
HINTS FOR TAKING THE ORDINATION EXAMS: OPEN BOOK BIBLE EXEGESIS

First of all, breathe. Say a prayer of thanksgiving that God has brought you this far, and ask that God will continue to guide you.

Second, know that the readers of these exams really do care about you and your growth into ministry. They believe in grace. They may seem to be members of the Evil Empire, but they're really not. That's why a number of them have put these hints together—so that you will have a better idea of what to expect and how to meet their expectations.

You should know that readers are given guidelines about what to expect from your answers, but the guidelines are not templates. If you include something that's not in the guidelines or do not include something that is in the guidelines, that's usually okay—unless you have failed to abide by the most important rule of taking these exams, which is to ANSWER THE QUESTION. In many cases there are two or even three parts to a question. Answer all of them.

THE MINISTRY CONTEXT

Make sure you notice what ministry context—a wedding, a youth conference, whatever—is given for your exam. The instructions tell you that this ministry context should inform your responses throughout the examination. You do not need to actually refer to the context until the sermon outline, but it's a good idea to keep it in mind throughout. Failing to explicitly address the sermon to the assigned context will usually result in an “unsatisfactory” exam.

SECTION I: LANGUAGE, HISTORICAL SITUATION, SCRIPTURAL AND THEOLOGICAL CONTEXT

LANGUAGE

The question(s) on language must focus on the language. If the question lifts up specific words, it is likely asking for a word study. Where else are these words used within the pericope, within the book, elsewhere in the Bible or externally? What is the range of meaning for each? How are they translated in different versions of the Bible?

The paper must do more than pull out a concordance to reference different citations of the specified word. It must discuss the contextual meanings of the word. Resist the temptation to move into theologizing at this point, but do make reference to the implications presented by the word study.

If you haven't taken Hebrew or Greek for a while, do not panic. Many good commentaries exist that will guide you. Do be aware that not everyone reading the exams is a teaching elder who has had seminary courses on these languages; ruling elders also serve as readers. You may wish to include an English alphabet transliteration next to the word in its original alphabet.

HISTORICAL SITUATION

You will most likely need to do some research for this one. Try to find respected scholars' work; relying on Wikipedia or other general websites will make you appear to be less than a real scholar.

In most cases the question will ask you to apply your understanding of the historical/cultural context to your overall understanding of the text. In other words, you need to be able to move from explaining the historical facts and/or suppositions you have uncovered to showing how these pieces of information affect the meaning of the text.

SCRIPTURAL/THEOLOGICAL CONTEXT

The Scriptural Context question will ask you to show relationships between the text you're studying and some other part of the Bible—another pericope, the book in general, or another book. Again, explore the details and then draw conclusions from them.

The question on theological context may ask you to show how a particular kind of theology is evident in the text. For example, what theology of salvation is evident in John 3:16-21? Before you tackle this question, make sure you have a sense of what is involved in such a theology. This again may involve some research. A dictionary of Reformed theology is a very good resource. As you develop your theology, keep our Reformed understandings in mind; you will run into trouble with articulating, for example, a theology that says that God is not sovereign or that it is entirely up to humans to determine their salvation.

SECTION II: PRESENTING A FAITHFUL INTERPRETATION

In this section you are asked to pull together what you have found in the exegetical steps from Section I—plus perhaps other exegetical findings—to create your own interpretation of the text. It is this interpretation that you will use to create the sermon outline in Section III.

FOCUS STATEMENT

In 50 words or fewer (and yes, the readers have been known to count the words), write a clear and succinct summary of your faithful interpretation of the text. This is basically a thesis statement. Do not simply quote the Biblical text but indicate what you're going to say about it, what angle you're going to take in interpreting it. Also, a focus statement is a "statement," or a sentence. It is not a question.

It may be helpful to first write the Interpretive Statement and then come back and craft the focus statement after you actually know what all is included in your interpretation. You may want to come back and check this statement one more time after finishing the sermon outline.

INTERPRETIVE STATEMENT

This is where you pull together everything you learned by doing the exegesis in the first section. You do not have to stick with just the points covered in those questions; it is entirely possible that in the course of your research you will have discovered additional issues that seem to be important in analyzing the text.

Do not cut and paste your answers from the first section; rather you should summarize or reference what you said there, using that information to support your overall interpretation.

At 1600 words, this is by far the longest essay of the examination. You should treat it as the most important. Organize it as carefully as you would a major paper for seminary, determining your focus (thesis), your major points, and your supporting details. Make sure you are not speaking in generalities without specific support, and do not wander off into other unrelated concepts (however interesting they may be).

Remember as you write that this is an academic essay, not a sermon, which means that your approach needs to be to explain your thinking in a rational manner, not to persuade the reader of God's goodness, the

reader's sinfulness, the need for repentance, the importance of caring for the poor, or anything else. Hint: If you find yourself wanting to use exclamation points because you are so excited about what you are writing, you are probably veering into preaching. Restrain yourself.

SERMON OUTLINE

NOTE: The general directions (at the beginning of your test booklet) for this part of the exam state that either a sermon or lesson plan may be written. However, follow the specific directions for your particular exam and scripture passage. It may likely say to write a sermon outline for a certain situation. Always follow the specific directions.

This section is where your understanding of the ministry context should be most evident. Gear your message to the people for whom you are supposed to be speaking. Make it obvious to the reader.

The outline does not have to be in formal outline format (I.A.B.1.a.b.2., etc.). It must be complete enough that the reader can get a fairly good idea of what you're going to talk about, but it also must fit on two pages. In other words, a sermon whose main points are *Message, Excitement, Glory, Promise, Joy, and Eternal Life* simply will not do—the reader will have no idea where you mean to go with those general words. At the same time, you do not need to write out in complete sentences everything you plan to say. (Some people write sermons more easily by writing out the entire text. If that is true for you, write the sermon out, save it on your computer for some time in the future when it may come in handy, and outline what you've written for this exam.)

Consider time restrictions when you write the sermon outline. A wedding sermon, for example, does not need to last 30 minutes.

Pay attention to the number of extraneous scriptures that you are referencing. A sermon that references Bible verses beyond the pericope can exhaust the listener and distract from the original text.

If you are developing a sermon from a Hebrew Bible text, be very cautious about extrapolating to Jesus or other New Testament references. The Hebrew pericope should be able to stand faithfully on its own, as it did as a part of Jesus' Jewish faith. The Christian context can simply be an acknowledgment that the text represented a key piece of Jesus' Jewish faith.

The sermon must reflect what you wrote in your Interpretive Statement. The illustrations of course will be added, but it must be clear that the points you are making there are points that grew out of your exegesis.

WRITING TIPS

USE ACADEMIC (FORMAL) LANGUAGE.

Your language should be somewhat formal but not stilted. You may use the first-person *I* and *me* (*I think; it seems to me*), but keep contractions (*can't, won't, it's*) to a minimum. Avoid slang—your audience is not your youth group or a group of friends at a restaurant. Use full sentences. Spell out words; if you wish to use an abbreviation, be sure to explain what it means the first time you use it. Avoid grammatical, punctuation and usage errors.

At the same time, use language that you are confident with. Stringing together long words often does not communicate well. Writing, for example, "in elucidating the causes and precipitations of this *crise du coeur*, one must undergo an exploration of multitudinous preceding events" instead of "three events led up to this

crisis” just makes you sound pompous. The ability to communicate exegetical and theological concepts simply and clearly is invaluable.

Remember that you are writing a formal examination. Snarky or sarcastic comments or attempts at humor are inappropriate. If the reader comes across them toward the end of a 14-hour stretch of reading exams, he or she is unlikely to find them as amusing as you had thought they were. This is an opportunity to demonstrate your exegetical competence and your intelligence, not your cleverness.

PROOFREAD.

Here are two excellent methods of checking to make sure you haven't substituted words (*then* for *than* or *there* for *their*, for example), omitted words, mangled sentences, or otherwise created incomprehensible, awkward text:

- Read what you've written from the end to the beginning. This forces the brain to pay attention to what is actually there, rather than reading what it *thinks* you wrote.
- Read what you've written out loud to yourself. Often your ear will hear things that your eye simply does not notice.

Note: The spell check feature on your computer is helpful, but not infallible. As long as you have written an English word, spell check will let it pass. Also, the word “pericope” is not recognized by most spell checkers. Double check to make sure your spell check has not auto-corrected *pericope* as *periscope*.

USE QUOTATIONS CAREFULLY.

Keep in mind the rule of thumb that says that at least 80% of your writing should be in your own words. An exam that consists of quotations strung together does not demonstrate your ability to think. If a quote has good material but is lengthy, summarize the information instead of quoting.

When you do include a quote, introduce it by referencing the author or work, and follow it up with a short restatement in your own words. The reality is that people often skip over quotations when reading, and if you're relying on someone else to make your point, you may not be getting that point across.

The same rule about plagiarism applies here as in your seminary: don't do it. Footnote all of your resources, whether directly quoted or paraphrased/summarized. Notes at the bottom of the page are more helpful than notes at the end of the whole paper. You may also use a shortened form of reference, like (Brown, p. 251) within the text of your paper.

USE INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE.

Masculine pronouns for God are acceptable, though if you can write well without them, do so. When referring to the people of God, avoid using exclusive masculine words and pronouns, like “man” and “mankind.”

HINTS FOR TAKING THE ORDINATION EXAMS: OPEN BOOK BIBLE EXEGESIS

First of all, breathe. Say a prayer of thanksgiving that God has brought you this far, and ask that God will continue to guide you.

Second, know that the readers of these exams really do care about you and your growth into ministry. They believe in grace. They may seem to be members of the Evil Empire, but they're really not. That's why a number of them have put these hints together—so that you will have a better idea of what to expect and how to meet their expectations.

You should know that readers are given guidelines about what to expect from your answers, but the guidelines are not templates. If you include something that's not in the guidelines or do not include something that is in the guidelines, that's usually okay—unless you have failed to abide by the most important rule of taking these exams, which is to ANSWER THE QUESTION. In many cases there are two or even three parts to a question. Answer all of them.

THE MINISTRY CONTEXT

Make sure you notice what ministry context—a wedding, a youth conference, whatever—is given for your exam. The instructions tell you that this ministry context should inform your responses throughout the examination. You do not need to actually refer to the context until the sermon outline, but it's a good idea to keep it in mind throughout. Failing to explicitly address the sermon to the assigned context will usually result in an “unsatisfactory” exam.

SECTION I: LANGUAGE, HISTORICAL SITUATION, SCRIPTURAL AND THEOLOGICAL CONTEXT

LANGUAGE

The question(s) on language must focus on the language. If the question lifts up specific words, it is likely asking for a word study. Where else are these words used within the pericope, within the book, elsewhere in the Bible or externally? What is the range of meaning for each? How are they translated in different versions of the Bible?

The paper must do more than pull out a concordance to reference different citations of the specified word. It must discuss the contextual meanings of the word. Resist the temptation to move into theologizing at this point, but do make reference to the implications presented by the word study.

If you haven't taken Hebrew or Greek for a while, do not panic. Many good commentaries exist that will guide you. Do be aware that not everyone reading the exams is a teaching elder who has had seminary courses on these languages; ruling elders also serve as readers. You may wish to include an English alphabet transliteration next to the word in its original alphabet.

HISTORICAL SITUATION

You will most likely need to do some research for this one. Try to find respected scholars' work; relying on Wikipedia or other general websites will make you appear to be less than a real scholar.

In most cases the question will ask you to apply your understanding of the historical/cultural context to your overall understanding of the text. In other words, you need to be able to move from explaining the historical facts and/or suppositions you have uncovered to showing how these pieces of information affect the meaning of the text.

SCRIPTURAL/THEOLOGICAL CONTEXT

The Scriptural Context question will ask you to show relationships between the text you're studying and some other part of the Bible—another pericope, the book in general, or another book. Again, explore the details and then draw conclusions from them.

The question on theological context may ask you to show how a particular kind of theology is evident in the text. For example, what theology of salvation is evident in John 3:16-21? Before you tackle this question, make sure you have a sense of what is involved in such a theology. This again may involve some research. A dictionary of Reformed theology is a very good resource. As you develop your theology, keep our Reformed understandings in mind; you will run into trouble with articulating, for example, a theology that says that God is not sovereign or that it is entirely up to humans to determine their salvation.

SECTION II: PRESENTING A FAITHFUL INTERPRETATION

In this section you are asked to pull together what you have found in the exegetical steps from Section I—plus perhaps other exegetical findings—to create your own interpretation of the text. It is this interpretation that you will use to create the sermon outline in Section III.

FOCUS STATEMENT

In 50 words or fewer (and yes, the readers have been known to count the words), write a clear and succinct summary of your faithful interpretation of the text. This is basically a thesis statement. Do not simply quote the Biblical text but indicate what you're going to say about it, what angle you're going to take in interpreting it. Also, a focus statement is a "statement," or a sentence. It is not a question.

It may be helpful to first write the Interpretive Statement and then come back and craft the focus statement after you actually know what all is included in your interpretation. You may want to come back and check this statement one more time after finishing the sermon outline.

INTERPRETIVE STATEMENT

This is where you pull together everything you learned by doing the exegesis in the first section. You do not have to stick with just the points covered in those questions; it is entirely possible that in the course of your research you will have discovered additional issues that seem to be important in analyzing the text.

Do not cut and paste your answers from the first section; rather you should summarize or reference what you said there, using that information to support your overall interpretation.

At 1600 words, this is by far the longest essay of the examination. You should treat it as the most important. Organize it as carefully as you would a major paper for seminary, determining your focus (thesis), your major points, and your supporting details. Make sure you are not speaking in generalities without specific support, and do not wander off into other unrelated concepts (however interesting they may be).

Remember as you write that this is an academic essay, not a sermon, which means that your approach needs to be to explain your thinking in a rational manner, not to persuade the reader of God's goodness, the

reader's sinfulness, the need for repentance, the importance of caring for the poor, or anything else. Hint: If you find yourself wanting to use exclamation points because you are so excited about what you are writing, you are probably veering into preaching. Restrain yourself.

SERMON OUTLINE

NOTE: The general directions (at the beginning of your test booklet) for this part of the exam state that either a sermon or lesson plan may be written. However, follow the specific directions for your particular exam and scripture passage. It may likely say to write a sermon outline for a certain situation. Always follow the specific directions.

This section is where your understanding of the ministry context should be most evident. Gear your message to the people for whom you are supposed to be speaking. Make it obvious to the reader.

The outline does not have to be in formal outline format (I.A.B.1.a.b.2., etc.). It must be complete enough that the reader can get a fairly good idea of what you're going to talk about, but it also must fit on two pages. In other words, a sermon whose main points are *Message, Excitement, Glory, Promise, Joy, and Eternal Life* simply will not do—the reader will have no idea where you mean to go with those general words. At the same time, you do not need to write out in complete sentences everything you plan to say. (Some people write sermons more easily by writing out the entire text. If that is true for you, write the sermon out, save it on your computer for some time in the future when it may come in handy, and outline what you've written for this exam.)

Consider time restrictions when you write the sermon outline. A wedding sermon, for example, does not need to last 30 minutes.

Pay attention to the number of extraneous scriptures that you are referencing. A sermon that references Bible verses beyond the pericope can exhaust the listener and distract from the original text.

If you are developing a sermon from a Hebrew Bible text, be very cautious about extrapolating to Jesus or other New Testament references. The Hebrew pericope should be able to stand faithfully on its own, as it did as a part of Jesus' Jewish faith. The Christian context can simply be an acknowledgment that the text represented a key piece of Jesus' Jewish faith.

The sermon must reflect what you wrote in your Interpretive Statement. The illustrations of course will be added, but it must be clear that the points you are making there are points that grew out of your exegesis.

WRITING TIPS

USE ACADEMIC (FORMAL) LANGUAGE.

Your language should be somewhat formal but not stilted. You may use the first-person *I* and *me* (*I think; it seems to me*), but keep contractions (*can't, won't, it's*) to a minimum. Avoid slang—your audience is not your youth group or a group of friends at a restaurant. Use full sentences. Spell out words; if you wish to use an abbreviation, be sure to explain what it means the first time you use it. Avoid grammatical, punctuation and usage errors.

At the same time, use language that you are confident with. Stringing together long words often does not communicate well. Writing, for example, "in elucidating the causes and precipitations of this *crise du coeur*, one must undergo an exploration of multitudinous preceding events" instead of "three events led up to this

crisis” just makes you sound pompous. The ability to communicate exegetical and theological concepts simply and clearly is invaluable.

Remember that you are writing a formal examination. Snarky or sarcastic comments or attempts at humor are inappropriate. If the reader comes across them toward the end of a 14-hour stretch of reading exams, he or she is unlikely to find them as amusing as you had thought they were. This is an opportunity to demonstrate your exegetical competence and your intelligence, not your cleverness.

PROOFREAD.

Here are two excellent methods of checking to make sure you haven't substituted words (*then* for *than* or *there* for *their*, for example), omitted words, mangled sentences, or otherwise created incomprehensible, awkward text:

- Read what you've written from the end to the beginning. This forces the brain to pay attention to what is actually there, rather than reading what it *thinks* you wrote.
- Read what you've written out loud to yourself. Often your ear will hear things that your eye simply does not notice.

Note: The spell check feature on your computer is helpful, but not infallible. As long as you have written an English word, spell check will let it pass. Also, the word “pericope” is not recognized by most spell checkers. Double check to make sure your spell check has not auto-corrected *pericope* as *periscope*.

USE QUOTATIONS CAREFULLY.

Keep in mind the rule of thumb that says that at least 80% of your writing should be in your own words. An exam that consists of quotations strung together does not demonstrate your ability to think. If a quote has good material but is lengthy, summarize the information instead of quoting.

When you do include a quote, introduce it by referencing the author or work, and follow it up with a short restatement in your own words. The reality is that people often skip over quotations when reading, and if you're relying on someone else to make your point, you may not be getting that point across.

The same rule about plagiarism applies here as in your seminary: don't do it. Footnote all of your resources, whether directly quoted or paraphrased/summarized. Notes at the bottom of the page are more helpful than notes at the end of the whole paper. You may also use a shortened form of reference, like (Brown, p. 251) within the text of your paper.

USE INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE.

Masculine pronouns for God are acceptable, though if you can write well without them, do so. When referring to the people of God, avoid using exclusive masculine words and pronouns, like “man” and “mankind.”

HINTS FOR TAKING THE ORDINATION EXAMS: OPEN BOOK BIBLE EXEGESIS

First of all, breathe. Say a prayer of thanksgiving that God has brought you this far, and ask that God will continue to guide you.

Second, know that the readers of these exams really do care about you and your growth into ministry. They believe in grace. They may seem to be members of the Evil Empire, but they're really not. That's why a number of them have put these hints together—so that you will have a better idea of what to expect and how to meet their expectations.

You should know that readers are given guidelines about what to expect from your answers, but the guidelines are not templates. If you include something that's not in the guidelines or do not include something that is in the guidelines, that's usually okay—unless you have failed to abide by the most important rule of taking these exams, which is to ANSWER THE QUESTION. In many cases there are two or even three parts to a question. Answer all of them.

THE MINISTRY CONTEXT

Make sure you notice what ministry context—a wedding, a youth conference, whatever—is given for your exam. The instructions tell you that this ministry context should inform your responses throughout the examination. You do not need to actually refer to the context until the sermon outline, but it's a good idea to keep it in mind throughout. Failing to explicitly address the sermon to the assigned context will usually result in an “unsatisfactory” exam.

SECTION I: LANGUAGE, HISTORICAL SITUATION, SCRIPTURAL AND THEOLOGICAL CONTEXT

LANGUAGE

The question(s) on language must focus on the language. If the question lifts up specific words, it is likely asking for a word study. Where else are these words used within the pericope, within the book, elsewhere in the Bible or externally? What is the range of meaning for each? How are they translated in different versions of the Bible?

The paper must do more than pull out a concordance to reference different citations of the specified word. It must discuss the contextual meanings of the word. Resist the temptation to move into theologizing at this point, but do make reference to the implications presented by the word study.

If you haven't taken Hebrew or Greek for a while, do not panic. Many good commentaries exist that will guide you. Do be aware that not everyone reading the exams is a teaching elder who has had seminary courses on these languages; ruling elders also serve as readers. You may wish to include an English alphabet transliteration next to the word in its original alphabet.

HISTORICAL SITUATION

You will most likely need to do some research for this one. Try to find respected scholars' work; relying on Wikipedia or other general websites will make you appear to be less than a real scholar.

In most cases the question will ask you to apply your understanding of the historical/cultural context to your overall understanding of the text. In other words, you need to be able to move from explaining the historical facts and/or suppositions you have uncovered to showing how these pieces of information affect the meaning of the text.

SCRIPTURAL/THEOLOGICAL CONTEXT

The Scriptural Context question will ask you to show relationships between the text you're studying and some other part of the Bible—another pericope, the book in general, or another book. Again, explore the details and then draw conclusions from them.

The question on theological context may ask you to show how a particular kind of theology is evident in the text. For example, what theology of salvation is evident in John 3:16-21? Before you tackle this question, make sure you have a sense of what is involved in such a theology. This again may involve some research. A dictionary of Reformed theology is a very good resource. As you develop your theology, keep our Reformed understandings in mind; you will run into trouble with articulating, for example, a theology that says that God is not sovereign or that it is entirely up to humans to determine their salvation.

SECTION II: PRESENTING A FAITHFUL INTERPRETATION

In this section you are asked to pull together what you have found in the exegetical steps from Section I—plus perhaps other exegetical findings—to create your own interpretation of the text. It is this interpretation that you will use to create the sermon outline in Section III.

FOCUS STATEMENT

In 50 words or fewer (and yes, the readers have been known to count the words), write a clear and succinct summary of your faithful interpretation of the text. This is basically a thesis statement. Do not simply quote the Biblical text but indicate what you're going to say about it, what angle you're going to take in interpreting it. Also, a focus statement is a "statement," or a sentence. It is not a question.

It may be helpful to first write the Interpretive Statement and then come back and craft the focus statement after you actually know what all is included in your interpretation. You may want to come back and check this statement one more time after finishing the sermon outline.

INTERPRETIVE STATEMENT

This is where you pull together everything you learned by doing the exegesis in the first section. You do not have to stick with just the points covered in those questions; it is entirely possible that in the course of your research you will have discovered additional issues that seem to be important in analyzing the text.

Do not cut and paste your answers from the first section; rather you should summarize or reference what you said there, using that information to support your overall interpretation.

At 1600 words, this is by far the longest essay of the examination. You should treat it as the most important. Organize it as carefully as you would a major paper for seminary, determining your focus (thesis), your major points, and your supporting details. Make sure you are not speaking in generalities without specific support, and do not wander off into other unrelated concepts (however interesting they may be).

Remember as you write that this is an academic essay, not a sermon, which means that your approach needs to be to explain your thinking in a rational manner, not to persuade the reader of God's goodness, the

reader's sinfulness, the need for repentance, the importance of caring for the poor, or anything else. Hint: If you find yourself wanting to use exclamation points because you are so excited about what you are writing, you are probably veering into preaching. Restrain yourself.

SERMON OUTLINE

NOTE: The general directions (at the beginning of your test booklet) for this part of the exam state that either a sermon or lesson plan may be written. However, follow the specific directions for your particular exam and scripture passage. It may likely say to write a sermon outline for a certain situation. Always follow the specific directions.

This section is where your understanding of the ministry context should be most evident. Gear your message to the people for whom you are supposed to be speaking. Make it obvious to the reader.

The outline does not have to be in formal outline format (I.A.B.1.a.b.2., etc.). It must be complete enough that the reader can get a fairly good idea of what you're going to talk about, but it also must fit on two pages. In other words, a sermon whose main points are *Message, Excitement, Glory, Promise, Joy, and Eternal Life* simply will not do—the reader will have no idea where you mean to go with those general words. At the same time, you do not need to write out in complete sentences everything you plan to say. (Some people write sermons more easily by writing out the entire text. If that is true for you, write the sermon out, save it on your computer for some time in the future when it may come in handy, and outline what you've written for this exam.)

Consider time restrictions when you write the sermon outline. A wedding sermon, for example, does not need to last 30 minutes.

Pay attention to the number of extraneous scriptures that you are referencing. A sermon that references Bible verses beyond the pericope can exhaust the listener and distract from the original text.

If you are developing a sermon from a Hebrew Bible text, be very cautious about extrapolating to Jesus or other New Testament references. The Hebrew pericope should be able to stand faithfully on its own, as it did as a part of Jesus' Jewish faith. The Christian context can simply be an acknowledgment that the text represented a key piece of Jesus' Jewish faith.

The sermon must reflect what you wrote in your Interpretive Statement. The illustrations of course will be added, but it must be clear that the points you are making there are points that grew out of your exegesis.

WRITING TIPS

USE ACADEMIC (FORMAL) LANGUAGE.

Your language should be somewhat formal but not stilted. You may use the first-person *I* and *me* (*I think; it seems to me*), but keep contractions (*can't, won't, it's*) to a minimum. Avoid slang—your audience is not your youth group or a group of friends at a restaurant. Use full sentences. Spell out words; if you wish to use an abbreviation, be sure to explain what it means the first time you use it. Avoid grammatical, punctuation and usage errors.

At the same time, use language that you are confident with. Stringing together long words often does not communicate well. Writing, for example, "in elucidating the causes and precipitations of this *crise du coeur*, one must undergo an exploration of multitudinous preceding events" instead of "three events led up to this

crisis” just makes you sound pompous. The ability to communicate exegetical and theological concepts simply and clearly is invaluable.

Remember that you are writing a formal examination. Snarky or sarcastic comments or attempts at humor are inappropriate. If the reader comes across them toward the end of a 14-hour stretch of reading exams, he or she is unlikely to find them as amusing as you had thought they were. This is an opportunity to demonstrate your exegetical competence and your intelligence, not your cleverness.

PROOFREAD.

Here are two excellent methods of checking to make sure you haven't substituted words (*then* for *than* or *there* for *their*, for example), omitted words, mangled sentences, or otherwise created incomprehensible, awkward text:

- Read what you've written from the end to the beginning. This forces the brain to pay attention to what is actually there, rather than reading what it *thinks* you wrote.
- Read what you've written out loud to yourself. Often your ear will hear things that your eye simply does not notice.

Note: The spell check feature on your computer is helpful, but not infallible. As long as you have written an English word, spell check will let it pass. Also, the word “pericope” is not recognized by most spell checkers. Double check to make sure your spell check has not auto-corrected *pericope* as *periscope*.

USE QUOTATIONS CAREFULLY.

Keep in mind the rule of thumb that says that at least 80% of your writing should be in your own words. An exam that consists of quotations strung together does not demonstrate your ability to think. If a quote has good material but is lengthy, summarize the information instead of quoting.

When you do include a quote, introduce it by referencing the author or work, and follow it up with a short restatement in your own words. The reality is that people often skip over quotations when reading, and if you're relying on someone else to make your point, you may not be getting that point across.

The same rule about plagiarism applies here as in your seminary: don't do it. Footnote all of your resources, whether directly quoted or paraphrased/summarized. Notes at the bottom of the page are more helpful than notes at the end of the whole paper. You may also use a shortened form of reference, like (Brown, p. 251) within the text of your paper.

USE INCLUSIVE LANGUAGE.

Masculine pronouns for God are acceptable, though if you can write well without them, do so. When referring to the people of God, avoid using exclusive masculine words and pronouns, like “man” and “mankind.”