Ten Commandments for Writing Research Papers

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1. Early in your paper, state a clearly defined thesis that you can support with argumentation and evidence throughout the course of your paper.
   
a. A thesis statement declares what you believe and what you intend to prove. It should be contestable, proposing an arguable point with which people could reasonably disagree. A strong thesis is provocative; it takes a stand and justifies the discussion you will present.

   b. Support your thesis statement as well as all major claims with arguments and evidences for those claims.

   c. Address serious counter claims to your own thesis and claims as well as the attending arguments and evidences of those counter claims.

   d. Avoid caricatures, “straw man” arguments, pejorative labels, and other argumentative short cuts. These only weaken your own position.

   e. Ask of each paragraph in your paper, “Does this paragraph support my thesis?” If the answer is “no,” the paragraph needs to be rewritten or removed.

   f. Judge your paper a success by whether or not you have provided your reader with sufficient argumentation and supporting evidence in support of your thesis. (Note: this doesn’t mean you’ve written a paper that will automatically convince your reader regarding the truth of your thesis, only that you’ve offered sufficient argumentation, it is then up to the reader to be reasonable!)

2. Use primary sources primarily.

   a. In a biblical studies course, and especially one focused on the Hebrew Bible, this means using the biblical text. Any paper written without references to or quotations of the biblical text will likely fail to successfully argue its point.

   b. On the other hand, simply quoting the text and asserting your position does not qualify as a successful argument. The text can be used as a piece of evidence to support an argument, introduce an argument, refute an argument, etc… But, it is only a piece of evidence and not a panacea for convincing others of your viewpoint.

   c. Cite secondary sources to bolster your interpretation of primary sources and to display differences of interpretation and debate related to the primary sources.

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1 Adapted from the work of Dr S. Swain.

2 A very helpful resource for understanding the relationship between thesis, argumentation, and evidence in a research paper is: Wayne C. Booth, Gregory G. Colomb, and Joseph M. Williams, The Craft of Research, 2d ed. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003). This work also provides guidance through the “steps” of the research and writing process.

3 For a helpful, short discussion of common logical fallacies, see Anthony Weston, A Rulebook for Arguments, 3d ed. (Hackett, 2001).
3. Make every effort to use the best and most scholarly resources in your research.
   
a. This applies to both primary and secondary sources.
   
b. This applies to arguments both for and against your thesis.
   
c. Use internet sources minimally and (as a general rule) only those that are republications of sources otherwise published by reputable publishing houses.
   
d. More specifically, any internet resource that is open to change by unvetted authors is absolutely NOT an acceptable resource. This means that wiki’s (Wikipedia, etc…) are not reliable, scholarly resources.
   
e. Study Bibles are wonderful. But a study Bible does not count as a scholarly resource for a research paper.
   
f. See your friendly neighborhood librarian for help on this.
   
4. Always attach a bibliography of works cited and consulted in your research paper.
   
5. Be charitable and fair toward other persons and viewpoints.
   
a. When defining or explaining a position, cite the actual proponents of that position, not the descriptions provided by opponents of that position.
   
6. Do not be naively uncritical toward those who share your own historical, philosophical or theological presuppositions.
   
a. The right presuppositions are not always accompanied by good arguments.
   
b. Do not promote/defend a position simply because you like the person or group who espouses that position.
   
7. Do not misuse or abuse history in your argument.
   
a. Use historical and theological labels correctly. For example: Augustine is neither an example of a “Roman Catholic” nor a “Reformed” view.
   
b. Do not disdain a philosophical, theological or ecclesial tradition (especially your own tradition!). Instead honor the tradition by seeking first to understand it on its own terms before you ever criticize it.
   
c. Do not embrace or reject a philosophical, historical or theological position simply because it is contemporary.
   
d. Historical and theological labels in and of themselves do not count as arguments in favor of or against a position. Thus, ascribing the adjective “modern,” “critical,” “Western,” etc… to a particular viewpoint is not yet an argument for or against that viewpoint.
   
e. Beware of partisan and eccentric interpretations of history, philosophy and theology (both classical and contemporary).
   
f. Avoid overly simplistic readings of ideas and unsubstantiated generalizations.
8. Write clearly and engagingly.
   a. But avoid colloquial expressions and conversational styles.
   b. Use a proofreader.

9. Pay attention to the syllabus. Do the actual project assigned by the professor and not one of your own devising.

10. Do not plagiarize.
   a. Cite every source from which you draw ideas, arguments, and/or evidence in your paper.
   b. Use proper quotation format when quoting a source and cite that source correctly.
   c. Restate in words that are unmistakably your own all cited but unquoted material.