Seattle Pacific Seminary Information Literacy Handbook

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Seattle Pacific
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I.   Introduction

This handbook attempts to reference in one place how to write a good theology paper at Seattle Pacific Seminary ("SPS"). Though it draws on a sampling of Seattle Pacific Seminary syllabi (e.g., "IV. Communication"), it is not meant to replace the importance of attending closely to the assignment as spelled out in the syllabus. Some of the elements referenced from this point (e.g., the School of Theology's policy on inclusive language, or the University's policy on academic integrity) do stand above and should therefore be common to all SPS syllabi. In other areas, however, consider the syllabus or assignment sheet the final word.

II.   Introductions to the Research and Scholarly Communication Process

Introductions to the research and scholarly communication process are legion. The standard here at SPS is Wayne C. Booth, Gregory C. Colomb, and Joseph Williams, *The Craft of Research,* 3rd edition (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2008).

SPS students would be well-advised to consult *The Craft of Research* for an approved approach to the research and scholarly communication process considered as a whole. Those writing M.A. theses will be required to read it carefully and be guided by it (see pp. 35-39 of the MA Thesis Policy). *The Craft of Research* is available via Library systems online and in print.

More specialized than *The Craft of Research* (whose list of "Bibliographical Resources" in "Religion" is superficial) would be the guides to research in the various sub-disciplines of theology composed by working professionals, for example (to name but two of the most general in English):

- Biblical studies: Michael J. Gorman*, Elements of Biblical Exegesis: A Basic Guide for Students and Ministers,* rev. & expanded edition (Grand Rapids, MI: Baker Academic, 2009); and
- Church history: James E. Bradley and Richard A. Muller*, Church History: An Introduction to Research, Reference Works, and Methods* (Grand Rapids: Eerdmans, 1995).

The Craft of Research speaks of "Three Kinds of Sources" (pp. 68 ff.). After the primary, secondary, and tertiary sources recommended by the faculty above all, Seminarians should familiarize themselves with tertiary sources[1] that are widely considered reasonably authoritative points of entry into the primary and secondary sources and/or loci of theology. Increasingly, the Theology Librarian will be listing the most fundamental of these on the

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[1]Specialized works of reference of all types; library catalogs; serial and non-serial bibliographies; classics of scholarship; series; standard translations; critical editions; reliable online full-text collections; and so forth.

subject-, course-, and assignment-specific guides mounted under Subject Guides > Theology on the Library website. Note also that the Theology Librarian stands ready to help with the identification, evaluation, and use of theological sources (whether listed thereon or not), as well as teach to and/or help with a specific assignment. SPS seminarians should feel free to drop by or set up an individual or group appointment.

Helpful introductions to the theology or seminary paper exist, but have not been vetted here, and are therefore listed only at the link above.

III.   Research

Access. As important as it is to know where and how to look for yourself, no amount of skillful searching can replace either:

- A close, critical reading of the primary sources themselves (e.g., the Bible, Gregory of Nazianzus, or Karl Barth); or
- The recommendations of an expert (e.g., your professor or other trustworthy specialist or theologian).

For this reason, it is very important to cultivate assiduously the habit of "following the links" (what *The Craft of Research* calls, on p. 80, "following bibliographical trails"). Attend to the recommendations of faculty. Pay close attention to any bibliographical asides present in the body of a trusted text – in its footnotes, endnotes, hyperlinks, bibliography, reference list, or recommended readings. Scan these for clues as to what the seminal resources are, attending with an independent and critical eye to what can be told of the "relevance and reliability" of the material recommended. For example, the presence of an abbreviation can be an indication of nothing more than the need to conserve space. But it can also be an indication that the work in question is so widely trusted that it needs no introduction. And then, having made your selection, secure and examine the most promising of these recommendations for yourself, watching all the while for what they also recommend, and making a note of the titles and authors that tend to recur.

But in addition to "following the links," you do need to be able to conduct searches for additional materials (primary sources in translation or the original; scholarship in the theological or other disciplines; theological reflection, whether systematic or otherwise; and so forth) on your own. For some of the principles here, see *The Craft of Research,* chapters five and six. But for the often highly specialized tools specific to the theological disciplines and therefore best suited to the task at hand, see the subject-, course-, and assignment-specific guides created by the Theology Librarian, or the Theology Librarian himself. Be sure to familiarize yourself with the following:

- Standard works of theological reference (usually the more specialized, the better), and learn to search effectively both;
- The Library discovery system (and other library catalogs) for books;

- The most appropriate (in some cases the most highly specialized) serial bibliographies (sometimes called databases) for essays and articles. These tend to be listed under an "Articles" or "Find Serial Bibliographies" tab on the subject-, course-, and assignment-specific guides created by the Theology Librarian. The most helpful general-purpose such serial bibliography or database is the ATLA Religion Database with Serials.

Evaluation: No amount of supposedly "vital piety" or apostolic zeal can in the long run make up for the damage done to the cause of the Gospel by persons (but above all theologically educated professionals) who are habitually careless about the truth. For this reason, it is important that you:

- Develop a respect for "knowledge," as well as certain epistemic and rhetorical virtues;
- Learn to think critically about and put the right questions to your sources, whether primary, secondary, or tertiary sources, or online or in print;
- Respect intellectual property, giving credit where credit is due;
- Maintain Academic Integrity; and, in general,
- Become a theologically responsible voice, rather than a mere echo (Diogenes Allen).

Thinking critically about and putting the right questions to your sources (not to mention your own arguments) is specifically discussed on pp. 76-80, 87-91, 135-38, 140-43, and 152-70 of *The Craft of Research*. Some of these same questions appear in a different form online.

So use primary, secondary, and tertiary sources critically. But use the latter two selectively and with judgment. Do not over-depend on them. Use them to support your case, and do not use them for the purpose of attempting to impress. Command the literature in order that the thesis you argue may serve the truth.

The points about writing (a form of scholarly communication) important enough to appear frequently on SPS syllabi are discussed below.

IV. Communication

Do what it takes to be sure that you are never the conduit of misinformation of any kind, let alone theological. Track anecdotes, quotations, and assertions to their source. Verify the accuracy of the information about them that you provide. Cite as close to the original as possible, but also value critical editions. Avoid the naïve use of translations without "mak[ing] or imply[ing unwarranted] claims about your linguistic abilities" (Ted Campbell).

Avoid resorting to unverified or at least unqualified generalizations, and be scrupulously fair to those taking epistemically defensible positions on differing sides of a question or debate.

Respect the "intellectual property" of others. Familiarize yourself with what constitutes the offence of plagiarism in the American academic context, and avoid it like the plague. Note, in particular, the section on "Academic Integrity" in the current SPU Graduate Catalog, as well as pp. 191-95 and 188-202 of *The Craft of Research*. Acknowledge, "link" to, name, and list your sources.

Adhere to the School of Theology style sheet, which, unless otherwise specified, is identical with the citation conventions established by Billie Jean Collins, Bob Buller, and John F. Kutsko, eds., *The SBL Handbook of Style: For Biblical Studies and Related Disciplines,* 2nd ed. (Atlanta: SBL Press, 2014), REF PN147 .S26 2014.

All written work submitted for SPS courses shall use the method of citing sources, as well as other stylistic conventions, described in that *Handbook*. For an online summary of SBL style, see the "SBL" tab on the SPU LibGuide "Citations Styles." Turn there for any SPS- or SOT-approved interpretations or even exceptions.

In sum, adhere to the graduate policy on Academic Integrity.

SPS and SOT syllabi articulating additional faculty expectations of student writing assignments tend to make certain points repeatedly. The following list should not be considered exhaustive, and note that some of the points it makes will be more applicable to some papers than others:

- Summarize the sources upon which you rely, or the topics you treat, masterfully, fairly, and clearly, having read them (and especially any primary sources) very closely. Using a judicious amount of the best scholarship (see "III. Research"), place them deftly in literary, canonical, historical, ecclesiastical, or theological context.
- Identify their strengths and weaknesses. For example, critique the following:
  - Church-historical sources read for church history papers in the light of their socio-historical context, and any scholarship about or commentary on them in the light of its fidelity to your own close reading of them, as well as that of other acknowledged experts; or
  - Theology sources read for theology papers in light of their fidelity to Christian orthodoxy (broadly construed), as well as contemporary religious, philosophical, scientific, and socio-scientific thinking.
- Make a well-organized, well-developed, and persuasive case. Focus on defending a clear thesis that anticipates objections and is well-argued and well-supported. Resist the temptation to include "irrelevant or tangential material." Make sure that the evidence you marshal actually supports your argument.
- Write elegantly, following the usual conventions of proper academic prose correct in all matters of grammar, spelling, syntax, diction, punctuation, and so forth. Refer, again, to *The Everyday Writer* and *The SBL Handbook of Style* for help with how to write.
- "Exhibit the sort of grace-filled sensitivity to human dignity" dictated by the School of Theology's Inclusive Language Policy.

- Articulate significance (or lack thereof) for Academy, Abbey, and/or Apostolate. Interact, thinking theologically above all. In general, make sure that your paper is rich in substance.
- Follow any further formatting guidelines specified in the syllabus, *The SBL Handbook of Style, The Everyday Writer,* etc.
- Submit via an approved mode of delivery on time.

V.   Assistance

Seminarians should feel free to avail themselves of the following opportunities to secure further assistance:

- Study Skills Workshop facilitated each autumn by the Academic Dean of the Seminary and the graduate assistant for tutoring services. The PowerPoint presentations used to communicate this information are available online.
- Introduction to Theological Research Workshop provided each October by the Theology Librarian. The Power Point presentation used to communicate this information is available online.
- Personalized or small-group assistance with study skills and theological writing, available from the graduate assistant for tutoring services.
- Personalized assistance with research, available from the Theology librarian.
- Personalized assistance with specific course assignments, available from the instructor during advertised office hours or by special appointment.