

PT6115 Theological Research and Writing

Fall 2026

Course description

I designed this course to take the intimidation out of research and writing for seminary studies. Students will develop competency in developing a topic into a focused argument, library research, paper formatting, avoiding plagiarism, and other critical skills for successful seminary studies. Class sessions will be highly interactive with a workshop feel. Students will be coached in the production of a high-quality research paper as a key outcome of the course. ***I have redesigned this course in the last year to integrate the ethical and effective use of artificial intelligence. Welcome to the new world!***

Instructor

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Schedule

This course will be on Mondays from 10:00 am until noon beginning on August 24, 2026, and concluding on November 30, 2026. I will post activities, forums, resources, and assignments organized by weeks on the Canvas course homepage no later than August 10, 2026. There is a small assignment due before the first class, so check in early!

Required reading

Burdett, Michael Stephen. "Proximate and Ultimate Concerns in Christian Ethical Responses to Artificial Intelligence." *Studies in Christian Ethics* 36, no. 3 (2023): 620–641. [Provided on Canvas course page.]

Kibbe, Michael. *From Topic to Thesis: A Guide to Theological Research*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2016.

RTS Memo on Artificial Intelligence Policy—Student Version [included at the end of this syllabus]

Vyhmeister, Nancy Jean, and Terry Dwain Robertson. *Quality Research Papers: For Students of Religion and Theology*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2020. [selected readings]

Williams, Joseph M. *Style: The Basics of Clarity and Grace*. Boston: Longman, 2009. [selected readings]

Recommended books that I will reference in class*

Bavinck, Herman. *Guidebook for Instruction in the Christian Religion*. Edited and translated by Gregory Parker and Cameron Clausing. Peabody, MA: Hendrickson Academic, 2022.

Berkhof, Louis. *Systematic Theology*. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1996.

Buswell, J. Oliver. *A Systematic Theology of the Christian Religion*. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Publishing House, 1962.

Calvin, John. *Calvin: Institutes of the Christian Religion*. Edited by John T. McNeill. Translated by Ford Lewis Battles. Vol. 1. Philadelphia, PA: Westminster Press, 1960.

Feinberg, John S. *Light in a Dark Place: The Doctrine of Scripture*. Wheaton, IL: Crossway, 2018.

Frame, John M. *The Doctrine of the Word of God*. Vol. 4 *A Theology of Lordship*. Phillipsburg, NJ: P&R Publishing, 2010.

Grenz, Stanley, David Guretzki, and Cherith Nordling. *Pocket Dictionary of Theological Terms*. Grand Rapids, MI: InterVarsity Press, 1999.

Grudem, Wayne. *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Biblical Doctrine*. 2nd ed. Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan Academic, 2020.

Hodge, Charles. *Systematic Theology*. Vol. 1. Grand Rapids, MI: Eerdmans, 1960.

McKim, Donald K. *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms*. Rev. ed. Louisville, KY: Westminster John Knox Press, 1996.

Turabian, Kate L. *A Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations: Chicago Style for Students and Researchers*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2018.

Ward, Timothy. *Words of Life: Scripture as the Living and Active Word of God*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP Academic, 2009.

Warfield, B. B. *The Inspiration and Authority of the Bible*. Philadelphia, PA: P & R Publishing, 1967.

*These are primarily books that I will quote in class to introduce the key concepts of the Doctrine of Scripture, the assigned topic for your research paper, to help you identify an interest that can be narrowed into a thesis.

Assignments*

Research paper drafts 20%

Students will post drafts of their research projects with increasing depth, detail, and length as the course progresses. See Canvas course homepage for specifics on the level of detail and due dates for individual drafts. Students will determine a research topic in the broad area of the Doctrine of Scripture and refine it with the help of peers, AI, and the instructor.

Presentations and peer review 20%

Throughout the course, students will present their ongoing and developing research project. They will learn to receive and to give constructive critique. We will discuss the dates and details for presentations and peer review in the Canvas environment.

Process documents 10%

Students will submit weekly process documents for their research that will outline their intellectual path toward completing the paper including how they utilized print resources and artificial intelligence. We will cover the format and approach for this assignment in class.

Research paper 50%

Students will submit a final version of their 2500-word research paper. Due December 14, 2026

*Syllabus due dates and assignments subject to in progress revision and negotiated changes.

Zoom Policy

The success of this course depends on a cohesive learning community that is fostered best by in person collaboration. There will be no Zoom options outside of extenuating circumstances that affect the whole class like weather emergencies.

Extension Policy

All assignments and exams are to be completed by the deadlines announced in this syllabus or in class.

Extensions for assignments and exams due within the normal duration of the course must be approved beforehand by the Professor. Extensions of two weeks or less beyond the date of the last deadline for the course must be approved beforehand by the Professor. A grade penalty may be assessed.

Extensions of greater than two weeks but not more than six weeks beyond the last deadline for the course may be granted in extenuating circumstances (i.e. illness, family emergency). For an extension of more than two weeks the student must request an Extension Request Form from the Registrar's Office. The request must be approved by the Professor and the Academic Dean. A grade penalty may be assessed. (RTS Catalog p. 46 and RTS Atlanta Student Handbook p. 18)

Any incompletes not cleared six weeks after the last published due date for course work will be converted to a failing grade. Professors may have the failing grade changed to a passing grade by request. (RTS Catalog p. 49)

Memorandum

To: RTS Students

From: Dr. Robert J. Cara, Provost and Chief Academic Officer

Re: Artificial Intelligence Policy—Student Version

Date: February 20, 2025

The RTS AI policy below is effective as of the date of this memo.

Artificial Intelligence Policies for Use in Coursework

RTS has instituted the following policy pertaining to the use of AI-enabled tools (including, but not limited to, generative chatbots like ChatGPT and Claude, writing assistants like Grammarly, and other AI-enabled assistants like Google Gemini, Microsoft Copilot, and Apple Intelligence).

It is noted that the policy below does allow for a limited use of AI. This will be the default RTS policy. *A professor, however, has the right to modify this policy, including denying the use of AI altogether. Any modifications to these policies by a professor for a specific RTS course will be explicitly noted by the professor.*

Gathering research leads: AI-enabled tools *may* be employed in a manner similar to using Wikipedia, blogs, social media, or other online sources in generating basic raw material (e.g., “What verses in the Old Testament use the word ‘covenant?’”) or leads for further reading (e.g., “What recent books deal with the topic of divine simplicity?”). Such uses *do not generally have to be disclosed*, but the student is encouraged to consult with the professor of record if there are any questions or doubts. Note: even the best AI tool is not infallible and often generates junk data; the student is, therefore, fully responsible for vetting the accuracy or validity of any such information generated.

Generating or analyzing content: AI-enabled tools *may* be used to generate small portions of content that would be used in a manner equivalent to quoting a commentary or other written or digital sources. Any use of such information in an assignment, either through direct quotation or indirect summarization, *must be fully disclosed* in keeping with the guidance provided by the Chicago Manual of Style and APA. The following examples illustrate appropriate methods of citation.

Footnoting direct usage (e.g., quotation) of the result generated by an AI tool:

1. Text generated by ChatGPT, Open AI, March 7, 2024 (<https://chat.openai.com>).
2. Text generated by Claude, Anthropic, March 20, 2024 (<https://claude.ai>).

Footnoting indirect use of AI results that are further modified/summarized by student:

3. ChatGPT, response to “What are the differences between Calvinists and Arminians concerning regeneration?” OpenAI, March 12, 2024.

4. When given a prompt of “What is the traditional Reformed view of church discipline,” the Claude-generated text outlined three reasons: “Obedience to God’s word,” “protection of the church,” and “restoration of the sinner” (<https://claude.ai>, April 2, 2024; see Appendix A for the full transcript).

Bibliographic entry

CMS/SBL: OpenAI, *ChatGPT* [large language model]. March 7, 2024.
<https://chat.openai.com>.

APA: OpenAI (2024). *ChatGPT* (March 7 version). [Large language model]. <https://chat.openai.com>.

Proofreading: AI writing assistants (e.g., Grammarly) *may* be used for standard help with basic spellchecking and grammatical proofreading; such uses *do not have to be disclosed*. However, AI *may not* be used to *fully rewrite* sentences or paragraphs.

Creative process and textual composition: All writing in every course assignment must be, for all intents and purposes, the original work of the student. Thus, AI *may not* be used to generate key components of a writing project that are aimed at cultivating certain competencies in the student, such as thesis/topic sentences, outlines, critical engagement with other views, and so forth. In addition, AI *may not* be used to write full sentences or paragraphs.

Other: AI-enabled tools *may not* be used in any way for online-discussion forum posts (e.g., TDQs), response papers, quizzes, and examinations.

Penalties

Illegitimate uses of AI are subject to penalties in line with the severity of the violation, ranging from letter-grade reductions, a grade of F for a course, or academic probation.