

A Guide to Successful Writing in Courses Taught by Scott Noegel

Writing well in the academy is challenging, but that does not mean that it has to be boring. Here are some ways that you can be successful at writing *and* enjoy the process.

How to Have Fun

1. **Success:** When people write well, they enjoy the experience. Follow the suggestions below. Producing good work is rewarding.
2. **Locating a Topic:** Sometime the most difficult aspect of writing a research paper is to find a topic. Start by thinking about what interests you the most. Then write yourself a list of ten questions that you have about that subject. After writing these questions try to answer them by reading widely on the topic. Repeat this process until you have narrowed your inquiry to a single question or problem.
3. **Think Small:** The larger the topic of research, the more unwieldy it will become. Identify a small problem that interests you. If you have researched the subject exhaustively, you will have plenty to write about.
4. **Data before Conclusions:** Do not undertake research with preconceived conclusions. These conclusions only get in the way of a proper assessment of data. If you have identified a problem and have been comprehensive in your research, then the data will produce your conclusion(s) for you.
5. **Solid Research:** Research is like detective work. It is fun if it is done properly. Solid research gives you the data you need to make an effective argument. The more comprehensive your research, the easier writing will become. Leave no stone unturned.
6. **Passion:** Find a topic that interests you. If you hate writing about a topic, readers will hate reading it.
7. **Do Not Fall in Love with Your Own Writing:** Writing is a process that involves many changes. Try not to be wedded to the way your essay reads. Warning: sometimes the most catchy phrases and paragraphs are the most unhelpful to the reader.

Arguments in Biblical and Ancient Near Eastern Studies

What is distinct about a strong academic argument when writing about the Bible, biblical texts, or ancient Near Eastern religions?

The academic study of the Bible and the ancient Near East is distinct from religious study. As a religious believer, one confesses one's faith and shares what one believes. As a scholar of the Bible or the ancient Near East, one seeks to make plausible arguments for what one thinks about a question or problem. A strong academic argument is *stated clearly* and is *backed up by evidence and argumentation*. This requires amassing an array of philological, literary, archaeological evidence. Your goal is to be *persuasive*—to make a plausible case for your point of view.

How to State Your Argument Clearly

1. **Concentrate:** Think deeply about your topic *before* you write. If your argument is unclear to you, it will confuse your readers. A few minutes brainstorming, or outlining your arguments beforehand will save you *a lot* of time and allow you to express your argument more clearly.
2. **Thesis:** State your thesis clearly and early.
3. **Organization:** The organization of your paragraphs should match the organization of your arguments. A paragraph is a group of sentences beginning with and unified by a topic sentence that communicates an argument or supporting argument in a coherent manner. Drafting an outline of the core argument and the logical steps to the conclusion can be helpful.
4. **Grammar:** Poor grammar distracts readers from your arguments and makes them less persuasive. Good grammar sharpens your arguments.
5. **Phrasing:** Awkward or convoluted phrasing distracts readers and makes your arguments less persuasive. State arguments directly and simply. This will make them more powerful: *Example:* “Smith’s definition adopts a nominal rendition.” vs. “Smith’s definition is nominal.”
6. **Word Choice:** Choose your words well. Use the right word and use it correctly. Clear articulation, not big words, impresses readers.
7. **Be Direct:** Get to the point. Cut out any useless words. *Example:* It does perform. vs. It performs (see below for specific tips).
8. **Use the Active Voice:** Go through your essay and switch passive sentences to the active voice wherever possible. The passive voice is less powerful and makes the subject ambiguous, thus confusing readers. *Example:* “It has been argued...” vs. “W. Moran argues that...” Note that you also should use the active voice and present tense when referencing literature. *Example:* “In his commentary on the Song, M. Fox states...” rather than “In his commentary on the Song, M. Fox stated...”
9. **Address Counter Arguments:** Do not ignore arguments and data that counter your finds. This will only make it look as if you have not researched the topic fully. If you must, address them in footnotes.
10. **Proofread:** Read your essay aloud to yourself or have someone else read it. Strong essays are often the easiest to read; they are clear, vivid, and to the point. This does not mean they avoid complex and sophisticated arguments, but rather that their arguments are stated succinctly. Spell checkers are **not fool proof**; read your entire paper with your own eyes.
11. **Be Consistent:** Regardless of which citation style you adopt you must be consistent in details. A lack of consistency distracts readers’ attention from the more significant aspects of your essay.
12. **Own Your Essay:** If you take ownership of your research and thoughts you will produce a stronger essay and have a more enjoyable experience. Besides, nine times out of ten, plagiarism is obvious to informed readers, and there are serious repercussions for attempting it. See: <http://depts.washington.edu/grading/issue1/honesty.htm>

How to Use Evidence and Argumentation

1. **Evidence:** Evidence is data, facts, statements validated through the arduous work of research. Evidence is data that is tested. Evidence is primary research that has outlasted intense scrutiny by a community of scholars.
2. **Use Examples:** Strong evidence should be supported by examples. *Example:* Rather than just “Driver’s definition is too narrow.” “Driver’s definition is too narrow because it does not apply to the evidence garnered from the Book of Job.”
3. **Be Specific:** Do not make general arguments when you can be specific. *Example:* “Wellhausen’s definition is obviously vague.” vs. “Wellhausen’ phrase ‘intense and sustained cultivation of a style of life’ is vague because it gives us no criteria by which to judge whether someone’s religion is ‘intense.’”

Footnotes and Citation Styles

1. Your footnote style should be absolutely consistent in all details. I prefer footnotes over endnotes and also over the style of citation adopted in the social sciences. Thus, please use footnotes **instead** of citing as follows: (Avalos 1995: 25-35).
2. **Unlike** bibliographies, footnotes place the author’s first name first, followed by the last name. For example: Hector Avalos, *Illness and Health Care in the Ancient Near East: The Role of the Temple in Greece, Mesopotamia, and Israel* (Harvard Semitic Museum Monographs, 54. Atlanta, GA.: Scholars Press, 1995), pp. 25-35.
3. Except for the order in which you cite an author’s name, the citation style of footnotes is identical with that of your bibliography (see below).
4. When citing the same work again you must **shorten** the reference to last name, partial title of the work, and pagination. For example: Avalos, *Illness and Health Care in the Ancient Near East*, pp. 25-35. Do **not** use Ibid.
5. Think of footnotes as miniature essays. They do not merely point readers to the sources of your information, but serve as useful repositories for additional thoughts you might have on a particular topic that is tangential to your main argument.

Bibliographies

1. Your bibliography should include **only** those items that you have incorporated into your essay.
2. Your bibliography must be **absolutely** consistent in details. Different citation styles inform readers that you did not proofread your work and that you probably cut and pasted the information from elsewhere. There are different citations styles, but I prefer those that give complete information (place of publication, publisher, date, etc.). An example of a monograph would be:

Noegel, Scott B., *Nocturnal Ciphers: The Punning Language of Dreams in the Ancient Near East* (American Oriental Series, 89; New Haven, CT, 2007).

3. There is no need to add pagination to monographs in bibliographies unless you cite an article in an edited works or journal. For example (respectively):

Noegel, Scott B., "Dismemberment, Creation, and Ritual: Images of Divine Violence in the Ancient Near East," in James Wellman, ed., *Belief and Bloodshed: Religion and Violence across Time and Tradition* (Lanham, MD: Rowman and Littlefield, 2007), pp. 13-27.

Noegel, Scott B., "Job iii 5 in the Light of Mesopotamian Demons of Time," *Vetus Testamentum* 57 (2007), pp. 556-562.

Note that there is no reason to cite the fascicle number or month of publication even if you know them.

4. In general, web sites are **rarely** useful sources of information. Nevertheless, if you must cite a web site, do so as follows: ETANA web site:
<http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/edition2/credits.php#cite>.
5. A bibliography that includes less than 25-30 sources tells me that you have not researched the topic adequately. Some philological topics might yield fewer sources, but 25-30 sources usually can be located without difficulty for most topics. Utilize the research paper resources and encyclopedias listed at: <http://faculty.washington.edu/snoegel/hebrew.html>.
6. Remember that dictionaries and encyclopedias represent **only the first stage** of your research. You must dig **much** deeper than these resources to fully understand a topic. Nevertheless, when reading articles in such resources take advantage of their bibliographies to locate additional information on a topic.

Practical Grammatical Tips

1. Use I not we
2. Avoid split infinitives: “to go boldly” rather than “to boldly go.”
3. Keep compound verbs together: “also have challenged” rather than “have also challenged.”
4. Foreign words and book titles are italicized (but not the Bible or Talmud).
5. Note the order of commas, quotation marks, and footnotes (...the end.”¹ “...almost the end,”² ...). Or “...the end of the story” (Mauss, 35).
6. Sentences written completely within parentheses place the period within the parentheses, e.g., (G. H. Gordon’s views appear below.)
7. Parentheses do not appear within other parentheses. Thus, to demarcate text within parentheses you must use brackets. Thus, e.g., “...(the same method was applied [by P. Tribble and Cheryl Exum] to other texts).”
8. Quotations of three or more lines are indented on both sides, single spaced, and appear without quotation marks.
9. Avoid colloquialisms and contractions (“is not” rather than “isn’t”; “cannot” rather than “can’t,” “the text explicitly states” rather than “the text comes right out and says.”
10. Only include your personal assessment when it offers germane support for your topic. Thus avoid characterizations like “to me, this method of interpretation just makes no sense at all,” “this seems way off,” “this is really out there.” Such statements also inform the reader that you have not attempted to see how the text might have made sense to someone coming from a set of philosophical, methodological, and/or cultural presuppositions different than your own.
11. Rule for apostrophes: “Mauss’s approach,” not “Mauss’ approach.”
12. Be descriptive but concise. Often you can replace the following words: has, had, is, are; makes, says, being, and for example. Thus, “she is addressing” > “she addresses,” and other similar cases.
13. Write in the positive. Thus “...these deeds did not go unnoticed” > “X noticed these deeds.”
14. Avoid being wordy by replacing nouns and adjectives with more descriptive nouns, and verbs and adverbs with more descriptive verbs.
15. Words and phrases you typically can avoid: the fact that, fact(s), very, actually, really, definitely, just, simply, merely, clearly, sort of, easily, obviously, true, seems, seemingly, look(s) at, prove, proof, after all, thing(s), something, better, worse, being, it is important to point out, interestingly, tries to, attempts to, necessarily.
16. Make references within your paper spatially not temporally. So “As I said above (or below),” not “As I said earlier (or later),” and “Elsewhere it appears that...”, not “At other times it appears that.”
17. Avoid ending a sentence with a preposition or with etc.
18. Use “that” instead of “which” unless following a comma.
19. Avoid widows and orphans. These often occur when the heading of a section appears at the bottom of one page and the section itself on the top of the next page. Proofread for these before submitting your paper.

20. When italicizing something with parentheses, the parentheses themselves are not italicized. So, e.g., ... *The Cuneiform Alphabetic Texts from Ugarit, Ras Ibn Hani and Other Places: (KTU: second, enlarged edition)*.
21. The first time you cite an author it should be with the first initial and last name (W. Moran) or first name and last name (William Moran). Whichever method you choose you must use for all authors mentioned in your paper. However, regardless of which method you chose, when citing the same author again you need give only the last name (Moran).
22. Use pp. followed by the pagination for multiple pages, but p. when a single page is referenced.
23. Do not forget to paginate your paper.

Specific Tips for Writing on the Bible and Ancient Near Eastern Topics

1. Biblical citations differ when the verse is included. Thus one writes 2 Samuel 11, but 2 Sam 11:3. You need not add periods after abbreviated biblical books.
2. When citing the Septuagint (LXX) simply reference it as LXX and give the Chapter and verse as above.
3. Citations in Ugaritic texts are done by Tablet, Column (if any), and line. When citing an Ugaritic text use the numbering system as found in M. Dietrich, O. Loretz and J. Sanmartín, *The Cuneiform Alphabetic Texts from Ugarit, Ras Ibn Hani and Other Places: (KTU: second, enlarged edition)* (ALASP 8; Münster: Ugarit-Verlag, 1995). Thus, *CAT* 1.14 V 5-6 would be text number 1.14 in *CAT*, column V, lines 5-6.
4. Citations in Classical and Hellenistic Greek literature are done with periods. Thus, *Iliad* 8.245 would mean Book 8 of the *Iliad*, line 245 (note that *Iliad* and *Odyssey* are both italicized). Some texts are marked by section as well, e.g., Pausanias, *Description of Greece* 8.18.1 stands for Chapter 8, section 18, line 1.
5. Note that Hebrew Bible and Talmud are capitalized (but not italicized), but biblical and talmudic are not when they are used as adjectives. Note also ancient is not capitalized in “ancient Near East” or “ancient Near Eastern” unless it is part of a title.
6. Note the plurals: Midrash > Midrashim and Targum > Targumim.
7. Israelites lived in ancient Israel. Israelis live in modern Israel. It is anachronistic to talk about Jews and Judaism before the exilic period in the 6th c. BCE.
8. Sitz im Leben (lit. “seat in life”) has a capital S and L even in English.

9. All ancient Near Eastern languages are italicized when transliterated. You must be careful also to preserve any diacritic marks when transliterating.
10. When referencing the meaning of a foreign word there is no need to use the infinitive. Thus, “This verb **אהב** means ‘love,’ rather than “The verb **אהב** means ‘to love.’”
11. Note the standard way of citing from the following dictionaries in footnotes.

When citing from Francis Brown, *et al.*, eds., *The New Brown, Driver, Briggs, Gesenius Hebrew and English Lexicon* (Peabody, MA.: Hendrickson, 1979). = **BDB**

BDB, p. 273, s.v. **אָהַב**.

Note that BDB is not italicized.

When citing from Walter Baumgartner and Ludwig Koehler, eds., *The Hebrew and Aramaic Lexicon of the Old Testament* (2 vols; Leiden: E. J. Brill, 2001). = *HALOT*

HALAT, 359, s.v. **אָהַב** I.

Note that s.v. here stands for *sub voce*, which means the lexical entry you are citing, and that here the roman numeral I represents the first entry listed for this lexeme. Note also that the same method of citation applies to entries found in Rudolf Meyer and Herbert Donner, *Hebräisches und Aramäisches Handwörterbuch über das Alte Testament* (18th ed.; Berlin: Springer-Verlag, 1987-), though this is abbreviated as *HALAT*.

When citing from I. Gelb, *et al.*, eds., *The Assyrian Dictionary of the Oriental Institute of the University of Chicago* (Chicago, IL: Oriental Institute, 1956-). = *CAD*

CAD H 96, s.v. *hurāšu*.

When citing from G. del Olmo Lete and J. Sanmartín, *A Dictionary of the Ugaritic Language in the Alphabetic Tradition*. W. G. E. Watson, trans. Vols. 1-2 (Leiden/Boston: Brill, 2003). = *DULAT*

DULAT, p. 618, s.v., *nbl*.

When citing from Henry George Liddell, Robert Scott, and Henry Stuart Jones, eds., *A Greek-English Lexicon*, 9th ed. with a supplement (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1996). = **LJS**

LSJ, p. 1001, s.v. **κτείνω**.

Note that LJS is not italicized.

When citing from *The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature*.

J. A. Black, G. Cunningham, J. Ebeling, E. Flückiger-Hawker, E. Robson, J. Taylor, and G. Zólyomi, *The Electronic Text Corpus of Sumerian Literature* (<http://etcsl.orinst.ox.ac.uk/>; Oxford, 1998–2006).

12. There is no need to provide a separate title page when writing research papers. Simply place your name and the title of your paper at the top of the first page.

Other Writing Resources

1. *The Chicago Manual of Style*.
2. *The SBL Handbook of Style: For Ancient Near Eastern, Biblical, and Early Christian Studies*.