Atla Religion Database (*the* most important tool for finding scholarly journal articles on the Bible, religion, theology, etc.)

- Guide to Atla (PDF)
- Introduction to Atla
- Atla: Using (but not abusing) Your (Loyal, Royal) Subjects
- Atla Scripture Search (it can save your life, or at least your exegesis grade)
- Saving and citing in Atla

Bible Software

- Accordance Bible Software (will need to create; link to tertiary level page?)
- Bibleworks
  - o BibleWorks is a Bible research software package that allows you to access over 190 Bible translations, 35 original language texts and morphology databases, 29 lexical-grammatical references, and many other practical reference works.

    Bibleworks Homepage
  - o Bibleworks Tutorial (Princeton Theological Seminary)
  - o Bibleworks User Forum

[Credo Reference](#)

- [How to run a basic search](#)

- [How to find a book (in Credo Reference)](#)

Free Theological Web Resources [link to subpage]

Other databases

- [Biblical Archaeology Society Library](#)

- [EBSCO databases](#)

- [Hein Online](#)

- [JSTOR: Religion and Theology archive collection](#)

- [Oxford Biblical Studies Online](#)

- [TexShare Databases](#)

Other helpful guides

- [Finding and Accessing Austin Seminary DMin Projects](#) (PDF)

- [Finding Sermons](#) in the Stitt collections

- [FullText@AustinSeminary: Linking your Google Scholar account to Stitt Library](#) (PDF)

- [Finding free-to-use images for presentations and papers](#) (PDF)

- [Finding articles in newspapers and popular magazines](#) (PDF)

Search strategies

[Subject vs. Keyword Searching](#) (North Kentucky University)

This handout from North Kentucky University outlines the differences between subject and keyword searching.

[Searching Effectively Using AND, OR, NOT](#) (Colorado State University)

This tutorial from Colorado State University Libraries explains to users how to use Boolean logic (AND, OR, NOT) to construct effective search queries. **(Requires Adobe Flash)**

[Boolean Searching (AND, OR, NOT)](#) (University of Alaska - Fairbanks)

This web page from the University of Alaska - Fairbanks concisely outlines what Boolean searching is and how it can be of use to you.

Using Sources

How do you use the information you found?

- Primary Sources
    - Primary sources are the heart and soul of research.
    - Primary sources are foundational; they provide basis upon which you build your thesis.
    - This requires close reading, informed by the background and contextual information gleaned from tertiary sources, and detailed analysis.
- Tertiary sources
    - Help introduce, contextualize, and lead to relevant primary sources
    - Tertiary sources are like a map: use them to get a broad overview of your topic and for contextual and background information.
    - This will help spark questions such as "in what ways did the English Civil War affect the CofE's response to Wesley?" or "Why was the 13th cent RCC able to successfully integrate reform movements like the Dominicans and Franciscans, whereas the 16th cent RCC was unable to do so?"

- o Secondary sources
    - ▪ Interpret primary sources.
    - ▪ Serve as conversation partners.

Like a good conversation, research is a give-and-take process of looking at the information provided by primary sources, expressing your own ideas, and allowing others (other secondary sources) to offer their own interpretations in ways that either challenge or confirm your ideas, compelling you to re-evaluate them.

This is why it is essential to base your research on direct interaction with primary sources, and to keep going back to your primary sources, so when you enter into the conversation with other researchers and interpreters, you will have something to say, and a basis for saying it.

Citing Sources

Where can your readers find the information you used?

- • [Finding and using the Chicago Manual of Style](#) (PDF)

Ask (for help) and Ye Shall Receive

- • Contact us any time at libraryiq@austinseminary.edu with any questions.
- • For additional help with writing for Seminary classes, see the [Theological Writing Resources page](#)
- • For help with off-campus access to library resources, see [Off-campus Access to Library Resources](#)