

**Suggestions for Writing Better Papers**  
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How can one write an excellent paper? Consider Luke 1:1–4.<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Inasmuch as many have undertaken to compile a narrative of the things that have been accomplished among us, <sup>2</sup> just as those who from the beginning were eyewitnesses and ministers of the word have delivered them to us, <sup>3</sup> it seemed good to me also, having followed all things closely for some time past, to write an orderly account for you, most excellent Theophilus, <sup>4</sup> that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught. (ESV)

These four verses are one, well-crafted sentence, suggesting to the reader that Luke will give an excellent presentation of history and theology. Luke acknowledges other writings on the topic (“many have undertaken to compile an account”) and that the experts (“eyewitnesses”) are the primary sources for his book. He did his research well (“having followed all things closely for some time past”) and carefully thought through how he would present it (“to write an orderly account”). He knew his audience (“most excellent Theophilus”) and gave him a definitive statement on the matter (“that you may have certainty concerning the things you have been taught”).

Learning from Luke’s example...

## **1. Research**

- a. Schedule large chunks of time for research. Encyclopedia and dictionary articles are starting points. Use their citations to find there to key books, journal articles, etc. Plan to read whole articles and books or key sections in books. Good research simply takes time. Rushed research will show itself in your papers, whether by a paltry offering of sources or your limited understanding of a topic (or both).
- b. Research well. You don’t have to be exhaustive, but do be comprehensive. Read the best representatives on your topic, whether for or against your thesis.
- c. Do not rely solely on your personal library, Logos, and internet sources. Use your best sources at hand as a starting point, and then know from there what books or what section of books you will need from a library. A terminal degree should imply that you know how to do good research.
- d. Build your bibliography as you study. Type an entry every time you pull a book from a shelf if it has value for your paper. This practice allows you to copy, paste, and modify bibliographic entries into footnotes as you write, simplifying and speeding the process.
- e. Know your content and outline in advance. If you have done thorough research and thought through your paper down to first-, second-, third-, and perhaps fourth-level headings, the paragraphs will come easily and quickly.

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<sup>1</sup> Adapted from lecture notes from “Introduction to Research and Writing,” class taught by Andreas Köstenberger, Southeastern Baptist Theological Seminary; Wake Forest, NC; June 6, 2011. Köstenberger is a prolific author and edited the *Journal of the Evangelical Theological Society* from 1999 to 2021. In addition to his comments on Luke 1:1–4, I have added my own suggestions from grading papers over the years.

- f. Know what position you are going to take before you write your paper. Be humble to allow your research to change your mind as sound authors challenge your convictions.
- g. If using the internet for research, use the *best* websites, or better, articles and resources posted at these sites. Quoting a favorite preacher's video pales in comparison to articles posted by other seminaries or institutions (or that favorite preacher). Unless a video has exceptional value, avoid YouTube and the like, and use websites ending in .org, .edu, or .com if it is a scholar's personal website.
- h. Familiarize yourself with Turabian and the BJU "Style Manual for Seminary Papers." You will avoid many careless mistakes in your paper's body and footnotes. *I highly suggest reading the recommended resources below before writing your final project.*

## 2. Writing

- a. Get good, consistent sleep. Write when you are most alert. One-night wonders the day or two before a deadline look sloppy, shoddy, and rushed.
- b. If possible, write the entire paper at once. Writing over periods of time may make for choppy writing. Whether tending the footnotes as you go or filling in their details later, make sure to do them well. If you have formed your bibliography as suggested above, you can quickly complete them as you write.
- c. Write in the third person, even if referring to yourself (e.g., "The present author concurs."). State facts. Make assertions. Be concise. Give conclusions.
  - i. First-person language, personal opinions, and anecdotes are not research. Scholarship in general does not regard someone as an expert unless he is a published author (not *self*-published, please note), has completed a terminal degree, or has been noted somehow for excellence in academia.
  - ii. Do not use second-person language in scholarly papers. Use third-person language here as well (e.g., "The reader will notice himself in this sentence."). Do not use imperatives that assume a second-person subject (e.g., "[You] Do not use imperatives that assume a second-person subject.>").
- d. A good introduction encourages your reader to keep on reading. Acknowledge other works and authors who have written on your topic. Give the idea that you thoroughly know your topic, what others know about your topic, and, especially in your thesis, how your paper adds something to the overall discussion. Thesis statements do not have to be wooden but should stand out somehow. They should preview the paper as well.
- e. Define your terms. Do not assume your reader knows as much as you. Even if he does, a review of key definitions is helpful.
- f. Know your audience. Write as if your reader has never considered your topic, and write thoroughly so as to state your case definitively as well. Try to get it right the first time. You may find yourself using this paper later, whether for ministry or further study. Be a good steward of your task and time, and don't make yourself do the work all over again.

- g. Use the active voice for verbs (e.g., “The Bible states,” not, “It is said in the Bible.”). Use strong nouns as well. Do not nominalize (turning verbs into nouns; e.g., “nominalization”). This practice makes your paper more engaging and moves your thoughts along (e.g., “The student’s writing was shown to him for its characteristics that created confusion” could be “The professor explained how the student’s paper could easily confuse a reader.”).
- h. Avoid metanarrative (i.e., writing about the paper itself; e.g., “The previous section made conclusions, and now this section will make some more.”). Simply state a statement without making a statement about your statements (a good tip for preaching as well!).
- i. Cite the best representatives, and cite them fairly, especially in debated topics. To do otherwise betrays poor research or suggests you are cherry-picking sources to avoid a weakness in an argument.
- j. Finish your paper one or two weeks before your deadline. This practice allows you ample time for editing.

### 3. Editing

- a. Common mistakes include...
  - i. Incorrect abbreviations for biblical books
  - ii. Providing too many or too few details in footnotes and bibliographic entries
  - iii. Incorrect citations of biblical dictionaries, encyclopedias, and commentaries
  - iv. Using hyphens or dashes incorrectly. From shorter to longer, use...
    - 1. *hyphens* in compound words or phrases (e.g., “The merry-go-round provided an all-you-can-eat buffet.”)
    - 2. an *en-dash* between numbers (e.g., Gen 3:1–7; 2022–2023)
    - 3. an *em-dash* for emphasis (e.g., “The author made a startling admission—plagiarism.”)
    - 4. Notice the sizes: -, –, and —.
- b. Print your rough draft, and correct mistakes with a red pen. Underline every verb. Change passive verbs to active, and replace weak with stronger verbs.
- c. Replace weak nouns with stronger nouns. Look for ambiguous words like “thing” and replace them with nouns that give precision (e.g., “Five things are wrong with this argument,” could be, “This argument raises five objections.”).
- d. Print your edited draft for a third party to proofread, and edit your paper again. A second set of eyes will catch many mistakes that you miss. A reader for your papers will also avoid jerky writing that leaves gaps and makes jumps because of what is left inside your head as a writer but has not made it to the paper.

## Recommended Reading

Bob Jones University, “Style Manual for Seminary Papers.” Greenville, S.C.: Bob Jones University, 2022. style manual supplement.

Available online: [https://seminary.bju.edu/files/2022/09/BJUSeminaryStyleManual\\_Updated2022.pdf](https://seminary.bju.edu/files/2022/09/BJUSeminaryStyleManual_Updated2022.pdf).

BJU paper template: [https://bjui.instructure.com/courses/4572/files/2216772?module\\_item\\_id=675880](https://bjui.instructure.com/courses/4572/files/2216772?module_item_id=675880).

Booth, Wayne C., Gregory G. Colomb, Joseph M. Williams, Joseph Bizup, and William T. FitzGerald. *The Craft of Research*. 4th ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2016.

Newport, Cal. *Deep Work: Rules for Focused Success in a Distracted World*. New York: Grand Central, 2016.

Strunk, William and E. B. White. *The Elements of Style*. 4th ed. New York: Longman, 2000.

Turabian, Kate L. *A Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*. 9th ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018.