

Research and Writing in the Seminary: Practical Strategies and Tools

Diane N. Capitani and Melanie Baffes. *Research and Writing in the Seminary: Practical Strategies and Tools*. Jefferson, NC: McFarland, 2014. 250 pp. \$40.00. Paperback. ISBN 9780786478644.

What happens when an English professor and an editor go to seminary? Rhetorical anomie, that's what. Capitani says, "Research and writing in and for the seminary was an entirely different thing altogether and required different skills, as well as a different vocabulary" (1). One finds that one has landed on another planet of discourse.

I experienced it myself when I left the English professoriate and began working in a theological library. The categories and tools of research, the vocabulary, and the rhetorical forms in which the written work of theological education gets done are challenging even for experienced scholars who transition into theology from other disciplines. How much more challenging are they for seminary students, and especially for the increasing number of second-career seminary students?

Capitani and Baffes have set out to provide a rhetorical orientation for MDiv-level students by analyzing model papers of seven types: book reviews, exegetical papers, essays/summaries, reflection papers, research papers, sermons, and journal articles. Twenty-one sample papers by thirteen different students compose two-thirds of the text. Ten of the thirteen student authors are women, and several explore social and cultural topics from feminist/womanist/Latina perspectives.

Each genre chapter begins with procedures for developing the paper and for organizing its presentation. Each sample paper has sidebar comments strategically placed to highlight how the student author is meeting the assignment. Tip sheets on such things as academic voice, paraphrasing, and choosing verbs for footnotes are interspersed as appropriate. Appendices of theological terms, research sources, style guides, and recommended reading round out the "tools" indicated in the title. Notes, a bibliography, and an index are provided.

No comparable set of sample theological papers is available in the competing guides to research and writing in theological disciplines. Faculty at a seminary where this textbook was adopted could rely on consistent exposure to well-annotated models given in full rather than in snippets. The only way to more effectively demonstrate the quality of work locally expected would be to put sample papers on reserve in the library. Showing a student a good example is a very effective pedagogy, especially if more than one sample is offered. Annotating the example amplifies its value. Every genre treated in this book has at least two annotated examples.

One might wonder how Capitani and Baffes selected the set of assignments. Since the book is based in their student experiences at Garrett-Evangelical Theological Seminary, and was developed for a course Capitani now teaches there, the book probably reflects and serves that curriculum, as would be natural. At the same time, one would like to see a rhetoric based on a survey of assignments actually in use in a wider sample of theological schools.

Case studies, for example, are missing from this volume. This genre and several others rooted in social science methodologies are thoroughly treated in Nancy Jean Vyhmeister and Terry Dwain Robertson's *Quality Research Papers for Students of Religion and Theology* (Grand Rapids, MI: Zondervan, 2014), though without samples. It would perhaps be unfair to complain that longer forms such as theses, dissertations, and DMin projects are omitted by Capitani and Baffes, since clearly the book is aimed at the MDiv market. However, Vyhmeister does address these forms, and, even more importantly, the kind of thinking and evaluation of resources that go into them.

The model-paper method of the authors necessarily creates a product-oriented rhetoric rather than the process-oriented rhetoric found in Deborah Core's *The Seminary Student Writes* (St. Louis, MO: Chalice, 2000) or Lucretia Yaghjian's masterful *Writing Theology Well* (New York: Continuum, 2006). In fact, Capitani and Baffes pointedly remark that "we do NOT want this to be a wordy book that bores students to death with theories about writing. We've learned from

experience in teaching writing that students simply don't read those books. This is a how-to book, a practical handbook for seminary assignments" (3). The emphasis is on "practical" instruction, so it adopts a directive rather than exploratory or developmental stance.

As theological professors and librarians know, adult learners are often inclined to seek practical solutions and to apply their life experiences to academic matters before them. They are often frustrated by theory and yearn for application. The directive nature of the Capitani and Baffes's text will meet an urgent felt need to learn how to perform in a new setting. A student who uses this book well will perform efficiently in executing familiar types of seminary assignments.

We should not expect in this work the detailed style guidance theological writers get from resources like Turabian's *A Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations* or from the *SBL Handbook of Style*. Although these two works are aimed at a level of advanced research writing above the general seminary student, they will still be necessary if the student ventures into the thesis process or beyond.

Although the title of the book begins with *Research and Writing*, the book's most significant weakness is its failure to understand and address the information literacy needs, i.e., the research literacy needs, of students. Librarians are mentioned only in passing (1, 4). Although a ten-page list of print and electronic resources is gathered in Appendix B, the actual use of these resources is not demonstrated. A student using this book will read finished model papers, but there is no demonstration of the means by which any particular paper was actually conceived, discovered, developed from sources, composed, tested, and revised.

There is no recognition of research on the cognitive and affective experience of readers during the information search process, such as has been described by Carol Kuhlthau. The authors' prescriptions do not explain how to execute the information behaviors of defining search strategies, discovering, evaluating, and selecting appropriate sources for one's project. By contrast, the third edition of Vyhmeister's *Quality Research Papers for Students of Religion and Theology* excels on these points, having brought librarian Terry Dwain Robertson on as a co-author. William Badke's *Research Strategies: Finding Your Way Through the Information Fog* (Bloomington, IN: iUniverse.com, 2014), though not aimed at the theological student specifically, provides excellent help on research literacy.

How will *Research and Writing in the Seminary* be used in the seminary? Seminary faculty will certainly welcome a compact handbook that gets their students started. It will be immediately useful to MDiv students as a standalone desk guide, especially if the student does not have an undergraduate background in the study of theology or religion. Clearly, it can function as the textbook in a course taught at a writing center, though as a process-oriented writing teacher I would find it necessary to provide ample access to intermediate versions of sample papers. Where research and writing instruction is taught by the librarian, the book can function as a good resource for examples but will need supplementation in research methods and resources. I would look to Badke, Kuhlthau, Yaghjian, and Vyhmeister and Robertson for support in these areas.

The book is a clear, accessible, and pleasantly designed book suitable for individual use. More expensive in paperback than its peers, it is not available in hardcover but is available as a Kindle book at a very reasonable price.

Recommended for entry-level theology students, for theological faculty, for the theological reference desk, and for reference collections in theological libraries.

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