

# OBJECTIVE RESEARCH? IN THE SEMINARY?

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## Abstract

Common understandings of “objective” research include values such as “factual” and “interpretive neutrality”. There is a growing consensus that the person doing the research, counts as much as if not more in the interpretive outcomes than the “facts” alone, and that “interpretive neutrality” is not possible.

The poster explores an alternative framing of “objective research” as the grounded, intentional and savvy analysis of an “object” in conversation with a community of peers/experts for the purpose of creating knowledge.

Following Ferraris’ ontology, three classes of “objects” exist.

- **Natural objects:** exist whether or not a person notices them. Example: table, tree. Seminary application: Archaeological artifacts.
- **Ideal objects:** exist even though only a mind can conceive of them. Example: triangle. Seminary application: Systematic theology.
- **Social objects:** only exist in a social context. Example: documents (authored by a person for a reader in a specific context for a purpose). Seminary application: Biblical Exegesis, Church History, Christian Ministry, Missiology.

Thus, within the Seminary curriculum, research assignments could be considered *objective* while still engaging the full hermeneutical persona of the author.

## Problem Statement

How should novice researchers think about library sources when doing “academic research”? To many, it involves finding a few articles on a topic in a library database. The focus is on the technology and the publishing format, not the content. All disciplines need the resources provided by the library, but how the resources play into the research learning that takes place varies from discipline to discipline.

## Definitions

Research is the *grounded, intentional and savvy analysis* of an “object” in *conversation with a community* of peers/experts for the purpose of *creating knowledge*. The definition assumes a “published” document as closure.

**“Grounded”** — (a) Sufficient knowledge to identify, understand and appreciate the “object” to be studied, including the capacity to ask the right questions. (b) Sufficient awareness in the appropriate methods of analysis for the object.

**“Intentional”** — (a) Purposeful, *telos* focused, such as in answering a research question. (b) Methodological rigor. (c) Learning driven, so that when the research project is completed, new knowledge is acquired. (d) An audience or readership constantly in mind.

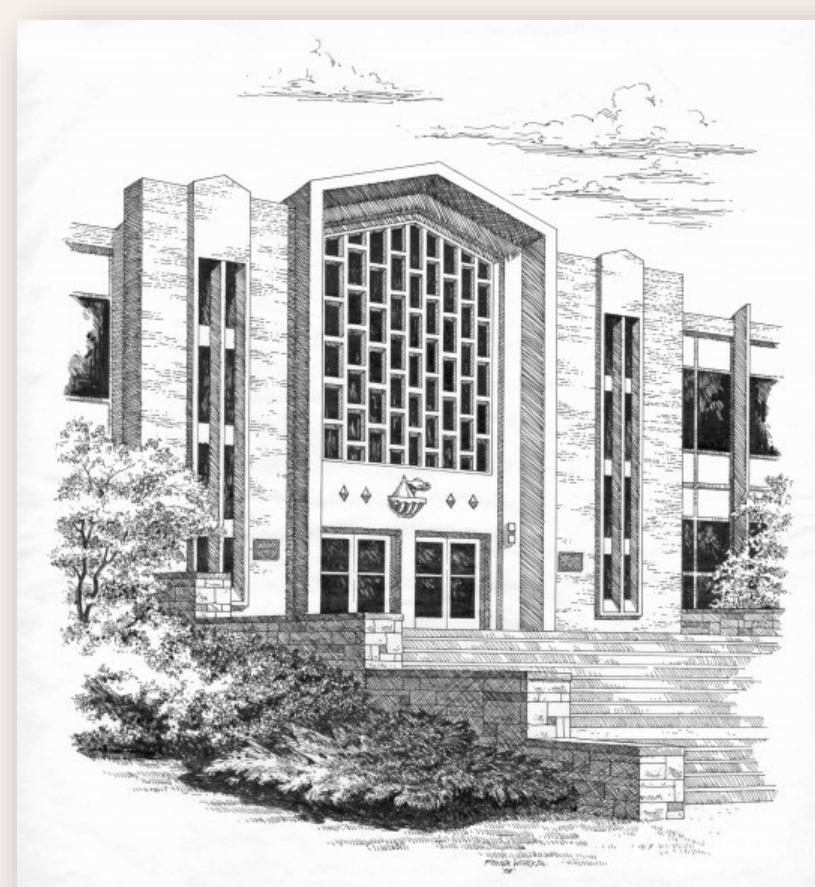
**“Savvy”** — (a) Attentive to the *ethos* of the disciplinary community within which the “object” has meaning. (b) Charitably, but not naively, allowing for the normal constraints on veridical communication through commodified documentation, such as the author’s time, place, audience, language, technology, access to information, documentation parameters, etc.

**“Analysis”** — Submitting the “object” to careful, thorough, systematic examination using the best practices as developed within a discipline. This anticipates the researcher stepping apart from and outside the “object.”

**“Conversation with a Community”** — Knowledge/experience at first hand is delimited by time and location of the subject. Most knowledge is acquired second hand. It is wise to learn from the trustworthy and authoritative members of the community of experts in the area of interest. Conversation can be understood as intelligent and creative authors sharing their best thoughts on the subject, not as arbiters of absolute truth.

**“Creating Knowledge”** — (a) Learning. (b) Contributing to the collective knowledge of the community through competent documentation. The classic definition of knowledge is justified true belief. A belief is considered justified if it (1) corresponds to reality; (2) it fits or is coherent with other knowledge; and/or (3) it works.

## References



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## OBJECTS

**Natural Objects** — An example of research on “natural objects” in the Seminary is the work that engages the artifacts proper in the Horn Museum. The “Primary Sources” are the artifacts themselves, and serve as the focus of the research. “Tertiary Sources”



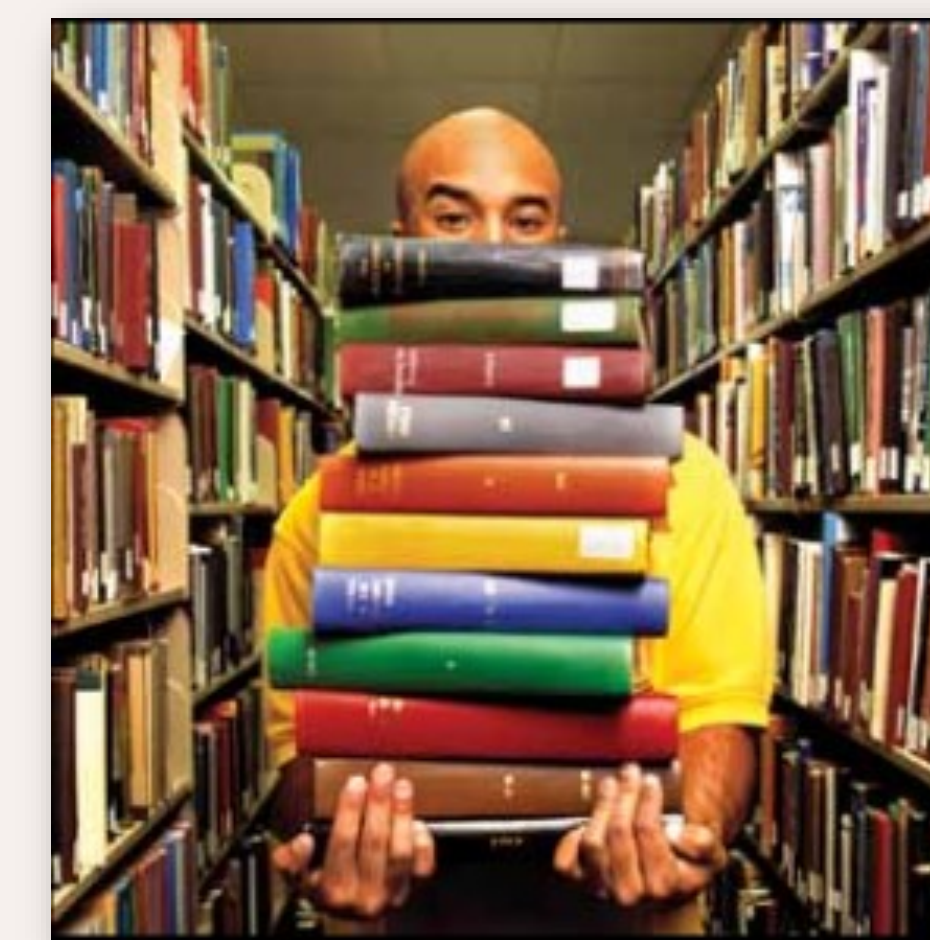
include the various reference sources used to interpret the artifact perhaps including time, location, and translation of any writing. “Secondary Sources” include any of the writings that discuss the object itself, or objects like it. Library resources include the secondary and tertiary sources that document the analysis of the object within the community of experts. Research that creates new knowledge may include a rigorous description of the object, with defensible interpretations of its origin and purpose. New knowledge may also be created by correcting prior misconceptions.



**Ideal Objects** — An example of research on “ideal objects” in the Seminary is the work that endeavors to understand the abstractions associated with systematic theology and ethics. The “object” is an idea, an abstraction, so

the standard method for analyzing the abstraction is to critique the various attempts to explain it. Another approach is to seek a method by which to critique the object with reference to other similar objects. Either approach is informed by library resources. “Tertiary Sources” are useful for establishing common language and capturing the context. “Secondary Sources” enrich the conversation on the object and have the potential to fill in a any gaps in the researcher’s thinking processes. Research that creates new knowledge may make significant connections between ideas or fill in gaps in the collective knowledge.

**Social Objects** — An example of research on “social objects” in the Seminary is the work that engages the reified and commodified information that authors have created to communicate some thing to readers for a purpose. The “Primary Sources” are the texts themselves, which then serve as the focus and anchor of the research. The most pertinent text for study is that of the Holy Scriptures. “Tertiary Sources” include the various reference sources used to interpret the texts, including works that elucidate the time, location, language and audience of the author. “Secondary Sources” include any of the writings that discuss the text itself, and can be considered as the “conversation” of scholars. The library resources include the primary object, as well as the secondary and tertiary sources that document the analysis of the object within the community of experts. Research that creates new knowledge may include a rigorous description of the object as both a communication medium and a message from an author to a reader, with defensible interpretations of its origins and purpose in view of both author and reader. New knowledge may also be created by correcting prior misconceptions. This becomes interesting as it informs timeless human values that remain pertinent today.



## What About the Researcher?

Many conversations about the “researcher” emphasize an expectation that she will approach a topic with an “open mind.” Concerns about bias and “selective hearing” may be valid. However, because the “object” in this framing remains external to the researcher, the commodified expression of the findings of the researcher are then open to being verified and validated by others as a newly created object in and of itself. This should not be disconcerting. While each and every author lives within the same constraints of time, place, language, etc., each author also brings to the conversation the benefit of her expertise and experience. Thus it is in the robust conversation of many that a clearer understanding of the truth can be achieved.

In 2 Peter 1:3-7, a positive orientation on this question is offered. “His divine power has given us everything we need for a godly life through our knowledge of him who called us by his own glory and goodness. Through these he has given us his very great and precious promises, so that through them you may participate in the divine nature, having escaped the corruption in the world caused by evil desires. For this very reason, make every effort to add to your faith goodness; and to goodness, knowledge; and to knowledge, self-control; and to self-control, perseverance; and to perseverance, godliness; and to godliness, mutual affection; and to mutual affection, love.” NIV.

According to this, the *telos* of research is to honor the calling to “participate in the divine nature” by “making every effort” to add the virtue of “knowledge.” While a consumerist mindset might picture this quantitatively, Peter reminds that it is qualitative knowledge, and that the full flourishing of this knowledge in the life will lead to love.

Thus, the researcher who is fulfilling her vocation, making every effort to grow in virtue, can trust her work will be fruitful, that her efforts will be rewarded, that she will grow in knowledge. This path can be pursued with delight because she can trust that “the Lord knows how to rescue the godly from trials” (2Pet 2:9), and that by grace it is possible to learn and grow.

	Class of object	Primary Sources	Secondary Sources	Tertiary Sources
This Poster	Ideal Object, Information Literacy	ACRL Ferraris	Balance of references as listed	Reference resources
Archaeology Report	Natural Object	Artifacts First hand documentation	Articles	Reference resources
Exegesis Paper	Social Object	The text in the original language	Commentaries, Articles	Language tools Translations Encyclopedias
Church History Paper	Social Object	Texts from the era under study	Articles, books	Reference resources
Doctrinal Study	Ideal Object	Selected works on the doctrine, usually standard	Articles, books	References

## Concluding Observations

The accomplished researcher may understand tacitly this ontological framework, and may appreciate the nuances that emerge with increasing levels of abstraction. On the other hand, the novice researcher would benefit from an intentional application of this ontology to specific research assignments. This would address typical assumptions that “research” can only be done one way, that it is done the same way regardless of the topic, that it is about technology and not about knowledge.

This ontology may provide a novice researcher a way of thinking that clarifies the process in a multidisciplinary context, facilitating shifts from one class of object to another.







