



10 Surefire Ways to

Survive Seminary





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Introduction

Whether you're about to start seminary or are a year in and wondering what you've gotten yourself into, you could probably benefit from some tips from someone who's been there and come out alive on the other side.

I had the privilege of attending seminary from 2010 to 2014, and it was the greatest—and hardest—experience of my life. Before I even set foot in my first class I asked myself the same things I'm guessing you are:

How many hours a week will I need to put into my classes?

How much will I have to sacrifice?

How many papers will I have to write?

How much of a toll will seminary take on my health?

My marriage? My friendships?

The answer? A lot.

Seminary will challenge you spiritually, theologically, intellectually, socially, emotionally, and even physically¹ (my exercise regimen while in seminary was almost nonexistent).

But I survived, and you will, too—whether you are starting seminary at 22 or 42 (like me).

Here are 10 things I learned along the way combined with some wisdom and tips from others.

¹ <http://www.goingtoseminary.com/2015/05/19/how-to-succeed-in-seminary/>

1. Embrace discomfort.

You will likely face discomfort early on and perhaps even doubt your decision. You might feel like you're not prepared to read and study at an academic level, even if you've studied the Bible your entire life. You'll probably hear professors talk about subjects you are already familiar with in new ways, which might challenge what you believe about certain theological topics. You may struggle with new terms and concepts you've never heard and find yourself resistant to new ideas or even questioning your professor's faith.²

If you're tempted to raise the white flag, turn, and run far, far away, remember why you chose to begin seminary. Likely it involved time on your knees and wise counsel from friends, a spouse, or colleagues. Trust your decision, but recognize that this doesn't mean you won't have challenges on the journey.

Seminary is a chance to offer your body as a "living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God," an act of true and proper worship (Rom 12:1). You can flip your perspective about discomfort when it comes by embracing it as an opportunity for growth and a way to honor and worship God.

2. Hold true to your convictions.

You probably researched and chose your school for its theological preferences, but there will be times when professors will present conflicting views (sometimes because they hold those views and sometimes to spur your thinking). Don't try to rehash their views just to please them.

Your professors don't want to destroy your beliefs—they want you to think about whether those beliefs are the best way to understand the world and whether they truly line up with Scripture (and are not just a folk theology).³

Be willing to entertain different perspectives, even if you don't ultimately agree. At the same time, be open to being wrong—seminary is not the

² Adapted from Zaccharias, Danny and Ben Forrest, [Surviving and Thriving in Seminary](#) (Bellingham, WA: Lexham Press), 9.

³ Zaccharias, [Surviving](#), 9.

time to hold tight to pride: “Receive with meekness the implanted word...” (James 1:21). The more you learn, the more you may find your stance shifting. But your personal convictions will be strengthened, too.

You don’t have to acquiesce to others’ theological viewpoints. You shouldn’t. But you can learn from them.

3. Get ministry experience while in school.

It’s not uncommon for graduates to have difficulty finding a job—not because they aren’t capable, but because they don’t have experience.

If you have to work while in seminary, try to secure a job that will both pay the bills and give you the ministry experience you’ll need to find a job after graduation. If that’s not possible, volunteer at your church, a non-profit, or a mission organization—anything that will give you real-life ministry opportunities that put you in the game.

Find ways to teach material you are learning in class. It’s one thing to study something, but teaching it to others helps it “stick.” For example, if you’re leading a small group and taking a class on the Gospels, take your group through the Gospels at the same time. You’ll be able to serve, gain experience, and solidify what you are learning without doing a lot of extra work.

Whatever you do, gain as much experience as possible while in school. It will make your search for a job that much easier after graduation.

4. Map out your degree.

Most schools offer a suggested schedule of courses you’ll need to graduate, including electives. Get a copy before you start or soon after, then rank classes by difficulty. Original language classes like Hebrew and Greek are often time intensive and challenging, while pastoral ministry classes or an elective on something like the Epistles are often easier.

Next, massage it to fit your personal schedule, capabilities, and outside commitments. Make a semester-by-semester plan and spread out difficult courses so you aren't overwhelmed some semesters and not others. If big family commitments are already on your calendar, like weddings or vacations or the birth of a child, plan for a lighter semester.

Note that some schools require students to take certain classes in a certain order. If you were assigned an advisor, ask them to help you map your degree in a way that matches your commitments and goals.

Then, hold that schedule loosely. Though you may do your best to plan everything out, it's the Lord who orders your steps (Prov 16:9).

5. Find your study place

About halfway through seminary, a wise friend who had already graduated encouraged me to pick one spot to study for difficult classes, and diligently seek it out as a place of refuge.

One class that I found particularly difficult was Greek. So I took his advice—and the corner booth at Panera Bread became my Greek classroom outside of the classroom. I was there religiously every Monday for 6+ hours before heading to my Greek class that same evening.

Panera became my “place,” and I kept going even after that class was over. For whatever reason, it provided an environment away from my regular, chaotic world where I could focus on my studies. (I sing [“alpha-beta-gamma-delta-epsilon”](#) to myself when I walk into a Panera now, with fondness.)

Your study place might be a library or an office. Find one, and use it. It will help you not only keep focused but also stay sane.

6. Prioritize relationships.

The most important benefit of seminary might be the people you meet, not the things you learn.⁴ Your fellow seminarians will go on to become pastors, ministry leaders, and university professors. Some will start new missions movements. Others will write books or work for Christian non-profits.

Most people in seminary love God and are razor sharp, and those types of friends are invaluable for anyone in seminary, ministry, and life. Plus, when seminary ends you'll find yourself looking for a job, and most ministry positions are filled through relational connections.

So while in seminary, strive to meet as many people as you can—professors and fellow students—and nurture those relationships. They might just end up becoming an invaluable, lifelong support system.

7. Plan ahead for language study.

Original language studies are often what make incoming students the most anxious.

But they don't have to. [Zaccharias and Forrest](#) write that learning Hebrew and Greek is like going from a 13-inch black-and-white television to a 27-inch color television, and then finally sitting in a theater with 3-D glasses and watching a movie on a big screen. You see things you haven't seen before in stories you already know by heart because you are not equipped to engage in deeper research and study of the Bible.⁵

You can [get a head start on your Greek](#) or Hebrew classes by first getting refreshed on English grammar, especially if English is your second language. [Here are some other helpful hints](#) to getting ahead of the game:

1. Learn unfamiliar terminology like “morphology,” “phonology,” “dialects,” and so on. The authors of *Surviving and Thriving in Seminary* recommend reading *How Biblical Languages Work* by Thomas John

⁴ Warnock, Mark. [The Complete Seminary Survival Guide: Start Smart, Avoid Burnout, Finish Strong](#) (West Palm Beach, FL: Seminary Survival Strategies, 2017), 119.

⁵ Zaccharias, [Surviving](#), 13.

Finley and Peter James Silzer prior to starting an original language course to get an overview of how languages work in a general sense.

2. Purchase your textbooks early, and read the introductory chapters.
3. Memorize the alphabet before the class starts. There are numerous videos online. Many are set to catchy tunes that make it fun. (My daughter learned the Hebrew aleph-bet with me, and we still sing it on occasion.)

Don't worry—your classmates are probably just as anxious as you. Try to enjoy the journey, and as I suggested in the “Embrace discomfort” section, make learning the biblical languages an act of worship. You'll be blessed.

8. Manage your time wisely.

Seminary requires loads of reading, research, and notetaking that takes time. Lots of time. One seminary advises students to plan to spend 8–10 hours per week on each course and 3–4 hours of time devoted to coursework. Your success in seminary will depend on how well you manage your time.

At the beginning of each semester, create a schedule for each class, then calendar out assignment due dates. Set aside blocks of time for researching, writing papers, and studying for tests, and diligently guard that time. Complete reading and minor assignment(s) first, always pushing toward major assignment(s) since the bulk of your grades are tied to them.⁶ Adjust each day and week accordingly, giving yourself grace when you can't get to things.

Eliminate distractions, like notifications on your computer, phone, and social media. Hide or turn off your phone when you're studying, so you don't see it every time it lights up.

Begin assignments early, even if they aren't due until the last week of class. Life doesn't stop, and unexpected commitments or emergencies will surface. The more you can get ahead, the less stressed you'll be.

⁶ Zaccharias, *Surviving*, 81.

And my best bit of advice? Take a Sabbath rest each week. It's an act of faith and obedience, a glimpse of heaven where all striving will cease, and a reminder that no matter how much we study to become excellent ministers of the Word, God is still in control. (It's also, by God's gracious design, rejuvenating. It might not feel like it, but what you need most in seminary is to cease from all work once a week.)

9. Invest in the right tools.

Bible software is no longer a luxury for seminary students but a necessity, and choosing the right one can dramatically reduce the time spent flipping through print books. I recommend trying [Logos 8 Academic Basic](#), a free Bible software program you can try and see if it's right for you.

Bible dictionaries and encyclopedias, lexicons, books, and more are integrated within Logos that make valuable connections—without extra work. It's like having a [personal Bible study assistant](#), one who has every book in the Bible and your library totally memorized. You'll do in seconds what would normally take hours, and keep track of everything you learn with a high-powered notes system. In just a click, you can study the meaning of a word in its original language.

You can add textbooks and other theological works to build a substantial digital theological library in the same place you study—many are discounted through the [Logos Academic discount program](#).

Another huge perk? When you paste quotes into research documents, it cites everything for you. With the number of papers you'll be writing, this is a no-brainer.

Plus, you get to take all this with you after you go. Your books don't stay in the seminary library.

10. Don't sacrifice time with God for knowledge.

Often students end up prioritizing their studies at the expense of personal devotion time. But what commissions you for ministry is not more knowledge—rather, it's the Spirit and calling of God in you.

In *The Complete Seminary Survival Guide*, Mark Warnock and Jimmy Scroggins warn that knowledge is not life, and when knowledge is pursued in place of spiritual growth, it leads to spiritual decline. “Jesus did not come to make us smart,” they write. “He came to make us live.”⁷

Being smart and acquiring knowledge isn't bad, but it's more valuable to have godly wisdom—which Solomon says it's “more precious than rubies” (Proverbs 3:15). God grants spiritual wisdom to those who seek him with their whole hearts (Deut 4:29; Prov 2:6), and this only happens when you spend time with him.

No amount of theological knowledge can compare.

Conclusion

Seminary was hard. But it was also transformative. What I learned in the classroom has shaped not only how I do ministry but also how I study the Bible, handle relationships, and approach life.

I'm a different and better person today because of it—and you will be, too.

⁷ Warnock, *Complete Seminary*, 115.

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