A Short Guide to Writing Research Papers in History and Theology

The following notes and references are meant to help you to organize and compose a traditional academic research paper in theology. You may find the basic sequence and resources helpful in other disciplines, too, especially in religious studies, philosophy, and biblical 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 in the available primary and secondary sources and authorities.

With reference to A Reformation Reader, topics might be suggested by points in the chapters or readings, by questions posed in the study guide to A Reformation Reader (also available at FortressPress.com/janz), by the For Further Reading section at the end of each chapter, by your own religious or historical interests, or others, such as the following:

Late Medieval Interpretations of Eve: Kraemer and Sprenger, Agrippa, and de Pizan
Erasmus’ Critique of the Church
Luther and Erasmus’ Debate on Free Will
Luther’s Response to the Peasant Revolt of 1525
Law and Gospel in Luther’s Interpretation of Scripture
Zwingli and Luther on the Eucharist
Zwingli’s Reform of Zurich
The Twelve Articles and The Peasant Revolt of 1525
Anabaptist Martyrs: Reasons for Persecution and Their Response
Peter Walpot’s Vision of the Church
Calvin on the Knowledge of God
The Place of Predestination in Calvin’s Theology
Calvin and the Council of Trent on the Eucharist
The Execution of Michael Servetus: Politics and Religion in Calvin’s Geneva
Marie Dentière and Jeanne de Jussie on Women’s Roles in the Church

Queen Mary: Reform as Return to Rome

The Via Media of Elizabeth I

The Council of Trent and Luther on Justification

Ignatius Loyola and Martin Luther: A Comparison of Strategies for Reform

The Relationship between Prayer and Reform in the Life of Teresa of Ávila

Resources for Choosing a Topic and Beginning a Research Paper

Print resources


2. Researching Your Topic

Material about your topic may reside in a single text or an array of historical texts by one or many 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:


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.asp.


- “Scholarly Collections” on the Web have been linked by Douglas E. Oakman at www.plu.edu/~oakmande.


- “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.

Other online sources pertinent specifically to Reformation research are:

Collections of Primary Reformation Texts


- “Reformation Europe” on the “Internet Modern History Sourcebook” site maintained by Fordham University: http://www.fordham.edu/halsall/mod/modsbook02.html.

- “Electronic Sources for Research,” including hundreds of links to texts, author sites, and related cultural topics, from the Centre for Reformation and Renaissance Studies, University of Toronto: http://www.library.utoronto.ca/crrs/Databases/WWW/Bookmarks.html.
Links to Reformation Websites and Background Information


• “Renaissance,” a vast array of links that place the Reformations in the larger cultural and artistic context of Renaissance Europe, part of Nancy B. Mautz’s “Creative Impulse” page: http://history.evansville.net/renaissa.html.

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 text (e.g., Rom. 5:1–5 or Luther’s On the Freedom of a Christian), 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-
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:


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 documents or artifacts that provide data for interpretation: the Bible, conciliar decrees, interviews, memoirs, baptismal registries, 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—for example, the idea of memory in Augustine’s Confessions—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 http://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:
  
  
  • Yale University Divinity School Library: http://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 Websites 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, representing 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 theological 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 Augustine’s notion of time, you might come to regard his discussion of time in The Confessions as decisive. You might advance a thesis that his discussion of time in Book X allowed him to see his own story (Books I-IX) as part of a larger, divine/human story he found in Genesis (Books XI-XIII). So you have:

• Topic: Augustine on time

• Specific topic: Time in The Confessions

• Specific question: Why did Augustine devote a part of his autobiography to a discussion of time?

• Thesis: Augustine’s Platonism bequeathed him the problem of time, which in Book X of The Confessions he worked out by relating his own temporal story to the eternal purposes he found narrated in Genesis.

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.:

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: http://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:


Book in a series:

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

Edited book:


Essay or chapter in an edited book:


Multi-volume work:


Journal article:


Encyclopedia article:


Unsigned encyclopedia article:

Website source:


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

CD-ROM source:


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:


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:

Book:


Book in a series:


Edited book:


Essay or chapter in an edited book:


Multi-volume work:


Journal article:


Encyclopedia article:


Unsigned encyclopedia article:


Website source:

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

CD ROM source:


Bible:


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.