

# General Advice on How to Write a Paper within the RRE MA Programme

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## The Study Plan

Read the Study Plan of the RRE MA Programme for the type of course you are following and adhere strictly to its stipulations (also regarding format of paper).

## How to read this paper, “General advice on how to write a paper”?

This is not an official legal document. It gives informal advice at a general level. The Study Plan is the legal document and you should always give priority to that. Additionally, while this paper attempts to offer advice at a general level, teachers in the individual courses will most likely be able to give you more specific advice on the particular paper you are about to write. Here again it would probably be advisable to let such specific advice take priority over the more general advice given in this paper.

This paper is written with free papers in mind, but most of the advice will also apply to fixed papers.

**General ordering of papers** (in papers written for text courses you will also be asked to provide a translation and a commentary on a particular passage of a text; for such papers the ordering will of course have to relate to this):

1. Introduction: formulation of the problem to be investigated, presentation of the material (most importantly the primary material and possibly also relevant scholarship), if relevant also some of the following elements: definitions, approach, theories, methodology.
2. Main part: describe, analyse, compare, discuss, and argue.
3. Conclusion.
4. Bibliography.

It is crucially important that there is a close match between the introduction, the main part and the conclusion. A dull way of stating this is to say:

- In the introduction you write what you intend to describe, analyse, compare, and discuss.
- In the main part you do the describing, analysing, comparing and discussing.
- In the conclusion you write what you have been describing, analysing, comparing and discussing.
- (In brief: Tell what you are going to say. Say it. Tell what you have said.)

You might think that this is too repetitive; but although pure repetition is to be avoided, it is our experience that the risk of writing a paper where the introduction, the main part and the conclusion do not match in the required way is much greater.

## 1. Introduction:

The introduction should not take up more than one sixth of the overall length of the paper.

A good introduction will answer the following questions:

- *What* do you intend to investigate (what problem is investigated, what questions do you ask)?
- *Why* do you want to investigate this (why is it an important scholarly question, field, theme etc.)?
- Based on *which* material do you intend to pursue this investigation or answer these questions?
- *How* will you investigate it (method, approach and any underlying theory)?

A short introduction to the subject or theme is often a good way of starting and will lead naturally to the more specific formulation of the problem or question to be explored. This in turn will logically lead to a presentation of the material available for the investigation and how you will go about analysing this material.

A good introduction will leave the reader in no doubt as to the main theme and content of the paper.

Formulation of the problem to be investigated (the thesis or the questions):

A paper should include a clear statement of what you intend to investigate, analyse and discuss. The formulation of the problem can take the form either of questions that are asked or of a thesis. The problem must be limited. What is crucial and to be investigated, what is less crucial and not to be investigated? What is a realistic scope for the investigation (given the format of the paper and other limitations)?

Limits of the theme to be investigated can be geographical, thematical or chronological. Stating scholarly reasons for your choices within the given limits demonstrates an amount of familiarity with the theme to be investigated.

In order to arrive at a relevant and realistic problem for the investigation it is advisable to try to filter your thesis or questions through the following test:

1. Is the answer to my basic question self-evident (or is my thesis self-evident)?
2. Is it impossible to find sources on the basis of which one may discuss the questions that are asked (or test the proposed thesis)?<sup>1</sup>

If the answer to the either of these questions is ‘yes’, then you had better start all over again with a new theme for investigation.

A paper, and all the work that goes into the paper from the reading of primary and secondary texts to note-taking and the writing of draft sections, should be structured by the formulation of the theme to be investigated. It is therefore recommended that you write a draft of a “theme to be investigated” very early in the process. However, the actual process of investigation and the writing of the paper often lead to somewhat unexpected results and it can to a limited extent take you in another direction than the one originally envisaged. This is not to be deplored, but you should take account of this by re-writing your draft “formulation of the problem” once you have written the conclusion. This will ensure the necessary match between the introduction, the main part and the conclusion.

Regarding fixed papers one may say that the “theme to be investigated” or the “question” or “problem” is a given matter, presented to you by the teacher. The advice formulated above is therefore not so important when in relation to fixed papers as to free papers. However, even with fixed papers, it is recommended that you formulate the questions and the theme to be investigated in your own words. This will help you to become aware of the nature and limits of the given questions, and it gives your readers a chance of seeing how you understand the questions posed. You should also be aware that if you are writing a fixed paper, you will not have the time to do a lot of structured reading with your topic in mind, since you will receive your topic much too late for that. It is therefore advisable to take notes during the course work of such a kind that you will be able to easily and quickly find information that might be pertinent to any future topics. In terms of learning outcome it is usually more rewarding to write a free paper than a fixed one.

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<sup>1</sup> Modified from Kate L. Turabian, *A Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses and Dissertations*, 7th ed., rev. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007), 17-18.

Presentation of the material:

It depends on the nature of a paper whether it is most logical to present the most important material in the introduction or in the main part when individual texts, artefacts or contributions from scholars are brought into play. Often the answer will be a combination, with the most important sources (e.g. two texts that are to be analysed and compared throughout the paper) being presented in the introduction, while other sources, which are only referred to once or twice or in passing or even in a footnote, are only (if at all) introduced in the main text (or in a footnote to the main text).

When a source is substantially analysed, you should (either in the introduction or in the main part) present or discuss:

- its dating (when it was written or in the case of an artefact produced); such a dating can either be given in absolute terms (e.g. written between 177-180 AD) or in relative terms (e.g. the Gospel of Mark most likely being written before the Gospel of Luke),
- its author,
- possibly also the relevance and the limits and possibilities of the material in relation to the questions you are asking.

If the theme you are to investigate has been thoroughly researched in previous scholarship and with clearly identifiable schools with main positions on the subject, and if you to a certain degree plan to enter into debate with a couple of representatives from each of these schools, a short introduction to previous scholarship and its main positions is important. In your master's thesis such a passage on previous scholarship is compulsory, so you might as well start practising writing them. The major challenge is to keep them short; you do that by focusing strictly on what will be essential for your paper.

Definitions, approach, theories, methodology:

A passage on such issues often follows logically on the presentation of the material. How will you go about analysing and comparing the material you have chosen? Have scholars arrived at different conclusions because they disagree on definitions, in their methods or in their underlying theories? What is your own underlying theory? Can it be "tested" empirically on the material or is it an assumption that is made beyond testing (in this context)? How will you approach the sources, and how do you define terms that are important for your paper? Finally: it is of course a strength if you can give scholarly reasons for your choices. Why is your method, approach or definition superior?

**2. Main part:**

The main part of the paper will normally take up at least four sixths of the overall length of the paper.

In the main part you do what you said you would do in the introduction. It is common (and often a logical sequence) to move from describing and analysing the content of the given material to the more complicated processes of comparing, discussing and arguing.

Pure description and analysis will not bring you far (at the master's level you are able to move beyond simply reading, understanding and structuring texts); but (and this is important) the basis for good results in the discussions and comparisons is often laid when you simply and plainly describe the content of a source.

There is no requirement at the master's level that you contribute something radically new and original to scholarship. What is demanded is a good quality, independent ability to argue a point. Such argumentation is ideally done in a way where you (regarding the central questions of your paper) base your claims on primary material (this is your evidence) and enter into dialogue with scholarship. E.g.:

Passage 1 in text I suggests x; this is also maintained by scholar A with further reference to text II; this is contrary to the interpretation of scholar B, whose interpretation of the central term etc.

The main part should be structured in subsections. It helps to make your structure clear to yourself and your reader if such subsections are given headlines. The subsections are often better organised thematically, chronologically or (in a manner that can often be combined with this) according to main sources. Only rarely is it a good idea to order the subsections according to modern scholars (with headlines such as a scholar A's view on theme x). Scholarship is not a martial art or contact-sport – you should “go for the ball, not the player”.

The main unit of a paper is not a word, phrase, or sentence or one of the subsections. It is the paragraph. A paragraph is a tool used to explain a complete idea. Paragraphs are ideally made up of, not just sentences, but specific sentences: claims, reasons, and warrants. Claims are the main issues you want your reader to understand from reading your paragraph. They can stand on their own or support one another to lead towards a grand conclusion. Reasons and warrants act as the logical connectives between a claim and the evidence that supports the claim. Reasons provide explanations for the claim; warrants support the use of the reasons. The most important and most conventionally used type of warrant in research papers is evidence. Evidence provides a specific, localized example, which supports the truth value of the claim made. The structure is therefore as follows:

X is Y, based upon evidence Z. Evidence Z is important because of warrant W.

Most papers will rarely follow this format. Experienced researchers have a distinct knack of breaking the rules but still arrive at a paper that nonetheless makes sense. Beginners should focus on structure.

To really learn to understand structure, nothing is more informative than spending an afternoon on dissecting an essay piece by piece to see how the author supports each of his or her arguments with sub-arguments, evidence, disproved counterexamples, and so on.

Here is an example from Sarah Iles Johnston's “Animating Statues”:<sup>2</sup>

In the past fifteen years or so, scholars of antiquity have become newly fascinated with the ritual power of the material image. [general claim/background] In a widely praised 1992 book, Christopher Faraone heightened our appreciation of Greek and Roman beliefs in the ability of statues to do things particularly to ward off demons, diseases, pirates, and all other sorts of evils. [evidence 1] In 2001, Deborah Tarn Steiner, starting from an idea that Faraone had touched upon, developed the premise that Greeks and Romans understood statues to be literally filled with that which they represented — that statues of gods were presumed actually to contain the gods. [evidence 2] Both Faraone and Steiner assume as well that, although the Greeks and Romans believed the gods might spontaneously enter their statues and animate them, from early times the Greeks and Romans frequently also performed rituals to ensure that animation would take place — rituals to ensure that the god would be present in the statue at a given moment to hear prayers, receive sacrifices, and perform miraculous actions. [evidence 3]

Please note that the claim in this example concerns scholarship: scholarship is claimed to have a specific character. References to scholarship can of course serve as evidence for such claims (scholarship is here the primary material). However, for most claims that you are likely to make

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<sup>2</sup> Sarah Iles Johnston, “Animating Statues: A Case Study in Ritual,” *Arethusa* 41:3 (Fall 2008): 445-46.

regarding central issues of your papers the most appropriate evidence is not scholarship, but primary material from antiquity.

### **3. Conclusion:**

The conclusion should take up less than one sixth of the overall length of the paper. It should state an answer to the problem (question, thesis).

Several conclusions are possible, all of them equally valuable: the thesis holds true in all ways, the thesis holds true if understood in a qualified sense, the thesis does not hold true, or it is impossible to determine whether or not the thesis holds true given the evidence at hand. To arrive at a seemingly inconclusive conclusion may be frustrating, but one's work can still nonetheless have value insofar as it offers a new perspective on a given topic (or casts doubt on a conventional but unfounded consensus).

### **4. Bibliography:**

The bibliography is a list (alphabetically ordered after the surname of authors) of all the sources and scholarly works you have used for your paper. It is often a good idea to divide your bibliography into two parts: a) sources; b) scholarship.

The bibliography of a paper is not to be confused with the syllabus. In the bibliography you list all the sources and all the secondary literature that you have actually used (and made reference to) in your paper. This may be all, most or just some of the sources and works on your syllabus (fixed and additional), and it may also include works or sources not included in your syllabus. In most cases the syllabus and the bibliography will to a large extent overlap with each other (since your paper should fall within the theme of the course).

### **Plagiarism**

To copy (manually, mechanically or electronically) or to slightly rephrase something that others have written without indicating by citation marks and with due reference that this is what you are doing (that is to pass off something that another person has written as if you have written it yourself) is not only illegal (and severely punished by all universities in the programme); it is also stupid. Technical developments and the internet have made it a lot easier for students (or indeed professors) to copy from others, but it has also made it exponentially easier for professors to discover when and where plagiarism is involved.

### **References**

References to secondary literature should be made either in the text (in brackets) or in footnotes. A reference to the page number (or column number) is sufficient (no need to indicate the line).

Regarding the style of referencing and how to indicate author and work, see below.

References to primary texts should be made either in the text (in brackets) or in footnotes. Most ancient texts are divided into different types of sections (often books, chapters and paragraphs). When referring to a passage in such a text you should refer to the relevant section. Do not refer to the page number in the edition you are using. For instance, if you are using the *Church History* of Eusebius and you want to refer to his claim that Mark was a follower of Peter, then you do not refer to page 115 (for example), but you refer to II.15.1 (or 2.15.1), where II is the book, 15 is the chapter and 1 is the paragraph. Not all ancient texts are divided in this way; shorter ones are not divided into books, but only in chapters; not all chapters are divided into paragraphs and many very short texts are not even divided into chapters.

## FORMATTING:

### Footnotes or in-text citation:

The predominant difference between MLA and Chicago formatting styles is that MLA uses in-text citation and Chicago uses footnotes. Most works in early Western religious studies relies on a combination of both. A rule of thumb to follow: if the text is a primary or ancient text, use in-text citation. If it is a secondary source, use a footnote.

Punctuation in footnotes (Chicago Style):

If we compare the form of a footnote with the form of a bibliographic entry, we note several interesting differences:

Footnote style: Michael Pollan, *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals* (New York: Penguin, 2006), 99–100.

Bibliographic Entry Style: Pollan, Michael. *The Omnivore's Dilemma: A Natural History of Four Meals*. New York: Penguin, 2006.

In footnote style, the author's name is given in traditional first name, last name order, followed by a comma, the italicized title of the book, followed by parentheses containing the location, publisher and date of publication. A comma follows the closing parenthesis, and the final elements are the page numbers of the relevant citation. There is only one full stop in a footnote, and it arrives at the end.

Bibliographic style is designed so that individual entries are easy to find in a long list. This style therefore places the last name first. It also separates large elements with full stops.

Lists of citations in footnotes are separated by semi-colons.

e.g.

12. See also Elizabeth Castelli, "I Will Make Mary Male': Pieties of the Body and Gender Transformation of Christian Women in Late Antiquity," in *Body Guards: The Cultural Politics of Ambiguity*, ed. Julia Epstein and Kristina Straub (New York: Routledge, 1991), 29–49; Ingvild Saelid Gilhus, "Male and Female Symbolism in the Gnostic *Apocryphon of John*," *Temenos* 19 (1983): 33–43; Dennis Ronald MacDonald, "Corinthian Veils and Gnostic Androgynes," in *Images of the Feminine in Gnosticism*, ed. Karen L. King (Harrisburg, PA: Trinity Press International, 1988), 276–92.<sup>3</sup>

### Use of scare quotes:

So-called "scare quotes" are used to indicate that a given term should be understood in a qualified sense. Most style manuals advise against this use. However, particularly in a field where terms are difficult to concretely define, it often seems necessary. Do not be shy about using "Sethian" or "Gnostic" when confronted with such a daunting and mysterious tradition. Avoid using quotes for mere emphasis, though.

### Use of foreign languages:

Most style guides will tell you that the use of foreign language terms to convey simple English ideas is bad form. There is, however, a widespread tradition of this in the academy. It lends a work a certain level of cultured pretentiousness, serves the rhetorical goal of producing an ethos, and, for better or worse, it is already something of a *fait accompli*. Defenders of the tradition will argue that many of these words have become *termini technici* and cannot be translated. Use of such terms is

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<sup>3</sup>Benjamin H. Dunning, "What Sort of Thing Is This Luminous Woman?: Thinking Sexual Difference in *On the Origin of the World*," *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 17:1 (Spring 2009): fn. 12, 58.

largely a matter of authorial voice and taste. It should be noted, however, that abbreviations like *op. cit.* and *q.v.* have largely fallen out of fashion.

### **Making reference to ancient peoples:**

The *SBL Handbook of Style* encourages putting birth and death dates of famous dead figures in parentheses after the first mention of their name. Where such dates are unknown approximations are accepted. Dates for figures like Jesus and Moses do not seem to be necessary.

### **Making reference to ancient texts:**

Quote scriptural sources in-text, identifying which translation is used.

e.g.: “Therefore, if anyone is in Christ, he is a new creation; the old has gone, the new has come!” (2 Cor. 5:17 New International Version).

Often, a required text or fragment will not have survived in its entirety, but instead will exist only in quoted form in some later author. In this instance use the abbreviation *ap.* (Lat. = *apud*), meaning ‘by’ or, in this context, ‘according to’. E.g.: Damaskios *ap.* Phot., *Bibl.* 181.126a

Canonical writings are not italicized. Within the body of a sentence, a standard abbreviation form is preferred. At the beginning of a sentence a non-abbreviated form is necessary. (For the standard abbreviations see the *SBL Handbook of Style* sect. 8.2.)

The *SBL Handbook of Style* sect. 8.3 has a list of canonical, pseudepigraphal, and apocryphal writings with appropriate abbreviations. Sect. 8.3.14 has a basic list of rules for abbreviating classical works (dialogues of Plato, historical writings of Eusebius, etc.).

When quoting in ancient languages, there is no need for quotation marks. A standard format is to place a translation in quotes, followed by a parenthetical transcription, followed by an in-text citation to the ancient writing in question” “[translation]” ([transcription, citation])

#### Example 1:

In response then to the archons’ anthropogonic plot, Sophia laughs [...] and sets into motion her own creational counterplot: “On account of this, she preceded them. She created first her own human being so that it might instruct their molded figure to despise them and so to be saved from them” ([Coptic text here], 113.17–20).<sup>4</sup> (Note that the author has already mentioned his source text, *On the Origin of the World*, and so there is no need to give the title here.)

With longer quotes the original text can be placed in a footnote.

#### Example 2:

So the first Adam of Light is pneumatic and appeared on the first day. The second Adam [i.e. the Eve figure] is psychic and appeared on the sixth day, which is called Aphrodite. The third Adam is choic, that one who is the person of law, and he appeared on the eighth day [after the] rest of poverty, which is called Sunday.<sup>69</sup>

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69. [original Coptic text]<sup>5</sup>

### **Capitalization of theological terms:**

The *SBL Handbook of Style* also includes a useful list (App. A) of capitalization examples showing which theological or religious terms should be capitalized and which should not.

<sup>4</sup> Dunning, “Woman?”, 69.

<sup>5</sup> Dunning, “Woman?”, 74-75.

### Annotated Bibliography of Useful Sources

#### Guides:

Adler, Mortimer J. and Charles Van Doren. *How to Read a Book: The Classic Guide to Intelligent Reading*. Rev. New York: Simon and Schuster, 1972.

*Good writers are first and foremost good readers. This is an extremely useful guide to learning (or remembering) the art of critical reading. Adler does tend to drone on a bit at times, and the reader may find her- or himself wishing that he would just get to the point. However, from another perspective, this is one of the book's joys. Adler advocates a very slow and methodical form of reading, which, if mastered, will be of immense value to the student.*

Booth, Wayne C., Gregory G. Colomb, and Joseph M. Williams. *The Craft of Research*. 2<sup>nd</sup> ed., Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2003.

*This book is extremely useful when you find yourself floundering and wondering how to proceed in your analysis of a given topic. Concrete advice throughout. Highly recommended.*

Strunk, William and E.B. White. *The Elements of Style*. 4<sup>th</sup> ed., rev. Boston, MA: Allyn and Bacon, 2000

*Strunk and White remains a classic for anyone who writes. This little book with its basic rules is continually invoked against overblown or incoherent prose.*

Turabian, Kate L. *A Manual for Writers of Research Papers, Theses, and Dissertations*. 7<sup>th</sup> ed., rev. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2007.

*This is basically the Chicago Manual of Style boiled down for the use of students. Students use it all the time.*

#### Examples used in this paper:

Dunning, Benjamin H. "What Sort of Woman Is This?: Thinking Sexual Difference in *On the Origin of the World*." *Journal of Early Christian Studies* 17:1 (Spring 2009): 55-84.

Johnston, Sarah Iles. "Animating Statues: A Case Study in Ritual." *Arethusa* 41:3 (Fall 2008): 445-477.