

Some Tips and Tricks for Writing a Good Research Paper

Step 1: Start by Picking a Good Topic

- Select something you're interested in, curious about, or challenged by. If you choose something you will be able to talk about with others, you'll get more out of this assignment and enjoy the process.
- If you're still not sure what to pick, review the introductory analysis assignment to see what questions you had about the author, audience, language, literary features, history, geography, culture, theology, and structure of Amos. What is still unanswered at this point in the class?
- You can also look over the questions you identified in your weekly essays—which ones are you still curious about? What do you want to circle back to delve deeper in?
- One of the classic mistakes is to pick something that's too BIG or broad a topic for this sized paper. Narrow it down to dial in on something specific. The goal is to suck the marrow out of a unique aspect of the text and become an "expert" in it.
- On the flip side, avoid topics that have limited source materials. For example, you might be interested in knowing what happened later in Amos' life, but because of the limitations of the evidence, you might consider refocusing on what the text *does* say about him.
- Avoid subjects or methodologies that are too technical, learned, or specialized. You need to stretch yourself but make it manageable.
- Don't pick something that is a convenient springboard out of Amos to somewhere else in Scripture. Roll up your sleeves and get your hands "dirty" in this book. Make sure your paper is grounded in the text of Amos not theology in general. There should be an ample number of references to verses and passages in the book of Amos.

Step 2: Articulate a Question or Questions About the Topic

- Before you begin your research, write out the question(s) you want answered through your study. You shouldn't have a thesis statement yet because you haven't done the research yet, and you don't want to project your assumption onto the text.
- By shifting your topic into a question or set of questions, you'll stimulate greater curiosity and make new discoveries that you might have otherwise missed.
- As an example, the question of "what is the significance of the visions of Amos 7-8" is too vague, so try to get more specific. You might want to ask what a specific sign vision means or why they are given in that order or why Amos asks God to relent in the first two but then stops etc.
- Feel free to run your topic *and* question(s) by me before embarking into full-scale research.
- If, after beginning your research, you decide to shift the topic, you are certainly free to do so. Just make sure you restate for yourself what you're aiming to find out.

Step 3: Determine Your Methodology

- This is a step that's easy to miss. We all have a methodology when approaching the text, we just don't always know it consciously. Make the effort to define yours.

Since this will be a key component of your grade (“theoretical framework”), you’re going to write it up as part of your introduction later. For now, you just need to know what tact you’re taking and how those assumptions affect your research.

- For example, are you entertaining the idea that the text you’re studying is composed of different literary sources? Are you going to look into possible cultural forms that were utilized? Will you consider how an editor may have arranged various sources to create the final form, or are you simply focusing on the canonical form that we have received? Are you planning to study the history and cultural backgrounds of the text? Will you investigate how the text is structured or how the language is loaded to heighten its impact? To what extent are you extracting the text from its historic context to respond to it as a modern reader? All of these questions reflect different methodological considerations and influence the outcome of your research.
- If you have taken “OT 503 Reading the Old Testament,” you will be equipped to identify whether you’re using source, form, redaction, canonical, rhetorical, structural, or new criticism or something else. If you haven’t, you’ll need to do your best to state how you’re going to study the text. Review Barton’s *The Theology of the Book of Amos* for some background.
- You are also encouraged to identify strengths and weaknesses of the method. You don’t have to act like you’ve got a smokin’ gun or silver bullet.

Step 4: Dig In!

- Time to start the research mode. The first step is always to read the text. What are your theories and suspicions based on the text alone?
- Then use the selected bibliography in your syllabus as a springboard. Pick several commentaries from “Category 1” to begin. Keep an eye out for good leads to more focused articles dealing with your area in the footnotes of the commentary pertaining to your verses.
- You should also search for scholarly articles and books on the Nyack College Library database. This is where it really helps to know how to search by the right key words. Click below to access video tutorials if you don’t know how to do this. If needed, contact Cheryl Felmlee, Director of the ATS Library, at cheryl.felmlee@nyack.edu.

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- You will need to devise your own method to take and organize notes from your research. However that plays out, be sure to record full bibliographical information so you can have it on hand when you’re writing your paper. The info is useless then if you can’t cite the source.

- To review what information is needed and how to cite it in your notes and bibliography, review the “Student Supplement for *The SBL Handbook of Style*, Second Edition” by clicking [here](#).
- On a side note, if you really enjoy academic study and anticipate continuing with graduate or doctoral work, I highly recommend using a bibliographic manager. I used Zotero for my dissertation and wished I would have started in grad school. It’s a free online tool or application available for download in a standalone version. It allows you to store references in one place, keep reading notes linked to sources, and most importantly, to insert footnotes and a bibliography into your paper automatically formatted in the prescribed style. There’s a learning curve to using it, but it saves a ton of time if you’re going to be doing a lot of academic writing.
- Oh yes, don’t forget that using someone else’s knowledge as if it’s your own is called “plagiarization” or, to use the biblical terms, lying and stealing.

Step 5: Critically Analyze Your Research Data

- Here you will analyze, synthesize, sort, and digest all that information you have gathered up.
- By now you should be able to write an answer to the question(s) you asked before you started the research. Turn that into a thesis statement (a one sentence declaration of your belief). The main portion of your essay will consist of arguments to support and defend this belief.

Step 6: Make A Tentative Outline

- This is where you lay out your tact to eat that elephant one bite at a time. No doubt it will continue to evolve as you continue research and writing, but have the skeletal structure help you think through your topic carefully and organize it logically before you start writing.
- Check your outline to make sure that the points covered flow logically from one to the other.

Step 7: Write Your First Draft

- Many students write the body of the essay or paper first and then the introduction and conclusion last.
- The body is where you present the arguments to support your thesis statement. In doing so, you will want to evaluate multiple options or possibilities for something, demonstrating the strengths and weaknesses of the alternatives. If you present a new idea that you came up with, be sure to self-critique it. That actually makes it a stronger argument because it shows you are making objective assessments. A simple compilation of data is not an essay. Don’t just describe something, analyze the information and argue for a particular conclusion. When you draw from secondary literature, document it appropriately, but make sure your own analysis carries the weight of the essay.
- The introduction states your thesis, the reason you are writing the paper, and how it is a contribution to the field (in more in-depth essays you can cover the history of research). It also covers the theoretical framework/methodology you’re using. Give

a simple statement of the major points you plan to cover before you dive in. You can also define the scope and limitations of what you plan to cover.

- The conclusion restates or rewords your thesis and summarizes your arguments that led you to that position. This is where you will want to identify areas needing more study. Rarely does an essay deal with a topic that can be completely or definitively answered within the space allowed for this essay.

Step 8: Revise Your Outline and Draft

- Arrange and rearrange ideas to follow your outline. Reorganize your outline if necessary, but order everything with your thesis in mind.
- Re-read your paper for grammatical errors. Do a spell check. Correct all errors that you can spot. Get someone else to read it over. Often a second pair of eyes can see mistakes that you missed. I wish I had someone to do it with athis ppaer . . . just messin' with you to make sure you're paying attention :)
- Consider using a free grammar and proof reading checker such as [Grammarly](#).
- [Here](#) is a helpful checklist I found online:
 - Is my thesis statement concise and clear?
 - Did I follow my outline? Did I miss anything?
 - Are my arguments presented in a logical sequence?
 - Are all sources properly cited to ensure that I am not plagiarizing?
 - Have I proved my thesis with strong supporting arguments?
 - Have I made my intentions and points clear in the essay?
 - Did I begin each paragraph with a proper topic sentence?
 - Have I supported my arguments with documented proof or examples?
 - Any run-on or unfinished sentences?
 - Any unnecessary or repetitious words?
 - Varying lengths of sentences?
 - Does one paragraph or idea flow smoothly into the next?
 - Any spelling or grammatical errors?
 - Quotes accurate in source, spelling, and punctuation?
 - Are all my citations accurate and in correct format?
 - Did I avoid using contractions? Use "cannot" instead of "can't", "do not" instead of "don't"?
 - Did I use third person as much as possible? Avoid using phrases such as "I think", "I guess", "I suppose"
 - Have I made my points clear and interesting but remained objective?
 - Did I leave a sense of completion for my reader(s) at the end of the paper?

Step 9: Submit the Final Paper

- Proofread the final paper again. Make sure you run the spell check and watch for punctuation problems and sentences where the subject and verb are not in agreement.

- Get that thing done before the deadline so you have peace of mind and a chance to do the final check vs. submitting at 11:58pm.