For a capstone independent study in religion, I wrote a paper on Song of Songs (a book in the Hebrew Bible describing two lovers in a garden). The research process for my final paper passed through biblical studies, film studies, art history, gender studies via masculinity studies, queer studies, and a bit of narrative theory. I blended my research across these different fields to explore masculinity and queerness in my chosen biblical passage.

My advisor, Professor Jarrad, played a key role in the preliminary stage of my research. Song of Songs has an extremely robust field of scholarship surrounding it, and I was unsure of how to begin reading. My advisor recommended I look through three major commentaries on Song of Songs by Fishbane, Moore, and Exum. This was my first time using commentaries and they were useful for situating myself within scholarship. Exum’s commentary was especially helpful in deciding to focus on the erotic and the presentation of the body of the lovers. As a result of the citations in this commentary, I also came across Brenner’s Feminist Companion to Song of Songs, which I read selections from to narrow my interest.

Afterwards, I turned to SuperSearch and used phrases like “Song of Songs body” and “Song of Songs sex” to pull articles to narrow my interest. Two articles which were helpful to clarifying my argument were Cunning Linguists: Oral Sex in the Song of Songs by M.L Case and Unsafe Sex: Feminism, Pornography, and the Song of Songs by Burrus and Moore. I decided to argue that the presentation of the male lover in Song of Songs 5 is erotic because his body is presented the way a woman’s would be. In particular, the gaze applied to women objectives by looking at parts of the body rather than the whole body.

While I was overwhelmed with information when I first started researching, I ran into the opposite problem once I narrowed my argument. I couldn’t find academic sources describing my point about women’s bodies and the erotic gaze. Therefore, I met with Sarah Barbow, who showed me how to better use search terms and directed me to a few librarian research guides, like the Old Testament Abstracts. Sarah also suggested I look at areas outside of gender studies or biblical studies to find a source that articulated my point because there wasn’t sufficient discussion of what I wanted to say within biblical studies itself. I decided to look at visual fields to find the research I wanted.

I turned to film theory first. Earlier, I read Rhiannon Graybill’s Are We Not Men?, a book about masculinity in the Hebrew Bible. In this book, Graybill applies methodology from film theory to biblical prophets and her approach heavily influenced my final one. I also spoke with my advisor who suggested I look through Oxford Bibliographies to find sources in fields that I was not familiar with. I looked through bibliographies like “Feminist Film Theory”, “Psychoanalytic Film Theory”, “Women and Film and Media Studies”, and “Women, Art, Art History, and Gender”. By doing so, I found Barker’s The Tactile Eye and Mulvey’s “Visual Pleasure” in the realm of film studies to articulate the point I was looking for. Pulling from the bibliography of art history, Bahrani’s Women of Babylon helped contextualize my argument on gender to the Ancient Near East specifically.

After fully articulating my argument, the last step of my research process was to check my work against the previous scholarship because my final argument took the opposite stance of the previous scholarship. I went back to the commentaries and looked for footnotes citing specific articles that argued the opposite point. I pulled Polaski’s “What Will Ye See in the Shulamite Women” to anchor my understanding of the opposite perspective. During this time, I also came across Peter Brooks’ Body Work in a footnote. Body Work is about the construction of the body in modern narrative, but its underlying arguments were extremely useful to me as a framework for articulating certain points in my paper that I was struggling with.
Throughout this research process, I’ve learned the value of approaching research from an interdisciplinary perspective. I started strictly within my own field of study and after realizing the limitations of existing scholarship, I looked to other disciplines to clarify my arguments. I learned to read through sources not only to pull out its direct arguments, but also for frameworks of thinking that I could apply to my own research.