

New York Theological Seminary Writing Center

Why is theological writing so hard?

- I. I. Complicated ideas, convincing arguments, fine distinctions, careful definitions, well-thought-out evaluation, painstaking analysis, and detailed exegesis require complicated sentence structure.
- A. You want to agree with part of someone's ideas but not with other parts or you want to express partial agreement between two sources.

Examples: I agree with so-and-so in that x, but disagree in that y.

Richardson's analysis of the problem is successful. [Describe in detail the way in which it is successful] However, he fails to offer any helpful solutions. [Suggest possible solutions or areas that he overlooks]

Ellwood's analysis is partially correct: her view of the language as metaphorical rather than literal is consistent with the context of the passage. However, her interpretation of the words themselves is too speculative and fanciful.

- B. It is hard to precisely summarize or offer criticism of someone else's difficult ideas. Nevertheless, one must attempt to retain the complexity of the argument.

Examples: "For Barth, just as there is an absolute gap between death and life, sin and grace, so there is nothing in common between human and divine."¹

This emphasis on the transcendence of God makes God utterly distant, while at the same time removing human responsibility to seek God.²

While it is true that God is transcendent and separated from humanity, this does not mean that the transcendent God is not willing to respond to human attempts to search for him.³

- C. Cause&Effect –Sources Example: "Schleiermacher was deeply influenced by Romanticism and sought to show that feeling was at the core of religion as opposed to the

¹ Michel Tran, "Karl Barth on the Doctrine of God", unpublished paper for TH302, Claremont School of Theology, Dec. 13, 2000, 1.

² Tran, 9 (slight rewording is mine).

³ Tran, 9 (slight rewording is mine).

view that all experience can be reduced to Rationalism or Empiricism.”⁴

Luther’s theology of the cross was shaped by his austere and unforgiving monastic life and own difficult struggle to find assurance and acceptance from God.

Rationalism debunked and challenged supernaturalism, God’s imminent power present as an actor in the world, undermining the authority of the written scriptures and leading to new approaches to New Testament scholarship.

- D. Showing Emphasis Example: “He does not focus his idea of salvation on what happens after death, but is referring to the religious life here and now.”⁵

Rauschenbusch minimizes the importance of individual salvation, whereas he accentuates the significance of identifying and eliminating corporate sins.

Rather than separate or contradictory theologies, Carol Christ asserts that process theology provides an adequate framework for creating a feminist process paradigm due to feminist and process rejections of similar classical theological understandings, sexist language and imagery.

- E. Quotations and summaries from sources need to be integrated seamlessly into the text with proper attribution to the source. It is easy to quote whole passages, but not so easy to pick out exactly the part of the passage that illustrates your point or summarize complicated ideas in your own words. So, use only those words that make your argument strong, and be sure to introduce your quotation before presenting it, and then follow it with explanation. Think of it this way: First say what the subject of your quotation is, then quote it, and then explain what you just quoted. Imagine that your quotation is in a foreign language and you need to translate it for your reader.

Example: The opening scenes of Aeschylus’ *The Eumenides* are colored by vivid depictions of the gruesome, bloodthirsty furies, hot after Orestes for killing his mother. Though the furies might seem justified in pursuing the son who killed Clytemnestra, their negative depiction works to sway us against this conclusion. Moreover, Apollo himself condemns them as he shoos them from the sanctuary, declaring, “Freaks like you should make their hole deep in some blood-beslobbered lion’s den and not come rubbing off

⁴Mark Lansberry, “Schleiermacher, Rauschenbusch and Brunner”, prepared for John Cobb’s class, Nov. 29, 1989, 1.

⁵Lansberry, 1.

their filth on those beside these sacred mantic spots.”⁶ Apollo’s status as a god lends credence to his stinging words. In addition to this, his reverence for the sacred space further classifies Apollo as good and the furies as bad.

“Grimke rebels against those who define woman’s ‘appropriate sphere...[as] silence...and...submission.”⁷

- II. Precise, nuanced vocabulary is key. The connotation and the exact force of each word are very important.

A very good English-English dictionary and thesaurus may help, but acquiring the necessary vocabulary is time consuming. Try to learn at least one new word a day. Look for useful words and sentence patterns in textbooks, handouts, and academic journals.

Examples: “X makes a compelling argument” means something slightly different than “X makes a satisfactory argument.” Use language that says exactly how strong the argument is and use vocabulary that exhibits fine shades of meaning.

- III. It is hard to make defensible claims that are not simplistic. Make sure you do not baldly assert something that is open to interpretation. Try to use words and phrases called “academic hedges,” which show the reader that what you are describing is your interpretation.

Examples: One way to understand Schleiermacher’s assertion is that ...

The most likely interpretation of this passage is that ...

It seems as though the author is attempting to...

And better still, always try to be specific:

Though his frequent use of birthing imagery, it seems as though the author is attempting to...

- IV. Each discipline within the seminary has specialized vocabulary and expectations. One size definitely does not fit all.

⁶ Aeschylus, *The Orestes Plays of Aeschylus*, trans. Paul Roche (New York: Penguin Books, 1962), 167.

⁷ John Fanestil, “Angelina Grimke, Theodore Weld and the Process of Social Change”, unpublished paper for Religion and American Culture, Claremont School of Theology, March 31, 1989, 2.