BRIERCREST | SEMINARY

GUIDE FOR WRITING RESEARCH PAPERS AT BRIERCREST SEMINARY

REVISED: MAY 2021

> What has exceedingly hurt you in time past, nay, and I fear to this day, is want of reading.
>
> I scarce ever knew a preacher read so little. And perhaps, by neglecting it, you have lost the taste for it. Hence your talent in preaching does not increase. It is just the same as it was seven years ago. It is lively, but not deep; there is little variety, there is no compass of thought. Reading only can supply this, with meditation and daily prayer. You wrong yourself greatly by omitting this. You can never be a deep preacher without it, any more than a thorough Christian.
>
> O begin! Fix some part of every day for private exercises. You may acquire the taste which you have not: what is tedious at first, will afterwards be pleasant.
>
> Whether you like it or not, read and pray daily. It is for your life; there is no other way; else you will be a trifler all your days, and a petty, superficial preacher. Do justice to your own soul; give it time and means to grow. Do not starve yourself any longer. Take up your cross and be a Christian altogether. Then will all children of God rejoice (not grieve) over you in particular.
>
> -John Wesley to John Premboth on August 17, 1760, *Works* (London: John Mason, 1830) 13:238
>
> I write in order to learn.
>
> -attributed to St. Augustine

THEOLOGICAL ORIENTATION

Briercrest Seminary does not require research papers of its students in order to be "academically respectable" or just to give students work. The seminary assigns research papers because the skills involved in writing one are *directly applicable* to your ministry, whatever that happens to be. Of course, the church requires a variety of different spiritual gifts in order to flourish, and not all the body is supposed to be a brain (1 Cor 12.17). You do not need to get an A+ on every paper in order to fulfill the ministry God has laid on you.

Nevertheless, it remains true that the skills necessary to write a research paper are directly relevant to pastoral, counseling, leadership, and teaching ministries. If these skills lie atrophied within you, your ministry will be hindered. If you are unable to interact with and learn from the great saints and theologians of the church, your ministry will suffer. The same is true if you are unable to organize your thoughts and your speech clearly or argue a point with people. (A good

deal of Paul's letters seem to be doing exactly this: to render a conclusion about Jesus Christ or the Christian life inescapable, so that his people say, "Of course—it has to be this way!")

The quotation from Wesley rewards careful reading: he calls on his intern to become a whole Christian ("a Christian altogether"), to stop starving himself, and to deepen and empower his ministry by . . . reading! (How might our self-diagnoses be blind to this?)

It is possible from the outset to make one of two mistakes as you work on a research paper (irrespective of the grade you receive at the end). On the one hand, it is possible for those members of the body less comfortable with academic work to retreat from this kind of assignment, to treat it as a formality, just "jumping through the hoops." As argued above, this psychological distance from the assignment runs the risk of leaving the seminarian under-resourced. If you fall into this category, remember: you are already loved and accepted and delighted in because of Christ's merit, irrespective of your performance (not by works) in class or in ministry. That means you are free to enjoy this opportunity to learn and grow and deepen, even if academic work isn't your strong point.

From a different angle: If ministry is all about you, then you should avoid doing anything that makes you look bad (in this case, a research paper). But ministry is not about you. The Lord is the minister, the counselor, the teacher; you are only the conduit. That means you can relax and get as much out of this assignment as possible, without your identity or self-worth being threatened.

On the other hand, those members of the body who excel in academic work can turn it into an idol: academic accomplishment can come to mean too much; it can become important in the wrong way. Remember that you are loved and accepted and delighted in by God according to the flawless merit of Christ, not according to your accomplishments (not by works). That means you can relax and enjoy your research, without turning academic accomplishments into your identity and self-worth.

YOUR THESIS

There are different kinds of papers which you will write during your time in seminary which will be different from a research paper (a reflection paper, a book review, etc.). A research paper is one which argues a thesis.

A thesis and a topic are not the same thing. Your topic is the thing you are writing about; your thesis is what you are saying about what you are writing about. A thesis should be contestable: it should be a claim with which someone could legitimately and reasonably disagree. Your research paper is the arguing and proving of your thesis.

For instance, say you learn in BLST 610 Pentateuch that the portrayal of the garden of Eden and Adam's role there in Genesis 2-3 contains a number of "tabernacle" echoes—that Eden is portrayed as a kind of proto-tabernacle, with Adam a kind of proto-priest. You decide to write a research paper about this, but so far, you only have a topic ("Edenic anticipations of the tabernacle"), not a thesis. Your thesis might be: "The Eden narrative in Genesis 2-3 is written in such a way that the reader of the Pentateuch is intended to draw connections to the later building of the tabernacle (Exod 25-40)." Or: "Although there are some echoes between the portrayal of Eden in Genesis 2-3 and the construction of the tabernacle in Exodus 25-40, they are neither sufficient nor pronounced enough to conclude that the former is being modeled on the latter. The Eden narrative serves a different function."

Either of these is a fine thesis: you are making a claim about your topic with which someone could reasonably disagree. Unfortunately, sometimes students think that thesis statements are actually just statements of topic; as a result, the paper tends to be muddled. The sharper and more specific your thesis, the easier it will be to write your paper.

THE SHAPE OF YOUR PAPER

Your first paragraph identifies your topic and briefly introduces it. The last sentence of your first paragraph states your thesis—a one-sentence summary of your argument.

The body of your paper demonstrates the validity of your thesis. Everything in your paper must be connected to the demonstration of the validity of your thesis, or it does not belong in the paper. You conclude your paper by summarizing your thesis and showing what significance it has—by addressing the "so what?" factor. (In the example above, you might point out that the modeling of Eden on the tabernacle shows God's grace—he gives back to his people what they threw away in the fall.)

The body of your paper does more than discuss or summarize other views. You are aiming to convince your reader that your thesis is the best option, over against other competitors. You should sympathetically but critically assess the positions of other authors and weave their thoughts into your own. While you do not need to be totally original, your own voice should come through in the writing.

Do not fail to address any potential objections to your thesis toward the end of your paper (or at suitable points throughout). Even if your instructor agrees with the rightness of your thesis, you will damage your case if you show no knowledge of obvious objections to it. The course of your research should uncover potential objections (scholars can be quite argumentative!). You can also write your paper, and then stand back and play devil's advocate: If I were to argue with this, what would I say?

While not every professor at Briercrest Seminary requires an outline to be turned in with your paper, you should outline your paper on your own. The organization of paragraphs and sentences should be the most natural way to structure the stages of your argument. The reader should feel the rightness of your organization, making your conclusion inescapable.

Bear in mind that you may have to re-write your thesis after finishing your paper—you may have to ask yourself, "Now that the argument is finished, have I proved what I set out to prove? Or have I proved something else?" It is common to write the body of a paper, then the conclusion, then the introduction and thesis.

This is as good a place as any to say that rewriting and proofreading your paper is a necessity and should be done more than once. Having a second set of eyes read it is also very much worth your time.

FINDING A TOPIC

Students often ask about how to find a topic. If you're at a loss for a topic, there are two ways to search. The first is simply to read in your area. You will inevitably find scholars taking different sides on an issue or ignoring an important question.

Another way forward is to take a little time and find what interests you the most. What is pulling at you in this class? What things were said in class which interested you or bothered you? Each one of us comes to seminary with a variety of motives, some of them unconscious. Try to get as clear as possible about what major life-projects you are working on, what major questions you are trying to answer. You will not be able to answer a major life project in one research paper, but you might be able to answer one subset of questions within a major issue.

Remember that the earlier you get a specific research question (e.g., what connections/echoes are there between Eden and the tabernacle?), the easier your reading will be—you will be reading for a specific question and will feel less inundated by endless information.

Don't be discouraged by dead ends or if your thesis turns out to be indefensible or needs to be adjusted. This happens to everyone and is actually a sign of good research. Also, don't be worried if you don't entirely know where your research is going—knowing exactly where you want to end up may vitiate your results.

RESEARCH, QUOTATIONS AND PLAGIARISM

As you read, establish primary and secondary texts—for example, in a biblical studies class, determine which biblical texts are central to your thesis and which scholarly works you will

interact with most intensely; then determine which other biblical and scholarly texts will play a more peripheral role in your argument. The best way to search for literature is to follow bibliographies in articles and books and search on ATLA (on the library's website, click the "electronic databases" link).

Scrutinize your non-biblical texts. What assumptions are made? Are there leaps in the argument? (The greatest of minds will still have blind spots). Show that you can interact with other authors in a way that transcends just splicing together quotations from others.

Watch out for popular or devotional books. These can be great books to read, but they are generally not suitable material for this kind of paper.

With regard to citations/quotations: on the one hand, you should cite every idea which is not your own. Err on the side of being overly scrupulous with this. Sometimes students assume that if they are not directly quoting a source, they need not cite it; but this is incorrect. Regardless of your intentions, every uncited idea in your paper will be assumed to be your own. Avoid intellectual theft. (If you come to a conclusion independently and then read the same in a secondary source, just say so in a footnote.)

On the other hand, do not quote directly from another source if you can summarize that source in your own words. Avoid strings of quotations, especially long ones. You should directly quote a source only if the original wording is extremely memorable or exemplary or if the source or subject is controversial and you wish to avoid misrepresentation. Similarly, avoid long quotations of Scripture unless the wording is important for your argument. Assume your grader knows the text.

Paraphrase whenever you can. But beware of simply copying the author's words. If you use more than two or three words which are identical to the original source, put quotes around them or re-word your sentence.

Common ideas or ideas discussed frequently need not be cited (e.g., that the ancient Middle East had flood narratives similar to the one found in Genesis, that Athanasius wrote a book on the incarnation, etc.).

METHOD FOR WRITING A RESEARCH PAPER

There are many ways successfully to write a research paper: one learns by doing. However, the following process is one way forward.

1) Pick a topic.

2) Get absolutely clear on the question being asked.
3 (or 11) Develop a tentative answer to the question—formulate the argument/thesis you are going to make
4) Determine the hierarchy of primary/secondary texts.
5) Read your primary texts as much and as often as possible.
6) Read your secondary texts, taking notes on quotations, ideas, and arguments which are relevant to your thesis.
7) Type out your notes.
8) Organize your quotes—put them together into groups or clusters, then structure the clusters in a logical order.
9) Write around your notes.
10) Proofread and make sure you are making the argument you said you would make at the beginning of your paper.

A WORD ON PROCRASTINATION

It is possible to work so hard, to neglect one's family and health, that it becomes a sin. But probably most of us struggle with the opposite problem. Procrastination has its own allure. Resist it as you would any other temptation. If you only give yourself the last week before the post-course work is due to write your paper, you will increase the amount of pain in your life and you will not benefit from the exercise. You are paying enough money and taking enough time on your seminary education that it is worth the discipline of starting each research paper early. You will enjoy it a great deal more and grow more as a result.

COMMON MISTAKES

- Make sure your thesis is actually contestable: that it is a claim with which someone could reasonably disagree.
- Make your introductory paragraph interesting: it is easy to be too general and vague. Get to the point as quickly as possible.
- Make only one argument in your thesis. Excise everything which does not contribute to that one argument.
- Make sure your conclusion is the right one, given the evidence assembled.
- Make sure your paper is about the discipline the course was in. For example, if a biblical studies paper on the flood spends more space on apologetic or archaeological evidence in favor of a universal flood than it does on the biblical text itself, it will get a low grade, regardless of the quality of the apologetic argument. A paper in a systematic theology class should not spend pages in erudite biblical exegesis.
- A sermon is a different genre from a research paper: wonderful as sermons are, don't mix them with your research. Avoid preachy, moralistic, overly spiritual language.

- Avoid grammatical mistakes. Write coherent, grammatically correct sentences in an ordered sequence.
- Prize brevity. Omit whatever is not absolutely necessary, even at the level of individual words. Keep asking, "If I take this word/phrase/sentence/paragraph out, what is lost?" If the answer is "nothing," it doesn't belong. If there's a shorter way to say something, take it unless there is good reason to do otherwise.
- Avoid adverbs. Do not overstate. For instance, do not claim something is "very obvious" unless it is.
- When you disagree, do so moderately. State your difference without castigating another author.
- Avoid rhetorical appeals: "What the church today needs to realize is . . .".
- Avoid "slippery slope" arguments: "If we surrender belief in a literal seven-day creation, then liberalism cannot be far behind . . ."
- Avoid "straw man" arguments (caricaturing your opponent and then attacking your caricature).
- Avoid "ad hominen" arguments (personal attacks): "Because Paul Tillich was a serial adulterer, we need not take seriously his ideas in *The Courage To Be* . . ."
- Avoid begging the question (assuming what you are trying to prove).

Top 20 Tips on Style (and Other Matters) in Academic Writing

1. Quotation marks and Punctuation
   When in doubt, punctuate inside quotations marks.
   SO: "In the beginning was the Word." NOT "In the beginning was the Word".
   Exceptions: Semi-colons and colons usually fall outside quotations marks.
   SO: He argued "the Word became flesh"; nevertheless, he doubted.
   However, when using parenthetical documentation, the period comes after the reference. So: "When in doubt, document" (Timmerman and Hettinga 1987, 62).
   -ALSO: Do not mix use of single and double quotation marks. Standard Canadian/American usage is only to use single marks when identifying embedded quotations.
   SO: The Rabbi said, "Your fathers say, 'Do not handle.' But this is of the world."
   OR: It is important to distinguish between the words "quote" and "quotation."
   NOT: It is important to distinguish between the words 'quote' and 'quotation'. (*This is a common British style, but not usually used in North American publications.*)

2. The placement of footnote/endnote numbers
   Footnote numbers, when placed at the end of a sentence, are always last.
   So: Smith notes, "The end is near."[1] *not* Smith notes, "The end is near[1]." *nor* Smith notes, "The end is near.[1]"

3. Block quotations
   Block quotations, by virtue of the fact that they are already set off by indentation, do not need quotation marks, unless a quotation is embedded within a quotation. Footnote markers should always be at the end.

4. Word Usage
   The words I have identified as being most often misused:
   - Then & Than
     Then as in "then & now"; *than* as in "greater/lesser than." "Then" has to do with time; than has to do with relation. SO: "*Then* he went home rather *than* enduring the party."
   - Compliment & Complement
     Compliment is something given free – a kind comment, a free book ("complimentary"); *Complement* is something that "complete**s**" ("Their writing and editing skills are complementary.")
   - It's and Its
     It's = a contraction of "it is"; *its* = a possessive; SO: It's wise to leave a dog alone with its bone.

- Principle & Principal
  The *princip<u>al</u>* is your 'pal' (also, princip<u>al</u> is <u>all</u> the money owed on a loan); *Principle* is a ru<u>le.</u> ("our strategic principles")
- Their, There & They're
  Just know them! *Their* = possessive "their rules"; *there* = place ("over there"); *they're* (= they are)
- Regardless/~~Irregardless~~, and "In regard to/~~In regards to~~
  Regardless is a word; *irregardless* is not! Also: Use "In regard to" <u>not</u> "in regards to"!

5. Split infinitives (i.e., "to" phrases – "to run," "to walk")
   There is difference of opinion on the acceptability of split infinitives and they are common even in published work. However, I still prefer to avoid them.
   SO: "to go boldly where no man has gone before" *not* "to boldly go where no man has gone before"
   Hint: Once your paper is written, do a quick search on the word "to" and ensure that there are no "ly" (i.e., adverbs) words immediately following.
   Note: *Elements of Style* (Strunk and White) advises against splitting infinitives, but allows for them if "the writer wishes to place unusual stress on the adverb." In other words, split your infinitives sparingly!

6. I.e., E.g., and Ibid. Usage and Punctuation
   I.e., = "in other words" and is used to clarify what was previously said.
   SO: "The moon is invisible, i.e., it is nowhere to be seen." Punctuation is as noted in bold (with periods followed by a comma.)
   E.g., = "for example" and should be used only when illustrating a point. SO: "Some theologians (e.g., Karl Barth) insist upon the centrality of christology." Punctuation is as noted in bold.

   Ibid., = abbreviation for *Ibidem* meaning "in the same place." As abbreviation, is always capitalized and followed by a period if citing from the same source and same page.
   Example: [7] Ibid. If citing from same source, but different page: [7] Ibid., 39.

7. Ellipses (. . .)
   Ellipses are used to leave out material in quotations. They are almost NEVER needed at the beginning or the end of quotation, unless confusion would result without. SO: "The Word of God must be preached . . . lest we fall into confused silence."
   <u>Spacing</u>: Ellipses always have one space before and after each period. So as above, ***<u>not</u>***: "The Word of God must be preached…lest we fall into confused silence."

8. Italics

   Italics are usually reserved for book (or major work) titles (John Calvin, *Institutes of the Christian Religion*), for words in a foreign language ("Hegel's concept of *Aufhebung*"); or for emphasis ("It is neither *necessary* nor *desirable* to think in these terms"), though italics for emphasis should be used sparingly.

9. Inclusive language pronouns

   Rules for gender inclusive language are not set in stone, but one of the most commonly used rules pertains to pronouns which should be listed in alphabetical order.
   SO: "He or she", and "her or him."
   However, overuse of such devices as above can become cumbersome. To avoid this, try to convert sentences into plurals. Thus rather than "A person must identify her/his place in the Church," try, "Persons must identify their place in the Church."

10. Bible/biblical; Christ/christological

    The rule is simple. Bible and Christ are proper nouns, and therefore capitalized. However, biblical and christological are adjectives and thus have no need for capitalization.

11. Pronouns for divinity

    Following the lead of the King James Version and New American Standard Bible, many writers still prefer to capitalize pronouns referring to God. However, this is unnecessary in most cases and you are not being disrespectful when using lower case pronouns to refer to God. (Remember: In the Hebrew and Greek, the use of capitalization as we have it in English did not exist.)

12. Paragraph and Footnote spacing and indentation

    Paragraphs: There is no need for additional spaces between paragraphs. The only place a double space is required is before major headings. Always indent the first line of each paragraph five spaces or ½ inch.
    Footnotes: Footnote entries are single spaced, but there should be a space between each entry in a footnote or endnote entry. Footnotes are indented ½ inch; footnote numbers are always superscripted.

13. A.D. and B.C.; C.E. and B.C.E.

    A.D. = *anno Domini,* "[in] the year of our Lord." The abbreviation is always used BEFORE the year. Thus: "Jerusalem fell in A.D. 70."
    B.C. = *before Christ.* The abbreviation is always used AFTER the year. Thus: Jesus was actually born around 4 B.C.
    Use of C.E. ("common era") and B.C.E. ("before common era") are increasingly common in

scholarly literature. My preference is to avoid their usage, especially in theology, because I view them as an attempt to speak of history outside the perspective of Christian faith. We can't stop others from using these new abbreviations, but as Christians we have every right to continuing to use the old standards. Even the *Columbia Guide to Standard American English* recommends: "Best advice: don't use *B.C.E., C.E.,* or *A.C.E.* to replace *B.C.* and *A.D.* without translating the new terms for the very large number of readers who will not understand them."

14. Numbers

    Dates: Always use numerics: 1975; A.D. 70; 4 B.C., etc.

    Numbers: Spell out the words of numbers up to 100. Thus: four Gospels (not 4 Gospels); seventy years (not 70 years).
    For large numbers: The population is three million (not "The population is 3,000,000")

15. Clichés and Slang Language

    Clichés and slang, while appropriate in everyday speech, are usually not helpful in academic writing and should be avoided like the plague! (Joke intended!) Clichés can come across as condescending or even add confusion to the argument. On rare occasions, a cliché or slang may be used in an especially pertinent point, but as a general rule, these instances should be rare and certainly not more than once in a paper.
    Also, guard against using "filler-words" such as "sort of," "kind of," "it seems that," or even, "obviously." (If your point is so obvious, there is no reason to point out how obvious it is; saying "obviously" calls into question the intelligence of readers if they happen to disagree with you!)

16. First (I, we), Second (you), and Third person (he/she/they) Language

    First Person: Some insist that academic writing should avoid first person language. There is nothing morally wrong about using first person language; your paper states *your* opinion, after all. However, third person language is generally used to help the writer focus on the *argument* and the *evidence* adduced to support the argument. Second Person: My general rule: Second person language ("you") should almost never be used (except when quoting someone directly) when writing formally. (I count this little document informal, so I'm allowed!) Second person language always has the danger of sounding "preachy" or "condescending" to the reader.

17. Consistent Verb Tense

    It not overly important which tense you choose in which to write (present, past, etc.), but you should seek to maintain the verb tense throughout the paper. In other words, do not start in present tense and then later shift to past. This happens easily, especially when writing a paper over a period of many days. The best way to correct this is to read the paper through at the

editing stage paying attention solely to verb tense.

18. Consistent Pronoun Use

Many writers carelessly shift from third to second person pronouns, or from single to plural (or vice versa).

WRONG: "It does not matter which topic one chooses, but you should stick to it."
CORRECT: "It does not matter which topic one chooses, but one should stick to it."
CORRECT: "It does not matter which topic they choose, but they should stick to it."

WRONG: "The person (sing.) who preaches must be careful how they (pl.) prepare."
CORRECT: "The person who preaches must be careful how she [he/one] prepares."

WRONG: "If anyone (sing.) seeks to relate to God on their (pl.) own, they will fail."
CORRECT: "If persons seek to relate to God on their own, they will fail."
CORRECT: "If anyone seeks to relate to God on her or his own, he or she will fail."

19. Proofing and Editing Tips

- Set aside completed papers for a day before proofing and editing because it helps to give ourselves distance from our writing.
- Rely on spell checkers and grammar checkers, but not too heavily! These tools are aids but are not replacements for better knowledge of the language.
- Use the "Find" feature in a word processor. For example, I have a tendency when writing to start sentences with the word "But." After I write, I will often search for all the occurrences of "But" (using the case-sensitive feature). It amazes me how often it comes up! Using this feature, however, has also taught me to use the word "But" less often to start a sentence. (By the way, I don't believe it is wrong to begin sentences with words like "but" or even "and" as your grammar teacher taught, but these should still be rare occurrences and only when emphasis is desired.)
- If you have problems with sentence structure, read your paper out loud. Though spoken and written English are not the same, reading sentences out loud help us to "hear" when something is correct or not.

20. Improving your Writing

If you are really struggling with English, there are three things you should do (other than battling through a dry grammar book): 1) Read more (reading good English helps us to absorb grammar through mental "osmosis"); 2) Write more (Don't wait until your paper is due to learn to write; make writing in journals, notes, even email, a more regular part of life); 3) Have a good writer read your papers and point out things you need to correct (Someone else will almost always be able to spot our own writing blind-spots).