

INTRODUCTION TO WRITING AT PSR¹

Writing is taken very seriously at Pacific School of Religion. This introduction to writing at PSR will point out some of the expectations shared by the faculty for student writing, provide some examples and discuss certain matters of importance related to writing at PSR.

Writing is the primary tool of communication in academia. In most of your courses your grade will be based primarily on the professor's evaluation of what you have written. Beyond the academy writing is an essential tool of the professional world. The effectiveness of church bulletins, grant proposals, letters to the editor and a myriad of other writing tasks will, to a large extent, determine your effectiveness in the professional world whether as a pastor, political activist, teacher or wherever God may call you. Learning to write clearly is important.

Many students come to PSR from successful careers in fields such as law, medicine or business. These students are sometimes surprised to discover that the writing style and rhetoric (way of presenting ideas) used in these various fields does not meet the expectations of the faculty in their course work. Appropriate and effective writing styles vary according to the context and the expectations of the audience. At PSR, the context is academic, more particularly, the humanities. The expectation of the audience (your professors) is based on the style and rhetoric of the humanities. The style guidelines used in the humanities generally and at PSR specifically are found in *The Chicago Manual* or Kate Turabian's *A Manual for Writers* (usually just referred to as "Turabian"). ... Turabian has more details than *Form and Style* by Carole Slade, *et al* but is harder to use and takes some practice. While Turabian is clearly more thorough, both Turabian and *Form and Style* are summaries of Chicago; so if you follow either faithfully, you will not run into problems. And therein is the core of the issue: faithfully following a style sheet. Either book will give the details about what your papers should look like (e.g., margins, fonts, layout) and how to use and cite sources properly. All you have to do is look it up.

Style, however, refers to more than just footnotes and page numbering. Style also refers to syntax and punctuation. There are some basics you should keep in mind when writing for PSR professors. First, clarity is more important than beauty. Second, punctuation should be consistent and minimal. Third, sentences should be no longer than necessary. The best and most concise book for guidance on style is still Strunk and White's *Elements of Style* (available free on line at <http://www.bartleby.com/141/>). If you have never read this, you owe yourself the favor as soon as possible. If you have read it, maybe you should read it again. For those who would like something that goes a little deeper, *Writing with Style: Conversations on the Art of Writing* by John R. Trimble is recommended; or for something more contemporary and a bit more theoretical, *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace* by Joseph Williams.

Rhetorically, writing in the humanities is overwhelmingly thesis-based writing. That is,

¹Slightly adapted from "Introduction to Writing at Claremont School of Theology," http://www.cst.edu/academic_resources/writing_center

PSR faculty will expect to find in the introduction to your essays a very clear thesis statement (even if it is merely descriptive: "In this essay I will discuss five ways Barth understands 'Word of God'"). Moreover, thesis-based writing incorporates topic sentences at the beginning of paragraphs that introduce new material. The topic sentences function as an outline, rather like an exoskeleton holding the essay together. A typical topic sentence looks something like this: "The third way Barth understands 'Word of God' is as the Bible." If you are not familiar with thesis based writing, just about any college writing handbook will give you an overview.

While students can find all of the following in Turabian or *Form and Style*, some of the basics are the following:

Typeface: Twelve point, Times New Roman (or similar). Not acceptable: Bold type, colored type, larger or smaller fonts (with the possible exception of footnotes which may use ten point type).

Paragraphs: Indent, double space, justify to the left, do not skip lines between paragraphs.

Margins: one inch on all sides.

Page numbering begins on the second page of text and should be placed in a header in the top right corner with the author's last name: for example, Smith, 7.

Staple papers at the top left corner. Do not use folders or binders unless the professor specifically asks for it.

Graphically speaking, nothing in the physical appearance of your paper should make it stand out from the others. The professors are looking for evidence of great thinking, not impressive graphics.

TYPES OF WRITING ASSIGNMENTS

Students at PSR, especially at the Master's level, can expect to encounter at least four different types of writing assignments: thesis-based essays, reflection papers, exegesis papers, and unique assignments. Before we look at each of these separately, however, the warning is ***Understand and follow the instructions given by specific professors for specific assignments***. Professors often ask for particular features in certain papers such as title page or no title page, parenthetical references or footnotes, or a supplied outline that is to be followed. Carefully read and adhere to the instructions given by the professor, keeping in mind that the most common reason for a poor grade on a paper is not following the professor's instructions.

Thesis-based essays are the most common writing assignments. Thesis-based essays have many purposes. Two of the more common tasks are to analyze a text (such as letter written by a sixteenth century Jesuit missionary in China) or to describe an idea (such as how Marjorie Suchocki understands the doctrine of sin). It is important to keep in mind that in such writing tasks the professor often does not want to know your opinion on the topic. Rather, the professor wants you to analyze what the text says (often following a provided formula such as "how does X understand Z and why does X understand it that way) or describe how a particular person understands a particular idea. The goal of such assignments is to demonstrate your ability to understand and explain clearly the texts or ideas of others. The opportunity to explain your own ideas will come later. The professors often want students to learn a format and style that is acceptable in the field (i.e., theology, biblical studies, history) before the students begin expressing their own theological, biblical or historical opinions .

Such thesis-based essays usually follow a common pattern.

- First, a brief introduction which includes a clearly stated thesis (even if it is merely descriptive).
- Then each section of the essay is introduced with a topic sentence clearly stating the topic of the section.
- Finally, a concise summary concludes the essay. Often very strict guidelines in terms of topic, number of pages and notation style (parenthetical or footnote) are also provided by the professor.

Reflection papers are a much looser form of writing than thesis-based essays. In a reflection paper, a professor wants you to write about your ideas as you reflect on an assigned topic or text. It is essential that you are able to present the basic ideas of the text before you reflect upon it. As long as your reflections are directly related to the assigned topic or text, you are pretty much free to write whatever you want. However, always keep in mind that someone will have to read what you have written. *Reflection does not mean stream of consciousness*. Basic conventions of form, style and rhetoric still apply.

Exegesis is a technical form of writing in biblical studies. Generally speaking, exegesis is the disciplined examination of various aspects of a (usually biblical) text in order to determine the

meaning of the text. Often each professor has specific guidelines for exegesis papers in terms of both content and outline, especially at the introductory level.

In spite of the wide range of preferences and emphases in exegetical writing, there are some common characteristics in most exegesis papers.

- For example, exegesis papers do not always have a clearly stated thesis in the introduction. They tend to be organized by level of inquiry starting with textual issues, moving to literary and historical/cultural issues and ending with theological issues.
- Each paragraph or section of the exegesis paper looks at the given text (called a pericope) through a different lens. For example,
 - one paragraph might examine the meaning of specific words in the pericope,
 - the next might focus on a specific literary device (repetition, for example),
 - the next might focus on a specific historical event that the pericope mentions.
- Each of these paragraphs (or sections in a longer paper) attempts to pull meaning from the pericope by examining it in a specific way or from a specific perspective.
- Rather than summary conclusions, exegesis papers tend to have conclusions which tie together the significant points of the essay to provide a somewhat unified meaning, interpretation or application of the pericope to a specific context. That context might be the context of the original author(s) or redactor(s), or some contemporary context.

Unique assignments are those for which the professor gives specific instructions in terms of style or outline/rhetoric. For example, in a religious education or pastoral counseling course you may be asked to report on an experience or activity using a very specific format such as by answering three questions or by "dialoging" with the authors you have read in the course. ***It is important in such cases that you clearly understand the expectations of the professor and follow the instructions of the professor exactly.*** Keep in mind that what may appear to you as an arbitrary request may indeed have an important purpose. Even if the professor's instructions seem arbitrary, you should do your best to follow them.

USING SOURCES

Unintentional plagiarism is a serious matter in graduate school. Unintentional plagiarism most often occurs when a student loses his or her own voice. The scenario goes something like this: the student finds a source with whom he or she agrees and, making a few changes in wording, basically follows the structure of the source material. Even if citations are used, this is a recipe for plagiarism. The following are some commonsense suggestions to help you avoid unintentional plagiarism.

- Use your own voice. Put what you have to say in your own words. Don't hide behind the "experts."
- Never compose essays with source material open. Take notes from source material on note cards and compose from those cards.

- Clearly mark cards to distinguish summaries from quotations.
- Keep quotations brief and few. Use direct quotes as spices in a meal, not as the main dish
- Use block quotations only when you plan to give extensive analysis of the quoted material.
- Always introduce quotations (e.g. According to Helmer, "...").
- Summarize or paraphrase material using sentence structure that differs significantly from the source. (Changing a few words, but keeping the same basic sentence structure of the original is still plagiarism.)
- Provide a citation for all quoted, paraphrased or summarized material. When in doubt, provide a citation.

Examples:

Original Source #1

Cheap grace means the justification of sin without the justification of the sinner. Grace alone does everything, they say, and so everything can remain as it was before. [1]

Plagiarized Version #1A

Cheap grace means the justification of sin but not the justification of the person who sinned. Some people say that grace alone does everything, so everything can remain the same. [2]

Comment:

Even though the writer has cited the source, quotation marks were not used around direct quotations such as "cheap grace means the justification of sin" and "grace alone does everything."

Plagiarized Version #1B

Cheap grace is taking care of sin without dealing with the one who sins. God's unmerited favor alone takes care of everything, some say; so the situation can stay as it was before. [3]

Comment:

Still plagiarism. Replacing key words with synonyms but keeping the basic sentence structure of the original is still plagiarism, even if you provide a citation.

Acceptable Version #1C

According to Bonhoeffer, cheap grace refers to the theological position that a sinner can be justified before God without changing his or her behavior. According to this theological position, one does not need to change to receive justification for it is provided by grace alone. [4]

Comment:

This is a legitimate paraphrase of Bonhoeffer's words. Note that it is both introduced and footnoted. Also note that short phrases (usually three words or less) do not necessarily need to be placed in quotation marks, especially if the sentence structure is completely different from the source.

Original Source #2

As Christianity spread, and the Church became more secularized, this realization of the costliness of grace gradually faded. The world was Christianized, and grace became its common property. It was to be had at low cost. Yet the Church of Rome did not altogether lose its earlier vision. It is highly significant that the Church was astute enough to find room for the monastic movement, and to prevent it from lapsing into schism. [5]

Plagiarized Version #2A

Christianity spread throughout the Empire but at the same time it became more worldly; thus the realization of the costliness of grace gradually faded away. As the Empire embraced Christianity, grace became its common property and was available cheaply. Nonetheless, the Church of Rome did not completely lose its earlier vision. That the Church was smart enough to make room for the monastic movement and to keep it from dividing from the Church is highly significant.

Comment:

Plagiarism: not only does the writer copy the outline and sentence structure of the original, she or he fails to place within quotation marks long phrases taken directly from the source such as "the realization of the costliness of grace gradually faded" and "grace became its common property." Moreover, there is no citation.

Plagiarized Version #2B

According to Bonhoeffer, Christianity spread throughout the Empire but at the same it became more worldly; thus "the realization of the costliness of grace gradually faded." As the Empire embraced Christianity, grace became its common property. Nonetheless, the Church of Rome did not completely lose its earlier vision. It is highly significant that the Church was "astute enough to find room for the monastic movement," and to prevent if from "lapsing into schism." [6]

Comment:

Still plagiarism. Although the writer has introduced the material and included a citation and placed some quoted material in quotation marks, other direct quotations are not in quotation marks such as "grace became its common property." Moreover, the sentence beginning with "nonetheless" is a direct quote with only two words replaced by synonyms. Finally, the overall structure of the paragraph and of each sentence mimics the original too closely.

Acceptable Version #2C

Bonhoeffer argues that monasticism within the Church is evidence that the concept of costly grace was not completely lost after Christianity became the state religion. Nonetheless, the Church was largely secularized during this period; and for most, grace "was to be had at low cost." [7]

Comment:

Notice that the paraphrased information is introduced and a citation is provided; both the over-all structure and the sentence structure differ significantly from the source. One small quotation is used to add flavor.

NOTATION STYLES

For most of your papers, you will be asked to follow the footnote/bibliography format of the *Chicago Manual of Style*.

For the Chicago footnote/bibliography style, you must carefully follow either Turabian or *Form and Style*. If you are unfamiliar with this style, you should carefully read chapter seven of *Form and Style* before you attempt to use it. Keep in mind that footnotes look different from bibliographic entries:

Footnotes are in numeric order at the bottom of the page. They are indented, with the author's first name first. Commas are used between items and publication information is in parentheses. Page number is included.

Example:

[1]Dietrich Bonhoeffer, *The Cost of Discipleship* trans. H. Fuller, (Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1949; Macmillan Publishing Company, 1963), 46.

Bibliographic entries are in alphabetical order at the end of the essay under the heading, "bibliography." They have a hanging indentation with the primary author's last name first. Periods are used between items and publication information is not in parentheses. For most book entries, no page number is given.

Example:

Bonhoeffer, Dietrich. *The Cost of Discipleship*. Trans. H. Fuller. Munich: Chr. Kaiser Verlag, 1949; Macmillan Publishing Company, 1963.

Keep in mind that punctuation and form have a purpose in notes and bibliographic entries, so creativity is not appreciated. See *Turabian* chapters eight through eleven or *Form and Style* chapter seven for abundant examples.