

A Short Guide to Writing Research Papers in an introductory course on the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible

The following notes and references are meant to help you to organize and compose a traditional academic research paper on the Old Testament. You may find the basic sequence and resources helpful in other disciplines, too, especially in religious studies, theology, 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 *Old Testament/ Hebrew Bible* topics might be suggested by points in the chapters or readings, by questions posed in the Study Guide, by the additional sources in the bibliographies, or by your own religious or historical interests.

Some print resources which might also help you in choosing a topic and beginning a research paper are:

- Booth, Wayne, Gregory C. Colomb, and Joseph M. Williams. *The Craft of Research*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1995.
- Kennedy, J. *Library Research Guide to Religion and Theology: Illustrated Search Strategy and Sources*. 2d ed. Ann Arbor: Pieran, 1984.
- Luey, Beth. *Handbook for Academic Authors*. 3rd ed. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1995.
- Preece, Roy. *Starting Research: An Introduction to Academic Research and Dissertation Writing*. New York: St. Martin's, 1994.

2. Researching Your Topic

Material about your topic will be found in a wide variety of historical sources. 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 and then diminish with increased knowledge from your research, your own deeper concerns, insights, and point of view should emerge and grow. You might even try to reach new conclusions or arrive at a new perspective about your topic.

A. Consult Standard Sources and Build Bibliography

Encyclopedia articles, dictionaries, and other standard historical reference tools contain a wealth of material--and helpful bibliographies--to orient you in your topic and its historical context.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:

General Reference Tools:

Anchor Bible Dictionary

New Interpreters Bible
Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible
Eerdmans Dictionary of the Bible

One volume commentaries

Barton, John, and John Muddiman, editors. *The Oxford Bible Commentary*. Oxford: Oxford Univ. Press, 2001.

Brown, Raymond E., Joseph A. Fitzmyer, and Roland E. Murphy, editors. *The New Jerome Biblical Commentary*. Englewood Cliffs, N.J.: Prentice-Hall, 1990.

Dunn, James D. G., and John Rogerson, editors. *Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible*. Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 2003.

Farmer, William R., editor. *The International Bible Commentary: A Catholic and Ecumenical Commentary for the Twenty-first Century*. Collegeville, Minn.: Liturgical, 1998.

Mays, James L., editor. *The HarperCollins Bible Commentary*. Rev. ed. San Francisco: HarperSanFrancisco, 2000.

Newsom, Carol A., and Sharon H. Ringe, editors. *Women's Bible Commentary*. Expanded edition. Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 1998.

General books on ancient Israel:

Coogan, Michael D., ed., *The Oxford History of the Biblical World*. New York: Oxford, 1998.

King, Philip J. and Lawrence E. Stager, *Life in Biblical Israel*. Louisville: WestminsterJohnKnox, 2001.

De Vaux, Roland, *Ancient Israel*. 2 vols. New York: McGraw Hill, 1965.

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

Important scholarship in biblical studies is frequently 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 *Old Testament Abstracts*, which provides summaries of books and articles, on individual biblical books and topics.

Major biblical journals are:

Biblica

Catholic Biblical Quarterly

Journal of Biblical Literature

Journal for the Study of the Old Testament

Vetus Testament

Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft

Note that even foreign language journals, such as *Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft*, often publish articles in English.

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:

- "Religion on the World Wide Web": www.virginia.edu/religiousstudies/admin/research.html
- "Wabash Center Guide to Internet Resources for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion": www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/Internet/front.htm

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. The main primary source that you are dealing with is the Bible itself, with occasional use of other texts from the ancient Near East. *Secondary* sources are all the articles or books that analyze or interpret primary sources. Your research topic will probably require you to look at a combination of primary and secondary sources.

Many theological libraries and archives are linked at the "Religious Studies Web Guide": www.ucalgary.ca/~lipton/catalogues.html. Some of the best library sites are:

- Blais: Online Catalog of the Libraries of the Claremont Colleges: blais.claremont.edu/search
- Yale University Divinity School Library: www.library.yale.edu/div/divhome.htm
- Princeton Theological Seminary Library: www.ptsem.edu/grow/Library/index.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, you can review each source, noting down its most important or relevant facts, observations, or opinions. 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, re-presenting 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 differing points of view about many historical topics 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*.

- *Topic*: The attitude to the temple cult in the Hebrew prophets
- *Specific topic*: Why was a specific prophet (e.g. Amos) critical of the cult?
- *Specific question*: Did Amos want to abolish temple worship, or reform it, or something in between?
- *Thesis*: Amos was concerned with specific abuses, and was not formulating a general position on cultic worship for all times and places.

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 and abbreviations.

- Gibaldi, Joseph. *MLA Handbook for Writers of Research Papers*. 4th ed. New York: Modern Language Association, 1995.
- *The Chicago Manual of Style*. 14th ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993.
- Turabian, Kate L. *A Manual for Writers of Term Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*. 6th ed. Rev. by John Grossman and Alice Bennett. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1996.
- Williams, Joseph M. *Style: Toward Clarity and Grace*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993.
- Alexander, Patrick H. ed., et al. *The SBL Handbook of Style: For Ancient Near Eastern, Biblical, and Early Christian Studies*. Peabody, Mass.: Hendrickson Publishers, 1999.

- Online, see "General Problems Encountered in Undergraduate Papers":
www.plu.edu/~oakmande

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: 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 SBL Manual style:

Basic order:

Author's full name, *Book Title*, ed., trans., series, edition, vol. number (Place: Publisher, year), pages.

Book:

John J. Collins, *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible*, with CD-Rom (Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004) 51.

Book in a series:

Mordechai Cogan, *1 Kings* (Anchor Bible 10; New York: Doubleday, 2000) 52.

Edited book:

R. A. Kraft and G. W. E. Nickelsburg, eds., *Early Judaism and Its Modern Interpreters* (Philadelphia: Fortress, 1986) 22.

Essay or chapter in an edited book:

Seth L. Sanders, "Performative Exegesis," in April DeConick, ed., *Paradise Now. Essays on Early Jewish and Christian Mysticism* (SBL Symposium Series 11; Atlanta: SBL, 2006) 57-79.

Multi-volume work:

B. McGinn, J. J. Collins and S. Stein, eds., *The Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism* (3 vols.; New York: Continuum, 1998) 1.85

Journal article:

David Petersen, "Hebrew Bible Textbooks: A review Article," *Critical Review of Books in Religion* 1(1988) 1-18.

Encyclopedia article:

K. Stendhal, "Biblical Theology. Contemporary," in G. A. Buttrick, ed., *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (4 vols.; Nashville: Abingdon, 1962) 1.418-32.

Website source:

Religion-Online. "Women Clergy: How Their Presence Is Changing the Church," *Christian Century* (February 7-14, 1979): 122. (www.religion-online.org/)

For a full listing of citation styles for internet sources, see "Citation Style":

www.bedfordstmartins.com/online/citex.html

CD ROM source:

Helmar Junghans, *Martin Luther: Exploring His Life and Times — 1483—1546*, CD ROM (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998).

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:

- Stendhal, "Biblical Theology," 418; Collins, *Introduction*, 592.

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:

Basic order:

Author's last name, first name and initial. *Book Title*. Ed. Trans. Series. Edition. Vol. Place: Publisher, Year.

Book:

Collins, John J., *Introduction to the Hebrew Bible with CD Rom*. Minneapolis: Fortress, 2004.

Book in a series:

Cogan, Mordechai, *I Kings*. Anchor Bible 10; New York: Doubleday, 2000.

Essay or chapter in an edited book:

Sanders, Seth L., "Performative Exegesis," in April DeConick, ed., *Paradise Now. Essays on Early Jewish and Christian Mysticism*. SBL Symposium Series 11; Atlanta: SBL, 2006. Pp. 57-79.

Multi-volume work:

McGinn, Bernard, John J. Collins and Stephen Stein, eds., *The Encyclopedia of Apocalypticism*. 3 vols. New York: Continuum, 1998.

Journal article:

Petersen, David, "Hebrew Bible Textbooks: A review Article," *Critical Review of Books in Religion* 1(1988) 1-18.

Encyclopedia article:

Stendhal, K. "Biblical Theology. Contemporary," in G. A. Buttrick, ed., *Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible* (4 vols.; Nashville: Abingdon, 1962) 1.418-32.

Website source:

Religion-Online. "Women Clergy: How Their Presence Is Changing the Church." *Christian Century* (February 7-14): 122. (www.religion-online.org/)

For a full listing of citation styles for internet sources, see "Citation Style":

www.bedfordstmartins.com/online/citex.html

CD ROM source:

Helmar Junghans. *Martin Luther: Exploring His Life and Times — 1483&3151;1546*. CD-ROM. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1998.

Bible:

The Holy Bible: Revised Standard Version. New York: Oxford University Press, 1973.

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.

EXEGESIS PAPERS

The purpose of an exegesis paper is to identify a major point that is raised in the passage and discuss it. But you must put the point in context. Therefore you need to discuss the literary form of the passage, and, if possible, the historical context in which it is set.

Choose a passage that is a coherent literary unit, 10-15 verses in length.

You may find helpful the format

Structure,

Genre,

Setting

Intention,

Outlined by Gene Tucker, *Form Criticism* (Fortress Guides to Biblical Scholarship) and exemplified in the FOTL series (Forms of Old Testament Literature, Eerdmans).

You should consult several commentaries on the passage in question, and also monographs and articles when they are relevant.

Recommended commentary series include:

AB Anchor Bible

AOTC	Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries
BerO	Berit Olam
CC	Continental Commentaries
FOTL	Forms of the Old Testament Literature
Hermeneia	Hermeneia: A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible
IBC	Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching
ICC	International Critical Commentary
ITC	International Theological Commentary
JPSBC	Jewish Publication Society Bible Commentary
JPSTC	Jewish Publication Society Torah Commentary
NCBC	New Century Bible Commentary
NIB	New Interpreter's Bible
NICOT	New International Commentary on the Old Testament
OTL	Old Testament Library
OTR	Old Testament Readings
SB	Schocken Bible
SHBC	Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary
WBC	Word Biblical Commentary

Note also the commentaries in the one-volume commentaries listed earlier in this guide, especially *the Harper Bible Commentary*, *the New Jerome Biblical Commentary*, *the Oxford Bible Commentary* and *the Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible*.