Seven Steps to a Great Research Paper

During the first week of classes you may experience a great deal of anxiety about the numerous assignments that you will have to complete by the end of term. Don't panic; if you gauge your time, you will finish your work by the due date. The research paper is often the main component of many courses so it is important that you know how to get from the idea to the written paper. This guide offers seven steps for writing a good research paper.

1. Allow Yourself Enough Time

- Take time to develop the thesis, do research, distill the information and write the paper.
- Profit from the process by learning more about the subject area and developing valuable skills.

2. Define the Scope of Your Essay and Write a Clear Thesis Statement

a. Check potential topics

- Check the course syllabus for paper topics suggested by the professor.
- Choose a topic that interests you, since it will motivate you to do the paper and your enthusiasm for the subject area will be evident.
- The sample topic for this case study is "Solutions to the Synoptic Problem."

b. Narrow down the topic

- Focus in on the key elements of the topic by asking some basic questions.
- Ask questions such as, "What is the Synoptic Problem?" "What are the various solutions to the Synoptic Problem?"
- Select one particular solution to the Synoptic Problem, such as the Griesbach Hypothesis (the Two-Gospel Hypothesis), as the focus of your paper.

c. Write a provisional thesis statement

- Determine the aim of the paper or what you intend to argue by developing a provisional thesis statement, such as, "The Griesbach Hypothesis is an inadequate solution to the Synoptic Problem."
- Remember that as you research and write, your thesis could change.
- Check with the professor or the T.A. to ensure that your topic is acceptable.

3. Do a Thorough, yet Focused Search for Research Materials

- Use your thesis statement as a guide for selecting relevant information.
- Consult the following items:

a. Dictionaries and Encyclopedias
- Consult the *Anchor Bible Dictionary* under "Synoptic Problem," "Griesbach Hypothesis" or "Two-Gospel Hypothesis." This will provide you with a good summary article and an excellent bibliography.
- Record some the key terms concerning your topic, e.g., "Synoptic Problem," "Griesbach Hypothesis," etc.
- Be aware of the author's biases.

b. Books

- Check the terms you have noted in the LCSH (Library of Congress Subject Headings), available on the library reference shelves.
- Look up "Synoptic Problem," in the LCSH and you will find BT (broad term) "Bible. N.T. Gospels-- Criticism, interpretation, etc." and NT (narrow term) "Griesbach Hypothesis."
- Do a subject search in the online catalogue using the narrow term "Griesbach Hypothesis."
- This will give you at least 7 hits.
- Use other terms in your subject search, such as "Synoptic Problem", which gives about 80 hits.
- It is not advisable to use the BT "Bible. N. T.-- Gospels--Criticism, Interpretation, etc.,” since it yields over 1000 entries.
- Locate your books in the various campus libraries.
- Check the table of contents and index to ensure that your subject is addressed.
- Read the introduction, if you have time, to see if the author's discussion will be applicable.

c. Periodicals

- Use the ATLA (American Theological Library Association) Religion Database to find relevant periodical articles.
- You may use similar search terms as identified above.
- Start your search by entering the subject "Synoptic Problem." This search will give you over 500 entries.
- Limit your search by selecting language and record type, full-text etc.
- Go through the records to determine which articles will be most relevant. Some may have the full text of the articles, while others may only give the basic bibliographic citation, which you can email to yourself by selecting and exporting the relevant selections.
- Consult other periodical indexes such as New Testament Abstracts, Old Testament Abstracts, and Catholic Periodical and Literature Index which you can select individually as part of the ATLA suite of databases, or you can search three together, if you wish.
- Check for the location of your journal articles by searching by journal title in the online catalogue.
- Determine the relevance of the article(s) prior to printing or photocopying.
d. Bibliographies

- Check for any bibliographies on your subject by doing a subject search, i.e., "Synoptic problem--Bibliography" in the online catalogue.
- Check for other relevant bibliographies in the Z section of the reference collection.

4. Read Research Materials and Take Notes

a. Read the relevant books/articles

- Read selectively by consulting the table of contents and the index for the sections that are most applicable to your topic.
- Read critically by being aware of the author's argument or possible bias.

b. Take helpful notes

- Take focused research notes, remembering the limits of your paper.
- Summarize the author's argument and copy relevant quotes.
- Record relevant bibliographical information in order to properly cite material in your paper (see Books on Style and Grammar below).

c. Develop a provisional outline

- Develop an outline for your paper and organize your research.
- A provisional outline could look like the following:

"The Griesbach Hypothesis: An Appraisal"

1. Introduction
2. The history of the hypothesis
3. Major arguments of the hypothesis
4. A critical appraisal of the hypothesis
5. Conclusion

5. Write your Paper

- A solid thesis statement and a clear outline will enable you to move through the writing stage more efficiently.
- Be flexible in your approach to writing. Sometimes you may feel like shaping a crucial paragraph until it is just right, while at other times you may do speed writing to get your ideas down.
- Fully document any idea or direct quote that you gained from another author. If in doubt, footnote it. Do not plagiarize.
• Compile a complete bibliography of all the resources that you consulted.

6. Edit your Paper

• Read your paper, preferable aloud, to see that your argument makes sense and flows well.
• Carefully check for any errors in style, spelling, grammar or logic.
• Rewrite, edit and rearrange your paper. A good paper should go through several drafts.
• Do some additional research if you think that you are lacking in a certain area.
• Have someone else read your paper. Another person's discerning eye can pick up any errors that you may have missed.

7. Print your Paper and Hand It In

• Use a font that is both readable and the appropriate size.
• Make a title page that has the correct information.
• Check your printer's ink cartridge or toner to ensure optimum printing.
• Submit your paper.

Other Resources on Writing Research Papers

a. Books on Style and Grammar


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