A Short Guide to Writing Research Papers in an introductory course on the Old Testament/Hebrew Bible

The following notes and references are meant to help you to organize and compose a conventional term paper on archaeology and the Bible. You may find the basic sequence and resources helpful in other disciplines, too.

1. Choosing a Topic

Your topic may be chosen for you, but, if not, aim for one that is (1) interesting to you, (2) manageable with readily available sources, (3) malleable so you can narrow in on an especially interesting or important aspect and (4) arguable. The following resources explain the dynamics of choosing a good topic for any research.


Choose topics suggested by assigned readings, by questions posed in the Study Guide or by the additional sources in the bibliographies.

2. Researching Your Topic

Material about your topic will be found in a variety of sources. In most cases, you can build your research by moving from general to specific treatments of your topic.

In your research, it is vital that you not allow your expanding knowledge of what others think about your topic to drown your own curiosities, sensibilities, and insights. Instead, as your initial questions
expand and then diminish with increased knowledge from your research, your own deeper concerns, insights, and point of view should emerge and grow. You might even try to reach new conclusions or arrive at a new perspective about your topic.

A. Consult Standard Sources and Build Bibliography

Encyclopedia articles, dictionaries, and other standard reference tools contain a wealth of material—and helpful bibliographies—to orient you in your topic. Look for the best, most authoritative, and up-to-date treatments. Checking cross-references will deepen your knowledge.

General References:


One volume commentaries


General books on Egypt, Mesopotamia and ancient Israel:

York: Facts on File.

Start listing the sources you consult right away in standard bibliographical format (see section 5, below, for examples of usual formats). Assigning a number to each one facilitates easy reference later in your work. Investing in a bibliography program like EndNote (http://www.endnote.com/), Biblio (http://www.scholarsoft.com/biblio2.htm) or Biblioscape (http://www.biblioscape.com/) will keep your sources and your notes in usable order.

B. Check Periodical Literature

The eventual quality of your research paper rests entirely on the quality or critical character of your sources. The best research uses academically sound treatments by recognized authorities arguing rigorously from primary sources.

Important scholarship in biblical and archaeological studies is published in books and academic journals. In consulting books and articles dealing with your topic, you will learn where agreements, disagreements, and open questions stand, how older treatments have fared, and the latest relevant tools and insights. Since you cannot consult them all, work back from the latest, looking for the best and most directly relevant articles from the last five, ten, or twenty years, as ambition and time allow.

The primary sources that you are dealing with are the Bible, its Near Eastern parallels, and the archaeological artifacts. Secondary sources are all the articles or books that analyze or interpret these primary sources.

Search the American Theological Library Association database (ATLA) for primary and secondary sources -- books and journal articles on your topic.

Major biblical journals are:

*Biblica*

Catholic Biblical Quarterly
Journal of Biblical Literature
Journal for the Study of the Old Testament
Vetus Testament
Zeitschrift für die alttestamentliche Wissenschaft
You can also find links and some full articles and bibliographies online. Guides to the many religious studies and theological websites include:


- “Wabash Center Guide to Internet Resources for Teaching and Learning in Theology and Religion” www.wabashcenter.wabash.edu/Internet/front.htm


- Blais: Online Catalog of the Libraries of the Claremont Colleges http://blais.claremont.edu/search

- Yale University Divinity School Library www.library.yale.edu/div/divhome.htm

- Princeton Theological Seminary Library www.ptsem.edu/grow/Library/index.htm

D. Taking Notes

With these sources on hand, you can review each source, noting down its most important or relevant facts, observations, or opinions. Take notes only on the relevant portions of secondary sources.

Keep notes using bibliography programs like EndNote or Biblio or Biblioscape. Record information such as the subtopic, the source and the main idea or quotations.

E. Note or Quote?

While most of the notes you take will simply summarize points made in primary or secondary sources, direct quotes are used for (1) word-for-word transcriptions, (2) key words or phrases coined by the author, or (3) especially clear or helpful or summary formulations of an author’s point of view. Remember, re-presenting another’s insight or formulation without attribution is plagiarism. You should also be sure to keep separate notes about your own ideas or insights into the topic as they evolve.

F. When Can I Stop?
As you research your topic in books, articles, or reference works, you will find it coalescing into a unified body of knowledge or at least into a set of interrelated questions. In most cases, your topic will become more and more focused, partly because that is where the open question or key insight or most illuminating instance resides, and partly for sheer manageability. The vast range of scholarly methods and opinions and differing points of view about many historical topics may force you to settle for laying out a more circumscribed topic carefully. While the sources may never dry up, your increased knowledge gradually gives you confidence that you have the most informed, authoritative, and critical sources covered in your notes.

3. Outlining Your Argument

On the basis of your research findings, in this crucial step you refine or reformulate your general topic and question into a specific question answered by a defensible thesis. You then arrange or rework your supporting arguments into a clear outline that will coherently and convincingly present your thesis.

First, review your research notes carefully. Some of what you initially read now seems obvious or irrelevant, or perhaps the whole topic is simply too massive. But, as your reading and note-taking progressed, you might also have found a piece of your topic, from which a key question or problem has emerged.

- What is the topic or question that is most interesting, enlightening, and manageable?
- What have been the most clarifying and illuminating insights I have found into the topic?
- In what ways have my findings contradicted my initial expectations? Can this serve as a clue to a new and different approach to my question?
- Can I frame my question in a clear way, and, in light of my research, do I have something new to say and defend my thesis that will answer my question and clarify my materials?

In this way you will advance from topic and initial question to specific question and thesis.
• **Topic:** What do the excavations at Dan and Bethel contribute to the understanding of the attitude of the prophets in ancient Israel toward public worship?

• **Specific topic:** What have the excavations at Dan and Bethel contributed to the understanding of the book of Amos on public worship there?

• **Specific question:** Does archaeology indicate that the book of Amos wants to abolish public worship at Dan and Bethel or reform it?

• **Thesis:** Amos was concerned with specific abuses, and was not formulating a general position on cultic worship for all times and places.

You can then outline a presentation of your thesis that marshals your research materials into an orderly and convincing argument. Functionally your outline might look like this:

1. **Introduction.** Raise the key question and announce your thesis.

2. **Background.** Present the necessary literary or historical or theological context of the question. Note the “state of the question” or the main agreements and disagreements about it.

3. **Development.** Present your own insight in a clear and logical way. Marshal evidence to support your thesis and develop it further by:
   - offering examples from your primary sources
   - citing or discussing authorities to bolster your argument
   - contrasting your thesis with other treatments, either historical or contemporary
   - confirming it by showing how it makes good sense of the data or answers related questions or solves previous puzzles.

4. **Conclusion.** Restate the thesis in a way that recapitulates your argument and its consequences for the field or the contemporary religious horizon.

The more detailed your outline, the easier will be your writing. Go
through your cards, reorganizing them according to your outline. Fill in the outline with the specifics from your research, right down to the topic sentences of your paragraphs. Don't be shy about setting aside any materials that now seem off-point, extraneous, or superfluous to the development of your argument.

4. Writing Your Paper

You are now ready to draft your paper, essentially by putting your outline into sentence form while incorporating specifics from your research notes.

Your main task, initially, is just to get it down on paper in as straightforward a way as possible. Assume your reader is intelligent but knows little or nothing about your particular topic. You can follow your outline closely, but you may find that logical presentation of your argument requires adjusting the outline somewhat. As you write, weave in quotes judiciously from primary or secondary literature to clarify or punch your points. Add brief, strong headings at major junctures. Add footnotes to acknowledge ideas, attribute quotations, reinforce your key points through authorities, or refer the reader to further discussion or resources. Your draft footnotes might refer to your sources as abbreviated in source cards, with page numbers; you can add full publishing data once your text is firm.

5. Reworking Your Draft

Your rough draft puts you within sight of your goal, but your project's real strength emerges from reworking your initial text in a series of revisions and refinements. In this final phase, make frequent use of one of the many excellent style manuals available for help with grammar, punctuation, footnote form and abbreviations.


Closely examine your work several times, paying attention to:

1 **Structure and Argument.** Do I state my question and thesis accurately? Does my paper do what my Introduction promised? (If not, adjust one or the other.) Do I argue my thesis well? Do the headings clearly guide the reader through my outline and argument? Does this sequence of topics orchestrate the insights my reader needs to understand my thesis?

2 **Style.** Style here refers to writing patterns that enliven prose and engage the reader. Three simple ways to strengthen your academic prose are:

   • Topic sentences. Be sure each paragraph clearly states its main assertion.

   • Active verbs. As much as possible, avoid using the linking verb, to be. Rephrase using active verbs.

   • Sentence flow. Above all, look for awkward sentences in your draft. Disentangle and rework them into smooth, clear sequences. To avoid boring the reader, vary the length and form of your sentences. Check to see if your paragraphs unfold with some short sentences, questions, and simple declarative ones.

Likewise, tackle some barbarisms that frequently invade academic prose:

   • *Repetition.* Unless you need the word count, this can go.

   • *Unnecessary words.* Need we say more? Such filler as “the fact that” and “in order to” and “there is/are” numb your reader. Similarly, such qualifiers as somewhat, fairly, rather, very take the wind from the
adjecive that follows.

- **Jargon.** Avoid technical terms when possible. Explain all technical terms that you do use. Avoid or translate foreign-language terms.

- **Overly complex sentences.** Short sentences are best. Avoid compound-complex sentences and run-on sentences. Avoid etc.

3  **Spelling, Grammar, Punctuation.** Along with typographical errors, look for stealth errors, the common but overlooked grammatical gaffes: subject-verb disagreement, dangling participles, mixed verb tenses, over- and under-use of commas, semicolon use, and inconsistency in capitalization, hyphenation, italicization, or treatment of numbers.

Miriam-Webster Online contains both the Collegiate Dictionary and Thesaurus: www.m-w.com/

4  **Footnotes.** Your footnotes will give credit to your sources for every quote and for other people’s ideas you have used. Here are samples of typical citation formats in SBL Manual style:

**Basic order:**

Author's full name, Book *Title*, ed., trans., series, edition, vol. number (Place: Publisher, year), pages.

**Book:**


**Book in a series:**


**Edited book:**


**Essay or chapter in an edited book:**

Seth L. Sanders, “Performative Exegesis,” in April DeConick, ed.,

**Multi-volume work:**


**Journal article:**


**Encyclopedia article:**


**Website source:**


For a full listing of citation styles for internet sources, see “Citation Style”: www.bedfordstmartins.com/online/citex.html

**CD ROM source:**

Helmar Junghans, Martin Luther: Exploring His Life and Times — 1483—1546, CD ROM (Minneapolis: Fortress, 1998).

**Bible:**

Cite in your text (not in your footnotes) by book, chapter, and verse: Gen 1: 1-2; Exod 7: 13; Rom 5:1-8. In your Bibliography list the version of Bible you have used.

**Repeated citations:**

If a footnote cites the immediately preceding source, use ibidem, meaning “there,” abbreviated:
Sources cited earlier can be referred to by author or editor's names, a shorter title, and page number:


### Bibliography

Your Bibliography can be any of several types:

- **Works Cited**: just the works—books, articles, etc.—that appear in your footnotes
- **Works Consulted**: all the works you checked in your research, whether they were cited or not in the final draft
- **Select Bibliography**: primary and secondary works that, in your judgment, are the most important source materials on this topic, whether cited or not in your footnotes.

Some teachers might ask for your bibliographic entries to be annotated, i.e., to include a comment from you on the content, import, approach, and helpfulness of each work.

Bibliographic style differs somewhat from footnote style. Here are samples of typical bibliographic formats:

### Basic order:


### Book:


### Book in a series:


### Essay or chapter in an edited book:


**Multi-volume work:**


**Journal article:**


**Encyclopedia article:**


**Website source:**


For a full listing of citation styles for internet sources, see “Citation Style”: www.bedfordstmartins.com/online/citex.html

**CD ROM source:**


**Bible:**


After incorporating the revisions and refinements into your paper, print out a fresh copy, proofread it carefully, make final corrections, format it to your teacher's or institution's specifications, and print your final paper.
Exegesis Papers

The purpose of an exegesis paper is to identify a major point that is raised in the passage and discuss it. But you must put the point in context. Therefore you need to discuss the literary form of the passage, and, if possible, the historical context in which it is set.

Choose a passage that is a coherent literary unit, 10-15 verses in length.

You may find helpful the format

Structure,
Genre,
Setting
Intention,

Outlined by Gene Tucker, *Form Criticism* (Fortress Guides to Biblical Scholarship) and exemplified in the FOTL series (Forms of Old Testament Literature, Eerdmans).

You should consult several commentaries on the passage in question, and also monographs and articles when they are relevant.

Recommended commentary series include:

AB Anchor Bible
AOTC Abingdon Old Testament Commentaries
BerO Berit Olam
CC Continental Commentaries
FOTL Forms of the Old Testament Literature
Hermeneia Hermeneia: A Critical and Historical Commentary on the Bible
IBC     Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching
ICC     International Critical Commentary
ITC     International Theological Commentary
JPSBC   Jewish Publication Society Bible Commentary
JPSTC   Jewish Publication Society Torah Commentary
NCBC    New Century Bible Commentary
NIB     New Interpreter’s Bible
NICOT   New International Commentary on the Old Testament
OTL     Old Testament Library
OTR     Old Testament Readings
SB      Schocken Bible
SHBC    Smyth & Helwys Bible Commentary
WBC     Word Biblical Commentary

Note also the commentaries in the one-volume commentaries listed earlier in this guide, especially the Harper Bible Commentary, the New Jerome Biblical Commentary, the Oxford Bible Commentary and the Eerdmans Commentary on the Bible.

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