

How to Write a Theological Paper

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What follows is *my* method of theological research and writing. There are, of course, many others, and I would not dream of imposing my approach on anyone else. Still, you have to start somewhere, with some sort of model in your head; and after some years of work in the field, I still think the following plan has some merit.

Every theological paper, even those wholly devoted to the author's original ideas, will involve some research. (This is the case even for papers and other presentations that are not written in a traditional academic style.) At the very least, it will involve exegetical research and intelligent interaction with biblical texts. Otherwise, the theological work can hardly make any claim to scripturality; and if it is not scriptural, it is simply worthless. Additionally, there should usually be some interaction with other orthodox theologians to guard against individualistic aberration. There may also be interaction with nonorthodox theology, secular science, politics, economics, philosophy, cultural trends, and the like, by way of contrast, critique, and "point of contact" (see chapter 11, *B*, (3)).

Furthermore, every paper should contain something of the theologian himself. It is rarely sufficient simply to tell the reader what someone else says (an "expository paper," as I call it). Nor, in seminary level papers, is it adequate to write down a series of "standard" arguments on an issue—arguments that have been used time and time again. I describe papers of that sort as "party lines." Party lines are often useful; it is good to have at your fingertips the standard arguments for infant baptism, for example. I myself use this kind of argument frequently in talking with inquirers. But generally, party-line arguments do not belong in theological papers. Expositions, summaries, surveys, party lines—all of these are essentially regurgitations of ideas obtained from other sources. They involve little analytical or critical thinking. But such thinking is precisely what is needed, if the paper is to represent an *advance* in the church's knowledge.

Integration between research and one's own creative thought, then, is the goal—or rather an important means to the ultimate goal of edification. To achieve this purpose, I work according to the following steps (more or less).

1. Choose a topic with care, one that will be helpful to people, one that you can handle adequately in the time available to you and in the length of document you intend to write (or size of nonwritten presentation).

2. Understand your sources. Scripture texts ought to be fully exegeted. With other sources, I generally write out complete outlines of the ones that are most important. If I am reviewing a book (at some length, at least) I usually outline the entire volume, seeking to understand precisely the structure of the arguments, what is being said and how it is being said. Those sources which are less important, that is, those which will be referred to only in passing or of which only small portions are of interest, can be treated with proportionately less intensity; but the theologian is responsible to make *correct* use even of incidental sources.

3. Write down what you find interesting. After I outline my sources, I usually go back and read them again (it goes faster the second time, for the outline helps) to discover things that interest me. I write down (with page references) anything that seems to be especially useful, anything especially bad, anything confusing or perplexing, any tidbit that might add spice to my writing. This is the beginning of real theological creativity (though creativity of a sort is not entirely missing even from stages 1–2).

4. Ask questions about your sources. What is the author's purpose? What questions is he trying to answer, and how does he answer them? Try to paraphrase his position as best you can. Is his position clear? Analyze any ambiguities. What is he saying on the best possible interpretation? On the worst? On the most likely? If you come across anything especially interesting, add it to the notes mentioned in step 3.

5. Formulate a critical perspective on your sources. How do you evaluate them? Use criteria 1–9 under Appendix E. There must always be some evaluation, positive or negative; if you don't know what is good or bad about the source, you cannot make any responsible use of it. With a scriptural text as a source, of course, the evaluation should always be positive. With other texts, there will generally be some element of negative evaluation (see chapter 7, *E*).

6. Organize your notes according to topics of interest. I generally go through my notes and write down everything that bears on a particular topic. A computer can be of assistance here.

7. Ask, then, What do I want to tell my audience on the basis of my research? Determine one or more points that you think your readers, hearers, viewers (etc.) ought to know. The structure of your presentation should be fully determined by that purpose. Omit anything extraneous. You do not need to tell your audience *everything* you have learned. Here are some things you might choose to do at this point. (a) Ask *questions*. Sometimes a well-formulated question can be edifying, even if the theologian has no answer. It is good for us to learn what is mysterious, what is beyond our comprehension. (b) *Analyze* a theological text or group of them. Analysis is not “exposition” (above) but “explanation.” It describes *why* the text is organized or phrased in a certain way—its historical background, its relations to other texts, and so forth. (c) *Compare* or *contrast* two or more positions. Show their similarities and differences. (d) Develop *implications* and *applications* of the texts. (e) *Supplement* the texts in some way. Add something to their teaching that you think is important. (f) Offer *criticism*—positive or negative evaluation. (g) Present some combination of the above. The point, of course, is to be clear on just what you are doing.

8. Be self-critical. Before and during your writing, *anticipate objections*. If you are criticizing Barth, imagine Barth looking over your shoulder, reading your manuscript, giving his reactions. This point is crucial. A truly self-critical attitude can save you from unclarity and unsound arguments. It will also keep you from arrogance and unwarranted dogmatism—faults common to all theology (liberal as well as conservative). Don’t hesitate to say “probably” or even “I don’t know” when the circumstances warrant. Self-criticism will also make you more “profound.” For often—perhaps usually—it is objections that force us to rethink our positions, to get beyond our superficial ideas, to wrestle with the really deep theological issues. As you anticipate objections to your replies to objections to your replies, and so forth, you will find yourself being pushed irresistibly into the realm of the “difficult questions,” the theological profundities.

In self-criticism the creative use of the theological imagination is tremendously important. Keep asking such questions as these. (a) Can I take my source’s idea in a more favorable sense? A less favorable one? (b) Does my idea provide the only escape from the difficulty, or are there others? (c) In trying to escape from one bad extreme, am I in danger of falling into a different evil on the other side? (d) Can I think of some counter-examples to

my generalizations? (e) Must I clarify my concepts, lest they be misunderstood? (f) Will my conclusion be controversial and thus require more argument than I had planned?

9. Decide on an audience. Children of a certain age? Unbelievers? New Christians? Educated? Uneducated? Theologically trained? Professional scholars? Americans? Other nations? The audience chosen will have a great effect on the format and style of the presentation.

10. Decide on a format and style. Again, flexibility is important. Consider various possibilities: (a) academic research paper, (b) sermon, (c) dialogue form (valuable for many reasons, not least that it encourages you to be more self-critical), (d) drama, (e) poetry, (f) fantasy, (g) allegory, (h) mixed media, (i) popular article. There are many others.

11. Produce your formulation—on paper or use whatever medium you choose. Outlining beforehand is helpful, but I generally find myself changing the outline as I see where the text seems most naturally to be going. More helpful is *rewriting*. A word-processor can be immensely helpful at this point. If you have problems with sentence structure, paragraph organization, and so forth, it is often helpful to read your work aloud, preferably to someone else.

The thrust should not be a summary of your research (that would be an “expository” paper) 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 conclusions.

The whole work ought to be undergirded with prayer. We have seen the importance of God’s sovereign working to the success of theology and apologetics. Who else can bring about the knowledge of God but God himself?