



# Library Guides #5

## Evaluating books

Don't judge (only) by its cover

In order to research well, you need to be able to evaluate books effectively. This means working out a book's purpose and its relevance to your topic. Evaluating books effectively takes a lot of practice. This guide gives some hints for starting out.

### Relevance

- A common mistake students make is to borrow irrelevant books and waste time reading them. You need to be able to get quickly to the information that is going to help you answer your question.

#### (a) Checking the catalogue record for relevance

- Just because the title of a book contains the key word you're looking for doesn't make it relevant.
- Is it using the keyword in the same way as your question?
- Make sure it's not too specific - *Tudor apocalypse: sixteenth century apocalypticism, millenarianism and the English Reformation* is about the return of Jesus, but only in the context of 16<sup>th</sup> century English church history. It is not helpful for an assignment on the return of Jesus in the gospels – or for a different period of church history.
- The subject headings in the catalogue records will give you more clues as to what the book is about. In the example below, you can see the subjects give you some information not found in the title. (If a subject is blue, you can click on it to see other books with the same subject heading.)
- In this example, the contents is also listed under 'Article text'. Some records will have contents records



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### Rome and Jerusalem : the dash of ancient civilizations / Martin Goodman. (2008)

<p><b>Authors:</b> Goodman, Martin</p> <p><b>Holdings:</b></p> <p><a href="#">Less info</a></p>	<p><b>Branch</b> Library</p> <p><b>Collection</b> Popular Collection</p> <p><b>Imprint:</b> London: <a href="#">Penguin</a> (145), 2008</p> <p><b>Description:</b> xiv, 638 p. : ill., maps ; 20 cm.</p> <p><b>Subjects:</b> <a href="#">Jews - History - 168 B.C.-135 A.D</a> ; <a href="#">Jews - Palestine - Politics and government</a> ; <a href="#">Jews - Rome - History</a> ; <a href="#">Judaism - History - Post-exilic period, 586 B.C.-210 A.D</a> (3) ; <a href="#">Palestine - Kings and rulers</a></p> <p><b>Notes:</b> Includes bibliographical references and index.</p> <p><b>ISBN:</b> 9780375726132 (pbk.)</p> <p><b>Article Text:</b> The main witness -- The destruction of Jerusalem, 66-70 CE -- A tale of two cities -- One world under Rome -- Diversity and toleration -- Identities -- Communities -- Perspectives -- Lifestyles -- Government -- Politics -- Romans and Jews -- The road to destruction, 37 BCE-70 CE -- Reactions, 70-312 CE -- The growth of the church -- A new Rome and a new Jerusalem -- The origins of antisemitism.</p>	<p><b>Classification</b> P933 GOO</p>	<p><b>Copies</b> 1 Copy</p>	<p><b>Status</b> In Process</p>	<p><a href="#">List</a></p>
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and others will not. Contents pages give you an excellent idea of what is in a book. Make sure you check them and compare to your topic.

- If a book looks promising enough from the catalogue, write down its Classification number and find it on the shelf. You can then do some further evaluation.

#### (b) Checking the book itself for relevance

- Usually, the blurb on the back of the book will explain what the book is about. Is your topic within its scope?
- If you didn't see the contents record on the catalogue, look at the contents page in the actual book.
- The other place to look is the index at the back of the book - see what references there are to your topic. You might need to think of synonyms (other terms for the same topic).
  - If there are only a couple of one page references, the book won't be very relevant. A range of pages – eg '4-8' or '4ff' – indicates the topic is discussed for a number of pages, meaning it is more likely to be helpful.

## Age

- Generally, the more recent a book is, the better – it will be more relevant and up to date. This matters more for some subjects more than others. For pastoral theology (ministry) subjects, you need very up to date books, as the context of ministry changes so fast.
- Every field has classics which are still important even though they are old. If it is a book which recent authors are still discussing, then it is probably a classic.
- As a general rule, you should prefer books from the last ten to twenty years.
- You can limit the results on your catalogue search by age. On the advanced search screen, it is the 'Year from' field. If you want to find recent books on a topic, you might put '2000' or '2005' in this field and you will only get results from that year to the present.
- Watch out for books which are reprints of much older books. Some publishers reprint out-of-copyright books which look new but are actually decades or centuries old.

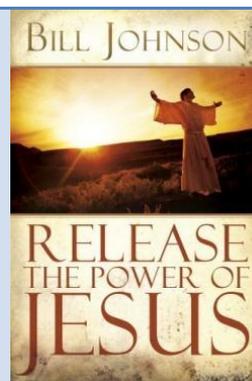
## Authority

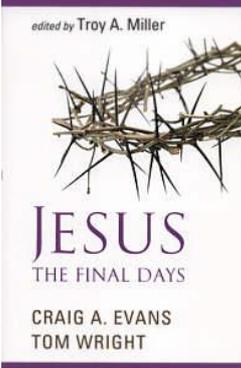
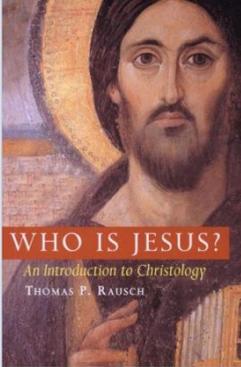
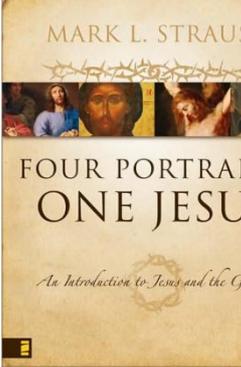
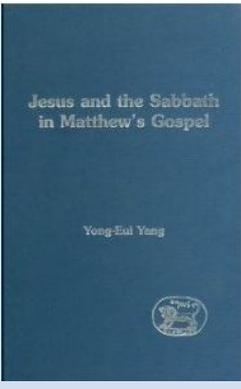
- Weighing up a book's authority is a difficult skill. It is not a precise science, but it is important. It is basically a measure of how seriously the book is taken within the theological world. You should use authoritative books as much as possible and be cautious about using books lacking any authority.
- If your lecturer has recommended a book by talking about it or referring to it in your unit outline, consider it authoritative! After all, your lecturer is the one marking your assessment.
- A book by an acknowledged expert in the field and published by a major publisher will hold a lot of authority. Books by authors with no qualifications and books published by small presses or self-published hold less authority. (There is a list of many of the major theology publishers at the end of this guide.)
- See if the book gives any information about the author – does he or she hold a post at a university or seminary? Is there some other indication that they are an expert in the field?
- Is the book endorsed by other experts in the field with comments on the back cover or front page?
- The use of bibliographical references adds credibility to a book – check to see how much the book refers to other works.
- If you can't determine a book's authority, don't worry too much, but be cautious about relying on it extensively.

## Types of books

If you found five Christian books written on the same subject, they might all have very different purposes. Here are some of the main types of books according to their purposes:

<i>Type</i>	<i>Description</i>	<i>Clues you might be holding one of these</i>
<b>Devotional and Christian living books</b>	These aim to inspire; they are rarely helpful for assignments.	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• It's a best-seller at Koorong</li> <li>• The writer is not an academic</li> <li>• No index</li> <li>• No bibliographic references</li> <li>• Not usually found in the Vose Library.</li> </ul>



<p><b>Popular treatments</b></p>	<p>There are books aimed at the general reader. They're not usually too long or technical, but they still might be written by an expert in the field.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Usually less than 200 pages</li> <li>• The writer is an academic</li> </ul>	
<p><b>Introductions</b></p>	<p>These are often an excellent starting point for any particular subject. They aim to give you a picture of the main points of a subject, as well as a range of opinions and issues.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Usually has 'introduction' in the title</li> </ul>	
<p><b>Textbooks</b></p>	<p>These are introductions especially written for use in a class.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Often have discussion questions, reading lists, diagrams and tables.</li> <li>• Often laid out in two columns to make them easier to read.</li> <li>• Many textbooks have been updated and are in their 2<sup>nd</sup>, 3<sup>rd</sup> or more edition.</li> <li>• These days, many are in full colour.</li> </ul>	
<p><b>Academic monographs</b></p>	<p>These are scholarly books which make an original contribution to a subject. They push the boundaries of knowledge and usually assume that you already know the basics.</p>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Often have very plain covers.</li> <li>• Often have very long titles.</li> <li>• Often hardcovers.</li> <li>• Usually have many pages of bibliographical references and several long indexes.</li> </ul>	

## Appendix: Publishers

It helps to know the publishers you're dealing with, as each publisher will publish certain kinds of books. It can be difficult to generalise about a publisher, and the table that follows is only a rough guide.

<i>Publisher</i>	<i>Church or tradition</i>	<i>Type of books</i>	<i>Notes</i>
<b>Augsburg/ Fortress</b>	Lutheran, USA	Popular – Academic, including textbooks	
<b>Australian Theological Press (ATF)</b>	All traditions; Australia	Mainly academic	
<b>Baker</b>	Evangelical, USA	Devotional-Academic	
<b>Brazos</b>	Postmodern orthodox, USA	Cross between popular and academic.	Postmodern publishing arm of Baker.
<b>Brill</b>	Netherlands	Academic	
<b>Broadman and Holman</b>	Conservative Baptist, USA	Popular – Academic	
<b>Eerdmans</b>	Evangelical, USA	Popular – Academic	Many Eerdmans books are written to be understood by the average intelligent reader.
<b>Eisenbrauns</b>	USA	Academic	Old Testament and Ancient Near East only.
<b>Herald Press</b>	Mennonite, USA	Popular – Academic	Commentary series – 'Believers Church'
<b>Inter-Varsity Press IVP (USA) IVP (Britain)</b>	Evangelical	Devotional- Academic	The British and US branches seem completely separate these days. IVP began as the publishing arm of the university Christian Unions.
<b>Matthias Press</b>	Reformed Evangelical (Sydney Anglican), Australia	Devotional - Popular	
<b>Paternoster</b>	Britain	Popular – Academic	Now owned by Koorong, with Mike Parsons, formerly of Vose, selecting many of the books.
<b>Paulist Press</b>	Catholic, USA	Popular – Academic	
<b>Presbyterian and Reformed (P&amp;R)</b>	Conservative Presbyterian, USA	Popular – Academic	
<b>SCM Press</b>	Moderate/liberal, Britain	Many textbooks	Look out for 'SCM core texts' – textbooks for major themes in theology.
<b>Sheffield Academic</b>	Britain	Academic	Now a part of T&T Clark.
<b>Smyth and Helyws</b>	Progressive Baptist, USA	Mainly commentaries	
<b>Society Biblical Literature (SBL)</b>	All traditions	Academic	Biblical studies only.
<b>SPCK</b>	Anglican, Britain	Popular - Academic	
<b>T&amp;T Clark</b>	Britain	Academic	
<b>Westminster John Knox Press (WJK)</b>	(Moderate) Presbyterian, USA	Popular-Academic, including textbooks	
<b>Zondervan</b>	Evangelical, USA	Devotional-Textbooks (Generally no academic)	