

## Empowering theological research: promoting information literacy in the digital age

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# *Empowering Theological Research*

*Promoting Information Literacy in the Digital Age*

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One might ask what a chapter on information literacy (IL) is doing in a handbook explicitly focused on theological library services. The question is understandable and indeed justified, as the term “information literacy” and the concept underlying it are still comparatively recent. They emerged in the 1970s (Griesbaum 2023, 582–83) and are therefore significantly younger than the libraries’ core services, which have been offered for centuries (Attar 2015).<sup>1</sup> This chapter, therefore, argues that promoting IL—especially in the digital age—is one of the most essential services of modern libraries and should be seen as integral to the service portfolio of theological libraries.

## Information Literacy

To begin, we must clarify the concept of IL. Within the scope of this brief contribution, it is not possible to offer a comprehensive explanation of this complex and multifaceted term; for that, reference should be made to the extensive specialist literature.<sup>2</sup> For our purposes, however, two important definitions will suffice. The British Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals (CILIP), for instance, defines IL as “[...] the ability to think critically and make balanced judgements about any information we find and use. It empowers us as citizens to reach and express informed views and to engage fully with society” (CILIP 2018, 3). IL is not regarded here as a special skill or competence, but rather as “a set of skills and abilities which everyone needs to undertake information-related tasks.”

A very similar understanding is also found in the *IL Framework* developed by the Association of College and Research Libraries, and can be considered the most widely adopted and comprehensive description of IL currently available. This framework likewise conceives of IL in terms of “metaliteracy” (ACRL 2016, 2) and defines it as follows: “Information literacy is the set of integrated abilities encompassing the reflective discovery of information, the understanding of how information is produced and valued, and the use of information in creating new knowledge and participating ethically in communities of learning” (3).<sup>3</sup>

The now-rescinded *Information Literacy Competency Standards for Higher Education* (ACRL 2000) likewise offers a lucid description of what IL can mean and which component skills must be developed in order to be considered fully information literate. According to the standards, “an information literate individual” must be able to “determine the extent of information needed,” “access the needed information effectively and efficiently,” “evaluate information and its sources critically,” “incorporate selected information into one’s knowledge base,” “use information effectively to accomplish a specific purpose,” and “understand the economic, legal, and social issues surrounding the use of information, and access and use information ethically and legally” (2–3). In summary, IL can be described as a *metaliteracy that encompasses a range of individual literacies, abilities, and skills that are necessary in order to search for, locate, evaluate, process, and use information in a targeted and responsible manner.*

Librarians possess special expertise in the area of IL, due to their intrinsic connection to literature and research. They are therefore exceptionally well-positioned to promote and convey this competence to their users. IL is required not exclusively, but especially in the context of academic work, where it is essential to identify and assess information and to place it creatively into new contexts. This is particularly true for all branches of academic theology, which explicitly employs scholarly methodologies and thus sees itself bound by strict adherence to academic principles (Müller 2016).<sup>4</sup>

The general objectives of academic theological libraries in the field of IL may therefore be understood to include the strengthening of theological research for their respective user groups, the assurance of high-quality research outcomes, and the empowerment of users to engage independently and competently with information in accordance with scholarly standards. As these libraries are typically based at universities, seminaries, and other theological institutions of higher education, the following section focuses on how they can help students and researchers develop the advanced IL skills needed for their studies and future professional roles.

## *Theology and IL*

The most distinctive feature of theological libraries is rooted in the nature of theology itself. Theology is characterized by a high degree of interdisciplinarity, as few other disciplines within the humanities encompass such a broad range of subjects. Its fundamental division into historical, systematic, practical, and biblical theology makes it like a cross-section of the humanities (Raffelt 2012)—or, as Pascal (1958) put it, “Theology is a science, but at the same time, how many sciences?” (36).

Depending on the specific research focus and subfield, theology draws on a wide range of literature—from ancient and modern texts to manuscripts, digital publications, catalogs, and databases—alongside a broad spectrum of research methods. These range from quantitative-empirical approaches, for instance in religious education or Christian social sciences, to juridical methods as found in canon law, or to distinctly historical or literary methodologies used in church history or biblical studies. This breadth makes both theological study and research complex undertakings.

This complexity is reflected in the holdings and services of theological libraries, which must provide access to varied resources and discovery tools—from traditional catalogs to AI-supported systems—whose effective use requires user training. Teaching research techniques is thus central to promoting IL. Yet in today's digital world, this must be complemented by instruction on information handling and critical reflection.

## *IL in Theological Contexts: Instructional Content*

In light of these diverse requirements and responsibilities, the following provides an overview of various topics that may be addressed in IL instruction within theological libraries. This is not intended to be an exhaustive list, but rather a representative selection that should be adapted to the specific needs of each institution. Overall, close collaboration between librarians and teaching faculty is strongly recommended to ensure that IL offerings are well aligned with the theological curriculum.

### *Navigating Library Collections and Services*

Despite rapid digital developments, it remains essential to familiarize users with the library catalog and its technical features, even in an era of expanding digital services and artificial intelligence (AI). Especially in the humanities, research typically begins with one's own library. Using electronic catalogs effectively requires a basic understanding of search techniques, such as truncation, faceted navigation, known-item and subject searches, and Boolean operators (Wiesenmüller 2012). Equally important is a general introduction to library services and facilities, including layout (particularly in larger institutions), opening hours, borrowing policies, interlibrary loan options, and available technologies.

### *Academic Search Engines*

In contemporary scholarly research, academic search engines also play a central role, particularly for bibliographic searches and the

retrieval of journal articles. These platforms provide an easy entry point for accessing academic literature. At the same time, the landscape of search engines is utterly diverse, and different inquiries often require different tools. Academic search engines vary, for example, with regard to their coverage (open access versus licensed content), their underlying data sources (indexing services versus full-text databases), and their ranking algorithms. Understanding these differences is essential, as they directly affect the scope, quality, and transparency of search results. In this context it is clear that not every search engine is suitable for every purpose; therefore, users need training, which also offers the potential to improve their general search strategies (Lewandowski 2012).

### *Reference Management*

Given the vast amount of literature identified through digital research, it is essential to collect and organize this material efficiently. Reference management software helps automate the archiving of sources and bibliographic data, reducing errors through consistent citations and supporting the writing process (for example, by inserting citations directly into text processing software and by allowing users to switch between different citation styles or types with minimal effort). Students and even researchers are not always familiar with these tools, and that is why training in their use represents a valuable element of a library's IL offerings. Beyond these basic functions, reference management systems support the structured organization of personal literature collections, enable the annotation and tagging of sources, and help users keep track of relevant literature over time, including collaboratively, which is particularly pertinent for longer-term or larger research projects. Given the large number of sources that must be cited in most scholarly work and the high standards of accuracy rightly expected in academic research, reference management software—widely available, including through open-source solutions—offers clear advantages over manual citation practices.

Within the broader context of digital IL, the concept of “AI literacy” is gaining importance and should be reflected within IL-training programs. The term is defined as “a set of competencies that enables individuals to evaluate AI technologies critically; communicate and collaborate effectively with AI; and use AI as a tool online, at home, and in the workplace” (Long and Magerko 2020, 2). Since the release of ChatGPT in 2022, the potential of generative AI (GenAI) has gained widespread recognition and is now a common element in academic work. AI is used in various phases of research and teaching—from identifying topics and generating search strings to conducting literature searches, analyzing documents, supporting writing, and preparing presentations.<sup>5</sup>

Librarians face both the challenge and the responsibility of supporting users not only theoretically but also practically in the use of AI-based tools. Such approaches include low-threshold offerings, such as brief explanations of how GenAI works, its applications in literature research, and typical pitfalls, including hallucinations or bias. Instruction should also emphasize the importance of a critical and reflective approach to AI-generated content, including the careful verification of its authenticity and accuracy (Cox and de Brasdefer 2025).

In this context, AI literacy also includes the ability to critically assess the authenticity and quality of research outputs, including the identification of fabricated or misleading content that may resemble legitimate scientific work. Library users need to be supported in evaluating and processing information responsibly, so they can recognize misinformation, manipulation, and bias, and are able to identify and verify trustworthy sources. For libraries, fostering these competencies is therefore a key aim, enabling students and researchers to navigate the opportunities and risks of digital transformation independently (IFLA 2017).

## *Practical Implementation of IL Instruction in (Theological) Libraries*

Teaching information and AI literacy also requires thoughtful consideration of its practical or instructional implementation in libraries—an implementation that must be tailored to the specific needs of various user groups.<sup>6</sup> A long-term goal in this regard is the integration of IL offerings into the curricula of theological degree programs, thereby making them an integral part of academic study. As noted, the content should be closely linked to the respective disciplinary requirements. At the same time, embedding IL instruction into academic teaching presents challenges and requires persistence and long-term commitment on the part of the library (Farrell and Badke 2015).

Regarding concrete didactic implementation, various formats can be distinguished. Traditional in-person formats, such as training sessions and workshops, remain valuable for practicing specific tools and addressing individual questions. These are increasingly complemented by hybrid and fully digital formats, including webinars and e-learning platforms. Digital learning materials, particularly screencasts and instructional videos, enable flexible, location-independent learning.<sup>7</sup> The concept of blended learning, which combines in-person and online components, offers particularly effective opportunities to ensure an optimal learning experience and to foster student engagement (de Bruijn-Smolters and Prinsen 2024).

### *Challenges*

In practice, teaching comprehensive and differentiated IL presents theological libraries with several challenges. A key difficulty lies in the heterogeneity of users, who vary widely in prior knowledge and expectations. First-year students need basic introductions to library tools and academic standards, while researchers typically pose more advanced questions. This calls for a tiered IL program tailored to varying levels of competence. However, libraries in this case often face structural limitations, such as limited staff, funding, and technical infrastructure, as well as a lack of professional development in emerging areas. It is therefore essential to regularly evaluate existing

offerings to ensure their relevance and efficient use of the available resources. Such review processes should be firmly embedded within the library's overall IL strategy (Franke 2024).

### *Comprehensive IL*

Promoting a comprehensive approach to IL goes beyond teaching technical research skills and tool usage. It is closely linked to research ethics and responsible information practices. Library instruction can therefore address core academic standards, such as preventing plagiarism, fostering a culture of deliberate citation, and understanding copyright and intellectual property. In the digital age—and especially with the spread of AI-generated content—these ethical principles are more important than ever. Because digital content often appears to be easily accessible and convenient, students and researchers must be empowered to examine it critically, with attention to its origin, authenticity, scholarly integrity, and lawful use. The goal is to educate users not only to be technically proficient but also to become responsible, ethically reflective scholars capable of navigating complex digital information environments (UNESCO and Frau-Meigs 2024).

### *Conclusion*

IL is increasingly proving to be a strategic area of action for theological libraries. By continually developing their services and methods, libraries can respond flexibly to changes in the research, teaching, and digital technology landscapes, thereby ensuring their long-term viability. IL remains a central and indispensable prerequisite for preparing researchers and students to meet the ever-evolving demands of academia and society. As essential partners of theological faculties, libraries thus make a vital contribution to educating mature and responsible scholars who are equipped to engage with information critically and reflectively.

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## Notes

- 1 For further information on the history of IL, see Leaning (2017, 33–51).
- 2 For example, Smiley (2019), Hicks et al. (2024), or Sühl-Strohmenger (2016).
- 3 A highly differentiated concept of metaliteracy in the context of IL can be found, for example, in Mackey and Jacobson (2014).
- 4 “Theology, if it is to fulfill its task, cannot limit itself to a simple discourse of faith or to a mere exposition of church doctrine. Such a limitation would entail, among other things, the risk of a fundamentalist approach to scriptural interpretation—one that makes no hermeneutical distinction between the content of a statement and its embedding within a particular worldview. It would also risk a fruitless, purely positivistic appeal to revelation or ecclesiastical authority. Yet faith is not merely an affective disposition of the soul; rather, it constitutes a personal relationship with God, who reveals Himself in word and event through His historical self-communication as the overarching guiding idea of human experience and the search for truth. Precisely for this reason, human beings are necessarily referred to reason, by which they respond appropriately to the entirety of their experience of the world” (Müller 2016, 21; translation by the author).
- 5 For a comprehensive overview of the topic from a general perspective, see Cox and Mazumdar (2024). For the specific context of literature searching with AI, see Walder (2025).
- 6 A detailed overview of the diverse tasks and organizational models of the teaching library is provided, for example, by Franke and Krähling-Pilarek (2024).
- 7 Comprehensive presentations of library instructional concepts, exercises, and teaching designs can be found, among others, in Burkhardt (2016) and Hanke and Sühl-Strohmenger (2016). For professional development possibilities in this field see Wong (2019).

