

Writing Theologically

Foundations for Learning

Eric D. Barreto

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my compositional stupor. And yet all these fabulous tweets boil down to a simple reality: writing is perhaps both the hardest and the most satisfying intellectual activity any of us engage in.

Read the essays in the book, reflect on them, and then pick up your pen or your keyboard. You have a voice. God has called you to use it. And you never know what effect your words will have. You never know how God will imbue your feeble words with the power of the Spirit.

And when that happens, you will forget the late nights struggling over that sermon or that time your computer crashed right as you clicked “Save.” All you will remember is the power of God to transform a broken world. And then you will become a witness to God’s loving and graceful inspiration of ordinary people to imagine an extraordinary world.

Speak. Write. Tell the stories of God’s good news. We are waiting and listening. Now it’s your turn to write theologically.

1

Writing Basically

Richard Newton

Writing has played a pivotal role in the formation and spread of the Christian witness. In the prologue to the Gospel of John, we find an illuminating image of this relationship. “In the beginning was the Word, and the Word was with God, and the Word was God.”¹ The evangelist likens Christ to “the Word” (Greek *ho logos*, think “logic”), the very expression of reason, present since before creation and enlightening the world ever since. The apostle Paul tells the Corinthians that Jesus’ passion and resurrection happened “in accordance with the scriptures.”² These “scriptures” (Greek *tas graphas*, imagine “graphics”) or, more literally, “writings” to which Paul refers clearly dictated the dimensions of his worldview. For two millennia the church has used the discipline of writing to work out its understanding of who God is and what God is about. At the most basic level, this is writing theologically. Through this historic

1. John 1:1 NRSV.

2. 1 Cor. 15:3–4 NRSV

practice, you too—when you write theologically—can join in the body of Christ’s ongoing meditation on God’s movement in the world.

At the same time, the task of writing has a way of playing on a person’s worst fears. Maybe you are haunted by an incident in a previous educational setting. Maybe you are nervous about working in a language in which you are less than comfortable. Perhaps the unfamiliar halls of your seminary echo the quiet voice inside you saying, “You’re not a writer.”

But writing is not a zero-sum game. You do not fail to write anymore than you fail to live. Writing is a skill to be worked on such that you might enjoy the fruits of your labor. When those called to ministry write well, the world comes to understand better what is good about the good news. As you consider the next step in your vocational journey, ask yourself not whether you can write (for you can), but how willing you are to work at writing more effectively. Isn’t the word you are carrying worthy of your best efforts?

In concert with the wider mission of this book, this chapter lays out some basic writing skills that you will have the opportunity to develop throughout seminary. I invite you to use this chapter to consider your own vocational journey and discern how you might prepare to write theologically. Along the way, we will review the types of writing you will do in seminary and some ways you can sharpen your skills. By taking a moment to review the basics of theological writing, we prepare ourselves to express the word residing within us.

What Will I Be Writing?

While we often speak of ministry training in singular terms, a seminary education comprises various courses of study. Biblical interpretation, church history, the role of faith in society, the Christian message in theory and practice: each of these disciplines offers insight into an effective life in ministry. Your professors will use writing as a way to find out what you have learned. For this reason, I recommend that you approach writing assignments not as tests but as opportunities to discover what you can do with new ministerial tools. Writing creates a space to inventory the fruits born out of discipleship and the seeds in need of cultivation. Indeed, writing is hard work. But more important, it is worthwhile work.

The theological writer is challenged with having to inhabit two modes. The first is the *reflexive mode*. This involves finding one’s own position on an issue. In the reflexive mode, the seminarian takes inventory of his or her relationship to a subject matter—be it a biblical term or passage (for example, the *logos* in John 1), a theological concept (such as the Trinity), or ministry setting (a congregation, worship community, mission field, or other location). The reflexive mode is a soul-searching activity for the author. This can take place in a personal journal or in a writing circle of fellow journeyers. (See figure 1.)

Figure 1**Examples of Writing Theologically in the Reflexive Mode****Lectio Divina**

Historically, "divine reading" refers to the four-part Benedictine practice of reading, meditating, praying, and contemplating a passage of Scripture. More broadly, we might think of this as devotional Bible study carried out in private or in community.

Pastoral Care Diary

This is not only a record of activities done by a minister but also a registry of reactions to ministry events—from counseling sessions to worship services to outreach. The diary chronicles developments in the life of the pastor and the parish.

The Preacher's File

Good sermons (usually) are not written overnight. Preachers are always on the lookout for illustrations, analogies, and interpretations to help their congregations connect with a future message. This file provides a space to jot down quick reflections for you to think through later.

Liturgical Journal

Curating the aesthetic and ritual elements of worship requires a certain level of artistry. Journals provide a space to brainstorm and imagine. The finished product may look dramatically different from one's notes, but the journal eases the troublesome task of getting started.

The second mode is the *critical mode*. This involves shaping another person's perspective on an issue. The seminarian defends a position in a persuasive fashion—that is, a manner that convinces the reader of the argument's validity. In the critical mode, the seminarian is concerned with his or her perspective being understood and endorsed by another person (such as a biblical studies professor, church historian, theologian, fellow classmate, or parishioner). Key here is focusing on the court of readers' opinions. Ultimately, judgment on the effectiveness of the writing lies largely outside the writer's own assessment. (See figure 2.)

Figure 2**Examples of Writing Theologically in the Critical Mode****Credo**

From the Latin for "I believe," a credo paper puts forth a coherent statement of the Christian faith, justifying the author's belief with support from a range of sources that include history, current events, Scripture, and the witness of other Christians.

Biblical Exegesis

Exegesis refers to scriptural interpretation based upon what is known from the text and its historical context. With the help of specialized dictionaries, encyclopedias, and scholarly commentaries, these papers advance theological ways of reading a biblical passage.

Church History Paper

These writings explore specific moments in the life of the church, characterizing noteworthy events in which Christians have struggled to work out their faith. Rather than taking a side in a debate, you might be more likely to discuss how each side understood their actions as faithful.

Social Analysis Essay

In these papers, you might thoroughly discuss a problem typical to your ministry setting and prescribe a course of action. Your approach to these controversies will reflect your study of the human condition, your theological convictions, and your practice of the ministerial arts.

Liturgical Write-Up

The word *liturgy* derives from a Greek term meaning "work of the people" and usually refers to the rituals, services, and artistic aspects of Christian worship. While liturgy is commonly associated with the reflexive mode, liturgical design involves a critical weighing of church tradition, cultural literacy, and ministerial wisdom.

Part of what makes theological education unique is the high esteem in which both the reflexive and the critical modes are held. Seminaries unequivocally want their students to succeed. After all, the Latin term *seminarium* refers to a "seedbed," a place for nurturing. That being said, you, your fellow students, and your teachers are obligated to prune understandings that hinder the church from growing in spirit and truth. Even when done in the most constructive way, criticism can be difficult to take. As you receive feedback, think

through how you can respond gracefully and fruitfully to criticism and praise alike.

In the end, the biggest obstacle to the theological writer may be the self. Many seminarians see themselves as either good writers or bad writers. Both of these attitudes can be dangerous. The former leads you to believe that your work glows even when it doesn't. The self-proclaimed latter can't see the potential in their own work. I encourage you to remember that all writers have good days and bad days, but good writing begins with a commitment to the demands of the craft.

How Can I Write Well?

When writing in the reflexive mode, you are usually the judge and jury on the quality of your expression. But when writing in the critical mode, your readers will evaluate your work. So, what does good critical writing look like? In some respects, the answer is going to vary depending on your reader's taste.

Readers are fickle. Some of us appreciate long, complex sentences. Others like terse prose. Style and grammar conventions will also depend on the context of a writer's audience. Professors will usually outline their expectations by referring you to specific handbooks, manuals, or rubrics. In the case that he or she does not list this in a syllabus, ask your professors, your fellow students, or your campus writing center for some recommended resources.

Knowing your readers' preferences on these matters is important, but truth be told, they are secondary to one defining question: *Did you convince the reader that you know what you're talking about?* Writing well is contingent upon making your reader answer affirmatively. This result is different from convincing your reader that you are correct. Although that may be ideal, your reader may reserve the

right to maintain another equally sound perspective. Good writing can leave room for other valid opinions. And this is also different from captivating your reader with your beautiful prose. While you must keep your audience's attention, there is such a thing as artful nonsense. Smooth writing cannot make up for a lack of substance. You want readers to finish your work thinking, "Now that was thought provoking!"

At some point in your educational career, you were likely exposed to any number of writing models. Though they differ in terminology and emphasis, most of these approaches overlap in their intent to help you present a coherent argument. As a teacher, I want my students to tell me in the most efficient way possible what they think and why they think it. It is important to structure your writing in such a way that your reader can follow along easily. As you start your seminary education, it might be helpful to review what the three major parts of a paper—the introduction, body, and conclusion—are trying to accomplish.

The Get-to-the-Point Introduction

Introductions are the workhorse of any piece of writing. Writers are expected to lay out the subject of interest, the core argument, and argument structure in such a way that the reader will want to continue reading. To further complicate matters, these expectations are to be met in a relatively short section of the work. This call for clarity prompts many authors to rush through this principal portion of the writing process, but if done dutifully, the introduction can lay the foundation for your most impressive work. (See figure 3.)

While all this sounds like a tall order, it becomes quite manageable (and even helpful) when you see the forest for the trees. The point of an introduction is to tell readers what you have learned about

a subject after giving it some serious thought. They need to know these three things:

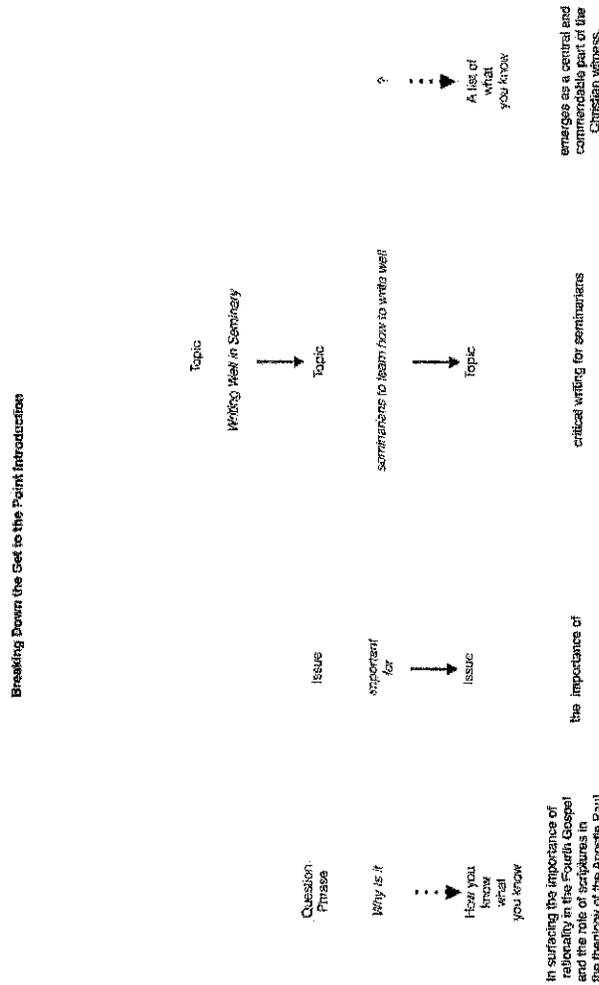
- Your *topic* or the subject matter of your paper. This is the search string your reader would use to find your paper and other related works at the library or on the Internet.
- Your *research question* or the issue you are raising about your topic. This is the specific who, what, where, why, when, how you are asking about your chosen topic.
- Your *thesis statement* or the answer to your research question. This is the informed response that you are prepared to give as a result of your study of the topic and issue.

In addition to presenting information central to your paper, you'll find that writing a successful introduction clarifies your thought process, enticing you to think about how all the different elements of your argument work together.

For example, if I were to write a critical paper on writing critically in seminary, I would need to raise an *issue* about my topic that would be worthy of investigation. After all, who would want to read (let alone, write!) something of little interest? So, for a research question, I might ask, "Why is it important for seminarians to learn how to write well?" Now having raised this question, the reader is going to expect me to answer it. This is where the thesis statement comes into play: "By surfacing the importance of rationality in the Fourth Gospel and the role of Scripture in the theology of the apostle Paul, seminarians should understand critical writing as a central and commendable part of the Christian witness."

Figure 3

Breaking Down the Get to the Point Introduction



As shown above, the introduction gives a blueprint of your main

argument. Notice how you can see the topic and issue consistently throughout each respective step. This moves the reader from your fascinating question to your insightful answer, which is the point of a strong introduction.

ACE Body Paragraphs

This exploration of good critical writing began with the goal of learning how to convince readers that you know what you're talking about. You now know a good introduction is where you lay out what you want to discuss, but how do you go about convincing a reader of the validity of your case? Readers will expect you to expand on the points that I just listed in describing the introduction. And in addition to needing to know from where you are getting your information, readers will want to be able to follow your train of thought. These demands are tailor-made for the paragraphs in the body section of a paper. If constructed well, you are on the way to a coherent argument. You just have to remember the three functions of what I call ACE body paragraphs. (See figure 4.)

Body paragraphs *assert* your views on your chosen topic and issue. A thesis statement is in fact an assertion, because you are saying that you claim to know some things about the topic and issue. Whenever you define something, show a correlation, suggest a cause, or put forward an interpretation, you have asserted your perspective. In each body paragraph, you will begin by showcasing a piece of your thesis statement for your readers' consideration. When brainstorming your first body paragraph, ask yourself what is the first idea you need to establish for your reader. Given our previous example, one might set out by asserting the importance of rationality in the Fourth Gospel. The rest of one's thesis can be developed in subsequent body

paragraphs, but this assertion will act as the starting point and sole focus of my paragraph.

Naturally, readers are going to wonder why you are confident in your assertion. This is why body paragraphs provide *evidence*. Evidence comprises all the experts, books, articles, and examples you use to support your assertion. Without evidence, your reader will presume that your paragraph's assertion is a made-up opinion rather than a demonstrable argument. For instance, imagine a reader questioning the importance of rationality in the Fourth Gospel. For the claim to hold water, one would need to back up that assertion. This could be done with a reference to the prologue to the Gospel of John. One might quote Luke Timothy Johnson, a New Testament scholar, who describes its author as crafting a "symbolic world" that combines abstract images like "light,' 'truth,' and 'life'" with actions such as "'believing,' 'seeing,' and 'knowing.'"³ From these two pieces of evidence, the reader will begin to see the rationale behind the assertion, even if his or her understanding of the argument is still developing.

That being said, good writing doesn't leave the reader's comprehension to chance. I suspect you know what it is like to read fact after fact and wonder, "So what's all of this supposed to mean?" Commentary keeps the reader caught up, making plain how the evidence contributes to the assertion's validity. It is the explanation, elaboration, interpretation, and analysis you use to illustrate your point. Your commentary (C) reinforces the link between your assertion (A) and evidence (E) for your readers: **A←C→E**. Put differently, your commentary ensures that your reader does not get lost in the depth of your point (assertion) and the breadth of your data (evidence). So, if I want to highlight the relevance of the prologue to

3. Luke Timothy Johnson, *The Writings of the New Testament: An Interpretation*, rev. ed. (Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1999), 526.

the Gospel of John to the importance of Christian writing, it would be helpful for the reader to learn that the Greek term *logos*—which English translations frequently render as "the Word"—is retained in English in more familiar terms like *logic* and *logo*, both of which signify approaches to human understanding. Likewise, readers would benefit from a paraphrase of Professor Johnson's statement, which suggested that the evangelist's intention to describe more theoretical matters parallels his understanding of the Word that became flesh. Hence, the reader is going to have a much greater chance of seeing written expression as a major touchstone for the Gospel author.

Figure 4

Breaking Down the ACE Body Paragraph

Assertion: Think "I argue . . ." statements.⁴

- Types: causes, correlations, opinions, your observations, and your suggestions
- Function: Describe how this helps demonstrate your thesis statement.
- This is the only idea that you are trying to teach your reader in this paragraph.
- If you have included more than one idea, you need to have more than one ACE. If there's nothing to argue, then it is likely not an assertion but commentary or evidence.⁵

4. Professors are divided over the appropriateness of the first-person pronoun in academic writing. Regardless, "I argue" makes a helpful prompt for your assertions. You can use the first-person pronoun to get you started and then erase it after you establish your assertion. Your sentence will nearly always work without the first-person clause.

5. If your paragraph primarily presents the argument of another writer, your assertion can be

Evidence: Think, "He, she, it, they argue[s] . . ." statements.

- Types: studies, definitions, images, quotations, others' observations and suggestions
- Function: Briefly note how you intend for this to help you defend your assertion.
- Remember, when summarizing, paraphrasing, or quoting a passage, a source must be cited.
- This is corroborated information, not your own ideas.⁶

Commentary: Think, "Thus, you, the reader, should now understand . . ."

- Types: analysis, interpretation ("This means . . ."), elaboration, explanation
- Function: How does this connect your evidence to the assertion?
- No evidence should be placed here.
- This is where you showcase your understanding of the evidence and how it proves your assertion.

More than a writing rubric, ACE body paragraphs aid you in keeping the reader in mind.

It is a mentality that foregrounds what you claim to know (your assertions), how you know it (your evidence), and how your reader

thought of as your interpretation of that writer's work. Thus, "Gonzales surmises . . ." can serve as an assertion if you are planning on walking the reader through the argument.

6. I tell my students that only those who have performed a peer-reviewed study may cite themselves as evidence. If you feel the need to cite yourself, discuss the matter with your teacher. You may be instructed to find an established resource that makes your desired point.

can better grasp it (your commentary). Theological writing is about sharing with your reader what you have come to understand about God's activity. Thus, body paragraphs are the building blocks of greater insights and greater exchange.

The Get-Out-of-the-Way Conclusion

Once you have explained your reasoning, your reader will judge for him- or herself the validity of your argument. This sounds like a cold proposition, but I think it best to treat this like a parting of companions. With conclusions, you may be tempted to linger—sneaking in one or two more points, adding a neat detail here, or throwing in a reference there. But you're better off getting out of the way and leaving the reader with the time and space to appreciate your work.

That is not to say your conclusion can't leave a lasting impression. You can begin by restating your thesis statement, which will make more sense now that your reader is familiar with your argument. In the case of the earlier example, this could look something like, "By reading the Gospel of John and the Pauline witness, we are reminded that writing is a foundational part of our Christian heritage." You might then remind the reader why you made the argument in the first place, reiterating the question that spurred your research. Since our research question asked whether it was important for seminarians to learn how to write, the conclusion brings the reader to consider this issue in light of the provided information. And finally, your reader should be left with a sense of why these ideas matter—in our case, the notion that writing is historically tied to the Christian witness. Your paper will have come full circle, and your reader will, you hope, appreciate your hard work.

How Can I Write Better?

Theological writing, particularly in the critical mode, is a lot of work. Even as I was laying out what it entails, I was thinking to myself, “Am I really up for this?” But remember what this is. We are talking about the mantle of leadership represented by whatever degree or certification you are working toward. At journey’s end, you will be a trusted theological authority in your community. We ought to learn to write well because we believe in the significance of the message we carry for ourselves and to others.

In my years as a former seminarian, minister, and professor, I have observed some best practices among theological writers of all levels. They read widely and often, keeping abreast of happenings in the world and church. They share their writing with colleagues, actively seeking critical feedback. And they see writing as part of their calling. Crafting expressions of the Christian message is central to their livelihood.

We write theology the way doctors practice medicine. Before us is serious work that we will never fully master. But we can gracefully and dutifully practice writing in hopes that we will help perfect the body of Christ.

2

Writing Persuasively

David G. Garber Jr.

Everywhere we turn, we hear the voices of people arguing. If we flip on the news, we see talking heads barking sound bites at one another. When we scroll through our social media feeds, we find friends or family from one camp or the other regurgitating certain political, social, or religious one-liners. Arguing is cultural. Arguing is entertainment. Arguing can even be fun for certain types of people. But making an argument is also countercultural. Taking into consideration opposing viewpoints and thinking through all the implications of your perspective is an arduous process. If we are going to be mindful about our service to God, the church, and the world, however, we must learn how to communicate persuasively while elevating the culture of dialogue with our neighbor, leading to a posture of reconciliation with all of God’s children.