

REFORMED THEOLOGICAL SEMINARY

Theological Research and Writing - PT6115 (1 hr. elective)

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Fall 2026 semester (Thursdays 11:05-12:05)

This is a one-hour practical theology course on theological research and writing. The course will give special attention to using print and electronic library resources and writing graduate level research papers. It will also focus on the tools and habits which can help students improve their reading, research, and writing skills for future ministry.

Required Texts

- Kibbe, Michael. ***From topic to thesis : a guide to theological research***. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016. **EBSCO ebook**
- Reinke, Tony. ***Lit! A Christian guide to reading books***. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2011. **EBSCO ebook**
- Silvia, Paul J. ***How to Write a Lot: A Practical Guide to Productive Academic Writing*** (2018 New Edition) **EBSCO ebook**
- Swart, Laura. ***Cut It Out: 10 Simple Steps for Tight Writing and Better Sentences***. Edmonton : Brush Education, 2018. **EBSCO ebook**
- Turabian, Kate, et. al. ***A manual for writers of research papers, theses, and dissertations: Chicago Style for students and researchers***. 9th ed. Chicago: Univ. of Chicago Press, 2018.
- Zinsser, William. ***On writing well: the classic guide to writing non-fiction***. New York: Collins, 2006. **EBSCO ebook**

Other helpful texts (not required to purchase; some required readings will be in these titles):

- Brohaugh, William. ***Write tight: how to keep your prose sharp, focused and concise***. Wilmington, DE: ISI Books, 2007. (pbk: 9781402210518) **EBSCO ebook**
- Hibbs, Pierce Taylor. ***Theological English: An Advanced ESL Text for Students of Theology***. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2018. (hbk: 9781629956022)
- LePeau, Andrew. ***Write better***. Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2019. **EBSCO ebook**
- Smith, Kevin. ***Writing and Research: A Guide for Theological Students***. Carlisle, UK: Langham Global Library, 2016. **EBSCO ebook**
- Vyhmeister, Nancy Jean. ***Your guide to writing quality research papers: for students of religion and theology***. 4th ed. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2020. (pbk: 9780310514022) **EBSCO ebook**

Purpose of the Course

To help RTS students improve their theological research and writing skills so as to succeed in their program of studies and in writing for their future ministry.

To that end, the course will seek to:

1. Show students the process of successful research utilizing library resources.
2. Enable students to develop effective working bibliographies.
3. Help students understand the different types of papers expected of them in seminary.
4. Teach students how to write an effective thesis statement and how to develop a paper consistent with that statement.
5. Improve student writing and language skills.
6. Demonstrate how to avoid plagiarism in research and writing by proper documentation of sources.

Course elements

Research

- What constitutes research?
- Deciding on a broad topic
- Developing research questions
- Understanding the expectations of the professors/syllabi
- Developing a research plan
- Learning to maximize benefits of library resources
 - Reference books
 - Commentaries
 - Inter-library loan
- ATLA/ATLAS basic searching techniques

Organization / Citation

- The working bibliography
- Citation management tools
- Turabian & SBL basics
- Knowing how to cite information / avoiding plagiarism

Refining and Writing

- Developing a thesis statement
- How to interact with sources of varying views
- Reaching preliminary conclusions / summarizing research
- Refining and completing the paper
- Tools for language / grammar
- Biblical studies papers – important elements
- Theological studies papers – important elements

Becoming better writers

- Developing the discipline of writing
- Developing discerning reading skills

General Assignments (details in outline below)

- Select a general topic that could be developed into a theological or biblical studies paper.
- Utilize reference tools in the library & online to refine the topic; submit evidence of tools used.
- Submit a research plan for the topic.
- Submit a working bibliography of at least 20 books and 5 academic journal articles.
- Develop a thesis statement based on the topic and preliminary research.
- Refine the working bibliography.
- Revise the thesis statement.
- Create a basic outline for the paper.
- Interact with articles about the craft of writing

Online discussions – You may submit answers to online discussions as soon as you wish, but each discussion must be concluded by the date shown in the syllabus.

Course outline (*subject to change*)

	Topics	Reading Assignments (due the week they are listed)	Assignments
Week 1 (Aug. 20)	Defining a topic that could be developed into a theological or biblical studies paper. The unique nature of Biblical & theological research.	Kibbe – pp. 11-53 (Intro & Chap.1) Vyhmeister , pp. 139-145 (Chap.11)	(none)
Week 2 (Aug. 27)	Utilize reference tools in the library to refine the topic and submit evidence of tools used. Developing a research plan.	Turabian , pp. 5-23 (Chap. 1-2) Vyhmeister , pp. 17-26; 127-134 (Chap. 1 & chap. 10 – up to ‘asking questions’)	Turn in initial topic for research. List any sources you used to help select your topic. Turn in Reference book exercise .
Week 3 (Sep. 3)	Basic RTS-Library tools for research: Commentaries / book catalog / browsing.	Vyhmeister , pp. 146-156 (Chap.12) Turabian , pp. 25-37 (Chap. 3) Silvia , ch.1-3, 5 (pp. 3-46, 59-74)	Submit your research plan for the topic.
Week 4 (Sep. 10)	Basic RTS-Library tools for research: ATLAS journal database – part 1.	Kibbe , pp. 55-64 (Chap.2) ATLA LibGuide : http://rts.libguides.com/ATLA (skim – all tabs)	Complete the online discussion based on readings in Silvia, <i>How to Write A Lot</i>
Week 5 (Sep. 17)	Basic RTS-Library tools for research: ATLAS journal database – part 2. What is an ‘academic journal’?	Turabian , pp. 38-65 (Chap. 4-5) Kibbe , pp. 65-83 (Chap. 3) On Canvas “quiz” : Select which style guide you plan to utilize (Turabian or SBL)	Submit a working bibliography of at least 20 books and 5 academic journal articles in either Turabian or SBL format (depending on topic).
Week 6 (Sep. 24)	Basic citation guidelines (SBL & Turabian).	Turabian , pp. 66-74 (Chap. 6) SBL student guide (skim) https://www.sbl-site.org/assets/pdfs/pubs/SBLHSupp2015-02.pdf	Turn in a thesis statement based on your topic and preliminary research.

	Topics	Reading Assignments (due the week they are listed)	Assignments
Week 7 (Oct. 1)	Avoiding plagiarism. Note taking. Citation tools for tracking research (Zotero, EndNote, etc.).	Turabian , pp. 81-84 (7.9-7.10) Vyhmeister , pp. 135-138 / 179-194 (Chap. 11 – “intellectual honesty” to end / Chap. 15) Kibbe , pp. 87-96 (Chap. 5/Conclusion/Appendix A)	Turn in revised thesis statement after feedback from the professor.
(Oct. 8)	FALL BREAK	NO CLASS	
Week 8 (Oct. 15)	Footnoting research – its purpose; when & how to do it	Turabian , pp. 75-80 Vyhmeister , pp. 216-223 (Chap. 18)	(none)
Week 9 (Oct. 22)	Refining your outline – keeping it on topic; what to keep/cut. Knowing when to stop research & finish writing.	Turabian , pp. 102-123 (Chap. 9-11)	Turn in initial paper outline* based on your thesis statement.
Week 10 (Oct. 29)	Various kinds of writing: exegetical, theological, historical, applied ministry.	Zinsser , pp. 3-53 (Chap. 1-8 / skim chaps. 9-10 if you wish) McGraw article , “On Theological Writing” (all 13 pages – on Canvas)	Turn in final bibliography in either Turabian or SBL format (depending on topic). Complete online discussion based on the McGraw article.
Week 11 (Nov. 5)	Basic RTS-Library tools for research: Other databases.	Brohaugh , pp. 19-81 (Chap. 2)/ also, skim 195-204 “C.S. Lewis’ writing advice” https://www.thegospelcoalition.org/blogs/justin-taylor/15-pieces-of-writing-advice-from-c-s-lewis/?queryID=c4b88ae117a7e28885cc818e367e61a9 “Jack’s Typewriter” https://www.desiringgod.org/articles/jacks-typewriter Swart , p.1-61	Turn in final paper outline* based on your thesis statement.
Week 12 (Nov. 12)	Other online tools Tools for improving your writing.	Brohaugh , pp. 83-122 (Chap.3-5) LePeau , pp. 171-208 (Chap.16-19; you may find other chapters of value)	Turn in Swart – Cut it out Writing exercise .
Week 13 (Nov 19)	Reading better / Reading to improve writing.	Reinke , chaps. 1, 5, 7, 8, 10, 11 (pp. 21-28, 65-80, 93-118, 129-146) “Why Read?” article by Trevin Wax [on Canvas] [see also Sire, <i>How to read slowly</i> , ch. 2 & 6, as an optional reading if you are interested]	Complete online discussion based on Reinke readings

ASSIGNMENT DETAILS (excluding online discussions)

Initial topic [5%]

Describe as specifically as you can at this time what you think your initial topic will be. I'm looking for **2-3 sentences**, but no more than one paragraph. An answer like "salvation" is too simplistic and will result in a failing grade. You need to put some thought into this. You will have time to change and refine this as the course progresses, but once you choose a thesis statement, you need to stick with that.

Reference Book Exercise [included in Initial topic grade]

This exercise is based on what you've chosen as your 'initial topic' (week 2 assignment). At this stage, you're still gathering basic information to help you narrow down your topic to something manageable. You should not be worried about any thesis statement at this point!

1. Stay away from any computer/tablet/smart phone for now!
2. Go to the reference section of the RTS-C library.
3. Browse through the titles (you know, like walk around and look at things with your eyeballs) until you find a reference dictionary or encyclopedia that may address your topic. *Eg., if your topic is something related to the history of the Reformation, you'll want to find a historical dictionary or encyclopedia.*
4. You are **not** allowed to use:
 - a. Bible Commentaries
 - b. Greek or Hebrew language reference titles
 - c. English usage reference titles
5. Find an entry in that reference source that is helpful in defining &/or explaining something related to your topic.
6. Take a scan/picture (a) of that entry and (b) the title page from the book [don't forget the title page!]. Upload it to Canvas.
7. Explain to me in Canvas how that source helped you.

Research Plan [10%]

A **1-2 page** brainstorming exercise to help you be more deliberate about the research process. I strongly encourage you to **hand write** this exercise (then scan it to submit in Canvas). Physically writing on paper is far more conducive to creative thinking, which is what this exercise seeks to foster!

What to include:

1. Your initial **assumptions & biases** about your topic.
2. **Questions** to answer about the topic (minimum 2-3).
3. Statement of the **significance** of your research – the "so what" of your paper.
4. **Working hypothesis** (beginning of a thesis statement).
5. **Steps** for your initial research (minimum 4-5) – be as specific as possible.

Working Bibliography [10%]

Provide a list of the following:

- Your **topic** at the top of the page
- A minimum of **20 books**
- A minimum of **5 academic journal articles**

Each of these need to be related to your initial topic in some way.

Format all your entries properly in either Turabian or SBL format.

Initial Thesis Statement [10%]

Submit your first draft of a thesis statement. Be sure that it is **one sentence long** – not 2 or more! Be sure that it makes an argument which you can attempt to prove. Otherwise, it is just a topic.

Revised Thesis Statement [10%]

After you receive feedback from the professor, revise and re-submit your thesis statement. Again, it must only be **one sentence long**. *Re-submitting without any revision* will result in a lower grade.

Initial Paper Outline [10%]

What to include:

- Introduction
 - Thesis statement
 - 1-2 sentences to explain/introduce your topic
- Main sections
 - 2-4 (at most) sections identified
 - 1-2 sentences summary of each section / what it will accomplish in the paper
- Conclusion
 - 1-2 sentences to summarize and tie things back to the thesis statement

Final Bibliography [5%]

Provide the following:

- Your topic at the top of the page
- A minimum of **20 books**
- A minimum of **5 academic journal articles**

All of these need to be related to your initial topic in some way. *I expect the contents of this list to be at least somewhat different from your initial bibliography.* Some sources will no longer be useful from the first list, and you should have found others to add.

Format all your entries properly in either Turabian or SBL format.

Final Paper Outline [10%]

What to include:

- Initial paper outline (including edits after feedback from the professor)
- A 1-2 sentence **transition statement** between each major part of the outline (eg, from intro to section 1)

Swart writing exercise [5%]

After reading the entire book (it's only 61 pages!), choose **TWO** "Your Turn" exercises from the chapters to do. Post them in Canvas in the assigned place (Word doc or PDF). [Note: this counts under the "Discussions" part of the course even though you are only 'discussing' things via the book.]

Online discussions (Silvia; McGraw; Reinke) [5% each / **15% total**]**Class participation [5%]****Readings [5%]**

Given the interactive nature of this course, it is even more critical for students to complete assigned readings in a timely way. ***If you do not complete at least 95% of the readings by the end of the course, you will not receive a grade higher than a B+.***

The **Reading Report** should be filled out in Canvas **no later than 5:00 PM, Dec. 8, 2026 (Tuesday)**.

Grading:

- Initial topic (includes reference book exercise) – 5%
- Research plan – 10%
- Working bibliography – 10%
- Initial thesis statement – 10%
- Revised thesis statement – 10%
- Initial paper outline – 10%
- Final bibliography – 5%
- Final paper outline – 10%
- Swart writing exercise – 5%
- Readings – 5%
- Class participation – 5%
- Online discussions – 15%

RTS Extensions Policy for Assignments: In extenuating circumstances, a deadline extension of up to one week may be granted at the discretion of the professor. Requests for extensions of more than one week must be submitted to the Registrar for consideration by the Academic Dean in consultation with the professor. Extensions are granted only for significant emergencies or unforeseen circumstances, and a grade penalty may be applied. *All extension requests must be made prior to the assignment deadline.* No retrospective extensions will be granted.

KMc addition: As a general rule I do not offer extensions – the reason needs to be a solid one!

Additional Bibliography (sources you may find helpful – not required!)

Badke, William. *Research strategies: finding your way through the information fog*. 5th ed. Bloomington, IN: iUniverse, LLC, 2014.

Booth, Wayne C., et al. *The craft of research*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2008.
[Note: this book is also largely incorporated into part 1 of Turabian.]

Capitani, Diane and Melanie Baffes. *Research and writing in the seminary*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland Books, 2014.

Core, Deborah. *The seminary student writes*. St. Louis, MO: Chalice Press, 2000.

Eco, Umberto. *How to write a thesis*. Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2015.

Evans, John F. *A guide to Biblical commentaries & reference works*. 10th ed. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2016. [An excellent tool for anyone's personal library!]

Jacobs, Alan. *The pleasures of reading in an age of distraction*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2011.

Latta, Corey. *C.S. Lewis and the art of writing*. Eugene, OR: Cascade Books, 2016.

Pazmiño, Robert W. *Doing theological research: an introductory guide for survival in theological education*. Eugene, Oregon: Wipf & Stock, 2009.

Puckett, Jason. *Zotero: A Guide for Librarians, Researchers, and Educators*. Second edition. Chicago: Association of College and Research Libraries, a division of the American Library Association, 2017.

Sire, James. *How to Read Slowly: Reading for Comprehension*. Wheaton, IL: Harold Shaw, 1978.
(see esp. chs. 2 & 6)

VandeCreek, Larry, Hilary E. Bender, & Merle R. Jordan. *Research in pastoral care and counseling: quantitative and qualitative approaches*. Eugene, OR: Wipf & Stock, 2008.

Yaghjian, Lucretia B. *Writing theology well: a rhetoric for theological and biblical writers*. 2nd ed. New York: Bloomsbury T & T Clark, 2015.

Laptop & other device use for this course

The policy for my courses is that no laptop or other device usage is allowed during the class unless I state otherwise. I provide lecture notes after each class, and I encourage you to take notes on paper as needed.

McMullen Policy regarding AI technology

The use of sites such as ChatGPT or other similar AI sites is **not allowed** for any work related to this course. Students should be aware that bibliographies generated by such sites will almost always contain references to books and articles which do not even exist.

General RTS Charlotte Classroom Technology Usage

RTS Charlotte recognizes how essential it is for students to have reliable, campus-wide access to the internet. For that reason, we have made Wi-Fi available for our student body, not only in the library and student lounges, but also in the classrooms. We know that students need to use the internet to download class materials, access files on the Cloud, and locate other important information. However, we also recognize that internet access in the classroom provides opportunity for abuse and misuse. Some students have unfortunately used their internet access to engage in many activities that distract them from the classroom lectures (e.g., surfing the web, checking sports scores, playing games). Not only does such activity hamper a student's own seminary education, but it distracts other students who can easily view the screens of nearby students. In addition, donors and classroom guests (who often sit in the back) can see this inappropriate internet usage, which reflects poorly on RTS. Classroom etiquette includes leaving cell phones turned off, refraining from surfing the Internet or playing computer games or other distracting activities. In addition, students must respect standards set by individual professors regarding the use of technology during their class.

In order to address this issue, we must appeal to the integrity of the students as ones who are preparing for a lifetime of ministry to Christ and his church. We expect each student to take personal responsibility for proper classroom technology usage and to encourage others around them to do the same. All RTS-Charlotte students are accountable to the policies stated in the Student Handbook and Academic Catalog and are therefore expected to use technology in the classroom only for appropriate class-related activities. Student conduct is under the supervision of the Dean of Students.

Course Objectives Related to MDiv* Student Learning Outcomes

Course: **PT6115 / Theological Research and Writing (1 credit hour)**
 Professor: Dr. Kenneth McMullen
 Campus: Charlotte
 Date: **Fall Semester 2026**

<u>MDiv* Student Learning Outcomes</u> <i>In order to measure the success of the MDiv curriculum, RTS has defined the following as the intended outcomes of the student learning process. Each course contributes to these overall outcomes. This rubric shows the contribution of this course to the MDiv outcomes.</i> <i>*As the MDiv is the core degree at RTS, the MDiv rubric will be used in this syllabus.</i>		<u>Rubric</u> ➤ Strong ➤ Moderate ➤ Minimal ➤ None	<u>Mini-Justification</u>
Articulation (oral & written)	Broadly understands and articulates knowledge, both oral and written, of essential biblical, theological, historical, and cultural/global information, including details, concepts, and frameworks. Also includes ability to preach and teach the meaning of Scripture to both heart and mind with clarity and enthusiasm.	• strong	1. Primary focus will be on effective research that leads to clear and effective writing. 2. Some of the communication skills in writing will also aid oral communication.
Scripture	Significant knowledge of the original meaning of Scripture. Also, the concepts for and skill to research further into the original meaning of Scripture and to apply Scripture to a variety of modern circumstances. (Includes appropriate use of original languages and hermeneutics; and integrates theological, historical, and cultural/global perspectives.)	• moderate	1. Research skills for writing about scripture are a portion of what will be examined.
Reformed Theology	Significant knowledge of Reformed theology and practice, with emphasis on the Westminster Standards.	• minimal	1. Students learn to explain their theological reasoning more clearly in writing.
Sanctification	Demonstrates a love for the Triune God that aids the student's sanctification.	• none	
Worldview	Burning desire to conform all of life to the Word of God. Includes ability to interact within a denominational context, within the broader worldwide church, and with significant public issues..	• none	
Winsomely Reformed	Embraces a winsomely Reformed ethos. (Includes an appropriate ecumenical spirit with other Christians, especially Evangelicals; a concern to present the Gospel in a God-honoring manner to non-Christians; and a truth-in-love attitude in disagreements.)	• none	
Pastoral Ministry	Ability to minister the Word of God to hearts and lives of both church and unchurched, to include preaching, teaching, leading in worship, leading and shepherding the local congregation, aiding in spiritual maturity, concern for non-Christians.	• minimal	1. Improving writing & communication skills for ministry roles is a secondary result.