

RESEARCH ADVICE

Strategies and traditional sources

A GOOD RESEARCH QUESTION.

- Always start with a good question. Vague questions or questions that can't really be answered are going to waste your time and frustrate you.
- As you create your research question be prepared to refine it several times, probably by making it more and more specific. At a certain level of specificity you will stop, because no research sources will be available.
- Sometimes the best strategy is to abandon your question (choose a new topic).

BASIC STRATEGIES:

- Pearl Growing. Starting with a citation, word, phrase or bit of information and using it as a starting point to find what's out there. You grow the pearl by using each new piece of information as a point of departure. Requires flexibility. Very effective for research on topics that may be obscure, or when you don't know how much information is available.
- Successive Fractions. In most cases this will be your approach at RBC. Start with the big picture or topic and narrow it down by being more and more restrictive in your searches. Very effective when there is a wealth of information to sort through. Also you need to know broader contexts in order to understand your topic well.

USE OF STRATEGIES:

- With pearl growing you need to find the first pearl (irritant)—a document that you know is valid and can serve as a source for more research. You might have to start with one document.
- With successive fractions you know that the net has been spread very wide. You will probably have lots of irrelevant or extraneous information. Narrow it down by using more and more restrictive approaches.

SUCCESSIVE FRACTIONS USING TRADITIONAL SOURCES (PRINT MEDIA) FOR BIBLICAL RESEARCH.

- Consider a general knowledge encyclopedia, including Bible Encyclopedias.
Get the big picture.
- Choose a more specific study out of the big picture. Find books about the subject you have chosen.
- Narrow it further with specialized knowledge encyclopedias, technical dictionaries, expert/scholarly commentaries.

TYPES OF SOURCES.

- You might start and end up in the reference collection. The most general and some of the most specific sources are usually in reference sections.
- In many cases these sources are read in part not in whole.
- It is in the middle of your research that you are most likely to have to read large portions of single sources.

SOME SOURCES WHO WOULD LIKE TO MAKE YOUR ACQUAINTANCE:

- World Book and Britannica. Use the index volumes especially in Britannica. More obscure topics don't necessarily appear in the alphabetic order that you suspect.
- International Standard Bible Encyclopedia.
 - Baker and Zondervan also publish Bible Encyclopedias.
- The Catholic Encyclopedia. (you will be given the Roman Catholic perspective, but the scholarship is first rate.)

These are all excellent starting places for your topics.

SOME OTHER SOURCES YOU WOULD DO WELL TO MEET:

- The five volume Mennonite Encyclopedia.
- The New Englishman's Concordance.
- The Ante-Nicene and Post-Nicene Fathers.
- The sets of scholarly commentaries (there are many):
 - The Ancient Christian Commentary
 - Tyndale
 - New International Greek Testament
 - New International Commentary
 - Keil and Delitzsch
 - The New American Commentary.

COMMENTARIES, LIKE BIBLE STUDY ITSELF, CAN BE ORIENTED TOWARD DEVOTIONAL OR SCHOLARLY APPROACHES. THERE IS NO CLEAR LINE SEPARATING THE TWO KINDS, AND IT MAY BE BEST TO THINK OF THESE AS A CONTINUUM. SOME COMMENTARIES ARE HYBRIDS.

- Devotional approaches will emphasize your spiritual growth and personal issues. They intend to inspire and reinforce your faith. They avoid controversy, and assume that a single interpretation is shared by most the readers. Devotional commentary emphasizes personal application.
- Scholarly commentaries are less personal and more objective. They emphasize historical context, grammar, word studies, theological significance, and various interpretations. They raise questions and may contradict cherished interpretations. Scholarly commentary emphasizes objective analysis.

IT MAY SOUND SIMPLE, BUT

- Learn to search the index at the back of the book for your topic.
- Notice the publication year. New isn't necessarily better, but it is often much better indexed.
- Devotional commentaries aren't generally good sources for research papers.