

[MJTM 15 (2013–2014)]

BOOK REVIEW

Nancy Jean Vyhmeister. *Your Guide to Writing Quality Research Papers: For Students of Religion and Theology*. 3rd ed. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2014. 290 pp. Pbk. ISBN 978-0-310-51402-2.

The third English edition of *Quality Research Papers* is an update of Vyhmeister's book, originally published in Spanish in 1980, to "show" students how research is currently done in the areas of religious studies and theology, especially in light of the advances of internet technology. Vyhmeister states that the goals of her book are to: (1) stimulate and develop students' capacity for doing research, (2) improve the ability of students to express themselves, (3) assist students in meeting their educational requirements and (4) improve students' skills and tools for doing research. Quoting Isaac Felipe Azofeifa, Vyhmeister defines research as the "(1) systematic search for (2) adequate information to reach (3) objective knowledge of a (4) specific topic" (1). After briefly explaining these four points, Vyhmeister goes on in her book to describe the process of research, which she divides into three main sections.

The first section of the book describes various types of theological research and devotes a chapter to each of the nine types of research that are mentioned. In each chapter, Vyhmeister gives a brief description of a particular type of research and then proceeds to examine that research. Research that Vyhmeister calls "biblical exegesis and interpretation," "descriptive," and "program development" are primarily examined by describing the steps in each of those types of research. The topic of "literary research" is explored by describing the various types of literary research, broadly contained within the categories of theology, history, and pastoral theology, as well as explaining

the use of primary and secondary sources. Finally, in types of research that Vyhmeister refers to as “case studies,” “action research,” “publication,” and “theses and dissertations,” Vyhmeister proceeds by examining the various components, or stages in the case of “action research,” that each of these types of research involves.

The second section of Vyhmeister’s book deals with the process that is involved with research and consists of ten chapters. Chapters 11–13 address topics that are related to the initial steps of research including: (1) clarifying what kind of thinking is involved in research, (2) steps involved in choosing a research topic and (3) the steps that are part of planning a research paper. The next three chapters, 14–16, focus upon aspects connected to the gathering of information. Thus, chapter 14 deals with library resources, chapter 15 deals with internet resources, and chapter 16 gives suggestions for how to read well for research as well as taking good research notes. Finally, the last four chapters of the second section address topics related to the presentation of one’s written research. These include a chapter on the style of English that is used in research, a chapter on how to organize a research paper with its component parts, a chapter on how to properly cite references, and finally a chapter on how to use and present statistics, tables, and graphs in one’s research.

The final section has three chapters that deal with the more technical aspects of presenting a research paper. These consist of a chapter on formatting a paper and two chapters, one each, on the Turabian and APA citation styles. After a brief conclusion, the book ends with a selected bibliography focused on books dealing with research as well as a list of appendices that touch upon issues of transliteration of Hebrew and Greek, tips for formatting, as well as various lists of abbreviations used in research writing.

In the introduction, Vyhmeister explains that the book was originally written to meet the needs of South American students. She goes on to relate how subsequent English editions were borne out of teaching experiences in the majority world, such as the Philippines and Africa. As such, this latest edition, while not explicitly written for a non-Western audience, retains a helpful

sensitivity to those who come from outside of a North American academic context. An example of this is Vyhmeister's discussion of plagiarism (107–8), where she acknowledges different cultural understandings of intellectual honesty before going on to explain what is considered plagiarism in the North American context. This and similar examples make Vyhmeister's book a helpful introduction to doing research in the North American context, especially for those coming from elsewhere.

A second strength of Vyhmeister's book is her addressing of topics related to electronic and internet research. While the speed at which technology develops could render some of her writing on the subject obsolete within a short time, the topic is vitally important for anyone doing research in the twenty-first century, and Vyhmeister helpfully addresses it throughout the book. Particularly helpful is the chapter dealing with internet use in research and the subsection entitled "thinking like a computer" (131–32), where Vyhmeister gives some very practical tips on how to maximize electronic word searches. Again, there is some caution as to how relevant some of her information will be, even in the next few years, but Vyhmeister gives some very helpful information and tips for students currently using electronic sources for doing research.

On the one hand, the breadth of topics that Vyhmeister deals with in her book is helpful in that it gives the novice student a broad introduction to the process of research. However, while in some ways this can be considered a strength, the breadth of topics presented in what is a relatively short amount of space also leads to the main critiques of the book. In the first place, the book is simply too broad to be able to deal adequately with all the topics that it discusses. Thus, while a whole chapter (chapter 12) is devoted to choosing a research topic, only two paragraphs are devoted to the vitally important topic of developing a proper research thesis (123–24). Even less discussion is given to what makes a good thesis statement. While the writing of a thesis statement is perhaps too obvious as a topic for a book on research, it is a skill that is vital in research writing and one that needs to be learned well. It would have been helpful to spend more time on this topic. Similarly, while Vyhmeister says a great

deal about the process of researching and how to present that research in terms of structuring and formatting, very little is said about developing a research methodology, and what is mentioned is simply inadequate. To be fair, Vyhmeister does mention the need for having a methodology (121–22), but the section is somewhat ambiguous and gives little help on how to find and use a good methodology that is appropriate to one's research.

In addition to not adequately discussing the topics it raises, a second critique of Vyhmeister's book is that it over-simplifies certain aspects of research that, if one is not careful, could lead to confusion for students. For instance, while the discussion of the Turabian and APA styles is correct and helpful, it is also true that these are not the only styles used in religious colleges and universities. Indeed, it has been my educational experience that academic institutions tend to have their own "house-style," which may or may not correspond, in part or in whole, to the Turabian or APA styles, and it is incumbent upon the student to be aware of this. While Vyhmeister acknowledges this fact, her caution does not feature strongly in the book and could be missed by students who do not read it carefully and think that these styles blindly apply to their school. A second example of over-simplification is Vyhmeister's discussion of the oral defense (84–85), where she gives the impression that one is always given a pass, with or without revisions. While one can appreciate that Vyhmeister wants to take some of the fear out of the process for students, students can and have failed their oral defenses. It is a discourtesy not to let students know this. In short, the book simply does not adequately deal with many important aspects involved with research at the graduate level.

That being said, Vyhmeister's book is one that could function well as a basic introduction for those just learning how to do research in religion and theology, whether undergraduates or those entering graduate programs in religion from other disciplines. The book is clearly structured, written in an accessible style with overly technical language being avoided or explained, making it easy for the non-specialist to follow along. However, it should only be considered a starting point, and students would be

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ill-advised to depend solely on this book throughout their research careers. One gets the impression that Vyhmeister is aware of this in various comments she makes throughout the book as well as when she recommends sources for further reading in the selected bibliography at the end of the book. Still, as a basic introduction to research, this book is to be commended.

Alexander Breitkopf
McMaster Divinity College
Hamilton, ON