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WRITING THEOLOGY WELL

*A Rhetoric for Theological
and Biblical Writers*

LUCRETIA B. YAGHJIAN

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In Memory of my Parents

Eleanor Welch Bailey

(1912–1994)

Joseph W. Bailey

(1910–1972)

and my Student

Pontiano Victor Okumu, OSB

(1962–2005)

- (3) What kinds of theological essays are there, and how shall we write them?
 (4) What are the rhetorics or elements of the (a) critical and (b) constructive theological essays? Before we proceed, I invite you to reflect on what an essay is and how it is written in the following Theological Memo:

THEOLOGICAL MEMO 1: When you hear the word *essay*, what kind of writing comes to mind? When you are asked to write a "theological essay," what is your understanding of what is required? Please define either the "essay" or the "theological essay" in your own words, identify one key characteristic of the genre, and describe how you typically write it.

WHAT IS AN ESSAY AND WHY DO PEOPLE WRITE IT?

The essay has been described as "*the* basic structure for making sense to others on paper," and the common denominator of that structure is the introduction, body, and conclusion that make up every essay.¹ Defining the essay in terms of its structure will prove useful presently when we adopt the same strategy to identify the "structure of correlation" as "*the* basic theological essay structure." But without a purposeful author composing a logically connected and coherent piece of writing on a particular subject in an appropriate style and voice for a real or imagined audience, we would have neither a structure nor an essay, so we must begin with a more comprehensive definition of this genre.

Let us define the essay, then, as a purposeful prose composition on a particular subject, with a structure that is divisible into an introduction, a body, and a conclusion, written in an appropriate style and authorial voice for a specific audience. Accordingly, the six characteristics that define an essay are (1) purpose, (2) subject, (3) structure, (4) style, (5) voice, and (6) audience.² Since each of these characteristics is given varying emphasis in different essays, they are also used to classify different kinds of essays by purpose (to inform; to persuade); subject (literary; scientific); structure (inductive; deductive); style (narrative; argumentative); voice (personal; academic); and audience (popular; professional). However, an essay is more than the sum of these characteristics. Just as the tennis player's racquet becomes the natural extension of the player's arm as it volleys the ball successfully across the net, so the writer's essay becomes an expression of her own thinking that conveys her message effectively to her readers. Yet just as tennis players must master the requisite form in order to hit a successful serve over the net, essay writers must become familiar with the classic forms of the essay, and why people write them.

From its inception as a literary genre, the essay was written for personal, formal, and academic purposes. The sixteenth-century French writer Michel de Montaigne coined the word *essay* (from the French *essayer*, "to try") to distinguish his *Essais* (1580), written as personal, informal "attempts," from the formal, authoritative ecclesiastical writing of his day. In so doing, he invented the

Chapter 4

Writing the Theological Essay Well: Rhetorics of Identification, Correlation, Suspicion, and Construction

The word is late, but the thing is ancient.

—Francis Bacon, Preface to *Essays*, 1597

... the essay is the simplest, most basic format for discursive writing—writing intended to inform, to explain, and to persuade.

—V. A. Howard and J. H. Barton, *Thinking on Paper*

What is it that makes an essay . . . theological?

—Gordon Kaufman, *Essay on Theological Method*

STARTING POINTS

What makes an essay theological? How shall we write a theological essay? These are the questions that we address in this chapter, and they flow from the presupposition that constructing a theological argument and writing a theological essay are integrated, not isolated, processes. According to V. A. Howard and J. H. Barton's definition of the essay in the epigraph above, it could be argued that any piece of theological prose "intended to inform, to explain, and to persuade" is a theological essay. Without denying this broader definition, our aim is to determine more precisely what distinguishes the theological essay from other types of essays, and thus to discover how to write it more effectively. To do this, we begin with four questions: (1) What is an essay and why do people write it? (2) What is a theological essay and why do theologians write it?

"personal" or "informal" essay. Sir Francis Bacon, on the other hand, introduced the "formal essay" to English audiences in his *Essays* (1597), which were brief, impersonal moral and political reflections in the classical tradition of Cicero, Seneca, and Plutarch.³ As a subspecies of the formal essay, the "philosophical essay" of Enlightenment philosophers such as John Locke and David Hume⁴ provided the prototype for the academic essay and further reinforced the distinction between "informal" essays, written in a personal voice for a popular audience, and "formal" essays, written for a more specialized audience. As we shall see, the contemporary theological essay embraces both of these.

WHAT IS A THEOLOGICAL ESSAY AND WHY DO THEOLOGICIANS WRITE THEM?

To answer the question, What is a theological essay? we must ask, What makes an essay theological? Our answer to this question leads to two definitions of the theological essay. The first provides us with a broad definition, encompassing all kinds of theological essays. The second, provided by Paul Tillich, defines the essay more narrowly in terms of its "structure of correlation," which he calls the "backbone" of the theological essay.

We have previously defined the generic essay in terms of its purpose, subject, structure, style, voice, and audience. If the category of the generic essay is analogous to a biological genus, then the theological essay is a species of the genus "essay," whose general characteristics will be adapted to the specifications of the theological writing tasks that they support. For example, the pastoral reflection paper described in chapter 2 is a pastoral (*subject*) essay. Its *purpose* is to reflect on experience from a pastoral perspective. Its *structure* is inductive. Its *style* is narrative. Its *voice* is personal, and its *audience*, broadly conceived, is the church. The systematic reflection paper described in chapter 3 is a theological (*subject*) essay. Its *purpose* is to present a credible and coherent theological argument. Its *structure* is deductive. Its *style* is argumentative. Its *voice* is academic, and its *audience* is the theological "academy." Although most essays require more elaboration than the one-page paper allows, you have already written a theological essay if you have completed either of these papers.

When described broadly, what makes an essay theological is simply its theological subject, purpose, structure, style, voice, and audience. However, Paul Tillich has provided a more precise definition of the theological essay that will help us to write it more effectively. For Tillich, the essay is one of the theologian's primary tools for correlating present-day questions with the traditional "answers" of Christian faith. Toward that end, he first defines the *essay* as a form of public theological discourse that "deals explicitly with one actual problem."⁵ He then proposes an explicitly "theological" essay structure based on this method of correlation, which we will use in this chapter to write the constructive theological essay.

More will be said about the structure of correlation and the constructive

theological essay later on, but what Tillich adds here to our generic definition of the theological essay is twofold. First, the essay deals with one "question" or "problem" in a methodical and systematic way. Second, it places that "problem" in conversation with the resources of the Christian tradition, in order to provide a constructive theological response to the problem. Gathering these threads together, the theological essay as described in this book is a structured theological reflection, argument, or conversation focusing systematically on one subject, question, or problem through the lens of a particular theological method, or rhetoric, written for a public audience⁶ in a style and voice appropriate for that audience.

Contemporary theologians find the essay format conducive to the writing of theology for many reasons. First of all, the essay is a genre that requires its author to actively imagine an audience, engage readers strategically, and write appropriately for that audience. Second, the essay format is traditionally conversational (even when it is structured more formally), and contemporary theologians are more often committed to conversation and dialogue with their audiences than to delivering a monologue or "lecture" to passive listeners.⁷ Third, the essay format follows an argumentative structure, just as the conversation of a theological essay typically follows one argument from its inception to its conclusion. Fourth, this conversation always unfolds as an "attempt," not a *fait accompli*, because "we are all in this mystery together; and we need to question one another, criticize one another, make suggestions to one another, help one another."⁸ All of these qualities of the theological essay converge in the critical theological essay and the constructive theological essay, the two essay formats used most widely to write theology well. We proceed to look briefly at both of these essay formats.

WHAT KINDS OF THEOLOGICAL ESSAYS ARE THERE AND HOW SHALL WE WRITE THEM?

We have described the theological essay broadly in terms of its defining characteristics, and more narrowly in terms of its structure of "correlation," to help you to identify a theological essay assignment. However, these definitions by themselves will not help you to write the essay you have due tomorrow. What is also needed is a familiarity with some typical subspecies of the theological essay that you will encounter frequently and an ability to recognize the basic elements from which these essays are constructed. We focus on two of the most common subspecies here: (1) the *critical theological essay*, whose purpose is to critique the subject matter of that essay; and (2) the *constructive theological essay*, whose purpose is to construct a theological position within the framework of that essay. We look first at the critical theological essay.

What Is a Critical Theological Essay and How Shall We Write It?

The *critical theological essay* is a theological essay defined by its purpose to assess, evaluate, or mount a critique of a theological author, position, topic, or

issue. This essay is also used to critique nontheological material (a current film; a cultural issue) from a theological standpoint, or according to theological criteria. If you have ever written a critical essay for another academic discipline, you can write a critical theological essay. It typically follows the format and elements of the academic "review" or "critique" and adapts them to the theological subject matter under consideration. Even if you have not written a critical essay of any kind, however, we will begin by identifying the elements of the critical theological essay. In the process, you will be invited to write (a) a theological summary; (b) a theological book review; and (c) a theological critique, or critical analysis, as we put the pieces of this essay format together.

What are the rhetorics of the critical theological essay? Every critical theological essay you write should include one or more of the following four rhetorical elements: *a problematic*, *an exposition*, *a criticism*, and *an interpretation*. The *problematic* includes the presenting question or issue that inspires the writer to write the essay and the thesis that is formulated in response to the question. The element of *exposition* informs, explains, and develops the question/thesis according to a particular rhetorical pattern (e.g., cause-effect; comparison-contrast; definition; and so on). The element of *criticism* analyzes, evaluates, and mounts a critique of what has been expounded on the basis of that analysis and evaluation. The element of *interpretation* draws out the implications of all that precedes it to construct an answering interpretation, imaginative construal, or practical application of the presenting question. Keeping in mind that the focal point of the critical theological essay is the element of *criticism*, let us examine each of these rhetorical elements more closely.

Problematic. Behind every theological essay is a reason why it was written, and behind that reason is a problem to be solved or a question to be answered, as we have already seen in the pastoral reflection paper and the systematic reflection paper. Whether the problem is posed by a particular assignment or by the specific issues you bring to it, the typical theological essay is problem-centered. But if all we had were a problem, we would not have an essay. The problem must elicit an answering thesis, or claim, to warrant its development as an essay.

If, then, a theological essay begins with a problematic, we might expect the order of problem to solution to be used frequently by theological authors in constructing their essays.⁹ However, there are as many variations on the basic pattern as there are theological writers following the threads of their own thinking from the beginning of the essay to its conclusion. We will look further at some of those organizational paths as we proceed, but once the writer has framed the problematic of the essay as a presenting question and an answering thesis, the next logical step is to explain, elaborate, and develop it, employing the rhetorical element of exposition.

Exposition. The body of a theological essay typically begins with "exposition," which literally means to put things in their proper order, one after another. The theological essay is not a random collection of thoughts or facts that are thrown "a tisket, a tasket" into the writer's basket. Like an artfully com-

posed flower arrangement, it is a prose composition that moves purposefully from an initial statement of thesis to an exposition or development of the problem being addressed in the essay to an inevitable conclusion. Writing that is composed in this way is called expository writing, or exposition. While all prose writing is broadly expository, the term has been used more narrowly in theological writing to distinguish writing that informs and explains from writing that takes a critical position,¹⁰ and we will follow that more narrow usage here.

Whatever form it takes, however, the goal of expository writing is to compose the subject matter of the essay clearly, coherently, and in an orderly manner, in keeping with the rhetorical constraints of the essay. For theological writers, this exposition might include a summary of a book to be reviewed; narration of a theologian's biography; a description of a particular theological position; a step-by-step exegesis of a biblical text. As we shall see below, the theological act of correlation, whereby a present question or problem and the imagination of Christian faith are "co-related" by the theological writer, proceeds in an expository fashion to expound the correlation. However, a formal theological essay typically moves beyond exposition, narrowly or broadly defined, to an answering critique of the theological position, the theologian's contribution, the book under review, the biblical text featured in the exegesis, or the act of correlation.

One cannot critique or evaluate material that has not been carefully read and understood as its author intended. Thus, before critiquing a book's thesis or a writer's theological viewpoint, theological essay writers frequently summarize the book or the writer's position, not only for the convenience of readers, but also to demonstrate that they have understood the premises of what they are critiquing. For this reason, the art of writing a good theological summary is fundamental to the art of writing a good theological essay. Before we move on, then, I invite you to try your hand at that most basic of expository assignments: the theological summary.¹¹

THEOLOGICAL MEMO 2: Choose a biblical or theological book that you have chosen to read for a book review assignment. After you have read it carefully, write a brief summary of the book (150 words max.), following the instructions below:

WRITING THE THEOLOGICAL SUMMARY WELL: AN OUTLINE

Definition and Purpose

The **summary** is a form of expository writing that digests and condenses a source text in your own words in order to shorten and simplify it.

In theological papers, **summaries** are used to write brief reading reports; to present relevant research; to describe a theological position or interpretation of a biblical passage; to provide a précis of a book in critical book reviews.

General Characteristics of a Theological Summary

- Its coverage of the source text should be complete (even if abbreviated).
- Its coverage of the material should be objective (not evaluative or critical).
- Its coverage of the material should be condensed and concise.
- Its coverage of the material should be in your own words.

Preparing to Write the Theological Summary

- Read the source text carefully.
- Note any headings or subdivisions in the text, and outline accordingly.
- Distinguish between main points and supporting details; write the summary from the main points; save supporting details for a more extensive project.
- Pre-write the summary in outline form, using the main points you have selected from the material; check for completeness, logical order of presentation, and writing in your own words.
- Now you are ready to write the summary!

Specific Writing Protocols for a Theological Summary

- An introductory sentence identifying the source text of the summary;
- A subsequent sentence describing the controlling thesis of the source text;
- A logical and sequential organization of the material that follows the source text in succeeding sentences, rendered in:
- Your own paraphrase of the source text (retain technical terms in quotation marks where needed for clarity);
- Smooth connections between the sentences to keep the summary coherent;
- A concluding sentence that "summarizes the summary" for the reader.

Criticism. The theological essay is not only an expository exercise but also a finely tuned instrument of critical thinking, reading, and writing, reflected in the writer's mastery of the element of criticism. Thus, the body of a critical theological essay begins with exposition, but moves inexorably toward critical assessment of the subject matter. From the moment that Anselm first defined theology as "faith seeking understanding," the discipline of theology embraced critical thinking as a constructive intellectual tool. It should come as no surprise, then, that the theological essay characteristically takes a critical stance toward the problem that it addresses in order to "seek understanding." To take a critical stance begins by taking a questioning stance, and one engages in the activity of "criticism" when one writes from that stance.

Depending on one's theological perspective, taking a questioning stance may arise either from "a hermeneutic of generosity" or from "a hermeneutic of suspicion."¹² A hermeneutic of generosity walks with the theological tradition, accepts it on its own terms, but asks it to account for itself in terms of an accepted theological norm.¹³ A hermeneutic of suspicion questions the theological tradition, does not accept it on its own terms, and provides its own norms for critique of the tradition.¹⁴ From either vantage point, this questioning posture comes naturally to many theological students. If, on the other hand, the prospect of writing a "critical essay" prompts you to ask "What does 'critical' mean, anyway?"—in asking the question, you have already begun to think (and potentially, to write) critically.

In order to understand what it means to think, write, and reflect critically as theologians, "the key," David Tracy acknowledges, "is [understanding] the word, 'critical.'"¹⁵ This word derives from the Greek word *krinein* (to separate; to choose; to decide; to judge; to interpret). When applied to a theological essay, the term *critical* implies an interrogative, consciously reflective process that engages the writer and the reader in *analysis*, *evaluation*, and *critique* of the problem, text, or other subject matter addressed in the essay. Let us look briefly at each of these operations.

(i) *Analysis*: To analyze anything—a situation, a person's motives, a biblical text, a theological position—is first of all to ask what it means. The process of analysis provides a particular way of getting at that meaning, which includes (1) dividing the subject into its constituent parts; and (2) considering how those parts are related to the whole phenomenon. Yet the purpose of a good critical analysis is neither to "murder to dissect," as the poet Wordsworth feared, nor to leave the pieces in disarray after dissecting them. With or without the help of "all the king's men (and women)," the goal is to "put Humpty Dumpty together again," with a fuller understanding of how the parts work together to create a text, or a theology, or, for that matter, a book about "Writing Theology Well." In this chapter, for example, I have divided the theological essay into four elements with the goal of making it easier for students to write.¹⁶

(ii) *Evaluation*: To evaluate a book, an article, or a critical position is simply to appraise its strengths and weaknesses according to a particular set of criteria. Evaluation is not unsubstantiated opinion or negative criticism for its own sake. The goal of evaluation is a reasoned, reflective assessment of the material that is able to sift the wheat from the chaff and harvest the usable "grain" for one's own constructive argument. In a critical book review, for example, one does not simply summarize the book or tell "what it is about"; one also evaluates the book by asking relevant questions that provide a credible basis for critique and assessment, as we shall see in "Theological Memo 3," below. Closely related is the word *criticism*, which is used more technically by theologians and biblical scholars "for the entire process of analyzing how the text does what it does and then judging the quality of the operation."¹⁷ When the term *critical* is applied to a hermeneutic of suspicion, however, it also construes criticism as "strictly empirical analyses of our actual economic, political, cultural and social situations."¹⁸ To the dismay of

students trying to understand what is meant by an "analytical," "evaluative," or "critical" essay, these terms are often used interchangeably and without precision, but the process of critical thinking is fundamental to all of them.

(iii) *Critique*: When used as a noun, the word *critique* is used to name and characterize the genre of critical writing. When used as a verb, *to critique* refers to the entire process of critical thinking—analysis, evaluation, and critique—that generates critical writing. It also refers to the final stage of that process, in which the writer presents a concluding "critique" on the basis of the preceding analysis and evaluation. In this section, a good writer will weave the elements of the analysis and the evaluation together with his or her own critical conclusions to produce a cogent "critique in a nutshell."

In some theological essays, the rhetorical element of criticism will predominate. In others, it may be limited to a concluding section. However, whenever the words *critical*, *critical analysis*, or *critique* appear in the title of an assigned essay or in the instructions for writing it, you will be expected to write a critical theological essay. When this critical element is the driving force of a theological methodology, it may also be characterized as a rhetoric of suspicion, as we shall see below. Whether we call this operation "criticism" or "suspicion," writing a theological essay well will always involve some measure of criticism in response to the subject, text, or problem that has engendered it. Since book reviews routinely require the honing of these critical skills, we conclude this section by "essaying" to write a theological book review:

THEOLOGICAL MEMO 3: Using the outline that follows, please prepare a **critical essay/review** of a book assigned for one of your classes. If you have completed Theological Memo 2 you have already written a **summary** of the book (II, below):

WRITING THE THEOLOGICAL BOOK REVIEW WELL: AN OUTLINE

I. Introduction

- A. Provide title, author, and publication data at the beginning of your book review.
- B. In an opening summary/thesis sentence, tell what the book is about and why it is theologically significant (hence worthy of review).
- C. Proceed with a "map" of your review, e.g., "In this review I will briefly **summarize** the main argument of the book and describe its parts (or organization of material). I will then offer my own **critique** of the book and evaluate it as a theological resource (or in terms of some criteria that will provide a basis for critique). I will **conclude** with a personal assessment and recommendation of the book for (theological or other audiences designated by the writer)."

II. Summary

- A. What specific field of theology (or other discipline) is treated, and how does it fit into the present "literature" of that discipline?
- B. What is the author's intention in writing the book (see preface)?
- C. From what perspective, or "slant," does the author write?
- D. What is the controlling idea or thesis of the book?
- E. What are the main facts or concepts driving the thesis?
- F. How is the book organized, and how does its argument unfold?
- G. Who is the audience for whom the book has been written?

III. Critique

- A. Critique of the book as a whole:
 1. Is the treatment of subject matter thorough or superficial?
 2. Is the organization of the book logical and coherent?
 3. Does it unfold in narrative or linear progression?
 4. What scholarly apparatus is provided? Is it reader-friendly?
 5. Is the language clear, readable, appropriate for the intended audience?
- B. Critique of the book's specific content and contribution:
 1. Is the subject matter significant, timely, fresh, innovative?
 2. Is the material presented objectively or with a discernible bias?
 3. Is the author's evidence credible and persuasive?
 4. Does the author do what s/he sets out to do (II B, above)?
 5. Is the book a useful addition to the present literature?

IV. Conclusion

- A. What is your critical assessment of the book, in a nutshell?
- B. How did the book teach, move, inspire, change, or disappoint you?
- C. To whom and for what audiences would you recommend this book, and why? Conversely, why would you not recommend it?
- D. If you cannot recommend the book, what suggestions do you have for revision?

Interpretation. A final element of the critical theological essay is interpretation. While the term "interpretation" can refer to the operations of biblical and theological hermeneutics,¹⁹ I use it here to describe the end "product" of that process,²⁰ the writer's construal and explication of a text's meaning. While many essays, such as the critical book review that we have just outlined, conclude with the writer's critique of the material presented in the essay, other critical theological essays draw the critique forward into a reinterpretation of the problematic posed in the essay. Whether the writer proposes a creative interpretation of a biblical text, a traditional doctrine, or a theologian's work, this element transcends exposition and criticism to present the writer's own constructive theological proposal in response to the problematic.

Because the act of interpretation is integrally connected to that of construct-

ing a theological position, the element of interpretation will also provide us with a bridge from the critical theological essay to the constructive theological essay. Before we traverse that bridge, however, I invite you to “attempt” a theological critique, which employs all the elements of the critical theological essay—the problematic, exposition, criticism, and interpretation—in its interpretive analysis of a theologian/author and their work:

THEOLOGICAL MEMO 4: Using the outline below, please prepare a theological critique, or interpretive analysis of a theologian and his or her work.²¹

WRITING THE THEOLOGICAL CRITIQUE WELL: AN OUTLINE

- A. Introducing the Theologian/Author, His or Her Work, and Your Own Thesis/Purpose
 1. Age: Period when particular work was written (or begin with #5, below, if you prefer)
 2. Different “schools of thought” to which the theologian/author belongs
 3. Major events that may have influenced the author’s life and philosophy (e.g., war, poverty, the Holocaust)
 4. Major and/or general themes of the theological work addressed in the Critique
 5. *For example:* My goal in this critical analysis is to. . . . In order to do that, I will focus on the following. . . . First I will . . . ; then I will . . . ; in conclusion, I will. . . .
- B. Identifying the Main Theme/s for the Focus of Critique
 1. Identify the central problematic addressed by the theologian/author (e.g., what is s/he discussing and why?)
 2. State the major theoretical position/s (e.g., liberation theology, feminism, racism)
 3. State the major thematic position/s (the concrete ways in which the theory or subjects of the theory *experience* the theory or problematic; e.g., African American women’s racial and religious oppression and liberation)
- C. Correlating the Methodology and Data Used to Construct a Theological Position
 1. *Methodology:* How the theologian/author *names* and *organizes* his/her thoughts and experiences (e.g., critical correlation [Tracy]; feminist-critical evaluation [E. Schüssler Fiorenza]; hermeneutic of the black historical experience [Cone]).
 2. *Data:* The nature of the sources used, pro and con (e.g., biblical

sources; church documents; other theologians; historical/cultural materials; current philosophical, psychological, educational, political, sociological theories)

3. How do *methodology* and *data* correlate with each other in the work addressed?
- D. Analyzing the Theologian/Author’s Assumptions
 1. Classical and/or current thinkers drawn upon
 2. Interesting or critical issues raised in footnotes
 3. Current interpretations included in the theologian/author’s thinking (e.g., race, gender, class)
 4. Current interpretations excluded from the theologian/author’s thinking (e.g., feminism, multiculturalism, postcolonialism)
- E. Summarizing and Critiquing the Theologian/Author’s Conclusions, Concluding with Your Own Interpretive Analysis of the Theologian/Author’s Work
 1. Summary statement of the theologian/author’s conclusions
 2. Do they follow logically from the writing, the evidence, the data?
 3. Your agreement/disagreement with the theologian/author’s *theory*
 4. Your agreement/disagreement with the theologian/author’s *method*
 5. Your agreement/disagreement with the theologian/author’s *evidence*
 6. Your concluding critical interpretation of the theologian/author’s *contribution*

What Is a Constructive Theological Essay and How Shall We Write It?

At the beginning of this chapter, we asked what distinguished the theological essay from other kinds of essays. Looking first at a general definition of the essay, we saw that while the generic essay format provided a basic but adaptable structure for the process of thinking on paper in any discipline, the theological essay’s distinctiveness lay in its theological subject, purpose, structure, style, voice, and audience. However, in our discussion of the critical theological essay we also noted that the critical essay format was common to other disciplines as well.

The constructive theological essay, on the other hand, is not common to other academic disciplines. Its distinctiveness lies in its integration of rhetorical and theological processes. Just as writing theology well is a theological practice, so the practice of writing a constructive theological essay integrates the process of writing with that of constructing a theological position, hence “working out a theology as we go.” In other words, while the critical theological essay engaged us in the critique and interpretation of theological authors, concepts, positions, and practices, the constructive theological essay invites those who engage it not only to critique and interpret the theology of others but also to “do theology on paper.”

However, in order to "do theology on paper" in the form of a constructive theological essay, writers must not only know the rudiments of writing a coherent essay with a beginning, middle, and end in an inductive or deductive format; they must also know the rhetorical elements, or rhetorics, of the theological essay, which build upon induction and deduction but are also informed by the theological material being presented and the theological method employed. In the hands of theologians as diverse as Karl Rahner, Nicholas Lash, Gordon Kaufman, and Stanley Hauerwas, the constructive theological essay has become a paradigmatic form of contemporary theological writing.²² Before we try our hand at writing it, we ask: (1) What is a constructive theological essay and why do theologians write it? (2) What are the rhetorics of the constructive theological essay, and how do these rhetorics inform the writing of the essay? (3) How shall we write a constructive theological essay?

What is a constructive theological essay? The constructive theological essay is a subspecies of the theological essay, in which theologians construct a theological position in writing. As Gordon Kaufman writes, "theology [is] primarily an activity of construction—construction of a conception or picture of God, of human life, and of the world,"²³ and the constructive theological essay is the fruit of that activity. Whether it takes the shape of a critical analysis, a research paper, a lengthier thesis project, or a published book, this genre flourishes across the theological curriculum. It is not always recognized as a distinctive mode of theological writing, however, because a good constructive theological essay is like a chameleon. It changes its coloring to adapt to the theological location from which it is written, and its rhetorical "skin," the essay genre that frames it, is similarly adaptable to the needs of its audience.

Since the uses of this genre are as diverse as the theologians writing it, it is easier to describe what a constructive theological essay does than to define it precisely. If you have written a paper that required you not only to reflect upon, critique, analyze, or interpret the theology of others, but also to formulate your own theology in conversation with them, you have written a constructive theological essay. While professors will describe this essay in different ways, their goal will be to lure you from merely "reading" theology into the active process of "doing" theology. This genre can be described more specifically in terms of the *constructive method* that it employs, the *theological rhetorics* that inform the method, and the *essay structures* characterizing both of these.

What is a constructive method? The constructive theological essay has developed from the subdiscipline of constructive theology, which is a contemporary form of systematic theology. However, while classical systematic theology has been more concerned with a methodical exposition of the traditional elements of Christian faith within a particular doctrinal tradition, constructive theology engages that tradition in a contemporary conversation that moves beyond "what the tradition says" to "what it means today" in our present situation.

In order to make that move from "then" to "now," however, the theolog-

ical writer must also move beyond mere description or exposition of a theological position and enter the realm of the constructive imagination. Paul Tillich recognized this activity as integral to the systematic theologian's work when he observed, "In each [theological] system an experienced fragment of life and vision is drawn out constructively even to cover areas where life and vision are missing."²⁴ Thus, while Tillich identified the writing of systematic theology as "a constructive task" in his *Systematic Theology* fifty years ago,²⁵ more recently Gordon Kaufman has argued that all theology is human imaginative construction conceived in the face of the mystery that we call God, with the goal of critiquing (or deconstructing) inadequate conceptions of God and creating (or reconstructing) theologies that provide more adequate orientation for contemporary life.²⁶ While not all would arrogate such an exclusive role to the imagination in the writing of theology, all theologians who draw upon resources from the theological tradition to formulate theologies that are conversant with the present situation employ the constructive method in both its critical and constructive (or deconstructive and reconstructive) moments, as we shall see as we proceed.

What Are the Rhetorics of a Constructive Theological Essay and How Do They Inform Its Writing?

For the writer, to choose a rhetorical structure is also to employ a method (Greek *meta* + *hodos*: a way, or process of doing something), just as for the theologian, "method reaches into the content of theology to shape the very understanding of the subject matter."²⁷ For example, the method employed in writing the pastoral reflection paper, which affirmed the writer's own experience as a starting point for reflection, predisposed the paper to an "inductive rhetoric." On the other hand, we identified the method used to write the systematic reflection paper as "deductive rhetoric" from the general thesis statement that introduced the writer's "position" and the particularizing arguments that followed. Thus, it should not surprise us that different theological methods and the theologies they inform have different rhetorical structures, or rhetorics, that "shape the very understanding of the subject matter." We proceed, then, to examine the integration of method and structure in the theological method of correlation, looking both at the method and at the rhetoric undergirding the method.

The method of correlation. "As a method, it is as old as theology," Tillich writes of the method of correlation.²⁸ The goal of this method is a constructive interpretation of the Christian message in the light of contemporary reality. Toward this end, David Tracy engages the religious tradition in a "mutually critical conversation" with a question or problem arising from the present situation.²⁹ As Roger Haight explains, this "involves both criticism of present-day experience by the tradition and criticism of traditional symbols by present-day knowledge."³⁰ Elizabeth Johnson imagines this process as "braiding a footbridge" to describe the theological task of "connecting Christian tradition with the contemporary religious experience of women."³¹ Rosemary Radford

Ruether observes that "the correlation of original and authentic human nature (*imago dei*/Christ) over against diminished, fallen humanity has traditionally provided the basic structure of classical Christian theology."³² Finally, Haight asserts the centrality of this method when he writes, "... a method of correlation is not *a* method of theology, but *the* method of a discipline that seeks to preserve the meaning of the past but understand it in a distinctly present-day manner."³³

In this book I am interpreting the method of "correlation" broadly and I invite you to do the same. When Tillich first formulated this "structure of correlation," he imagined the Christian message as the "answer" to contemporary questions that might be addressed to it, and he envisaged the theologian's task as providing that answer for contemporary audiences through the method of correlation. In order to counter the implication that the religious tradition possesses all the "answers" to the complexity of our "ever-shifting cultural, political, ethical, and religious situation,"³⁴ contemporary theologians emphasize the "mutually critical" dialogue between tradition and contemporary situation inherent in the method. When interpreted as a dialogical process, this method provides theological writers with a rhetoric of correlation that will support the writing of a constructive theological essay from a variety of theological starting points.³⁵

Charting the Rhetorics of the Constructive Theological Essay:

Identification, Correlation, Suspicion, Construction

If you have written the pastoral reflection paper in chapter 2 or the systematic reflection paper in chapter 3, you have already used the method of correlation. However, you might not have noticed that a pattern of essay organization is built into the method of correlation that can be used to guide your own writing of a theological essay. As it unfolds in a constructive theological essay, the structure, or "rhetoric of correlation," comprises four parts: (1) *identification*, which introduces the question or problem that engenders the essay and proposes a thesis in response to the question; (2) *correlation*, which places the question in conversation with the relevant resources of the Christian tradition, hence "correlating" present questioning and traditional religious "answers"; (3) *suspicion*, which critiques the negative, problematic, or oppressive elements of the tradition in the light of the pressing question; and (4) *construction*, which fashions a constructive, or "answering" theology from the theological and cultural resources arising from the "mutually critical conversation" between question and tradition that is imagined, conceptualized, reformulated, and synthesized by the writer/theologian.³⁶

While I have enumerated these parts in the order in which they typically appear in a constructive theological essay, they should not be considered merely static building blocks piled one upon another by rote to form a finished structure. On the contrary, each constituent integrates dynamic theological and rhetorical processes that will interact variously according to the argument of the essay and the constructive imagination of its writer/theologian. We might better think of them as ingredients in a delicious stew that you have added in the par-

ticular order specified by the recipe, but to which you have added a distinctive "bouquet garni" from your own herb garden. As the pot simmers slowly on the stove, a savory but subtle mingling of flavors is produced that another cook might not have achieved, even after following the recipe to the letter and adding the meat, carrots, and potatoes to the pot in the same order.

Or to change the metaphor slightly, we might think of "correlation" as the dynamic platform that is both the foundation and the fulcrum that draws the argument forward into different stages of emphasis (from *question* to *correlation* to *critique* to *construction*). Thus, these parts can be imagined as layers in the density of an argument³⁷ that do not supersede each other but "gather to a greatness," as Gerard Manley Hopkins's images of "God's Grandeur" do in that poem. If we are indeed "working out a theology as we go" in the process of moving from question to correlation to critique to construction, we should expect all of these processes to be at work throughout the writing of the essay. Nevertheless, the following "map" presents each part sequentially to help us focus on them discretely, and correlates this structure in turn with the elements of the essay that we have already examined:

WRITING THE CONSTRUCTIVE THEOLOGICAL ESSAY WELL: A MAP OF "CORRELATION"

IDENTIFICATION (The Problematic)	Identifying the Theological Question/Thesis: <i>The writer/theologian identifies a theological question or problem and proposes a thesis that will focus and direct the theological process of correlation.</i>
CORRELATION (Exposition)	Establishing the Theological Correlation: <i>The writer/theologian establishes the grounds of the correlation through an analysis of the question in conversation with the Christian tradition.</i>
SUSPICION (Criticism)	Engaging a Dialogue of Critical Suspicion: <i>The writer/theologian engages the tradition in a dialogue of critical suspicion regarding its negative or oppressive elements to demonstrate the need for a constructive interpretation.</i>
CONSTRUCTION (Interpretation)	Completing the Theological Construction: <i>The writer constructs an answering theology through a synthetic integration of (1) his or her own theological imagination and experience; (2) the sources of Christian faith (the Bible, church documents, "tradition"); (3) the theological norm³⁸ deemed authoritative for the theologian and the community for whom he or she is writing.³⁹</i>

How, then, might this structure be useful in your own writing of a constructive theological essay? Any time that you write an essay that begins with a theological question that you proceed to "answer" using the resources of the Christian tradition in dialogue with your own experience, you will be using the rhetoric of correlation to structure your argument. If, for example, we take another look at the essay entitled "Was Jesus a Feminist?" in chapter 3 through the lens of a rhetoric of correlation, we will easily find (a) an opening question (Was Jesus a Feminist?) and thesis in response to the question; (b) an explanatory section that limits the parameters of the argument, defines necessary terms, and provides relevant textual information; (c) an "answer" that is asserted in concert with the theological norm being proposed ("contemporary women's experience of oppression and liberation"), substantiated with evidence from "earliest Christian traditions" related in New Testament sources, and correlated in terms of a "fusion of hermeneutical horizons that coalesce in the egalitarian vision of the *basileia*," through which vision "Jesus may be interpreted as a feminist."⁴⁰ The concluding "answer" correlates "Jesus" and "feminist," and in so doing constructs a theological position that was not implicit before the author conceived and completed the essay.

WRITING THE CONSTRUCTIVE THEOLOGICAL ESSAY WELL: A STRUCTURAL MAP

IDENTIFICATION Identifying the Theological Question/Thesis:
Question: Was Jesus a feminist?
Thesis: Interrogated by women's experience of oppression, the earliest Jesus traditions provide warrants for interpreting Jesus as a feminist.

CORRELATION Establishing the Theological Correlation:

A. FRAMING THE CORRELATION

I follow Elisabeth Schüssler Fiorenza's definition of feminism as "not just a theoretical world view or perspective but a women's liberation movement for social and ecclesiastical change" (*Bread Not Stone*, 5). Her feminist hermeneutic includes these warrants: (1) Jesus and the praxis of the earliest church as a biblical root model, prototype [36], and locus of revelation [34]; (2) the contemporary experience of women struggling for liberation as a correlative locus of revelation [34]; and (3) the *basileia* as the inextricable connection between both of these [153].⁴¹

B. DRAWING THE CORRELATION

According to the earliest Christian traditions, Jesus ate with poor

women and prostitutes; engaged and was engaged in conversations with non-Israelite and Gentile women; touched and was touched by ritually "unclean" women; traveled in the company of women patrons; healed crippled women on the Sabbath; advocated for widows; and appeared first to women after his resurrection. These traditions suggest that Jesus did not restrict women's roles to reproduction, child rearing, and the domestic sphere. Rather, he challenged patriarchal family structures oppressive to women, and invited women and men to share his egalitarian *basileia*.

SUSPICION

Engaging a Dialogue of Critical Suspicion:

The answers we receive from a text depend on the questions we ask and the hermeneutic we bring to the question. Thus, the question, Was Jesus a feminist? must first be asked before it can be answered, and the answer will be predisposed by the hermeneutic that frames the question.

CONSTRUCTION

Completing the Theological Construction:

Whether or not the question of Jesus and feminism was asked by first-century Palestinian women, women ask it today. Jesus' advocacy for women of his culture becomes a norm for women's experience of liberation from patriarchy, and their struggle to make the "*basileia* vision of Jesus" a reality today. Therefore, this fusion of hermeneutical horizons coalesces in the egalitarian vision of the *basileia*, and Jesus may be interpreted as a feminist.

Writing a Constructive Theological Essay of Your Own:

A Progressive Model

A constructive theological essay assignment will not always provide an opening question like Why do you follow Jesus? or Was Jesus a Feminist? More often, you will be invited to follow the fault lines of your own theological questions and concerns as they are exposed in the course of your own reading, writing, and reflection for a particular class. Moreover, most constructive theological essays also invite an active integration of "pastoral" and "systematic" styles. For example, in his "Introduction to Theology" class at Episcopal Divinity School, Christopher Duraisingh provides a "progressive model" for writing a constructive theological essay comprising three assignments that build upon one another strategically during the course of the semester. These assignments enable students to (1) generate their own questions from reflection on a particular theological or pastoral question; (2) correlate those questions with three theological sources that address the issue; (3) critically analyze and reformulate the issue in a constructive theological proposal that is oriented toward their own context.⁴²

Duraisingh's "progressive model" outlines a simple but cumulative process for writing a constructive theological essay of your own. For example, if you

were a theological student from Rwanda, you might have searching questions about the horrific genocide in which Christian churches and pastoral leaders were complicit. Those questions might lead you to biblical analogues and theological responses to the conflict; to the current literature on genocide; to the literature of conflict resolution, models of reconciliation, and so forth. In the process of your own analysis, synthesis, and imaginative appropriation of these sources, illuminated and critiqued by your own experience, you might craft a constructive theology of reconciliation for the Christian churches of Rwanda. Even if your particular theological questions and faith issues are closer to home, they will provide your own starting point for writing a constructive theological essay. In the following Theological Memo, I have adapted Duraisingh's three written assignments to outline a more flexible "three-draft process" that you are invited to adapt in turn to the requirements of your own constructive theological essay.

This "three-draft model" and Duraisingh's assignments on which it is based follow the structure of the "Rhetoric of Correlation," but move purposefully beyond a mere correlation model in their constructive method. For example, the movements of correlation and suspicion are not distinguished by different drafts, but coincide in drafts 2 and 3 of the model. This is as it should be. At times "correlation" will be the dominant motif, and the tradition will be critiqued but not deconstructed. At other times, "suspicion" will require radical deconstruction before the constructive synthesis can be performed. But just as the piano scales that one practices in individual crescendos as a child disappear into the accomplished pianist's performance of a concerto, so at the hands of a gifted theologian, the discrete theological rhetorics of identification, correlation, suspicion, and construction conspire to create a constructive theological proposal that is faithfully rendered in the constructive theological essay that inscribes it. With this goal in mind, it is time to try your hand at writing the constructive theological essay well:

THEOLOGICAL MEMO 5: Writing a Constructive Theological Essay in Three Drafts:

(1) *Reflecting*: In a freewriting exercise or journal entry, reflect on two or three theological questions or faith issues that you struggle with, and describe the shape that your struggle takes. After you have completed the reflection, reread what you have written. Is any one of the questions more pressing for you? Is there any logical or intuitive relationship between the issues you have raised? Can you formulate the questions/issues into one broad but compelling theological motif? Please identify that question, issue, or theme in a concise statement.

(2) *Correlating/Critiquing*: Choose three theologians who have addressed your theological issue in their writings, and write a seven- to eight-page "Correlation Paper" that (a) summarizes each theologian's contribution and (b) compares and contrasts each theological articulation of the issue. In a concluding section, weave your own theological reflection through the loom of these theological perspectives. What constructive elements have you found in

each position? What elements have elicited your critique and/or theological suspicion? Which element remains dominant for you?

(3) *Constructing*: Using the materials in the first two drafts, in concert with your own theological imagination, prepare a twenty-page "Constructive Theological Essay" that (a) articulates your pressing theological question; (b) presents the theological formulations of three authors in relation to this question; (c) compares, contrasts, and critically analyzes them from your own theological perspective; and (d) constructively reformulates the issue in dialogue with your own context.

CONCLUDING REFLECTIONS: WRITING THE CONSTRUCTIVE THEOLOGICAL ESSAY WELL

A novel has a story, a poem rhyme; but what art can the essayist use in these short lengths of prose to sting us wide awake and fix us in a trance which is not sleep but rather an intensification of life. . . ? He [or she] must know—that is the first essential—how to write.⁴³

Although Virginia Woolf's reflections on "The Modern Essay," quoted above, were originally addressed to writers of literary essays, they challenge writers of theological essays as well. How long has it been since you have read a constructive theological essay, or a theological essay of any kind, that was written so well that it "stung you wide awake" and "fixed you in a trance which [was] not sleep but rather an intensification of life?" How long has it been since you have written such an essay yourself? If this is a rarer occurrence than you would like to admit, it may be due to the fact that writing a theological essay is more often a means of conveying theological information than a stylistic end in itself. But think for a moment of the last time you read a theological essay that moved, inspired, challenged, or simply communicated with you clearly and forcefully. The author of that essay undoubtedly knew how to write!

We have already seen that the prerequisite of writing a good essay in any discipline is knowing how to write in a style that is in perfect accord with its subject matter, purpose, structure, voice, and audience, and theological writing is no exception to this rule. But what is that elusive quality that makes an essay "leap off the page" as we read it? While few since Augustine have identified it as a virtue of theological writing,⁴⁴ that quality is "pleasure."⁴⁵ Although not all theological authors may consider "giving pleasure" to their readers a priority, are not being moved, being inspired, and being challenged by an essay forms of pleasure?

You may protest that the goal of giving the reader pleasure is a luxury reserved for experienced and gifted writers, and certainly not for theological students. Yet the kind of pleasure that an essay gives is not only due to an author's distinctive gifts of creativity and expression, or even to the author's theological competence alone. As every one of your professors will attest, the

pleasure that an essay provides its reader also depends on its author's mastery of language and style, whether that author is a distinguished theologian or a theological student. If you are still with me as we conclude the fourth chapter of this book, and if you have been writing the Theological Memos along the way, I suspect that your professors have already found your own theological essays more pleasurable to read. Nonetheless, prompted by Augustine and Virginia Woolf, I conclude with nine ways to make a constructive theological essay even more pleasurable to your readers.

First, write about what matters to you, invoking all the resources of your own theological imagination. In order to leave room for your own theological imagination, the topic for a constructive theological essay is typically broad and unspecified. To narrow its focus, begin with "some fierce attachment to an idea," which Woolf describes as the backbone of a well-written essay.⁴⁶ If the original essay topic does not attract you, keep reading and reflecting until you find your own path into the subject. This does not mean abandoning the assigned topic, but rerouting it through your own center of gravity. What theological questions, ethical debates, justice issues, or pastoral commitments are currently engaging you? What courses have captured your imagination? What did you preach on last Sunday? The most pedestrian essay topic can be transformed into a passionate inquiry if you follow the compass of your theological imagination until it fixates unwaveringly upon a question and rewrite the topic in the light of that question.

Second, capitalize on your own strengths of style and voice. "To write like oneself and call it not writing is a much harder exercise in style than to write like [a writer you admire] and call it writing well," Woolf suggests.⁴⁷ While there is both precedent and pretext for imitating the style of accomplished theological writers,⁴⁸ it takes courage to "write like oneself" when writing academically. Yet the essay form is rooted in this kind of self-reflection, and the constructive theological essay allows its author a wide range of expression. Moreover, just as you speak in a different register to your professor than you do to an intimate friend, a constructive theological essay can be written in a formal academic voice or in the more conversational voice of the literary essayist, and still be written in "your own voice."⁴⁹

Third, provide a preliminary "map" of your essay for the reader in the introduction (or introductory section). If your readers are to travel with you for the length of an essay, whether it is five, ten, or twenty pages long, they will not go far without a map. In her introduction to "The Modern Essay," for example, Woolf moves deftly from the seeming "chaos" of the English essay genre to her assertion that one can find "principles" implicit in a well-written essay that will also chart its "progress through history."⁵⁰ While she does not tell her readers what those principles are at the outset, she has intimated a trail map by telling them what to look for ("principles") and in what order (a historical survey). Whether your essay is written in an inductive style that saves its full disclosure for the conclusion of the essay, or in a deductive style that begins with a straightforward statement of your thesis, readers will thank you for providing them with

a brief but suggestive outline of your essay at the outset. In so doing, you will also have provided yourself with a "short form" of your longer outline.

Fourth, write simply. Choose simple words whenever possible, however tempted you are to emulate your favorite theologian's technical vocabulary. "Of all forms of literature," Woolf declares, "the essay is the one which least calls for the use of long words."⁵¹ To write simply, the weight of your sentences should fall upon concrete nouns and active verbs, with adjectives and adverbs used to clarify and intensify the words they modify, not merely to decorate your essay. Moreover, simple sentences should follow a straightforward "subject/verb/object" word order, and compound or complex sentences should employ parallel sentence structure. Then, when you vary word order and sentence structure for accent and emphasis, it will be all the more effective.

Fifth, write precisely. To write precisely, according to Woolf, is to use language that is "exact," "imaginative," and "truthful."⁵² Perhaps you would not put these words together so readily to describe writing that is precise. However, as an equally accomplished writer of fiction and prose, she understood that to write precisely it was necessary to be imaginative as well, and to be imaginative required truthfulness. What else impels writers to select words that truthfully reflect their intended meaning and evoke more than they intend, rather than settling for the first word that comes to mind? The theological language of image, metaphor, and symbol requires this integration of precision and imagination, no less than technical theological terms, which you should use accurately and define clearly when necessary.

Sixth, write truthfully. To write truthfully transcends the precision of individual words, images, or definitions, to embrace the larger truth that you seek to communicate in your essay. "Truth will give it authority," Woolf concludes.⁵³ The truth of an essay inheres in its sentences because the writer makes statements by constructing assertions in sentences that ring with the writer's "truth." At times you will write what you know is true. At other times you will not know what is true until you write it. But you will know if a sentence is true if you do not have to revise it. If you must revise, keep doing so until what you want to say rings true, word by word and sentence by sentence.

Seventh, write constructively. An essay is constructed with words, sentences, and paragraphs that form a beginning, middle, and end. Within this structure, Woolf cautions, "the bounds are strict and facts have to be used in their nakedness."⁵⁴ Yet this does not entail weighing the reader down with pages of quoted "facts," but rather digesting that material for the reader into a cogent narrative that is written in the writer's own words.⁵⁵ Toward that end, each essay paragraph should present its material coherently, and each paragraph should build upon the previous one. Think of building each paragraph as if it were an essay in miniature, with (a) an opening sentence; (b) supporting and exemplifying sentences; and (c) a concluding and/or connecting sentence that moves toward the next paragraph. If the essay order seems inevitable when you have finished, you have written constructively. If gaps or incongruities remain, go back to the drawing board!

Eighth, connect the parts of the essay. Just as a well-wrought essay needs an introductory “map,” the best-written essay that does not provide transitions between sections of the essay will lose readers along the way. Readers need to be reminded where they are going, where they have been, and what to expect around the next bend, whether you are moving between paragraphs, sections, or chapters. Imagine these transitions as strips of Velcro fastening what you have just said to what you are about to say, whether they are as short as a word (“First”; “Next”; “Finally”) or as long as a sentence or paragraph (“In this section we have seen . . . (a) . . . (b) . . . and (c). However, it is still not clear why (d) and (e). In the next section, then, we will explore each of these in turn before presenting a constructive theology of . . . (f) in the light of this discussion”).

Finally, revise until you get it right, but reserve the right to keep revising. As Montaigne first defined it and Kathleen Norris corroborates, “The essay . . . is merely an attempt.”⁵⁶ In other words, it is a work in progress. It does not have to be perfect. However, few people can write an essay well without revising it. Your final draft should reflect as much revision as is required to allow you to send it on its way confidently to its reader. If your professor, classmate, or writing tutor is willing to read a penultimate draft of your essay before you turn in your final draft, so much the better. While it is not always possible to receive feedback while the paper is in progress, it is also helpful to think of a completed theological essay as a work in progress, open to further conversation and continuing revision in the light of that conversation. If your professor’s comments on your completed essay continue the theological conversation the essay began, whether by questioning, critiquing, commending, or referring you to other pertinent sources, that is a good sign. Your essay has succeeded—at least enough to evoke a theological response—in giving that reader pleasure, and you have demonstrated that you know how to write the constructive theological essay well.

In this chapter we have asked, “What is it that makes an essay theological?” “How shall we write a theological essay?” In response to these questions we have followed the essay from its literary genre to its theological species. We have identified the elements of the critical theological essay and the rhetorics of the constructive theological essay. Finally, you have been invited to write a constructive theological essay that integrates both pastoral and systematic styles, using all of these resources. Whether your courses involve the writing of critical or constructive essays, your mastery of the essay form, with its carefully crafted beginning, middle, and end, will bode well for you in any paper you are assigned to write. But most essays require some form of research, whether the sources are included in your class readings or invite your own investigation. Without leaving the theological essay behind, in the next two chapters we quarry theological research as a resource for writing theology and probe the process of writing theological research well, employing rhetorics of *research* and *investigation* (chapter 5) and *organization* and *documentation* (chapter 6).

Part II

Writing Theological and Biblical Research Well