

Introduction to Writing at Claremont

Writing is taken very seriously at Claremont School of Theology. This introduction to writing at Claremont will point out some of the expectations shared by the faculty for student writing, provide some examples, and discuss certain matters of importance related to writing at Claremont.

Writing is the primary tool of communication in academia. In most of your courses, your grade will be based primarily on the professor's evaluation of what you have written. Beyond the academy, writing is an essential tool of the professional world. The effectiveness of church bulletins, grant proposals, letters to the editor, and a myriad of other writing tasks will to a large extent determine your effectiveness in the professional world, whether as a pastor, political activist, teacher, or in wherever profession God may call you to. Learning to write clearly is important.

Many students come to Claremont from successful careers in fields such as law, medicine, or business. These students are sometimes surprised to discover that the writing style and rhetoric (way of presenting ideas) used in these various fields do not meet the expectations of the faculty in their course work. Appropriate and effective writing styles vary according to the context and the expectations of the audience. At Claremont, the context is academic, more particularly, the humanities. The expectation of the audience (your professors) is based on the style and rhetoric of the humanities. The style guidelines used in the humanities generally and at Claremont specifically are found in *The Chicago Manual* or *Kate Turabian's A Manual for Writers* (usually referred to as just "Turabian"). Turabian is a must for all doctoral students, and some faculty require Turabian even for master's level students. Turabian has more details than *Form and Style* but is harder to use and takes some practice to get used to. While Turabian is clearly more thorough, both Turabian and *Form and Style* are summaries of Chicago; so if you follow either faithfully, you will not run into problems. And therein is the core of the issue: faithfully following a style sheet. Either book will give the details about what your papers should look like (margins, fonts, layout, etc.) and how to properly use and cite sources. All you have to do is look it up.

Style, however, refers to more than just footnotes and page numbering. Style also refers to syntax and punctuation. There are a couple of basics you should keep in mind when writing for Claremont professors. First, clarity is more important than beauty. Second, punctuation should be consistent and minimal. Third, sentences should be no longer than necessary. The best and most concise book for guidance on style is still *Strunk and White's Elements of Style* (available free on line at <http://www.bartleby.com/141/>). If you have never read this, you owe yourself the favor as soon as possible. If you have read it, maybe you should read it again. For those who would like something that goes a little deeper, I recommend *Writing with Style: Conversations on the Art of Writing* by John R. Trimble; or for something more contemporary and a bit more theoretical, I recommend *Style: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace* by Joseph Williams.

Rhetorically, writing in the humanities is overwhelmingly thesis based writing. That is, Claremont faculty will expect to find in the introduction to your essays a very clear thesis statement (even if it is merely descriptive: "In this essay I will discuss five ways Barth understands 'Word of God'"). Moreover, thesis based writing incorporates topic sentences at the beginning of paragraphs that introduce new material. The topic sentences function as an outline, sort of like an exoskeleton holding the essay together. A typical topic sentence looks something like this: "The third way Barth understands 'Word of God' is as the Bible." If you are not familiar with thesis based writing, just about any college writing handbook will give you an overview. You can also contact the Claremont Writing Center (447-2556 or email jmawhorter@writingcenter@csst.edu) located in Craig 104A. Tutors at the Writing Center are available to assist you in any aspect of the writing process (this is a free service available to all Claremont students).