Information Literacy: A Theological Librarian Reflects on Writers and Writing

by Robert Phillips

If we want to understand library users, we should reflect on when, why, and what they write. Generally, most users in academic libraries engage in "research-based writing." How are we to understand this particular genre that consumes so much of our users' time? How are we to respond?

Consider first what research-based writing is not. It is not creative writing, although creative writers will often research some aspect of their subject. It is not journalistic writing, although the journalist makes steady use of sources. It is not writing for publication, since it seldom finds an audience of more than five. It is not an essay, although it has a beginning, middle, and end. Certainly, it is rarely a sermon, even though the preacher has been taught to build the sermon around one central idea.[1] Eliminating these options, what remains?

Some characteristics of research-based writing are obvious. By the nature of its setting, it is a type of academic writing assigned as an exercise to foster specific learning outcomes and show knowledge of a specific topic. Those who do read it have certain expectations about its content, structure, and format. These include the writer showing an awareness of the writing topic's place in the world of ideas; basing claims on reasons and evidence, not emotions or hearsay; developing and supporting an argument by following principles of Western reasoning; and using only evidence that is verifiable and has a logical link to the reasons it supports.[2]

Furthermore, research-based writing seeks a plausible (not conclusive) answer to a question of interest to an audience. The writer's overarching purpose for undertaking the project is to show why a reader should accept the writer's claim as an answer to a research question. The writer does this by acknowledging and responding to possible alternative answers to the question. Others' ideas may support the writer's claims, reasons, or evidence—but the writer is not to present these as his or her own. Furthermore, the reader expects to see all this written in standard edited English with few (or no) errors in spelling, grammar, or punctuation.

As more international students enroll in American programs, both instructors and students quickly learn that educational systems in some other cultures have not shared these expectations. Yet even those raised in an American culture are slow to adapt to the rigors of research-based writing. Because non-academics rarely write in this genre, many have only vague memories of the processes last used many years before. In addition to recalling or acquiring the mental processes of research-based writing, this genre also requires an unfamiliar set of physical skills as students must use mysterious word processing functions, sift through the results of low precision database searches, keep track of notes and sources, and format pages correctly. For almost all who undertake it, research-based writing is a solitary exercise, with few places or persons to turn to for help.

Librarians have long understood their readers as readers. Consequently, they excel at providing unhampered access to written and spoken ideas; they purchase and lend books that few students could afford to replace; they facilitate

[1] Nor is it this column in *Theological Librarianship*, even though it has footnotes.

[2] This approach comes from Stephen Toulmin's *Uses of Argument* (Cambridge: University Press, 1958). For a summary of this process from the perspective of communication studies, see Wayne Brockriede and Douglas Ehninger, "Toulmin and Augment: An Interpretation and Application," *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 46 (1960): 44-53. The online writing center at LeTourneau Tech University has prepared a helpful one-page summary titled "Toulmin's Analysis," http://owlet.letu.edu/contenthtml/research/toulmin.html (accessed 19 April 2010).

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photocopying from journals that many libraries can ill-afford to renew. If there is a book or article the library does not own, staff can obtain it from another library in a matter of days, usually without cost to the user. Indeed, if students want something to read or view, "They have not because they ask not."

However, what difference might it make to our libraries if we as theological librarians made the subtle shift from understanding our patrons as readers who read to approaching them as readers who write? Certainly, students will still want access to sources we can offer, although some will want only those we can provide online and after hours when they finally have time to write. Some will come to the library only when necessary; others will find it a quiet refuge from the sounds of home or work. Our patrons will still need instruction in the use of our library systems, although many will want it only at the "point of need" with more visuals than text. As students engaged in research-based writing, they will still need someone to teach or reinforce research skills; they will also need help with such writing skills as how to write with style (and styles), how to think about what they read, how and when to summarize or paraphrase instead of quote, how to take usable notes efficiently, and how to organize their thoughts and plan both their writing as well as their research.

Few "stand alone" theological institutions can afford to invest in a formal writing support program such as those found at colleges or universities. However, theological librarians can establish informal programs by publicizing their own offers to help readers become better writers and by enlisting others willing to help. In addition to routinely sponsoring reading groups, theological libraries can sponsor writing groups where students (and faculty) can receive thoughtful comments from others before submitting a paper for a grade (or for double-blind peer review). Librarians themselves can devote more time to writing for publication, thereby gaining experience with the joys and frustrations of being readers who must also write. Such a shift in our perspective may even lead to a shift in how colleagues and superiors perceive us as theological librarians. As long as theological faculties use writing assignments to teach and assess learning, there will be a place for theological librarians who collaborate with readers who write and faculty who teach—working together to achieve the grand purpose of theological education.