

# Guidelines for Academic Level Research

## Avoid

- Do not use “popular” genre and/or non-academic (published for general readership) and/or unreliable resources (see comments on “Scholarly versus Popular Sources” below).
- Do not use study Bibles and/or other ultra-simplified materials. One volume commentaries on the entire Bible are not scholarly (e.g., Matthew Henry; Jamieson-Fausset-Brown; John Gill; Joseph Benson; Pulpit Commentary; Barnes’ Notes on the Bible).
- While it is fine to use course textbooks, these do not count as research.
- Academic level research needs to come from more recent times for may issues, unless the point one is making refers to criticism of a classic or historical viewpoint.
- Avoid excessive direct quotations. Quotation is not research. The point of research is not to harvest sound-bytes to insert into papers. Cite everything you use, but only use direct quotation when necessary.

## Citing Sources

- Cite all sources using correct style guidelines (e.g., SBL, MLA, APA, Chicago, Turabian).
- Sources must be cited even when no direct quotations are used. Always show the research with which you are interacting. For example, footnotes or parenthetical citations may say “see so and so” or “*contra* so and so,” and the like.

## Locating Sources

- Nothing beats going to a good library and working with academic level print media resources. Research is often enhanced by looking through the titles adjacent to books, consulting several reference works, looking through relevant academic level journals.
- If studying the scriptures it helps to work with reference materials related directly to the scriptures. These include multivolume Bible dictionaries and multivolume Bible encyclopedias and academic level multivolume commentaries on the scriptures (not one volume on entire Bible). Here are a few suggested biblical commentary series: Word Biblical Commentary, New International Commentary on the Old Testament, Expositor’s Bible Commentary, Tyndale Old Testament Commentary, Old Testament Library.
- Another avenue is recent academic journal articles on the biblical passage or topic. Digital research can accomplish much by using the library’s vast online resources and databases, like ATLA, JSTOR, EBSCO for academic level articles.
- A few acceptable biblical commentaries to supplement library research can be found at: <http://www.scriptureworkshop.com/bibliography/commentary/> and there one can find a link to “exegesis library” for additional reference works to supplement library research.

## Internet

- The internet has provided an extremely convenient source of filler material for many student papers. Academic standards require that resources be reliable and reputable. Some things on the internet may be good. Yet, since anyone can say anything much is unfit. Without the checks and screening processes used by academic publishers, many internet resources lack both credibility and substance. Viable academic studies means doing due diligence working with peer review publications written by credentialed authors published by reputable publishing houses. It matters who wrote the materials, and the standards for publication.
- None of this is about being stuffy or elitist. The point is about doing quality work. Inadequate standards in research lead to weak papers.
- Internet blogs, web pages, and web searches do not count as academic research.

## Scholarly Sources versus Popular Sources

### Academic Integrity

- Plagiarism defined: [http://scriptureworkshop.com/researchandwriting/w/plagiarism\\_defined.pdf](http://scriptureworkshop.com/researchandwriting/w/plagiarism_defined.pdf)
- Violation of academic integrity: see program handbook.

**[The following is an excerpt from Nancy Jean Vyhmeister and Terry Dwain Robertson. *Quality Research Papers: For Students of Religion and Theology*. 4<sup>th</sup> ed., Zondervan Academic, 2020, 22–23.]**

Vyhmeister and Robertson say:

“What Research Is Not

Perhaps giving some ideas on what research is not will help to clarify what it is.

Research is not simply a compilation of quotations. True, quotations are used to document and clarify findings. But research is not the result of an afternoon spent with scissors, glue, and photocopies. A good research paper shows that its author has assimilated and synthesized – digested, if you like – the material and drawn logical conclusions.

Research is not simply rewriting other people’s words and ideas into a neat description. In secondary or high school, we wrote papers by summarizing what we found in the textbook and the encyclopedia. The paper we proudly handed in gave a nice description of Outer Mongolia or the migration of Canada geese. It might have qualified as research at that level; however, that no longer counts. At the college level, students need to analyze – break ideas and facts into small parts – and then organize those ideas and facts into the appropriate thought “boxes.” Only then can they write the research report or essay.

Research is not a defense of or apology for one’s own convictions. This type of writing too often ignores unfavorable evidence and tends to look at one’s position through rose-colored glasses. Research seeks truth; it does not hide – for any reason – what may disagree with esteemed ideas. If the position being maintained is tenable, research can defend it; if the position is not based on truth, it is defended in vain. We cannot allow ourselves to use unsound arguments, even for a good cause.

Likewise, research is not polemical. Its objective is to clearly present truth, not to fight others’ positions, even if those may be erroneous. In good research, truth is presented in such a logical and convincing way that there is no need for harsh language.

Research is not merely the presentation of one’s own opinions. Research demands facts, data, information. Naturally, the conclusions we reach are modified by our personal opinions, but whoever reads the research report must be able to follow the logic and the evidence to see how we reached our conclusions.

Finally, especially for theology students, research is not a sermon. It is different in content, style, and language. Some research may be involved in the preparation of a sermon, but the main purpose of a sermon is to reach the heart and help change people’s lives. The language and the message are appropriate to this goal. Research, by contrast, seeks to inform and convince the mind. Research vocabulary is neutral, free of superlatives and emotional language. A sermon becomes effective through the delivery, whereas in research writing, there is no dramatic rendition from the pulpit. What appears on paper must stand, just as it is written, without any further embellishment” (22–23).

**[Thank you to Dr. John McLean for providing the following handout.]**

Many students have trouble distinguishing between scholarly sources and popular sources in their research. Often, below the graduate level, students form the habit of using light popular treatments of a

## Scholarly Sources versus Popular Sources

topic for essays and school projects. Also, worldly ideas about relativism and inclusiveness have influenced Christians more than we realize. Sometimes we think it is bad to make any distinction between scholarly work and non-scholarly. Many students believe the only valid distinction is between works that are biblical and ones that are not. This leads to problems with papers, with grades, and with the overall quality of education that students receive.

**Scholarly sources** are written by specialists in the field. **Popular sources** are written by pastors and evangelists who because of the nature of their ministry are generalists.

**Scholarly sources** consider the topic fairly and objectively, most often from an academic perspective. **Popular sources** can be either devotional (encouraging Christians to live for Christ) or polemical (advocating the author's point of view using rhetoric rather than reason). Either way, the popular source covers a topic very lightly.

**Scholarly sources** include documentation such as footnotes or endnotes. **Popular sources** normally do not bother with such matters.

**Scholarly sources** consider a matter in some detail. **Popular sources** offer a quick overview of the matter.

**Scholarly sources** use language that is at least somewhat formal and objective. The goal is precision in expressing the exact truth of a matter. **Popular sources** use language that is friendly and familiar and makes an appeal to the reader. Precision and formality are not important.

**Scholarly sources** often look "plain" in terms of the page layout, book cover, etc., since they focus on the ideas themselves. **Popular sources** often use creative fonts, sidebars, colorful bindings, etc. to appeal to the eye and draw in the reader.

Popular sources are not necessarily bad in terms of their intended purpose. In fact, the best popular sources are written by pastors or specialists who have done the hard work of scholarly reading and research. They have taken solid information and distilled it down to make it appeal to laymen.

If you try to get by in your paper using light easy reading produced by popular writers, you will do two things:

1. You will write a shallow paper that won't be backed up well and which won't get a good grade.
2. You will deny yourself the opportunity to deeply explore the truth in the area of your topic. Thus, you will have only "warmed over hash" to give the people to whom you minister. If you do the deeper reading required of a good paper, you will be able, years later, to recall what you learned and to make it simple, clear and relevant to the people who will hear you preach and teach.

Seek out and use the best scholarly sources for your paper, even though they are often less fun to read and less interesting than the popular source or book.<sup>1</sup> You owe it to yourself and the people to whom you minister, both now and in coming years, to do the hard scholarly work now while you are in seminary.

### What's next?

For help writing a thesis statement see:

[http://scriptureworkshop.com/researchandwriting/w/thesis\\_statement.pdf](http://scriptureworkshop.com/researchandwriting/w/thesis_statement.pdf)

For help with academic papers see:

[http://scriptureworkshop.com/researchandwriting/w/academic\\_argument.pdf](http://scriptureworkshop.com/researchandwriting/w/academic_argument.pdf)

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<sup>1</sup> See *Commentary and Reference Survey: A Comprehensive Guide to Biblical and Theological Resources*, by John Glynn, Kregel Publications for excellent help on graduate-level resources. John regularly updates the book.