Guidelines for Papers and Other Written Assignments

Daniel R. Driver, PhD*

1 Make an Argument

Academic writing aims to persuade. In my courses, therefore, you are asked to craft thoughtful, defensible arguments. Whether you are summarizing an article, conducting a book review, interpreting an ancient text, outlining a theological position, organizing historical evidence, or advancing a thesis in a major paper, you should be certain that you have a point to make, and that your writing serves that point effectively. Different assignments call for arguments to be mounted in different ways, but in virtually every case your submission should have a clear thesis statement that is well supported by the rest of the piece. Your readers should be able to identify it easily, not least because it takes the form of a single, grammatical sentence. In the best cases it will even be elegant. As Nicholas Lash writes, "God's beauty is not well served by ugly prose."[1]

What makes a thesis strong? Arguments can take many forms, but a good thesis has three main characteristics: it must be **restricted**, **unified**, and **precise**.[2]

First, to be **restricted**, a thesis must limit the scope of an essay to what can be discussed in detail within the bounds of the paper's expected length. Whole monographs have been written on single psalms. It is simply not realistic to think that you can prove something about the entire Book of Psalms in twenty pages. A good thesis is narrow in focus. For example: "The divine warrior motif in Psalm 24:7–10 finds natural resonance in later Christian liturgies of Christ's Harrowing of Hell, as seen in the libretto of Handel's *Messiah*."

Second, a thesis must be **unified**; in other words, it must express only one idea. Consider the following sentence: "Sabbath keeping has different rationales in the Old Testament, is radically transformed by Jesus in the New Testament, and yet interest in the topic seems to be growing as Christians struggle to find rest and renewal in their busy lives." The problem with this thesis is that it commits the writer to several different topics: (1) rationales for sabbath observance in ancient Israel, (2) the transformation of sabbath practices in the early Church, and (3) contemporary accounts of spirituality that may have as much in common with therapeutic self-help literature as with traditional religious devotion. When a thesis uses a coordinating sentence, containing two or more parts, it is important that all of the parts are closely related so that the focus of the paper is not diffused.

Third, a good thesis is **precise**, meaning that when it is read, it can only have one interpretation. Vague words should be avoided. And abstract words may be problematic, unless the paper is dealing with an abstract issue. For example, a theology paper dealing with Thomist metaphysics may require more abstract language than an exegetical paper dealing with manuscript evidence from the Dead Sea Scrolls. Generally, try to make the thesis as clear and specific as possible, fleeing from words that express nondescript meaning, such as *unusual*, *interesting*, *inspiring*, or *important*, to name a few.

Finally, a thesis sentence is most often expressed in a single sentence, and is generally found at the end of a well developed introductory paragraph. This rule is not set in stone but usually works well because it helps the reader to make an easy transition into the body of the paper. Remember, while you do have some flexibility in the way you craft your thesis sentence, without a thesis that is restricted, unified, and precise, it is nearly impossible to have a good paper.

In class or at home: rewrite the poor thesis at the top of this column. Make it restricted, unified, and precise.

* I would like to acknowledge my teachers. Two who might recognize echoes of their advice in what I set forth here are Jeffry C. Davis, who introduced me to composition theory, practice, and pedagogy, and Nathan MacDonald, who helped me see the use of setting an effective book review assignment.

[1] Nicholas Lash, *The Beginning and the End of "Religion"* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996), 122.

[2] Margot Northey, Bradford A. Anderson, and Joel N. Lohr, *Making Sense in Religious Studies: A Student's Guide to Research and Writing*, 3rd ed. (Don Mills, ON: Oxford University Press, 2019), 64–66.

2 Consider the Specific Assignment

Always refer to the syllabus for the exact parameters of your assignments in a given course. For general help with some common writing assignments in my courses, see below.

2.1 The Forum Post

Does a 250-word forum post need to have a thesis? Not necessarily. A class forum is a fine place to experiment with creative approaches to big questions, so please feel free to try something unusual. Responses could take the form of a letter (to the editor, say), a dialogue (after Plato), an imitation of a literary genre (including those of scripture), a children's sermon, or anything else that occurs to you as a productive way to engage the question. Then again, the venue also gives you an audience of peers with which to hone your persuasive writing skills. Even if you are brimming with creative ideas for prompt responses, take at least four opportunities over the semester to apply that energy to the humble paragraph. Paragraphs are the building blocks of essays, and it takes experience to know how to identify a paragraph-sized idea and then nurture it into a form that can help support a larger argument. Use the forum to practice. Learn to develop a robust unit of thought governed by a clear topic sentence, which is a thesis in miniature. How? Compose a single, well-ordered paragraph in answer to four or more discussion prompts this term.

2.2 The Review (Book or Article)

A book review can facilitate critical reflection on a significant work of biblical interpretation or theology, but note well: a book review is not the same thing as a book report. A report simply summarizes the contents of a book, as if the only goal were to prove that you read it, whereas a review is a focused exercise in critical analysis and evaluation. In very limited space, this kind of paper should first explain the message of a book or article, and then present an assessment of its significance. It should have the following elements:

1. full bibliographic details about the work under review. Let the reference follow SBL Style. Parenthetical citations may follow, thus: "quote" (73).

2. an introductory hook (a phatic or attention-getting device). It will be quite short compared to the introductions most other papers require.

3. a summary of the work and its arguments. You should describe the main argument in your own words and through the judicious use of quotes. Try to be objective (would the author recognize your summary of their work? is it fair?) and insightful (do you capture the work's central points?). Please avoid critical comment at this stage.

4. an analysis and evaluation of the work, possibly through discussion of a representative example. If the scholar's focus is exegetical, examine a characteristic instance of biblical interpretation. Read the biblical passage being interpreted, and ask yourself the following sorts of questions: Is the interpretation insightful? Does it help you understand the biblical text? Does it include everything in the biblical text? What does it omit? Why? Are there any problems with the interpretation? Does the biblical text aid the scholar's wider argument? Alternately, if the work is not especially exegetical, consider the list of questions suggested by Northey et al.[3] Critical comments should be thoughtful and measured.

5. optionally, a brief statement of your personal response to the work.

6. an apt conclusion. The final paragraph is often a good place to put a thesis statement, since the reviewed work must be understood before you can make an argument about it.

Unless the professor or syllabus states otherwise, at least half of the paper (50%) should be evaluative. Mere plot summary is not required. In the case of an assigned text, unlike a review that might appear in print, you can assume that your audience is already at least somewhat familiar with the work.

2.3 The Exegetical Essay

The basic task of an exegetical essay is to identify a suitable passage from the Bible (between four and eight verses long, and certainly not more than ten), and to offer a reading of it that supports an appropriate thesis.

The biblical exegete needs a plan of attack. Unfortunately, I know of no method that applies universally. I took a few courses on the Bible when I was an undergraduate.

[3] Northey, Anderson, and Lohr, *Making Sense*, 85–86.

In one I remember being presented with an authoritative list of steps for exegesis – I believe there were twelve steps in all. At the time, as a student of English Literature, the hermeneutical program struck me as artless. It was far too formulaic. Now that I have looked into the matter more thoroughly, I have become convinced that all such schemes are artificial. They might serve a purpose for a time and a place, but they cannot guarantee excellent results, even in the limited contexts in which they arise. This problem becomes more obvious when one studies the history of the Bible's interpretation. Some methods that worked for Origen or Jerome in one situation could not be followed by Diodore or Theodore in another. And Augustine's famous treatise on the interpretation of scripture, called *On Christian Doctrine*, is still worth studying, but it does not resolve all the interpretive conundrums that readers of the Bible have faced ever since. What is one to do? If you find yourself glowing with confidence about your favourite approach to the Bible, the first step might be to take a dose of humility. Walk through a world class theological research library, if you get the chance, and marvel at just how much has been written about the Bible over the centuries. If, on the other hand, you find yourself daunted by the challenge, I commend the steps outlined in *Making Sense in Religious Studies* as a reasonable and practical place to start.[4]

1. Find a text of suitable length.
2. Translate the passage or read it through in multiple translations.
3. Determine the genre.
4. Conduct literary analysis.
5. Examine the historical context.
6. Examine the compositional history (when possible).
7. Consult secondary literature.
8. Iterate. Revisit the above steps.

Note, too, that the thesis of an exegetical essay should have an organic relationship to the text it seeks to describe. If you only find in a passage something you already thought was there, the exercise has failed. Practically speaking, this means that the final version of your thesis statement may be the last thing you are able to write. However, a lucid statement of it still belongs in the paper's introduction. Lead off by presenting the results of your study of a biblical text, and then take the reader through the exegetical spade work that got you there. It can even be a virtue if, in the interest of honesty, you point out some limits in your reading. The goal is not to override but to clarify the text.

2.4 The Thesis Proper

A thesis proper, by which I mean not just a sentence but a total argument, is often a culminating work in a degree program. I regularly set a question that calls for a final thesis as the culminating assignment of a course as well. It requires all the things that have been described above: a sound thesis statement, mature and topical supporting paragraphs, competence in secondary literature, and a solid exegetical foundation. My main advice is to write and rewrite. Leaving most of the work to the night before a deadline is no recipe for success. Give yourself as much time as you can to revise your work, knowing that writing is a rigorous process. It takes effort to make prose appear effortless.

3 Try the Paramedic Method

Use the Paramedic Method (originally developed by Richard Lanham in *Revising Prose*) to edit any kind of professional writing. Editing your professional writing using the Paramedic Method will make your prose easier to read. Sentences that are easy to read are more persuasive and more user-centered.

See the Online Writing Lab (OWL) at Purdue University for details. Search for "Paramedic Method" or go to: https://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/resource/635/01/

1. Circle the prepositions (of, in, about, for, onto, into)
2. Draw a box around the "is" verb forms
3. Ask, "Where's the action?"
4. Change the "action" into a simple verb
5. Move the doer into the subject (Who's kicking whom)
6. Eliminate any unnecessary slow wind-ups
7. Eliminate any redundancies

[4] For details on each of these eight steps see Northey, Anderson, and Lohr, *Making Sense*, 105–112.