

A Checklist for Student Research Papers

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Note: All of the diagnostic questions below should be answered in the *affirmative!*

Research

1. Have you reviewed and cited an appropriate number of scholarly sources?
 - Consult the syllabus and/or check with the professor regarding expectations here.
2. Do your sources reflect both *breadth* and *depth* of research on your chosen topic?
3. Have you cited and engaged with some sources that take alternative/opposing positions?
 - Avoid citing only sources that agree with or support your thesis.
4. Have you avoided heavy reliance on Internet-based sources?
 - Google is not a shortcut for academic research. Use the library!
 - The librarian can help you access sources not available from your campus/local library.
5. Have you included a properly formatted bibliography at the end of the paper?
 - You should always include one unless specifically directed otherwise.

Use of Sources

1. Have you quoted your sources *accurately* and with due attention to context?
2. Have you quoted your sources *fairly* (i.e., so as not to give the impression they're saying or implying something they really aren't)?
 - Apply the "Golden Rule" here (Luke 6:31): Have you treated the authors as you would wish to be treated as an author?
3. Have you cited a source (e.g., in a footnote) each time you draw from it?
 - You should cite the source even when you're not directly quoting from it.
4. Have you made it clear whether you're directly quoting, paraphrasing, or summarizing a source?
 - *Direct quotes* should be properly punctuated: either enclosed in quotation marks or block-indented without quotation marks. (See below for more on punctuating quotes.)
 - *Paraphrases* should express the thoughts of a source *in your own words*. (You should still cite the source in a footnote in this case.)
 - *Summaries* express the main point(s) of a source, without the detail of a paraphrase.
 - In sum: it should be very clear to the reader when the words used are *not* your own!
5. Have you used the Turabian style for the citations in your footnotes and bibliography—and have you used it *consistently*?
 - Note that with the Turabian style the citation format for footnotes is *different* than the citation format for bibliographies. (See below for resources on the Turabian style.)
 - Give a full citation the first time a source is cited in a footnote; use abbreviated citations subsequently (and use "Ibid." for sequential footnote citations).
6. Have you used the proper style when citing an article or chapter from an edited volume?
 - The citation should give the specific author and title of the chapter as well as the editors and title of the volume.

7. If you're quoting from an English translation of the Bible, have you stated which one?
 - Give full bibliographic details (title, publisher, edition, year, etc.) in a footnote when you first quote from that translation. (You don't need to include it in the bibliography.)
8. Have you quoted the Bible *accurately* and with due attention to context?
 - Avoid superficial proof-texting!
9. Have you used a consistent style for biblical citations (including standard abbreviations for biblical books)?
 - It's best to put biblical citations in parentheses in the main text, unless you need to cite a large number of texts, in which case put the citations in a footnote.

Thesis and Argumentation

1. Does your paper have an interesting and clearly defined thesis?
 - If your thesis is vague then it will be difficult, if not impossible, for the reader to judge whether that thesis has actually been demonstrated.
 - If your thesis is trivial, inconsequential, or beyond serious dispute the reader will not consider your paper worth reading.
2. Have you engaged *fairly*, *respectfully*, and *charitably* with opposing positions?
 - Apply the "Golden Rule" here (Luke 6:31): Have you treated your opponents just as you would wish to be treated?
3. Have you anticipated and addressed significant *objections* to your position?
 - An objection is *not* an alternative position; it is an *argument* against your position that suggests one or more *reasons* for not accepting that position.
4. Have you anticipated and addressed significant *alternatives* to your position?
 - Consider whether the arguments you have given for your position actually support it over against significant alternatives. (Ask this question: Could someone who holds an alternative position use the very same arguments as you have used?)
5. Have you avoided circular reasoning ("begging the question") in your argumentation?
 - An argument "begs the question" if it tacitly assumes what it is supposed to prove.
6. Have you used key terms in a consistent way?
 - If not, you run the risk of committing the fallacy of equivocation.
7. Have you avoided common logical fallacies in your argumentation?
 - See below for some good resources on logical argumentation.
8. Have you supported substantive claims with argumentation or documentation?
 - Any assertion that wouldn't be considered general knowledge or be generally accepted by your readers should be supported with reasons or evidence.
 - Any disputable claims *must* be well supported.
9. Have you provided appropriate *evidence* to support your reasons?
 - If you argue "X because Y," Y is offered as a *reason* to accept X; unless your readers already accept Y, you should support Y with some kind of evidence or "hard data" (e.g., biblical texts, historical sources, or authoritative reference works).
10. Have you defined important terms (especially if those terms are used in a technical sense)?
11. Have you used appropriate scholarly reference works to support your definitions?
 - Don't use Webster's (or worse, Wikipedia!) for biblical or theological definitions.

12. Have you avoided “straw men” (i.e., caricatures of opposing positions)?
 - A good paper will engage with opposing positions in their strongest forms.
13. Have you answered the “So what?” question?
 - Say something, however briefly, about why your thesis should matter to the reader.

Structure

1. Did you construct an outline for the paper before starting to write it?
 - If you didn’t, outline the paper now and ask whether the outline make sense in terms of what the paper is intended to accomplish. (If it doesn’t, restructure the paper!)
 - If you did, check that the paper actually follows your original outline.
2. Does the paper have a sensible (and discernible) structure?
 - Consider dividing the paper into headed sections to help the reader see its structure.
3. Does the paper convey a sense of logical progression from one section to the next?
4. Does the paper have introductory and concluding sections?
 - The introduction should prepare the reader’s mind for the main topic and thesis of the paper. What is the issue and why is it important?
 - Note that some professors will not give an ‘A’ to a paper which fails to clearly state its thesis in the introduction.
 - The conclusion should summarize and tie together the paper’s main points, and press home any significant implications or applications.
 - It’s acceptable for the conclusion to raise questions “for further research.”
5. Does each section in the body of the paper contribute to its main thesis? (If not, why not?)
6. Does each paragraph in a section have a clear main point which contributes to that section?

Creativity, Clarity, and Style

1. Does the paper reflect at least some creativity on your part?
 - There are few things more disheartening to a professor than the feeling that he has read basically the same paper a dozen times already.
 - You aren’t expected to be a theological innovator—it’s usually better not to be!—but you should at least try to find fresh ways to articulate and apply the “old truths.”
2. Will the main point of your paper and its importance/relevance be clear to the reader?
3. Have you revised your paper *at least once*? (If not, why not? Is it really that good?)
 - As the adage goes, “The secret to good writing is rewriting.”
4. Have you proofread your paper *at least once*?
5. Has your paper been proofread by someone with a good grasp of the English language?
 - This is particularly important if English is not your first language.
6. Have you avoided errors of spelling, grammar, and punctuation?
7. Have you capitalized words *appropriately* and *consistently*?
 - Note the following in particular: Bible, Gospels, Protestant, Reformed, Reformation.
8. Have you avoided run-on sentences and sentence fragments?
 - *Example of a run-on sentence*: “Paul was a Pharisee, he was taught by Gamaliel.”
 - *Example of a sentence fragment*: “Which isn’t a complete sentence.”
9. Have you avoided hackneyed or clichéd expressions? (Avoid them like the plague!)

10. Have you adopted a style appropriate to your target audience?
11. Have you avoided colloquial language and conversational style?
 - If your paper reads like the transcript of a sermon or a fireside chat, it almost certainly hasn't been written in a style appropriate for an academic research paper.
12. Have you avoided contractions and slang terms?
 - Some contractions (“didn’t,” “isn’t,” etc.) are acceptable if the full form (“did not,” “is not,” etc.) reads awkwardly or unnaturally in the context, but consider these exceptions to the general rule.
13. Have you avoided very long paragraphs? (No paragraph should be longer than a page!)
14. Have you correctly punctuated and formatted your quotations?
 - Shorter quotations—four or fewer lines—should be included in the main text and enclosed in quotation marks.
 - Longer quotations—more than four lines—should be set off in a separate indented paragraph without quotations marks (technically known as a “block quote”).
 - Nested quotation marks should alternate between double and single (e.g., “Jesus warned, ‘Whoever says, “You fool!” will be liable to hell-fire.’”)
 - Every *opening* quotation mark should have a matching *closing* quotation mark!
 - If you’ve edited or abbreviated a quotation, indicate that with brackets and/or ellipses.
 - Quotations do not need to be italicized.
15. Have you used footnotes rather than endnotes? (Don’t ever, *ever* use endnotes.)
 - Footnote references in the main text should be placed *after* punctuation marks.¹

Final Checks

1. Is the paper an acceptable length—neither too long nor too short?
 - Double-check the syllabus! Does it specify an upper/lower limit for words or pages?
2. Have you included a cover page?
 - The cover page should include the title of the paper, your full name, the course name, the institution name, the submission date, and anything else required by the syllabus.
3. Have you given the paper an interesting, imaginative, and informative title?
 - *Example of a bad title:* “Unconditional Election” (informative but uninteresting)
 - *Example of a bad title:* “The Dark Knight of the Soul” (interesting but uninformative)
 - *Example of a good title:* “A Travesty of Justice? Defending the Doctrine of Imputation”
4. If you’ve used non-standard fonts (esp. non-English fonts such as Greek or Hebrew) are you sure they will appear correctly when the document is printed or opened by another user?
 - Remember that your papers should be uploaded in PDF format.

¹ Just like that one!

Further Resources

1. Booth, Wayne C., Gregory G. Colomb, and Joseph M. Williams. *The Craft of Research*. 3rd edition. University of Chicago Press, 2008.
 - This should be required reading for all students!
2. Frame, John M. *The Doctrine of the Knowledge of God*. Presbyterian and Reformed Publishing, 1987.
 - See especially Appendix F: “How to Write a Theological Paper” (available online [here](#)).
3. Turabian, Kate L. *A Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*. 6th edition. University of Chicago Press, 1996.
 - This is the standard reference for the Turabian style.
 - RTS-DE currently requires the 6th edition rather than the most recent (8th) edition.
 - A very helpful “Turabian Quick Guide” is available online [here](#).
 - Note: use the *notes-bibliography* style for citations, not the author-date style.
4. Weston, Anthony. *A Rulebook for Arguments*. 4th ed. Hackett Publishing Company, Inc., 2009.
 - A very helpful and readable guide to formulating and evaluating arguments.
5. Williams, Joseph M., and Gregory G. Colomb. *Style: The Basics of Clarity and Grace*. 4th edition. Longman, 2010.
 - A short and well-written (of course) guide to good writing style.

Also consider using reference management software to collect and organize your research sources. [Zotero](#) is an excellent choice. It’s free, easy to use, and can automatically generate properly-formatted citations for footnotes and bibliographies in any standard citation style.