**WHAT TOOLS DO I NEED TO KNOW HOW TO USE**

**FOR THEOLOGICAL RESEARCH?**

**WRITING AN ACCEPTABLE RESEARCH PAPER**

The goals of a good research paper are: 1) to understand different methodologies/viewpoints of the particular issues that arise from the topic under study; 2) to critically interact with the scholars to show their strengths and weaknesses; 3) to organize facts into a logical sequence which demonstrates the writer's command of the subject; and 4) to draw conclusions from your study of the topic. The following steps will help you accomplish these goals.

Step 1: The selection of a topic

Usually, the topics will be provided by the instructor in the syllabus. The only decision left to the students will be to decide which topic is of interest to them. The selection of the topic should occur by the second week of the semester.

Step 2: Narrowing the focus of the topic

Normally, the given topics have a broad range of issues within them. For example, if you were to choose the topic of the rapture, you would find that several issues exist within this topic. One aspect would be the extent of the rapture. If you chose this aspect of the rapture topic, you would examine whether or not all Christians would ascend in the rapture or only those who are watching and waiting for the Lord's return. Another aspect for a research paper would be an examination of the distinction of the rapture passages from the second coming passages. A third aspect contained in the rapture topic is the timing of the rapture. The student could critique a particular pre-, mid-, or post-tribulation rapture position. To write on the whole topic of the rapture would produce a paper that is too general and would not require any in-depth research.

Some initial research will be necessary to determine the area on which you would like to concentrate within your topic. You should have this done by the third week of the semester.

Step 3: Dig deeply into your specific area

The research paper should go into the appropriate depth for college or graduate level study in this specific area. This will require time to find appropriate articles and read extensively on your subject. Your goal is to find out all there is to know on the issue. Quite often I am asked how many sources should be used in a research paper. My answer is, "As many as it takes to find out about your area." Using only one source throughout the paper is only appropriate when writing a book report. Using only two or three sources is simply not research. Therefore, as a general rule of thumb, you should have USED (as opposed to just listing sources in the bibliography) at least 10-15 sources. You may now be coming to the proper conclusion that research takes time. If you wait until the last week before the paper is due, it is certain that your research paper will lack quality.

Step 4: Think critically

A research paper should develop a person's ability to think critically. If there are different viewpoints for the chosen area, then you should analyze the viewpoints, show why the scholars came to their conclusions, state the strengths and weaknesses of their arguments, and make your case for the position that you deem to be the most consistent with the overall evidence of Scripture.

Remember that all viewpoints are not of equal value. The Bible only has one meaning. Our job is to find that one meaning. Differences in views occur because the actual Scripture passages on the subject are unclear, or more often because of our own personal prejudices. Therefore, you, the writer, must analyze how and why the scholar came to his conclusions.

Critical thinking does not set you free to invent new theology. Intelligent people have been doing theology for 2000 years. It is highly unlikely that you will find something new that all other theologians have missed. The burden of proof rests upon you to demonstrate the validity of each of your statements. Simply quoting a Bible verse does not constitute proof. If you quote a Bible verse, you must demonstrate from scholarly sources that your understanding of the meaning of that verse is correct. Therefore, a good research paper will have sound, scholarly support behind its statements. Do not just throw the conclusions of your favorite scholar at the reader, but be sure to analyze the arguments and reasons that the scholar has given for his conclusions.

One might object that the writings of scholars are taking precedence over the Scripture. In response to this criticism, it is not uncommon to observe that opposing scholars use the same Scripture to back up their arguments. It is up to the writer to prove that the Scripture he is quoting actually means what he claims it means. Part of the job of writing a good research paper is to study the passages of Scripture in question using good, hermeneutical principles. The input of the scholars will help the writer to understand better the passage in question and the issues surrounding the controversy.

When you present the position of any scholar, you should do so on the basis of that scholar's work. This means that you need to actually read what that particular scholar wrote and not just read what someone else said that the scholar said. You should not present a scholar's reasoning processes or conclusions based on the writings of someone else, but the writer should always go to the original, primary source.

As the scholarly sources are consulted, you will find that you will need to answer the criticisms those scholars raise against your position. Those criticisms usually identify a weakness, whether real or perceived, in your position. If the writer can find no scholarly support for his position, then he needs to rethink his position. Remember, in a research paper, the writer's opinion carries no weight. His position must be proved using persuasive and scholarly arguments.

Step 5: Logically arrange the data so that the paper flows

After having done all the research, you need to assemble the data into a logical, coherent work (centered around a theme you have given in your introduction). You will need to create an outline to order your material. By the end of your research you have come to certain conclusions, so you will build your argument using the data of your research to lead your reader to your conclusions. This does not mean you present a one-sided argument. On the contrary, you present the opposing material in a fair and balanced way and point out the strengths and weaknesses of the opposing argument. Demonstrate that your argument is the better position; that is, tell why it answers more questions than the opposing view or views. Order the argument of the paper as if you were going to stand before a judge and present your case in a court of law. The only difference between the law court analogy and the research paper is that you should present a fair and balanced assessment of the opposing views. Unlike an attorney, your goal is to look for truth in a research paper not to "prove" your favorite prejudices "correct."

Step 6: The conclusion

In this part of the paper, you are either summarizing what you said in the body of the paper or drawing the appropriate conclusions from the data that you have presented in the paper. You cannot introduce new "proofs" in the conclusion of a paper.

**THE RESEARCH PAPER GRADE**

An “A” Paper

1. You thoroughly researched the paper, consulted a number and variety (commentaries, systematic theologies, journals, etc.) of resources, and determined all the viewpoints involved.
2. Your research led you to certain conclusions and you have organized the paper to logically present these conclusions.
3. As you presented your studied view, you interacted with the sources disagreeing with you and gave a rational reason for rejecting them.

A “B” Paper

1. You researched your topic and addressed the appropriate viewpoints.
2. You interacted adequately with your sources and presented the facts in a well-written paper.
3. The difference between an “A” paper and a “B” paper is the degree of effort put into the research and writing.

A “C” Paper

1. Resources consulted were meager (4 or less) or not of a scholarly nature.
2. Little effort was made to determine the issues involved with the topic.
3. Very little interaction with the resources.
4. The conclusions of the authors were simply stated and no effort was made to understand the author's reasoning process.
5. The argument was one-sided and little or no time was given to other views.

A “D” Paper

1. The paper is more of an opinion paper or a sermon rather than a research paper.
2. Little or no resources were consulted.
3. Only the writer's view was presented with no attempt to discuss the strengths and weakness of other views.
4. Poor writing skills/lack of Turabian formatting are evident.

An “F” Paper

1. "Writing" the paper by copying word-for-word from your sources.
2. Copying almost word-for-word from the sources but changing a word here and there.
3. Failing to footnote your sources.
4. Using ideas that did not originate with you without giving credit to the source.

The above constitute plagiarism and are grounds for immediate failure. In the research paper, the writer must write the paper. He/she should accurately summarize the content of the scholars that have been read and present that summary in the paper. Occasionally the writer may decide to quote the scholar's work verbatim. Short quotes are acceptable if they clarify or reinforce the point the writer of the paper is making. The writer should not quote at length sections from any scholar, nor should he simply cut and paste other scholars’ works to create his paper. The scholar may have said it so beautifully (he would not have been asked to write the book if he could not communicate well) that the writer hates to "ruin" it by summarizing it, but the writer’s job is to assimilate and to summarize the information. The writer ceases to be a writer and becomes only an editor if he/she cuts and pastes.

A corollary to the above is to be sure to give a scholar the credit for the work that he has done. For the writer to incorporate the scholar’s work within his/her paper without giving due credit is to commit plagiarism. This results in automatic failure.

Many students have trouble understanding when to footnote. The rules of footnoting are anytime you quote directly from a source that quote (which should not exceed 4 or 5 lines) should be footnoted. Also, anytime you have gotten an idea from your source and put it into your own words, then you need to footnote the source. If you are not sure when you should footnote, then follow the simple rule which says when in doubt, footnote.

**DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A RESEARCH PAPER AND A SERMON MANUSCRIPT**

In order to write a good research paper, the writer must understand that there are differences in purpose between the research paper and the sermon/lesson manuscript. One way to describe the difference between the two documents is to consider the research paper as the work required to help the speaker understand the issues contained in his topic. In other words, it is for the speaker’s benefit. Out of the research paper will come the materials for the sermon or lesson.

Another difference between the research paper and the sermon/lesson is that the writer is not the authority in a research paper, but he is in the sermon/lesson.[[1]](#footnote-1) A good research paper will study what other scholars have said about the chosen topic. At the master’s level, the writer of the paper critically evaluates the data and draws conclusions. The writer then organizes his findings around a theme (an outline is necessary to do this) in order to make a logical presentation of his findings. The usual sermonic trappings such as alliteration, the need for three points, illustrations, poems, and so on are not part of a good research paper. Sergeant Friday's (of days gone by) admonition "Just the facts ma'am," is a good maxim for research papers. I would add that the facts need to be conveyed in a carefully thought-out, logical sequence.

By virtue of these qualities, the research paper would make a terrible sermon/lesson. People would respond quite poorly if they had to listen to a research paper. Yet, the fruit of the research becomes the backbone of a good sermon/lesson.

**SOURCES NEEDED TO WRITE A GOOD RESEARCH PAPER**

**General Sources**

Sound principles of biblical interpretation state that you need to read the Bible as first-century hearers would have understood it. Do not read the Bible through a 21st century worldview. This mistake is often the cause of new "theology" or different views of our day. These general sources help you to understand the passages as they were intended for the original audience. Only when we properly understand what the Scripture meant to the original audience can we find the timeless theological principles that apply to us today. What the biblical author meant is critical to the research paper.

Start with general sources to get an overall picture of your topic. If you begin with the more technical sources, you will get lost in the forest of details that those scholars present. Therefore, to keep from being overwhelmed by facts, begin with an understanding of the broad picture. This will give you the opportunity to see what the issues are and why the issues are significant. If you get a feel for the lay of the land (the size, shape, and boundaries of the forest) you will be able to better keep your bearing when you jump into the forest. Several sources are available to help give you an overview of your topic.

1. **Bible Atlases:**

Aharoni, Yohanan, Michael Avi-Yonah, Anson F. Rainey and Ze'ev Safrai. *The Macmillan Bible Atlas*. 3d ed. New York: Macmillan, 1993.

Beitzel, Barry J. *The Moody Atlas of Bible Lands.* Chicago: Moody, 1985.

Brisco, Thomas C. *Holman Bible Atlas*. Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1998.

Rasmussen, Carl G. *Zondervan NIV Atlas of the Bible*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan,

1989.

1. **Bible Dictionaries and Encyclopedias:** These sources provide short articles that summarize the current scholastic understanding of the topic. Be sure that you look at the copyright date of the source to know when it was written since scholarly sources usually interact with the questions of their day. For example, conservative theological sources written around the 1900s will argue against the prevailing liberalism. Topics such as the inspiration of the Bible, the deity of Christ, and the virgin birth were the centers of debate then. These sources still provide some of the best scholarship on those issues.

Today, a new set of erroneous ideologies are flooding the theological world such as the error of open theism, the error that man is simply a machine, the opposite extreme of the neo-Platonic error that man is a spirit being (a reaction against the materialistic teaching of man as machine?), the belief that mankind can be deified, and other nonsense. The newer sources will begin to address the newer issues.

The topic you choose will more than likely have some issue of debate swirling around it. Knowing the approximate time that the issue was hotly debated will help you find the right sources. Since the articles in these dictionaries and encyclopedias are short, they cannot address the spectrum of the historical debates that occurred on the topic. Therefore, the articles usually will address the main issues of concern for their day.

Bromiley, Geoffrey W., ed. *International Standard Bible Encyclopedia*. Rev. ed. 4 vols. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1988-1997. This source has been revised recently. The earlier edition was copyrighted circa. 1930.

Butler, Trent C., ed. *Holman Bible Dictionary*. Nashville: Holman, 2003.

Douglas, J. D. and Merrill C. Tenney, eds. *New International Bible Dictionary*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1987.

Evans, Craig A. and Stanley E. Porter. *Dictionary of New Testament Background*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 2000.

Elwell, Walter. *Baker Encyclopedia of the Bible*. 4 vols. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1988.

Freedman, David Noel, Allen Myers, and Astrid B. Back, eds. *Eerdmans Bible Dictionary*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2000.

Marshall, I. Howard, A. R. Millard, J. I. Packer and D. J. Wiseman, eds. *New Bible Dictionary*. 3d ed. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1996.

1. **Bible Handbooks**: Depending on the handbook, they usually give you an understanding of the world during biblical times, featured articles on important subjects of the Bible, maps, and brief descriptions of the Bible books.

Alexander, Pat and David Alexander, eds. *Zondervan Handbook to the Bible*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1999.

Dockery, David S., ed. *Holman Bible Handbook*. Nashville: Holman, 1992.

1. **Old Testament and New Testament Introductions and Surveys**: Introductions provide general background information for each book of the Bible. This usually involves its authorship, the intended audience, the background material to understand why the book was being written to the audience (setting or *sitz im leben*), the type of literature (genre) that the book represents, and a thumbnail sketch of the content of the book. Knowing the situation and the problems that prompted the writing of the book helps the reader to know how a particular passage under his consideration fits into the overall flow of the book. This will keep the reader from imposing his own meaning upon the text and allow the reader to see the true message of the text.

Archer, Gleason, Jr. *A Survey of the Old Testament: Introduction*. Chicago: Moody, 1964.

Carson, D. A., Douglas Moo, and Leon Morris. *An Introduction to New Testament*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1992.

Dillard, Raymond B. and Tremper Longman III. *An Introduction to the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1994.

Elwell, Walter A. and Robert W. Yarbrough. *Encountering the New Testament*. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998.

Gundry, Robert H. *A Survey of the New Testament*. 3d ed. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994.

Guthrie, Donald. *New Testament Introduction*. Rev. ed. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity, 1990.

Harrison, R. K. *Introduction to the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1969.

Lea, Thomas D. *The New Testament: Its Background and Message*. Nashville: Broadman & Holman, 1996.

1. **Systematic Theologies:** Do not overlook these sources. Often they give overviews that will be helpful to your paper.

Erickson, Millard. *Christian Theology*. 2d ed. Grand Rapids: Baker, 1998. Erickson is a moderate Calvinist.

Geisler, Norman. *Systematic Theology*. 5 vols. Minneapolis, MN: Bethany House, 2002. Geisler refers to himself as a 0 point Calvinist. Though he takes issue with each of the five points, he still remains in the Calvinistic camp because of his position on foreordination.

Grudem, Wayne. *Systematic Theology*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1994. Grudem is a 5 point Calvinist.

Hodge, Charles. *Systematic Theology*. 3 vols. New York, Scribners, 1904-1906.

Ryrie, Charles. *Basic Theology*. Chicago: Moody, 1999. Ryrie is a classical dispensationalist.

Shedd, William G. T. *Dogmatic Theology*. 3 vols. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, about 1888.

Swindoll, Charles, and Roy B. Zuck, eds. *Understanding Christian Theology*. Nashville: Thomas Nelson, 2003. This is a very good, comprehensive, but readable systematic theology textbook.

Thiessen, Henry C. *Lectures in Systematic Theology*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

**More Specific Sources:**

Once you have a good overall understanding of your topic, it is time to begin investigating the issues within that topic in depth. Several resources can take you to the depth that you need to go.

It is always good to know the doctrinal position of those people who you are reading. Are they 5-point Calvinists, moderate Calvinists, classical Armenians, Open-theists, Liberal or other? Are they covenant theologians, dispensational theologians, or otherwise? This gives you insight into their presuppositions and helps you to better understand their thinking process. All scholars have a systematic way in which they approach theology and their conclusions come directly out of that system.

**Systematic Theologies**: see above. I am surprised at how often these resources are overlooked by people writing theological papers. You can easily check to see if the author has addressed your topic by looking in the subject index in the rear of the book. Most of these sources also contain a Scripture index that you can check if you are researching a specific verse. These sources provide a wealth of information on a large number of topics at the detail necessary for a research paper. It would be a shame to write a theological paper and not consult one of these resources. For the specific systematic theologies, see the list above.

**Commentaries:** Because the nature of the research paper is to prove everything you write, you cannot just quote Scripture to prove your point. You must first demonstrate that the Scripture in question is really saying what you claim for it. Commentaries are very useful tools that can provide you with an understanding of the passage and the support that you need. As always, if you cannot find your view anywhere, then reevaluate your view. It is best to read several commentaries on the verse or passage so that you can get a grasp of the full range of views for that passage. Remember that on the one hand, commentators are uninspired human beings and are therefore not infallible. On the other hand, these scholars have spent a good part of their lives studying the particular book of the Bible on which they are writing and have insights and understandings that you need to know.

As with any source, do not make the commentator say what you want him to say. Read the commentary carefully and determine what he is saying. Twisting the words of the commentators is very poor scholarship on your part and your "work" will be "rewarded" with the appropriate grade. Also, only quoting those that agree with you is poor research methodology. This, too, will be "rewarded." Remember the very reason you are doing research is to search the matter as thoroughly as possible to find the truth. You will do well to keep in mind that only one truth exists; that is, the passage only has one meaning--it is people that have views, not Scripture.

Commentaries range from very readable to very technical. It is always better to begin with the more readable commentaries and progress to the more technical. Some good commentaries are:

*Baker Exegetical Commentary*. Grand Rapids: Baker. This commentary can be technical.

*Expositor's Bible Commentary*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan. This is a good readable commentary though sometimes you are left wanting more explanation.

Keil, C. F. and Franz Delitzsch. *Commentary on the Old Testament*. 10 vols. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1976; reprinted from German. This commentary was written about 100 years ago, but it still provides some very good information.

*New American Commentary*. Nashville: Broadman & Holman. This is a very readable commentary.

*New International Commentary on the New Testament*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

*New International Commentary on the Old Testament*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans.

*NIV Application Commentary*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan. This is a very readable commentary.

*Tyndale New Testament Commentaries*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity. These commentaries are small and at times the information is either so packed that it is difficult to grasp the full meaning or it is too abbreviated and you want the author to expound a little more on the subject. In general, however, it is a good commentary series.

*Tyndale Old Testament Commentaries*. Downers Grove, IL: InterVarsity. See comments for New Testament.

*Word Biblical Commentary*. Waco, TX: Word Publishers. This commentary has a technical section for each passage and a more readable section. Touches of critical scholarship can be found in it.

**Monographs:**  These are books that focus on specific topics. The monograph may have only one author or it may have several contributing authors. They usually develop the topic in detail and carefully build an argument for their position. This makes it possible to follow the author's line of reasoning and understand why he came to his conclusions. If the book was written by several authors, then each author will usually take a specific part of the topic and write on that issue. When available, they make a good source of information for the paper. You can find the library holdings on your particular topic by doing a "keyword" search of the library database. You can also go to Amazon.com or Christianbooks.com and check their holdings.

**Journal Articles:** Journals are probably the most technical of all the sources and they deal with a very narrow subject matter. They pack a lot of information into a relatively short article. Journal articles are usually written because the author feels that he has valid reasons for seeing a slightly different view of a topic. Other scholars will read these articles and sometimes respond to them with a critique. The journal articles may be looked at as a discussion forum. They are worth reading because they not only give you a lot of information, but they provide you with sources that will be useful to your study of the topic.

The LRU library has made available to the students the ATLAS database, an online source for scholarly refereed journals. These journals will range across the theological spectrum from conservative to very liberal. You will need to use discernment when using the journals that are of a more liberal nature.

Some conservative journals are:

Bibliotheca Sacra

Journal for Biblical Manhood and Womanhood

Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society

Journal of the Grace Evangelical Society

The Master's Seminary Journal

Westminster Theological Journal

For more information on these sources go to the lesson on "How to Use the Library."

**USE ONLY PRIMARY SOURCES IN A RESEARCH PAPER**

Primary sources are those written by the scholar himself. The primary source will give you the clearest understanding of the what the author wants you to know about the issue. This may sound painfully obvious, but routinely students turn in papers which quote what so-and-so said about the author's work. This is called a secondary source. Secondary sources carry inherent dangers. First, the author quoting the original scholar may put his own spin on what he believes the original author said. Often as I go back and read the primary source, I wonder if the second author read the first author at all. Second, reading the original work allows you to see the context that the original author has set up for his reader.

Above all, stay away from internet articles written by some unknown person. That person is simply writing a research paper like you are; that is, he is reading the sources and reporting on them. You need to read the primary sources for yourself. One area in which you will need some help understanding the primary sources are the early church fathers. They use language that may seem almost heretical. Understanding the context of their day in which they used the expression is critical if you are not going to misread the fathers. Good scholarly help is available. The possibility of misunderstanding the fathers does not relieve you of the responsibility of reading the primary patristic sources, rather this possibility means you should not read the patristics through the grid of modern, 21st century eyes.

1. The fact that the speaker is viewed as an authority when he speaks should cause him grave concern. James writes, "Be not many masters, knowing that we shall receive the greater condemnation" (Jam 3:1). Since the speaker is going to be held accountable by God for what he has taught, it makes the research paper all the more valuable for the sermon preparation. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)