

OpenTheo

Is There a Reference Guide to Teach Me the Vocabulary of Apologetics?

May 1, 2025



#STRask - Stand to Reason

Questions about a resource for learning the vocabulary of apologetics, whether to pursue a PhD or another master's degree, whether to earn a degree in general apologetics or to pick a specific topic to study, and how tactics can be used in written communication.

- * I feel like I need a vocabulary lesson in Christian apologetics just to be able to keep up. Is there a reference guide you could suggest?
- * I'm finishing up my MA in apologetics, and I'm not sure whether to pursue a PhD or another master's degree.
- * Do you recommend earning an advanced degree in apologetics or choosing a specific lane (theology, philosophy, science, etc.)?
- * How can tactics be used in written communication? Is it possible to use your tactics in a digital written age?

Transcript

I'm Amy Hall, and I'm here with Greg Cokal to answer your questions on hashtag STRask. Now, Greg, today we have questions about being an apologist. Okay.

And this first one comes from Julie. Sometimes I feel like I need a vocabulary lesson in Christian apologetics just to be able to keep up. I've heard terms like hermeneutics before, and I'm not sure.

and thought it had something to do with medicine. Is there a reference guide y'all could suggest or would a dictionary work? Well, I'll tell you what I do when I run into a word, I'm not sure. I go to Google and I type it in.

It's all I do, very simple. Gives you the range, gives you whatever, and it's instantaneous. I don't

have to look up a book or anything like that.

It's handy, okay. Now, there are some little booklets. I have a bunch of them and they are like handbooks, small, like a five by eight footprint.

And they're just 30 or 40 pages or whatever. And they're guides to different things like a simple handbook to philosophy, one to theology, one to apologize, whatever. And then they have all these terms in there and they explain them.

And they're kind of fun. When you carry it around, you know, you're waiting for something, you just read for some and get familiarized with the language. Now, this is important, by the way, if you want to traffic in any discipline, there is always a vocabulary that is relevant to the discipline.

So I've spent some time in the trades, five years as a carpenter, my brother was 35 years as a contractor, all three of us crococo boys do woodworking. So we're doing work on our home and the contractor was there, we're working out yesterday details. Well, I was able to speak the language, you know, you know, about stucco molding and reveals and, you know, stud sizes and cripples and headers and all that.

So it meant that we moved through the conversation efficiently and accurately. If you don't know the language, you can get there eventually, it just takes a lot longer and it's easier to be misunderstood or to misunderstand someone else. So if you want to be efficient in a discipline, any discipline, then it's good if you, and this is, I think, Julie's impulse here is to learn some of the language.

So when we talk about harmonetics, which is fairly basic concept, which means the discipline or the science, if you will, or the skill at navigating through texts to accurately understand what they mean. We use that for all kinds of writing, but it's especially important with scripture because of the importance of the text itself and the meanings, et cetera. So I think that's great.

The simple way is to go ahead and get the, just go on Amazon. But of course, you can only use words that you've heard you don't understand, go to Amazon and get the word again. Sometimes you will not get, particularly if some of these terms of terms of art, in other words, they have specialized meaning within the context of the discipline.

So you talk about moral realism. Well, the word realism is used in philosophy in different ways, applying to different things. We say moral realism, that means that morals are real, that's objective morality.

They're a genuine, actual, factual, real feature of reality, okay? So sometimes you just have to do more study. The only thing I can recommend are these little handbooks. And I actually can't even remember exactly how they're titled, but they're quick reference handbooks regarding a host of different things, philosophy or apologetics or theology or something like that.

Maybe I can talk to Amy later and she could put some of the titles in there. Well, I can tell you the one that we sell in our store at STR and it's the pocket dictionary of apologetics and philosophy of religion. 300 terms thinkers clearly, thinkers clearly concisely defined by C. Steven Evans.

That's it, the pocket. So there's a whole series of pocket ones that deal with different, within the Christian, larger Christian enterprise, there are different pocket additions that focus on different things. So that's an excellent resource.

I remember when I first started out going to the apologetics lecture series at Biola a long time ago and it was difficult because, and I think we start to take this for granted as time goes on, but it was difficult at first when I didn't understand all the language. And I remember that it could be slow going, reading things or listening to things and not knowing exactly what was meant. And all I can say is just have grace for yourself and be patient and stick with it.

And as you go, you will pick up the meanings of these terms even if you're not looking them up specifically. That's right, JP Mullins said the same thing when we started in the class that I was in that started back in '93, the MA Phil program. Is this, it's going to sound Greek to you is what he said and just stay with it.

It's hard, but after a while it begins to sink in, it's just like learning any other language inductively. Now you have a leg up when you have a pocket guide like that. That's helpful, I have probably six of them.

There's one in church history maybe, and there's one on theology, whatever. But those are really good because they're vignettes or little short things that will help you. But when we start talking, tossing around words like ontology and epistemology and the grounding problem and all of these have very precise meanings in our discipline.

And when we're talking with people who speak the language as it were, we cover a lot of ground very quickly and very clearly. We have to be careful in a circumstance like this because we have a range of listeners. And so generally we'll try to use the language and then explain it in the context of our conversation so that it's an occasion for people to get up to speed in some of these words.

But I think it is very important to learn some of the terminology in a precise fashion. So it will increase your understanding. Well, the next two questions, I'm gonna read both of them because they're related to each other.

The first one comes from Chad. He says he's finishing up my MA in apologetics at Liberty University. And I'm not sure whether to pursue a PhD or another masters.

No desire to be an author or speaker. I love to teach youth and adults, recommendations. Then the second one comes from Jake.

For those interested in continuing their education and who also have a passion for apologetics,

do you recommend earning an advanced degree in apologetics or choosing a specific lane, theology, philosophy and science? No, great questions. I have two master's degrees. I have a master's degree in apologetics and I have a master's degree in philosophy from Talbot.

Now, the Talbot master's degree, it's a long program. It's like 90 some credits. That's a very robust MA program.

But at least a third of those credits are theology classes from the theological graduate school there at Talbot. And that's really important to have a robust theological foundation in addition to the philosophical element. At least it was for me.

I'm just saying this. And I think if you go into, do you get a PhD? There's a joke about a pile higher and deeper. You know, it's like, oh my goodness, you have to get much more narrow and go much deeper to qualify for a PhD.

And it's a lot of work. Here's my sense. I know Fritchric is a Dr. Turic.

Sean McDowell is a Dr. Sean. Bababa, I get lots of people that have gone to get those higher degrees. But I think for most people operating even professionally in the discipline, you do not need that.

Nobody on our team has a PhD. Jay Warren Wallace does not have a PhD. Lee Strobel does not have a PhD.

Mark Middleberg does not have a PhD. A Nancy Piercy does not. I can just go down the line.

And for me, I don't know. It feels, sometimes I get introduced as Dr. Kockel, you know, and I have to correct people. Thanks for the promotion, but that's not me.

But it sounds weird to me. Because it sounds, you know, highfalutin and hoity-toity. Now, I don't want to be called Dr. Partly because people who earned that worked hard to get it.

And I don't want to take that title. Even if somebody gave me an honorary, I'd say thanks for that, but I'm not going to call myself Dr. So I think having two masters in fields relevant to what you want to do is going to be, give you a much better foundation, especially as it was a Chad that mentioned, I like to speak to youth and adults, right? Yeah, well, he says he has no desire to be an author or speaker. He loves to teach.

Yeah, but he mentioned youth and adults, I think. So when you come PhD, you got to learn this other vocabulary we're talking about. And it's really hard to pay the big bucks and do the hard work to learn the vocabulary and not want to use it.

I paid a lot of money to be able to say this word. So I'm going to say it, you know? I sometimes joke like that with a group. But then I got to explain it to them.

You want to be able to communicate. I don't think putting it all in the lower shelf is a good

metaphor. I don't like that.

But you have to throw the ball so people can catch it. That's the point. You have to translate the tough stuff so people can kind of get a sense of it and sink their teeth into it.

And that's as I don't think a PhD is going to help unless you really want to reach a much more academic audience. Right, so I think it depends on who he wants to teach and what kind of thing he wants to teach. If he wants to teach at a university, then he'll have to get a PhD.

If he wants to teach in a more academic way, then he might need a PhD. But if he just wants to teach apologetics in various ways in his church or things like that, then probably the masters would be... I agree. And plus even in the masters levels, I can traffic in an academic environment because of my Emmy apologetics, and my Emmy Phil.

I know the language of the discipline. I can, you know, make quick work on some ideas with people who understand the language. But I also am really committed to translating so I can speak to those not educated in those disciplines in a way that they can understand and throw that ball so they can catch it.

So my recommendation for almost everybody, unless they want to be in the academy, if they want to teach in higher ed is to get master's degrees, one or two, philosophy or theology. You can get an Emmy in theology too, because the theological grounding is really, really important. You don't want to know kind of the apologetics without having a deep sense of the theological concepts that you are expected to defend as a defender of the faith.

And I would say, especially right now, the apologetics questions I get asked are almost entirely theological. So you really do need that theological foundation. Yeah, a lot of people don't even realize that there's a theological core that is necessary to understand, to answer this question well.

Why is Jesus the only way of salvation? What about those people who never heard? Okay, in both of those talks, the way I do it, I develop very particular theological notions from the scripture that I think can create a proper understanding of the right way to deal with those issues. But without that, people are going to, I think, make mistakes. So what do you think about Jake's question about getting a degree in apologetics or choosing a specific lane when he gets an advanced degree, either master's or? Well, I guess it would depend on what lane it is.

You know, if you get a degree in apologetics, that's a generalist degree because you're going to study a lot of different things that have to do with apologetics. I think of a guy like Steven Meyer and he's intelligent design. There are people who also focus on aberrant so-called Christian groups, like LDS or Jehovah's Witnesses or Christian Science or whatever.

And of course that requires a lot of theology, but it doesn't require a breadth of understanding in a lot of other areas. So I think a person has to decide what they want to do. I'm a generalist and I like that and it's fun.

But, you know, I don't do the deep dive that Steve Meyer does in his discipline. Of course, he's got a PhD and maybe two of them, I don't know, but he can go really, really deep into the scientific stuff and cover all those bases for the person who needs that, that deep dive. I like to read Steve's stuff and then take the stuff that is useful and translated.

And then offer it to the rank and file. That Steven Meyer is the one who wrote the signature in the cell and Darwin's Dowd and this latest one that he has on the rebirth of whatever that is. The God-how hypothesis.

Yeah, there you go. All great work. But you know, somebody like him, if you don't have a little bit more understanding of the field, technically, it's gonna be hard to follow a lot of the points he makes.

Though he's a great communicator, especially in public. But he writes with scientific depth and philosophical depth for the readers that he's reaching. But the point I'm making there is he does a deep dive in that, that's his lane.

And Alan has a couple of lanes. Alan Schleeman here. He can do all the sexual items, the gender stuff, the gay stuff, same-sex marriage.

And also he's really, really good at Islam. He's decided to do a deep dive in those because that's what he was interested in. There's a great need there.

And it makes him also valuable to others and he needs to learn about these things. So this is gonna be an individual decision. My basic counsel on this question from Jake is to follow your interest.

What is your interest? Do you have one interest that's really consuming you? That's really a big deal. We've got to go. It works for us.

It lives up in Utah. She's doing a great job working with so many LDS neighbors. She's got different study groups.

Women, she's discipling in that. And it's just the circumstances. She found herself in that circumstance.

She had good Bible training and everything. And now she's zeroing in in this particular area because that's what's been available to her, given her city of residence, state of residence. Yeah.

I think what you have to do is think about where you are on the spec or where you want to be on the spectrum between a popular level and academic level. So you might want to end up being in an academic setting where you are interacting with other people where you're actually doing the new research to break ground in apologetics and have new apologetics. If that's what you want to do, then I would go with a specific lane.

And the farther down you get on that spectrum to, I don't want to say down because I think

there's a place for both. But the more generalists you are and the more of a translator you are, rather than breaking new ground, you're learning what, you're in a position where you can understand what those who are in the academic world are saying and the new things that are coming out. And you can translate that on a popular level with an audience that doesn't know anything about it.

Then you might want to be more of a generalist. So figure out who you want to teach, who you want to be impacting, where you fit well. If you do have an aptitude for some particular area of study that you want to pursue and break ground in, then I would definitely go for a specific lane.

All right, let's squeeze one more in here, Greg. This one comes from Billy. And he says, how can tactics be used in written communication? Asking, what do you mean by that? It's not possible because I'm not in front of the person having this conversation.

Is it possible to use your tactics in street smarts in a digital written age? Yeah, it is. But it's not conversational. Sometimes you can ask the rhetorical question.

You can ask, what do you mean by that? In a rhetorical way. So, of course, you have to know how to answer it. With rhetorical questions, you answer them yourself, right? So you have to answer those in a way that will be educational to the person who's reading it.

So when a person says the Bible's been changed. Okay, let's just say that what I'm saying now is my text. But what does that mean the Bible's been changed? And I want them to tell me now it could be this or it could be that.

Okay. And so then I might characterize a little bit of that. Now, sometimes keep in mind that the tactics are, it's not just the Colombo tactic is the game plan, but there's all kinds of other tactics.

Let's take the suicide tactic. That's the ability to see that a point of view that's offered against Christianity self-destructs. Okay.

Well, you Christians don't agree among yourselves. What's the problem with that? I say, I might write this. It's true.

We don't agree amongst themselves ourselves. But who does? Do scientists agree among themselves? No. Do atheists agree among themselves? No.

Every group has its internal conflicts. Does that mean that no one could come to a proper understanding or an accurate understanding about areas of the discipline? Notice that's a question. No, it doesn't mean that because you have some things that are more well justified than others.

Okay. So notice how I just role played what could be a textual characterization, but I'm employing questions rhetorically answering the questions and then using them to show that

one instance of a challenge against Christianity, people don't agree among themselves. Turns out to be not very helpful because that's not a problem Christianity.

That's a problem with human beings, human groups. So something like that. So any time you're writing something, you want to lead the person through the thinking just as you would if you were asking the questions and having them think through themselves.

So obviously you can't do it that way exactly, but you can do just what you said. And in fact, that's what Paul does over and over. He anticipates the questions that people will ask.

So he asked them and then he responds to them. So if you can learn to anticipate how people are going to object or what their response is going to be, then you can address that response. And as you said, ask the questions in the piece and then answer them.

And we see this in the Bible. Right. So if you think about all these other tactics, whether it's road scholar or just the facts, man, or inside out or moving toward the objection.

All of these are in the in the latest edition of the book. You can just model that in your writing when you're doing something with people moving towards the objection instead of pushing away from it, somebody's, you move towards it. I don't know.

A lot of people told me there's a lot of hypocrites in the church. There are. Actually, there's a lot worse than that in the church, which is why they're in the church.

And so you take a negative and you turn it into potentially a positive. And of course, sometimes we can't have back and forth discussions online and on social media. Those are a little bit harder because you can't know exactly when they're going to respond.

But you can have a back and forth where you ask questions. Even if they're not sitting in front of you, they can respond. You can ask another question.

You can have an interaction using tactics. Absolutely. And this is especially important when people lay down a challenge and there is some significant ambiguity in it.

That's what you say. I'm not sure what you're what you mean. Can you spell this out a little more clearly for me? Maybe this or that? What is it? And then force them to do that.

Now, that's that's a conversation, but it's in writing. And that happens a lot online. We used to do that a lot when we had comments on our blog.

We'd have back and forth forever. Poor Amy. She had an overseal of that.

But it was so much fun. And I do miss that. I think people have a harder time having these conversations online back and forth because I think we've lost the ability to focus for that long.

I don't know what's happened. It's a possibility as well. In many cases.

Well, thank you so much for your question. Julie, Chad, Jake, and Billy, we got through four of them today. Thank you so much.

And we'd love to hear from you. You can send us your question on X with the hashtag STRAsk or go to our website at str.org. This is Amy Hall and Greg Cocle for Stand to Reason.