

HOW TO WRITE A THEOLOGICAL PAPER¹

Begin everything with prayer!!!

1st Step:

Choose a Topic and Relevant Scriptural Texts

1. Choice of the Topic

Criteria	Detail
Edification	Choose a topic that interests, challenges, and edifies you and readers.
Manageability	Consider the time and the space available.
	Focus on a limited aspect.

2. Relevant Scriptural Texts

2nd Step: Exegesis of the Scriptural Texts

Fully exegete them first! Remember the goal of exegesis is to understand **what the scriptural passages meant** in their historical context.

1. General Preparation

	Preparation	Questions to Ask and Notes to Keep
Reading the texts	Larger context of the passage (For an epistle, read the whole book).	
Reading the introductory works	Overview of the book. Refer New Testament Introductions; Introduction in the commentaries.	(1) Who are the recipients?
		(2) What is their situation?
		(3) Why is the author telling them this?
		(4) Is there a dominant or recurring motif?
		(5) Is there anything striking or difficult in this passage?
Translation	Rough translation of the Greek texts. Use Sakae Kubo and my Greek charts. Compare it with already existing translations such as NASB, NIV, RSV, NRSV.	(1) Are there any ambiguities in the Greek?
		(2) Any special vocabulary?
		(3) What strikes you as the main point of this passage?
		(4) How would this help the original readers?
Textual Problems	UBS (4 th) and Nestle-Aland (27 th). Consult Metzger's commentary for something intriguing.	If a textual variant of some value could affect the meaning of the passage, make a note of it.
Word Study	Look up significant words in Bauer Lexicon or Thayer's Lexicon, TDNT (for theologically charged words), a Greek concordance.	(1) Are the certain words peculiar to the author, or peculiar to the content of the passage?
		(2) TDNT may have a discussion of the passage, along with bibliography. Take extensive notes here including bibliographical data.

2. Analyze the Scriptural Texts

¹ For this part, I owe to the two works: Guidelines for Exegesis Paper by Dan G. McCartney; J. M. Frame, *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God* (Phillipsburg: P&R, 1987), 369-374.

	Analysis	
Syntactical	(1) Sentence diagramming	Any grammatical ambiguities should be noted and pursued (in Blass-Debrunner/Funk etc.).
	(2) Phrase flow	
	(3) Rhetorical devices or structure	
Contextual	Immediate context in the book.	
Historical	How does this passage fit with what we know about the recipients –their interest, fears, etc.	
Theological Concerns of the Author	(1) Are there particular theological concerns that are implicit or explicit?	
	(2) Formulate the theological teaching and implications, or ethical principles, that are deducible from this passage.	
	(3) Work this in with the theology of that author elsewhere, with the NT as a whole, and with the Bible as a whole.	

3. Make Preliminary Interpretations.

Write out what you think the author's main intention in the passage, and give your reasons.

3'rd Step: Researches

1. Make a Working Bibliography.

	Usage	Warning
Commentaries	All the best scholarly commentaries.	Be sure to include all bibliographical information in your notes.
Monographs	Make sure to check if there are any monographs that deal with the passage.	Use the online databases or card catalog in library.
Journal Articles	Check the last 30-40 years' worth of periodical indexes. For the list of theological journals, refer the LIST OF JOURNAL.	Skim all articles that bear more or less directly on the passage or related passages, and make notes of various interpretations.
Online Resources	Electronic library	Be critical when you use these sources. Some of them, individual websites in particular, could be misleading.
Books related to the subject		Use the online databases or card catalog in library.

2. Understand your sources

Write out complete outlines of the ones that are most important.

3. Note-taking

(1) Make a note of everything that might be useful on 4 x 6 cards.

(2) EXACTLY RIGHT FIRST TIME

If you copy a quotation, get it exactly right, and get the bibliographic information exactly right. This will save you agony later. This is the beginning of real theological creativity.

4. Ask critical questions about your sources.

	Questions etc.	Remarks
Ask questions	What is the author's purpose of writing?	This is the exploratory stage to check what problems you need to focus on.
	What questions is he trying to answer?	
	How does he answer them?	
Write	The author's position as best as you can.	This could become a framework of your paper.

5. Evaluation of Sources

Formulate a critical perspective on your sources

Criteria	Explanation
Scripturality	Are the ideas teachings of Scripture or at least consistent with it?
Truth	Is it true or false?
Cogency	Are the author's premises true, his argument valid?
Edification	Is it spiritually edifying? Harmful? Hard to say?
Godliness	Does the text exhibit the fruit of the Spirit, or is it blasphemous, gossipy, slanderous, unkind, and so forth?
Importance	Is it worth? Trivial? Important for some, but not for others?
Clarity	Are the key terms well defined, at least implicitly? Is the formal structure intelligible, well thought out? Are the author's positions clear? Does he formulate well the issues to be addressed and distinguish them from one another?
Profundity	Difficult questions; Important issues; Subtle nuances; Insightfulness
Form and Style	Appropriateness; Creativity

6. Organize your notes according to topics of interest.

Organize them according to your outline.

Devise your own method to organize your notes. One method may be to mark with a different color ink or use a hi-liter to identify sections in your outline, e.g., IA3b – meaning that the item belongs in the following location of your outline:

I. The Role of Women in Church

A. In the 1'st century Roman society

3. In Pauline churches

b. In Corinthian churches

Group your notes following the outline codes your have assigned to your notes. This method will enable you to quickly put all your resources in the right place as you organize your notes according to your outline.

*4'th Step:
Writing the Draft*

1. Thesis and Outline

	Detail	
Identify problem	(1) Identify what questions you are focusing your paper on.	
	(2) Write out a few sentences on a note card what your paper is going to do.	
	(3) Keep this in front of you as you work on your paper, to keep you from getting sidetracked.	
State your thesis.	Do some critical thinking and write your thesis statement down in one or two sentences. The main portion of your paper will consist of arguments to support and defend your thesis statement.	
Tentative Outline.	Purpose	It is to help you think through your topic carefully and organize it logically before you start writing. A good outline is the most important step in writing a good paper.
	Coherence	All points must relate to the same major topic that you first mentioned in your thesis statement.
	Structure	Include in your outline an Introduction, a Body, and a Conclusion.

2. Main Body

(1) Compare and contrast two or more positions. Show their similarities and differences.

(2) Develop implications and applications of the scriptural texts. [From this moment on, we deal with **what the scriptural passages mean to the modern day readers.**]

This is a very critical stage. What it meant to Paul (Exegesis) is one thing, but what it means now to you (Hermeneutics) could be another. Based upon objective evidence, you need to determine whether the scriptural teaching is: prescriptive or descriptive; universal or particular (culturally conditioned in the particular context).

(3) Supplement the texts in some way.

(4) Offer criticism – positive or negative evaluation.

(5) Present some combination of the above.

(6) Produce your formulation.

The thrust should not be a summary of your research, but your own creative response to your research. Do not spend ten pages in exposition and only one in evaluation or analysis. Include only enough exposition to explain and justify your own conclusion.

*5th Step:
Revise Your Outline and Draft*

Read your paper for any errors in content. Arrange and rearrange ideas to follow your outline. Reorganize your outline if necessary, but always keep the purpose of your paper and your readers in mind.

1. Check List #1

- (1) Is my thesis statement concise and clear?
- (2) Did I follow my outline? Did I miss anything?
- (3) Are my arguments presented in a logical sequence?
- (4) Are all sources cited to ensure that I am not plagiarizing?
- (5) Have I proved my thesis with strong supporting arguments?
- (6) Have I made my intentions and points clear in the paper?

2. Check List #2 (See the separate section on common errors).

*6th Step:
Type Final Paper*