

Purpose

Many students are surprised how difficult it can be to pick a topic for a research paper. With so many possible avenues of research, how should you get started? A simple way to pick a topic is to work backwards from tertiary sources, to secondary sources, to primary sources. The purpose of this paper is to define these terms and explain the process.

Defining Terms

Broadly defined, a “primary source” is a source “contemporary with (written during roughly the same time period as) your subject matter.”¹ Second, a “secondary source” is a source that “points back to the object of your research.”² Articles and monographs (specialized books written about one topic) are important secondary sources. Third, a tertiary source is a source “written about secondary sources.”³ This includes textbooks and dictionaries.

Working From Tertiary, to Secondary, to Primary Sources

Let's assume that you are a student in a church history course. You need to write a research paper on a topic of your choosing by the end of the semester. Based on what you already know

¹ Michael Kibbe, *From Topic to Thesis: A Guide to Theological Research* (Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2016), 34.

² Kibbe, *From Topic to Thesis*, 37.

³ Kibbe, *From Topic to Thesis*, 38.

about church history, you are interested in the Puritans. What would it look like if you worked from tertiary sources, to secondary sources, to primary sources in order to select a topic?

You begin by going to the library to look for tertiary sources. You find one particularly helpful book: Beeke, Joel R., and Mark Jones, eds. *A Puritan Theology: A Doctrine for Life*. Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2012.

As you skim through the book, you become especially interested in Puritan spiritual disciplines. You decide not to write about a particular historical event or a specific person. Instead, you begin looking for secondary sources about Puritan spiritual disciplines. One secondary source particularly interests you: Beeke, Joel R. *Puritan Reformed Spirituality*. Grand Rapids: Reformation Heritage, 2004.

You know that you need a narrow topic and a primary source. You decide to write about the Puritan practice of meditation. You look for the best Puritan works on mediation and discover: Calamy, Edmund. *The Art of Divine Meditation*. London: Tho Parkhurst, 1680.

You will have to engage in more much research, but you now have a topic and a primary source.

A Few Things to Note

Quality research is always focused on primary sources. You should begin to consider paper topics with tertiary sources to understand the contours and current debates in a given field, but primary sources must drive your actual paper.

Primary sources and secondary sources should fill your footnotes. You should only rarely cite a tertiary source.⁴

⁴ Kibbe, *From Topic to Thesis*, 39.

Keep a bibliography as you research. Keep track of the sources you find—you never know when you will need them.

Start early! Research will likely take more time than you think. Strive to choose a topic early in the semester and work steadily on your research.

Resources for Finding Primary Sources

Biblical Texts. Use an essentially literal translation of the Bible for seminary work.

Greek New Testament. The NA28 and UBS5 are standard.

Hebrew Old Testament. The BHS is standard. The library also has several Old Testament books available in the BHQ.

Septuagint. The Göttingen editions of the Septuagint are available in the library. For an often-cited English translation, see Pietersma, Albert, and Benjamin G. Wright, eds. *A New English Translation of the Septuagint And Other Greek Translations Traditionally Included Under That Title*. New York: Oxford, 2007.

Church History. The primary source will depend on your specific era or figure.

Resources for Finding Secondary Sources

You will find articles and monographs on the Atla Religion Database and Opals. These are both available at: <https://psem.opalsinfo.net/bin/home>.

Tertiary Sources

- Alexander, T. Desmond, Brian S. Rosner, and Robert Yarbrough, eds. *The New Dictionary of Biblical Theology*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2000.
- Alexander, T. Desmond, and David Baker, eds. *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Pentateuch*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2003.
- Arnold, Bill T., and H.G.M. Williamson, eds. *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Historical Books*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2005.
- David, Peter H., and Ralph P. Martin, eds. *Dictionary of the Later New Testament and Its Developments*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1997.
- Enns, Peter, and Tremper Longman III, eds. *Dictionary of the Old Testament: Wisdom, Poetry, and Writings*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2008.
- Evans, Craig A., and Stanley E. Porter, eds. *Dictionary of New Testament Background*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 2000.
- Freedman, David Noel, ed. *Anchor Bible Dictionary*. 6 vols. New York: Doubleday, 1992.
- Green, Joel B., Jeannine K. Brown and Nicholas Perrin, eds. *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*. 2nd ed. Downers Grove, IL: IVP.
- Hawthorne, Gerald, Ralph P. Martin, and Daniel G. Reid, eds. *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*. Downers Grove, IL: IVP, 1993.
- Treier, Daniel J., and Walter A. Elwell, eds. *Evangelical Dictionary of Theology*. 3rd. ed. Grand Rapids: Baker, 2017.