
Three Credits' Worth of Research

The Librarian as Research Advisor for MA Candidates

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ABSTRACT In addition to the MDiv degree, granted after three years of graduate study, students at St. Charles Borromeo Seminary in Wynnewood, Pennsylvania, can complete their requirements for the MA degree in Theology in their fourth and final year by writing a thesis paper. Several years ago, in an effort to ensure that the candidates were performing an acceptable level of research before beginning writing, academic administrators enjoined the librarian to supervise them during the fall semester of that fourth year, when their courseload is lighter. The students now earn three credits for the research they do. Thus, without the framework of regular class meetings, the librarian had not only to advise each student individually on the best sources and research techniques suited to his subject, but to encourage the students to work consistently, without the structural benefits that traditional courses provide, in the hope that the students will produce academically satisfactory work. The author will relate the trial-and-error course he took to bring this enterprise to its current form, and share some of the methods that he uses to keep on top of all the students throughout their research journey.

INTRODUCTION

A good number of Atla member libraries serve institutions like St. Charles Borromeo Seminary (SCBS) in eastern Pennsylvania—small seminaries primarily focused on producing people bound for ministerial work, not advanced academic work. But in the past five decades SCBS has increasingly emphasized academic achievement as a prerequisite for successful priestly performance. One illustra-

tion of the change in the atmosphere is the Master of Arts in Theology it began offering in the late 1980s.

In any given year, ten to twenty men may be in their fourth and final year of the theologate program (IV Theology for short). Having earned their MDiv degrees and been ordained as deacons by the end of their third year (III Theology), these men spend more time at their parish assignments on the weekends, preparing for life in that environment. In addition, all those studying for the Archdiocese of Philadelphia must fulfill the requirements for a Master of Arts degree in Theology by writing a thesis during IV Theology. Seminarians from other dioceses studying at SCBS have the option of pursuing the MA, but it is not a requirement for them as it is for the Philadelphians.

The purpose of this degree, the Seminary Catalog asserts, “is to provide an opportunity for *further research* into historical and speculative aspects of the foundational theological study... [It] seeks to equip the seminarian with the breadth of background in the theological disciplines useful as a basis for further graduate study as well as to enhance the ordained priest’s *general proficiency and aptitude in research* and study at the graduate level” (p. 91, emphasis mine). While the centrality of research is highlighted on paper, in practice the results, judging by the completed theses, have been mixed.

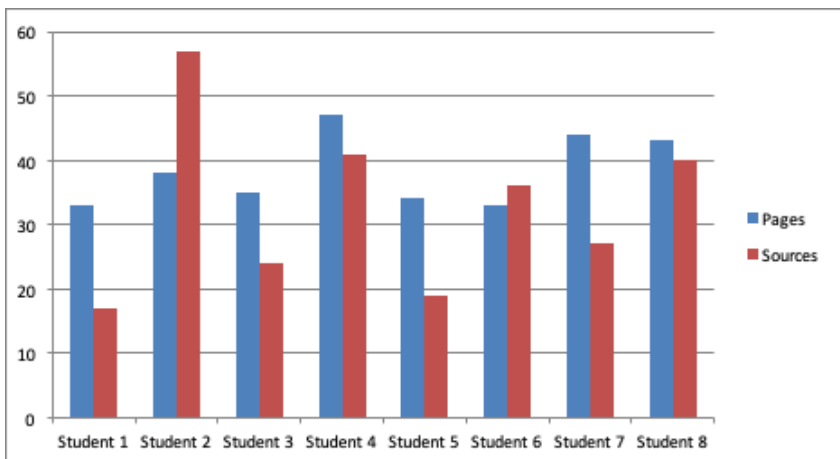
This is where the Ryan Memorial Library (RML) first came in. While RML may indeed have helped the MA candidates in their research at certain times, the candidates were not required to consult the librarians; oversight of the entire research-reading-writing process was entrusted to the faculty advisors. But the variability of the finished products led the academic dean to work out a plan, in 2008, with the library director, whereby the reference librarian would act as a research advisor, supervising the early stages of the MA process. This coincided with the formal adoption of the “research semester” as a three-credit fall course for IV Theology. When the reference librarian position was eliminated, I took on the role of Research Advisor, which I continue to maintain as Director of the Library.

While the impact of the Library’s involvement was felt almost immediately, I became aware, after a few years of relatively high performance, that the program was moving backward again, this time because of other factors. It was at this point that I decided to revise my entire approach to RML’s role in the MA program.

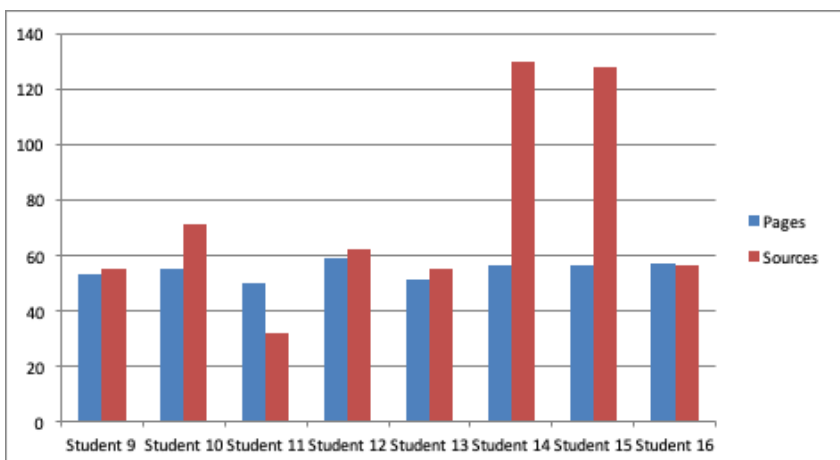
THE RESEARCH ADVISOR

One procedural matter that hasn't changed over the years is the forms that must be filled out by the librarian to verify the student's work during the research semester. The student will not be granted the three research credits without it. A portion of the form is reproduced here.

Two years after the Reference Librarian took on the role of Research Advisor, the number of sources cited in the bibliographies and the number of pages of the main text, which had been glaringly inconsistent, stabilized to where the department wanted them to be: 30–50 sources, and 45–50 pages.



2009



2011

When I took over as Research Advisor, I worked at what I thought was my primary duty in this capacity: to supervise the students in finding their sources. I emailed the students as a group, introducing myself. I told them to schedule a meeting with me as soon as possible—by the first week of September. (Too much valuable reading time is lost if they start any later than that.) At that meeting, I asked them to send me, as soon as they had done a little work on their own, a draft, even in very rudimentary form, of their bibliography—what they’d managed to acquire thus far from their initial searches. Knowing what they’d found on their own, I was able then to offer both search strategies and selected titles I’d come across that they had missed. I would send the bibliographies back to the students with these suggestions appended. We would then be able to review the expanded bibliographies at a later meeting in the semester.

Walsh, Christopher J. *The Untapped Power of the Sacrament of Penance: A Priest's View*. Cincinnati: St. Anthony Messenger Press, 1989.

[30 books](#)
[3 articles](#)
[3 papal documents](#)
[3 liturgical books](#)
[1 Bible](#)
[40 total](#)

[A good number of sources, but there's a need for more articles and possibly even more books. I performed a few searches in the databases for articles first. Here are the searches I suggest you replicate:](#)

[Search through databases ATLAS, CPLI, Religion & Philosophy Collection, Philosopher's Index.](#)

Search terms: SU guilt	AND	SU reconciliation	42 results
SU shame	AND	SU reconciliation	9 results
SU guilt	AND	SU penance	20 results
SU shame	AND	SU penance	5 results
SU shame — religious aspects			43 results
SU confession	AND	SU guilt	62 results
SU confession	AND	SU shame	7 results

[Here are two promising article titles from these results, although there are others as well:](#)

[George, Joseph. "Shame, Guilt, and the Rites of Reconciliation." Bangalore Theological Forum 35, no. 2 \(Dec 2003\): 60-82.](#)

[McCormick, Angela G. "The Intrapsychic and Interpersonal Effects of Talking about Guilt." Journal of Psychology and Christianity 31, no. 4 \(Winter 2012\): 354-365.](#)

[I would repeat these searches in the World Catalog as well, since you may find some books you've overlooked. You can find a link for it on the Journal Databases page, or you can simply select "Libraries Worldwide" from the dropdown menu in the search field on the main page. I recommend you use the Advanced Search function for ease in combining terms. You might want to try searching these terms as keywords instead of subjects, to broaden your result list.](#)

By the end of the fall semester, I could tell who had performed sufficient research from the state of their bibliographies. The rest—the absorption of substance from the sources, the development of the thesis into a structured argument, the writing of the actual text—I left to the student and his faculty advisor. Sometimes the student would ask me to review his bibliography and footnotes before he handed his final draft in, but for all intents and purposes I was done with my part of the process.

PROBLEM POINTS

Three years into my tenure as research advisor, I had an opportunity to look over the theses that had been written in the last few years. I was astonished and ashamed at what I found—not in all, but in enough to make a significant impact on my sense of satisfaction. Perhaps, because I was so focused on the research portion of the process, I was more-than-highly attuned to what I regarded as deficiencies. But other faculty members told me they were aware that the work was lacking in several respects, some of it having to do with the fact that the students were delinquent in producing their work. Most of the problems we perceived fell into one or more of the following categories (n.b. for “students” read “most students” or “certain students”):

First, students did not meet their target dates for handing in material. This went for the interim drafts (e.g., first chapter due in January, second in February), bibliographic work (first draft of bibliography finished by mid-fall semester, final draft as the MA text nears completion), and the final draft due in mid-April.

Second, students handed in final (first?) drafts as late as exam week. This means that any suggestions, edits, critiques (e.g., that their bibliographies were too thin, their expression too choppy) which, properly followed, might have improved their work, went unabsorbed, unincorporated, unanswered, since they were “on the way out the door” toward ordination by that time.

Third, students relied on non-academic web sources (news articles, blogs, personal webpages, YouTube videos) to an alarming degree. They seemed not to have even searched the databases for relevant literature, even after I gave them suggestions for search strategies and results. Four possible reasons why occurred to me, each worse than the next: 1) they couldn’t remember their passwords to the databases,

and weren't inclined to reset them; 2) they couldn't remember how to get to the portal to enter their passwords, and weren't inclined to ask; 3) they knew their passwords and where to enter them, but weren't inclined to consult academic literature; 4) they drew no distinction, in terms of substance, between journalistic and academic content. That students consult less rigorous, popular material isn't lamentable *per se*—anything can serve as a source for study or as support—but the degree to which that material outnumbered formal academic works in the bibliographies I was getting was.

Fourth, the students' tendency to turn to the web for material which could easily have been consulted in print versions meant that they ignored/omitted what would have been more verifiable, up-to-date sources (e.g., they used the 1917 Catholic Encyclopedia online at the New Advent website, neglecting the advances of the second and third editions; they quarried patristic quotations from homemade web sites on which someone collected favorite sayings from the Church Fathers, with no citations detailing where the quotations were drawn from or who translated them).

Fifth, students seemed to rely largely on sources that agreed with, confirmed, or supported their own views. The general drift of their bibliographies was toward the focused, the succinct, the predigested (or, more unkindly put, the one-sided, the superficial, the predictable). Most bibliographies evinced neither a broad survey of the literature, nor a determined effort to include views and opinions at variance with the students' own. When the subject matter (e.g., a divisive moral issue) called for tangling with opposing viewpoints, students opted for selectively packaged presentations with which they sympathized (e.g., video interviews with Bishop Barron or Cardinal Arinze), bypassing established texts on both sides.

Troubling as these deficiencies were, I understood that they were merely actualizations of problems which are present *in potentia* every year. In the past, the students' own personal standards of workmanship and honesty, coupled with the guidance of advisors and librarians, were enough to keep their work from falling into mediocrity. But we cannot anymore, apparently, take for granted the presence of such safety nets. To ensure that our future students produce acceptable Master's theses, I had to take steps to prevent these problems from being realized in the subsequent years.

MAKING THOSE THREE CREDITS COUNT

To that end, I first had to change the way I approached the students about the fall semester's work. They had to see the work they did for their MA in the same light as they did their other courses. A description of my current practice follows.

At our first one-on-one meeting, I impress upon each student the fact that this is a three-credit course like all the others. Despite our lack of fixed meeting times, the principle of Carnegie hours still applies: as a three-credit course is understood to derive from three hours in the classroom, students must start with a base of at least three hours which are devoted to nothing but the finding and, more importantly, reading of their sources. But, as students are supposed to devote twice as many hours per week to a single course's work as they do in the classroom, they should, in practice, set aside nine full hours for their research every week.

Once students get over their shock and disbelief, we try to identify the openings in their schedule which they could designate "research hours." Ultimately, the students are relieved to have a schedule (of their own devising, no less!), as it's easy to forget about deadlines in the fog of unstructured time. To help them visualize the work of the next few months, I drew up a syllabus for this and the following semester, laying out a series of meetings whose times, while not fixed, nevertheless had to happen at regular intervals. Syllabus in hand, the students cannot forget that deadlines exist, and are no longer able to treat the "research period" cavalierly as an unfathomable stretch of time in front of them. (See the Appendix for an abbreviated example of the syllabus.)

MONTHLY MEETING

At each and every monthly meeting, I ask a series of questions about what the students have been reading. When I became aware that, regardless of the size of their compilation of sources, the students were not putting in the time to read them—thus making their final products very narrow and parochial in the sources they actually drew on to write—I knew that in this capacity I must encourage, prod, and/or wheedle (if necessary) them to actually read what they find. Not skimming them—they must read entire articles, essays, chapters,

even whole books. I knew that they would likely benefit from a voice that impels them to read and comment on what they've read, especially at this early stage.

This led me to institute the research ledger, a daily journal of reading, research, anything else that contributes to the completion of the thesis. In order to provide them with structure, I generated a form which the students could then fill out and hand in at the following meeting (reproduced below). Students must see the entirety of this time (the fall semester) as productive, not just short bursts of research followed by inactivity. Not only does this form help students keep track of what they have read, it actively encourages them to read the materials they find, since they know that their notes will make it easier to consult quotations et al. when writing the paper.

Both the syllabus schedule and the ledger get the students into the mindset that every month, something is DUE. If they hand in a brief, sketchy, or nonexistent reading journal, or haven't added anything to their bibliographies, they will be aware that they have come up short.

MA RESEARCH LEDGER

Date	Activity	Time Start	Time End

At each monthly meeting, I also ask several or all of the following questions, depending on the course the conversation takes:

1. Which sources have you read/examined this week?
2. What attracted you to them? Why did you feel the need to pick them up at this point? (i.e., were they recommended, referenced by teachers; are they classics in the field; did you find them referenced elsewhere)

3. What is the level of discourse of each? (to make them conscious of how many popular sources they're consulting, and how many scholarly ones)
4. Have you come across any new terms or phrases that might prove helpful in further searches? (to emphasize the need to keep searching for sources, even after the initial searches produced good returns)
5. Which of this week's sources was the most challenging to absorb?
6. How will these sources prove helpful to you when you write?

To combat the apparent indifference students have toward journal articles, I give them a project for the second meeting. To make them more comfortable reading an academic article, they must find and read one before the next meeting. When we meet, we "take it apart" section by section. I ask him what is different or more difficult about this type of work than, say, a published book. If necessary, I review the database-searching process again.

Once we've reached the third meeting (usually mid-October), I ask the students to start thinking about their thesis statement, how they want to develop it throughout the paper, what kind of form and structure they will have their paper take. By Christmas, not only do they have a sizable bibliography, they will have read a good portion of the titles on that list; and with the outline fresh in their minds, they are ready to begin the writing in earnest. In the spring, I am available to meet with them, although I step back to let the faculty advisor take over during the writing. But I do ask them to submit their papers to me before they submit the final drafts, to make sure the footnotes and bibliographies haven't changed for the worse in the interim.

CONCLUSION AND UPDATE

The last IV Theology class saw fourteen MA candidates at the start of the year. Of them, twelve finished. While I continue to seek ways to make the MA research process fruitful and rewarding for the students, two developments occurred since I put this presentation together for the 2019 conference that affect my approach and practice. First, the MA is now optional, rather than required, for Philadelphia

seminarians. Second, in response to the experiences of the two who didn't finish, as well as a number of students who did but found it difficult to research and write the thesis within the traditional eight-month time frame of IV Theology, students in III Theology are now encouraged to choose their topic and advisor well before they leave for the summer. Their first meeting with me takes place in the spring, meaning that I'm able to send them off with books and articles to dig into during those three months. These changes will, I'm sure, mean that the quality of the work done for the MA program will continue to improve in the coming years.

APPENDIX: SELECTIONS FROM THE SYLLABUS

MA THESIS RESEARCH FALL 20XX

Supervisor: Mr. James Humble

Email: jhumble@scs.edu

Office: Ryan Library

Goals

In order to produce an acceptable Master's thesis, any student must first go through a period of intensive research. For students in a humanities subject like Theology, this means a period of intensive reading, in which he sifts through the published material on his topic. During the summer before IV Theology, the MA candidates are expected to read widely and deeply, gaining a foothold in their area of focus. The work done during this semester will lay the foundation for the writing of the thesis in the spring semester.

Recommended Texts

Hayot, Eric. *The Elements of Academic Style*. New York: Columbia University Press, 2014. ISBN 9780231168014

Kibbe, Michael. *From Topic to Thesis*. Downer's Grove: IVP, 2016. ISBN 9780830851317

Wicks, Jared. *Doing Theology*. New York: Paulist, 2009. ISBN 9780809145645

Yaghjian, Lucretia B. *Writing Theology Well*. 2nd ed. New York: Bloomsbury, 2015. ISBN 9780567499172

Reading Requirements

As the research semester is worth three credits, students are expected to devote the same amount of time to work toward their MA degree as they are to their other courses. Therefore, the student must set aside nine hours each week for searching, reading, note-taking, drafting bibliography or outline, meeting with the librarian. The student should look at this as a course whose class meetings are infrequent but whose requirements make the same demands as does a course that meets three times a week.

Assessment / Grade Determination

Grades will be determined according to the following factors and scale:

Learning Outcomes	Assessment Tool	Percentage of Grade
1. The student should be able to find relevant sources and cite them correctly and thoroughly	Bibliography, first draft (9/5) Expanded bibliography (10/3)	33%
2. The student should be able to plan out his entire thesis and explain it in detail	Preliminary outline (11/7) Detailed outline (12/5)	33%
3. The student should read all or part of all the sources he finds in his research	Reading journal (9/26, 10/17, 11/14, 12/12)	33%

NOTE: No grade will be given for this course, but a student will either pass or fail the course depending on the amount of work he does.

Schedule

Month	Requirements and Assignments	Assignments Due
8/20-9/19	Schedule first meeting with Mr. Humble Make initial research attempts Meet with Mr. Humble Start reading sources, keeping a reading journal	First meeting (8/28) Preliminary bibliography (9/5) Hold meeting (9/5-9/12) Journal entries (9/19)
9/20-10/17	Add entries to bibliography based on subsequent research (submit to both Mr. Humble and the advisor) Continue reading sources, taking notes	Expanded bibliography, perhaps with annotations (10/3) Next set of journal entries (10/17)

10/18-11/15	Meet with Mr. Humble Rough out a structure for the thesis Continue reading sources, taking notes	Hold meeting (10/24-10/31) Preliminary outline (11/7) Next set of journal entries (11/14)
11/16-12/15	Detailed outline due (submitted to both Mr. Humble and the advisor) Continue reading sources, taking notes, and adding entries to bibliography	Detailed outline (12/5) Final set of journal entries (12/12)
1/1-1/31	Write first chapter After advisors read draft, students in need of more research will be referred back to Mr. Humble for more help	Draft of Chapter 1 to advisor (1/23)
2/1-2/28	Write second chapter Perhaps students could start to submit portions of chapters to Mr. Humble for an estimate of their footnote formatting	Draft of Chapter 2 to advisor (2/20)
3/1-3/31	Write third chapter Insert footnotes for completed work so far, if they haven't already been Review bibliography, make sure all sources are accounted for	Draft of Chapter 3 to advisor (3/13) Drafts of all chapters to Mr. Humble for footnote format checking (3/13) Draft of latest bibliography to Mr. Humble (3/20)
4/1-4/15	Review returned drafts, make changes accordingly Prepare final version based on advisors' comments	Submit final draft (4/15)