# Some Tips for Reading Theology

Dr. Jeremy Garber

updated August 1, 2018

Many students have asked me over my 15 years of teaching, “How am I supposed to understand all this theology stuff anyway?” Following are some practical and hopefully helpful suggestions I’ve learned after years of reading theology for fun and academic credit.

1. **Read until it makes sense.** This is a great strategy for reading anything, from theology to murder mysteries. If you come across a passage or word you don’t understand, mentally file it, but keep going on. Most well-written works will explain things later.
2. **Mark it up.** I love books. I used to think this meant leaving them shining, white, and pristine. This is not a good way to approach complicated writing. Theology is systematic; it builds on itself and has a logical progression. See if you can identify that progression by highlighting the author’s main points and the evidence they use to support those points; don’t just mark stuff that’s interesting or frustrating (although that’s important too). I have developed a diverse system of underlining, check marks, question marks, stars, and exclamation points. Figure out a system that will help you identify the arguments.
3. **Know what you don’t know.** So you’ve gone through and made outlines of the author’s arguments, and there’s still stuff you don’t get. That’s important. Keep a separate running list of questions you have, and more importantly, their answers. This list can prove very valuable come exam time, and may even give you ideas for research topics.
4. **Look it up.** If reading further or identifying arguments fails, use other resources. Paul and I are resources, in person and via e-mail. Donald McKim’s *Westminster Dictionary of Theological Terms* (Westminster John Knox, 1996) is a fine resource for brief and helpful definition of theological terms. Paul and I can recommend others.
5. **Memorize.** Theology is like learning another language; there are just times you going to have to sit and pound definitions into your brain, just like vocabulary. If you can’t remember what “ecclesiology” means, sit there and repeat its definition until you are sick of it.
6. **Use your senses.** There are lots of methods other than simple reading or repetition to learn. One of my study partners from seminary and I created a little song to remember our terms in our theology class (“Ecclesiology – church! Eschatology – the end!” No, I won’t sing it for you.) Use different colors of highlighter. Say things out loud, or sing them. Write words on your mirror with dry-erase markers. Sculpt a timeline of theologians out of Play-Doh. Whatever it takes.
7. **Talk about it.** This is the brilliance of the theological lounging requirement. One of the best ways I’ve found to understand theology is to discuss it with other people. Talk about what you don’t understand, what’s new and interesting, what you hate. Someone else may have some neat insight or song or woodcarving that will help you learn it too. If you at all lean that way, study groups are invaluable to helping you understand.

**Learn well, and happy theologizing!**