

Outline of Michael Kibbe's *From Topic to Thesis* (2016)¹

- **"A research paper is not built around a topic, but a thesis."** (15)
 - You have to determine what set of information to include and that amounts to identifying the key voices in an ongoing scholarly conversation; your professor will often recommend some works, and essential reference works in the discipline will do the same at the end of each dictionary or encyclopedia entry.
 - **"A thesis is a specific claim you make about that particular set of information."** (15) A research paper is like a persuasive speech: You make an argument; that argument is your thesis.
 - **"Do not come into the research process having already decided what your paper is going to argue."** (53) You must argue from the set of information, the evidence, you find.
1. **Finding Direction** - Kibbe suggests avoiding secondary sources (scholarly books and articles) as you find your direction. Rather, ...
 - a. Read carefully your primary source multiple times (e.g. Bible, theological text)
 - b. Consult the relevant dictionary and encyclopedias that your subject librarian has recommended in the subject and/or course guides; they **identify the key people, works, and issues for the conversation you're joining**.
 2. **Gathering Sources** - Once you've got some feel for the important voices and the issues in the conversation from the tertiary sources (i.e. suggested readings from dictionaries) you can begin a broader scan of the literature using the library catalog and a database such the [Atla Religion Database](#). [Google Scholar](#) is also a highly recommended tool for exploring the secondary literature.
 - a. In biblical and theological studies **"Research is first and foremost about primary sources."** (64)
 3. **Understanding Issues** - This is the deeper reading phase. Kibbe suggests having a consistent method for engaging your texts and recommends making notes in the margins on a printed copy (but not the library's copy!). Avoid extensive highlighting or underlining!
 - a. This stage also underscores the iterative nature of research: expect to go back to #1 and #2 and more than once. Invariably, the reading of the sources you first gathered will drive you back to additional sources that emerge as essential to your research.
 4. **Entering discussion** - It's your turn to speak and to answer the following:
 - a. What you think the main issue is?
 - b. What is the current conversation on this issue?
 - c. What is your argument/position concerning the issue?
 - d. How does your argument fit into the conversation?

¹ Michael Kibbe, *From Topic to Thesis: A Guide to Theological Research* (Downers Grove, Illinois: IVP Academic, an imprint of InterVarsity Press, 2016). Dr. Kibbe earned his doctorate in biblical studies at Wheaton College in 2014. This work grew out a 2-hour writing workshop he led at Fuller Seminary in 2009.

5. **Establishing Position** - Make sure everything in your paper forwards your thesis. Cut the rest.
 - a. "Your thesis is the heart and soul of your paper."
 - b. If you cannot locate a substantive conversation on your topic, consult with your professor or with your subject librarian. There may be no existing conversation, in which case you might need to change your topic.