



**Lancaster**  
THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY  
SEMINARIAN  
COMMUNITY COUNCIL

## **Theological Writing Panel**

### **Discussion Notes**

Tuesday, September 7, 2021

*Panelists:* Dr. Julia O'Brien, Rev. Dr. Kathy Harvey-Nelson, Frank Gray

#### Understanding Types of Writings

#### **Could you explain the differences between an academic, theological essay versus a sermon?**

A sermon is when the preacher is trying to move and engage the audience.

Academic writings are trying to persuade the reader through a conscious conversation with what a student is learning and reading in class. They explain how one pulls together what is being learned into one location (includes readings, assignments, experiences). They are *not* a book report! What did you do with the reading? Use technical skills as well as individual creativity based on the reading. Not all papers require (or even invite) research beyond the classroom. All papers are expected to deal deeply and thoughtfully with whatever sources the assignment indicates. Emotions are not ruled out in all papers, but you're trying to make an argument based on something other than emotion.

#### **Could you explain the differences between a reflection paper and an article for a church newsletter?**

In a reflection paper, you are interacting and engaging with some source (a reading in class, your own experience). You are explaining the conclusions you've come to know through questions asked or resources used.

A church newsletter is a connecting piece. It connects the audience to worship, a sermon series, one other, spiritual practices, those unlike our group, missions. It's motivational; devotional. It may or may not be deeply researched but you do need some outside source as a foundation.

#### **What would you say is the thing that seminarians get mixed up when trying to discern these different types of papers and writings?**

Most writers think with their own voices when writing. In theological writing, you generally do not use personal pronouns, instead you should focus on the topic/issue/concept that has a tremendous amount of research and reflection. Shrink the context to a small issue/topic, and then present this in a formal, focused, and intellectual way. Bring people to a conclusion, not a summary. Academic, theological writing is not emotional.

## The Details of our Theology Papers

### **How does one tailor their thesis and argument for the discipline in which they are writing?**

Be aware of which class you are writing for. What are the learning goals? What language are you using? Your assignment will be in line with the course outcomes. For example, in biblical studies, the best argument takes account of the most features of the text. Keep the big picture of the course in mind and then get very literal about the assignment in light of the learning goals and language of the class.

Think on these questions: What are you learning? What are you doing with it? Figure out “what?” before you figure out “how?” If you can’t figure out how to say it, you probably haven’t figured it out yet.

### **How does one prepare to write their argument? How much research do we need to do before we write?**

- Thoroughly research both sides of the argument, in multiple contexts and historical eras.
- Get a lot of things out of your head and onto paper to make better sense of what you’re researching. List all elements of the argument, pro and con.
- List all the elements that you read (read scholarly!) and then discern their usefulness later. Make sure the sources for the research are valid and respected by scholars and discipline experts.
- What themes do you notice? Ascertain whether a main element of the argument is shared by other sources.
- Develop your own point of view.
- Eliminate ambiguity in all statements.
- Work from a detailed outline.
- Test all points using traditional logic methodology, ensuring that there are no fallacies.  
<https://www.logicalfallacies.org>.

## The Details of Reflection Writings

### **How do we decide about what we write for reflection papers, blogs, and newsletters when one might have a lot to say?**

Reflection papers are often interacting with a resource or experience.

Blogs and newsletters begin with a central theme. Then, write, keep writing, and notice what ideas appear. You can utilize the brainstorming tactic of a stream of consciousness to help get this process started.

### **How does grammar and punctuation look differently in these styles of writings?**

The most formal grammar and mechanics are hallmarks of both academic and theological writing. Because of the concise and focused nature of the essay form, any deviations from this standard are readily apparent and serve to compromise the impact of the whole effort.

For readily understandable and functional explanations and illustrations see any of the following resources:

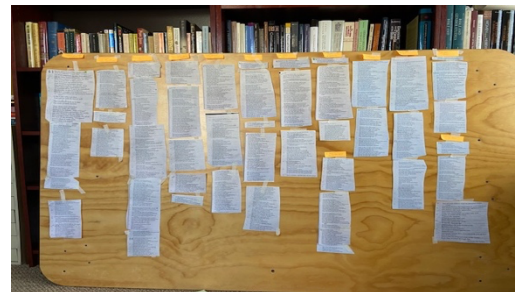
- [https://owl.purdue.edu/site\\_map.html](https://owl.purdue.edu/site_map.html) An all-inclusive site map for the Online Writing Lab.
- *Eats, Shoots and Leaves: The Zero Tolerance Approach to Punctuation* by Lynne Truss (2006)
- <https://www.grammarly.com> A comprehensive analysis tool for grammar and mechanics.
- LTS uses the Chicago Manual of Style, 17th edition. Again, the OWL Purdue site contains a current listing of the most recent protocols for documentation for theological writing. We use the NA (note/author) format. Contained therein is a Sample Paper with encapsulated explanations for a variety of resources.
- [https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/research\\_and\\_citation/chicago\\_manual\\_17th\\_edition/chicago\\_style\\_introduction.html](https://owl.purdue.edu/owl/research_and_citation/chicago_manual_17th_edition/chicago_style_introduction.html).

Read your paper out loud to hear what sounds off. Do not rely on your own accent. Don't try to make your writing sound smart, instead make it clear.

## Helpful Tools

**What are some useful tools that we can use to brainstorm ideas, get the process of writing flowing, and allow for the flow of thoughts?**

- Use the concept of “Pray in color” by Sybill Macbeth. This is a process of writing out words and ideas, then categorizing those thoughts with specific colors or designs. It is a visualization tool. Begin by putting your focus word on paper, then as you think, doodle around it. When another word comes, write it down, doodle around it. Continue the process until you find sentences and thoughts flowing freely.
- You need to find your own way to get out of your way. Everyone has writing anxiety. Sometimes you just need to start.
- Stream of Consciousness - write and write and write until a theme emerges.
- If you're lost, go back to your syllabus and its goals to see what the class is trying to accomplish.
- You're probably making more progress than you realize - as long as you start!
- Why can't you figure this out? Reflect on why you're stuck.
- Use excel to organize your thoughts.
- If you struggle to organize, print out your thoughts, and then manually move them around in different ways to see what order makes most sense.
- Don't start with a thesis - allow it to emerge as you notice themes
- Talk it out with someone else. **Let your professors help you. This is their ministry to seminarians.**



**How do we keep ourselves on track with our writing? How do we end one writing session that will jumpstart us for the next writing session?**

Write yourself a note about what you need to do when you return to the writing - leave yourself a breadcrumb trail.

**What are some suggestions for recording bibliographic information as we collect data for our writings?**

- Do it from the beginning - it's tedious and annoying, but just do it!
- Use colors to identify your words or someone else's.
- Software - EndNote (cost associated).
- You can export citations from the library website.
- Whatever method you use for citing, make sure there is enough information available to you to get back to the original source.
- Zotero - software paid for you through the library.
- Setup a resource folder in Google Drive with links to major and frequently visited resources. <https://guides.lancasterseminary.edu/subjects/MS100#tab-3>
- OWL of Perdue is very useful (see above).
- Use the guidelines available under MS100: <https://guides.lancasterseminary.edu/subjects/guide.php?subject=chicago>

**What can the Writing Center offer students regarding written papers for seminary?**

- A second pair of eyes.
- The Writing Center's process is to read a paper twice looking at organization of the paper, word choice, overall effectiveness, logic, sentence structure (is it clear? Is it pure? Have you said it well, once? Is it repetitive? Is it missing the mark?) Frank and Brian are NOT theologians.
- Send the assignment with the draft with at least one day lead time (two is preferable).