



McMaster Divinity
College

RESEARCH METHODS

CHTH 6R1000

McMaster Divinity College
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Fall 2026
Tuesday, 4:00–5:50pm

The mission of McMaster Divinity College is to develop effective evangelical Christian leaders for the Church, academy, and society through graduate-level education, spiritual development, and vocational formation.

COURSE DESCRIPTION

This course explores graduate-level research within the theological disciplines and prepares students with the foundational skills required for undertaking advanced research. Topics covered include the proper use of research tools (e.g. word processors, citation managers, note-taking applications, artificial intelligence, etc.), strategies for successful literature surveys (e.g. defining research topics; identifying key sources; implementing systematic literature searches; synthesizing and framing prior research), the importance of research design (e.g. formulating clear research questions; isolating key dialogue partners; demonstrating the need for further research; identifying useful theories, data, and methods; producing logical arguments), and key steps in the thesis/dissertation proposal process (e.g. adhering to the required genre/register; working with an academic supervisor; composing a clear thesis statement; articulating a viable plan).

COURSE OBJECTIVES

Having completed this course successfully, students will:

KNOWING

- Be aware of academic research tools, including emerging technologies;
- Know what characterizes an effective literature survey;
- Understand the role of each component in a research design (e.g. questions, [hypo]theses, data, theories, methods, analysis);
- Recognize prominent theories and methods used in their discipline;

BEING

- Have a personal stance regarding the proper goals of academic theological research and ethical implications that follow from these;

- Have an internalized sense of what it feels like to plan a large-scale research project that will make a tiny contribution to human knowledge;

DOING

- Be able to use essential research tools;
- Be able to draft a thesis/dissertation proposal;

TEXTBOOKS AND RESOURCES

All required resources for this course will be supplied on Avenue to Learn (A2L).

The following are recommended either for advance preparation (Kuhn) or for subsequent follow-up (Bolker):

Kuhn, Thomas S. *The Structure of Scientific Revolutions*. 4th ed. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012.

Joan Bolker. *Write your Dissertation in Fifteen Minutes a Day: A Guide to Starting, Revising, and Finishing Your Doctoral Thesis*. New York: Henry Holt, 1998.

COURSE REQUIREMENTS

APPROVED TOPIC

During the first week of the course, you will select a research topic as your focus for the semester. This should be your thesis or dissertation topic, if you have one, but any topic in your discipline can be used. You must **confirm your topic with me via email before the end of the first week of class**, to ensure that it is suitable for the coursework.

ASSIGNMENT #1

Your first written submission will demonstrate your ability to produce a complex document that adheres to MDC style (using Office 365), your ability to use a citation manager (such as Zotero, Endnote, or an approved alternative), and your ability to perform a systematic literature survey (using AI, online library catalogues, discipline-specific databases, previously published bibliographies, and good old-fashioned sleuthing).

To demonstrate these skills, you will produce a database of sources that are relevant to your research topic. You should begin by requesting sources from an AI chatbot, before completing the task yourself using the strategies discussed in class and/or in assigned resources. You will export your final database and **submit it as an RIS file**, showing that you are using a suitable citation manager. You will also **submit a Microsoft Word file that contains the following elements**, all formatted according to MDC style using Word's built-in mechanisms: title page, abstract (for the bibliography itself, not for your eventual research project), table of contents, abbreviations list, a brief overview organized using suitable headings (key topics would include the topic your bibliography explores, the databases you used, criteria you imposed to filter relevant

sources, etc.), the bibliography proper, and an appendix that very briefly reflects on the initial AI-generated bibliography as a component of the final project overall (with a view both to its quality and impact on your learning as a human researcher).

ASSIGNMENT #2

Your second written assignment will demonstrate your ability to synthesize disparate publications and to critically evaluate them based on research-related criteria (as opposed to other standards such as orthodoxy or truthfulness or persuasiveness). It will also force you to consider the role that generative AI should (or should not) play in your research and writing.

Using the sources obtained in Assignment #1, you will take organized research notes using suitable note-taking tools (such as Zotero, Endnote, Obsidian, Excel, etc.). Begin with key sources and work towards seemingly less important sources, tagging sources along the way (e.g. unread/read, low-/mid-/high-priority, etc.). Your *source notes* should be purely descriptive and should consist primarily of research-related meta-data, such as research questions discussed (“issues”), arguments advanced (“theses” or “positions”), data analyzed (e.g. ancient or modern sources, archaeological evidence, etc.), and theoretical or methodological frameworks employed (“approaches”). In separate *personal notes*, you should record your own evaluative and/or creative ideas (e.g. questions, criticisms, ideas for further work, etc.). For at least some of the less important sources, *after* skimming the source yourself, log into Microsoft Copilot using your MacID (to ensure that you are in PROTECTED mode), obtain an AI-generated summary of the PDF and then revise this summary into a source note that captures your own observations. **You are not required to submit your research notes, but I reserve the right to request them** before releasing your final grade (e.g. if your submission suggests inappropriate use of generative AI).

At some point, you will need to stop reviewing the literature and begin synthesizing it. You will do this in three ways and will **submit three Microsoft Word files—each of which contains a literature survey** that is 3,000–4,000 words in length. Each survey should focus primarily on describing past research into your topic, but a secondary focus should be an evaluation of the current state of the field with a view towards unresolved questions and future research. First, you will ask a free AI chatbot to produce a 3,000-word literature survey. You *may* guide the chatbot in any way you choose, except that you *may not* supply it with your bibliography, the related PDFs, or any of your source notes. Second, you will prompt Microsoft Copilot (in PROTECTED mode) to produce a 3,500-word literature survey. You *may* supply Copilot with your bibliography and source notes, but you *may not* provide it with PDFs or your personal notes. Third, you will write your own 4,000-word literature survey, drawing upon your own understanding of the literature. You *may* use an AI-chatbot to brainstorm with you, to review your initial drafts, and to offer suggestions that you yourself can implement, but you *may not* include *any* AI-generated content in this third survey.

In a fourth Microsoft Word file, compose a 300–500-word reflection on your experience with AI, offering your current assessment of its role in academic research (e.g. usefulness, appropriateness, drawbacks, etc.).

ASSIGNMENT #3

Your final written assignment will demonstrate that you know how to propose a thesis or dissertation that advances a specific argument, in response to a specific research question, using a specific theoretical and methodological approach, employing a specific outline, and with a specific timeline for completion.

First, you will **submit a 2,500-word document that contains the following elements**: a title page, an abstract (with bolded thesis statement), a main body consisting of four brief sections (introducing [1] key disciplinary dialogue partners, [2] theoretical concepts and/or terminological definitions, [3] methodological procedures, and a [4] workplan for completion that includes a tabular timeline with submission dates for each chapter), and a select bibliography (containing only key sources). Your document should be intelligible to educated readers outside your field who are unfamiliar with your research topic.

Second, you will pitch your proposal to the class in **a five-minute presentation oriented towards non-specialists**, like those given in the popular three-minute-thesis (3MT) competition. Your presentation will be assigned an aggregate score by your peers, who will respond anonymously to a poll that asks whether your proposal is understandable and whether your project is coherent and worthwhile.

GRADING SUMMARY

Assignment #1	35%
Assignment #2	35%
Assignment #3	30%
Total	100%

COURSE SCHEDULE

NB: Every effort will be made to avoid cancelling classes, but if a class must be cancelled or moved fully online then an announcement will be posted on Avenue to Learn (A2L). Please check for announcements each week before coming on campus.

Week	Assignment Deadlines (Tuesdays @ 1pm)	Seminar Discussions (Tuesdays @ 4pm)
Sept 15		Course Syllabus; Student Research Interests; Essential Academic Writing Tools
Sept 22	Approved Topic	Academic Community; Library Resources; Literature Surveys; Citations and Citation Managers
Sept 29		Research Topics, Questions, Goals, and Outcomes
Oct 6		Round-Table Tutorial #1
Oct 13	Assignment #1	Reading Week (No Class Meeting)

Oct 20		Artificial Intelligence; Spirituality & Ethics of Theological Research; Reading & Note-Taking Strategies
Oct 27		Logic; Research Design
Nov 3		Established Theories & Methods; “Critical” Scholarship; Effective Peer Review
Nov 10		Round-Table Tutorial #2
Nov 17	Assignment #2	Finding a Voice; Making a Contribution
Nov 24		Annual Society Meetings (No Class Meeting)
Dec 1		Titles, Abstracts, Proposals
Dec 8	Assignment #3	5-Minute-Thesis-Proposal Presentations
Dec 15		Writing and Publishing a Thesis/Dissertation; Course Evaluations

COMMUNICATION

AVENUE 2 LEARN (A2L)

We will make extensive use of Avenue to Learn (A2L) in this course; it will be the primary hub for all course content and for all course announcements. **It is your responsibility to log into the system regularly to check for announcements, course content, and course activities.**

EMAIL

I can be contacted using the email address listed at the top of this syllabus. To protect confidentiality and confirm your identity, all communication must originate from your McMaster email account. Similarly, if I need to contact you for any reason, I will send mail to your McMaster email address. **It is your responsibility to ensure that you are actively using and monitoring your McMaster email account.** If an instructor becomes aware that a communication has come from an alternate address (that is, an address other than the student’s McMaster email address), the instructor may not reply at their discretion. **Students must not use the “Instant Message” feature within A2L, nor should they send emails using A2L.**

OFFICE HOURS

I maintain office hours on at least two days per week, with the specific hours for each semester available both on A2L and outside my office door. **Office hours can be used for drop-in visits**, ideally kept to a half-hour maximum. If you need more time to visit or cannot come during office hours, please schedule a meeting by contacting me via email. **I am willing to meet in person or via Zoom as needed.**

SCHEDULED ACTIVITIES

PARTICIPATION

Presence and participation in this course are expected. Mediocre participation translates into mediocre learning outcomes. Moreover, logging into A2L or showing up to class are not, by themselves, sufficient as a demonstration of participation. Students are expected to engage with the professor and with one another, both in structured course activities and before/after class. **Relational engagement is an important part of belonging to and maintaining a community of learning.** Late arrivals disrupt the class and may affect your participation grade.

Conversely, excessive participation can amount to dominating class discussions. Please limit your interactions so that they do not overwhelm other students or hinder others from participating. If I discern that you are dominating our discussions, I may ask you to take a step back to allow others to participate more fully.

ETIQUETTE

It is critical that students show respect for classmates and instructors. Most, if not all, courses at MDC are devoted to the interpretation of Scripture. Invariably there will be disagreements; these **disagreements must be discussed and negotiated in a respectful manner.** This applies to individual and group communications involving the instructor and others enrolled in the course.

As the instructor of the course, it is my responsibility to model respectful disagreement and to help you to feel comfortable expressing your views in a respectful manner. I expect that you will give thought to your questions and comments. Please avoid sweeping statements that caricature or dismiss ideas or people with whom you disagree. Instead, identify concrete facts and speak clearly about their implications. When evaluating ideas or people, identify the underlying presuppositions or commitments that undergird your evaluation and make these explicit as part of your observation. Students who violate these guidelines may be dismissed from class.

ABSENCE DUE TO ILLNESS

If you must miss class due to an illness, please email me as soon as possible. If you are an in-person student and you are ill, please email me even if you plan to attend class online. Although I may be able to share a video recording of the class, I cannot guarantee that this will be possible, so you may wish to have a fellow student take notes for you.

CLASS CANCELLATIONS

If I should become ill and unable to attend class, I will communicate via A2L as soon as possible. **Please check A2L before coming to class, so that you do not miss any last-minute scheduling changes.** Similarly, please be sure to check whether MDC has closed due to inclement weather. If we must cancel class, I reserve the right to move the week's material to A2L (asynchronous format). This will help to ensure that we stay on schedule.

RECORDING

The recording of lectures, tutorials, or other methods of instruction may occur during a course, whether by an instructor for the purpose of authorized distribution or by a student for the purpose of personal study. **Your voice and/or image may be recorded during the class** and your participation in the course serves as tacit acceptance of this fact. Please speak with the instructor if this is a concern for you. Also, please respect the privacy of peers: **do not share images, recordings, or written contributions outside the class environment.**

COPYRIGHT

Please be advised that lectures, demonstrations, performances, and any other course material provided by an instructor represent copyright-protected works. The Copyright Act and copyright law protect every original literary, dramatic, musical and artistic work, *including lectures* by university instructors. **You are not permitted to share or otherwise distribute course materials or class recordings without written permission** from the relevant copyright holder(s).

ASSIGNED READING & WRITTEN ASSIGNMENTS

HURLBURT FAMILY BOOKSTORE

All required and recommended books for this class are available from the Hurlburt Family Bookstore located beside the entrance to the Nathaniel H. Parker Memorial Chapel of McMaster Divinity College. To purchase in advance, you may contact the bookstore manager, Bernice Quek, by phone at 416.620.2934 or 416.668.3434 (mobile); or by email at books@readon.ca. The Hurlburt Family Bookstore also carries other books and merchandise and is open throughout the academic year during posted hours.

ASSIGNMENT SUBMISSIONS

Written assignments must be submitted via Avenue to Learn (A2L) prior to the relevant due date (see schedule below and/or A2L). **Emailed assignments will not normally be accepted.** Under extenuating circumstances, I may be willing to accept an emailed assignment as submitted, but this is at my own discretion. At the end of the semester, any missing assignments will receive a grade of "0," unless the student has already been granted an incomplete or deferral from the Office of the Registrar.

FILE FORMATS

Written assignments must be uploaded to A2L either as Word documents (.doc, .docx) or in Rich Text Format (.rtf). If your file is not being accepted by the system, please ensure that you are using an accepted file format.

MDC STYLE

All stylistic considerations (including but not limited to questions of formatting, footnotes, and bibliographic references) must conform to the latest edition of the MDC Press Style Guide, which is

available on A2L from MDC Student Services. **Failure to observe appropriate style will result in grade reductions.** <https://mcmasterdivinity.ca/resources-forms/mdc-style-guide/>

LATENESS

A penalty of 5% per day will be applied to all late assignments. No assignment submissions will be received after the final week of class without written permission from the Office of the Registrar (mdcreg@mcmaster.ca).

ACADEMIC HONESTY

Academic dishonesty consists of misrepresenting the authorship or ownership of written work through deception or other fraudulent means. In an academic setting this may include copying or using unauthorized aids during tests or examinations; plagiarism, that is, presenting another person's (or generative AI's) words, ideas, data, or creative work as one's own without appropriate acknowledgement and citation; or submitting work for credit in more than one course without instructor permission.

A special note about Generative AI: Students are expected to do their own thinking and write their own papers and assignments. Generative AI is not to be used to do this work. The use of AI to produce content that is then submitted as though it were the student's own work constitutes plagiarism and is a violation of the Academic Honesty Policy. While AI tools may be used to correct errors in English grammar, usage, and mechanics, Generative AI must not be used to translate assignments from a student's native language into English. All degree programs at MDC are taught in the English language. Students are expected to be sufficiently proficient in English to engage fully in academic discourse in these programs.

A useful guide to avoiding plagiarism is the Harvard Guide to Using Sources:

<http://usingsources.fas.harvard.edu/icb/icb.do>

TURNITIN

In this course, we will be using a web-based service (turnitin.com) for plagiarism detection. A student's continuation in the course represents his or her consent to the use of this service. If a student has objections to the use of this service, alternate arrangements for assignment submission must be made with the professor in advance of the assignment deadlines.

GENDER INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE

McMaster Divinity College uses inclusive language for human beings in worship services, student written materials, and all its publications. It is expected that students will use inclusive language in all MDC assignments. When referencing biblical texts, students should preserve the integrity of the original expressions and the names of God while using gender-inclusive language when referring to human beings. Biblical quotations should be taken from a gender-inclusive translation such as: NRSVue (2022), NIV (2011), CEB (2011), NLT (1996), or CEV (1995).

GRADING SCALE

Percent Grade	Letter Grade	Grade Point (12)	Grade Point (4)	Grade Guidelines

90–100 85–89 80–84	A+ A A–	12 11 10	4.0 4.0 3.7	For work displaying mastery of the subject matter, creativity, and individualized integration of insights and their relationship
77–79 73–76 70–72	B+ B B–	9 8 7	3.3 3.0 2.7	For work displaying a good level of competence and comprehension
<i>For M.A, D.P.T, and Ph.D programs, any course grade below B– does not count for credit and must be repeated.</i>				
67–69 63–66 60–62	C+ C C–	6 5 4	2.3 2.0 1.7	For work which meets the basic course requirements but demonstrates a low level of comprehension
<i>For M.Div, Dip.Min, Cer.C.S, and occasional programs, any course grade below C– does not count for credit and must be repeated if it is a required course</i>				

AODA

In accordance with the Accessibility for Ontarians with Disabilities Act (AODA), McMaster Divinity College (MDC) is committed to supporting a learning environment that is inclusive and accessible to all students, including those with disabilities. **Students who require academic accommodations to participate fully in this course must register with Student Accessibility Services (SAS)** (<https://sas.mcmaster.ca/>) of McMaster University. SAS will work directly with the MDC Registrar to ensure reasonably appropriate accommodations are in place. Students with accommodations must use the SAS portal to activate the accommodations relevant to each course at the start of each term in which they are enrolled. This will generate a notification to course instructors outlining the activated accommodations for the student in their course. Please note that accommodations must be requested in advance to allow sufficient time for implementation. Accommodations are not retroactive and will not be applied to coursework or activities that have already concluded.

Contact Information:

Student Accessibility Services General Inquiries: sas@mcmaster.ca

Roksana Sobota (SAS Representative for MDC): sobotar@mcmaster.ca

MDC Registrar: mdcreg@mcmaster.ca

BIBLIOGRAPHY

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