

TheWordWorks

Expository Preaching Module 1: For the Preacher

Writing clear sermon scripts

Aim of this module:

To learn how to write clear sermon scripts

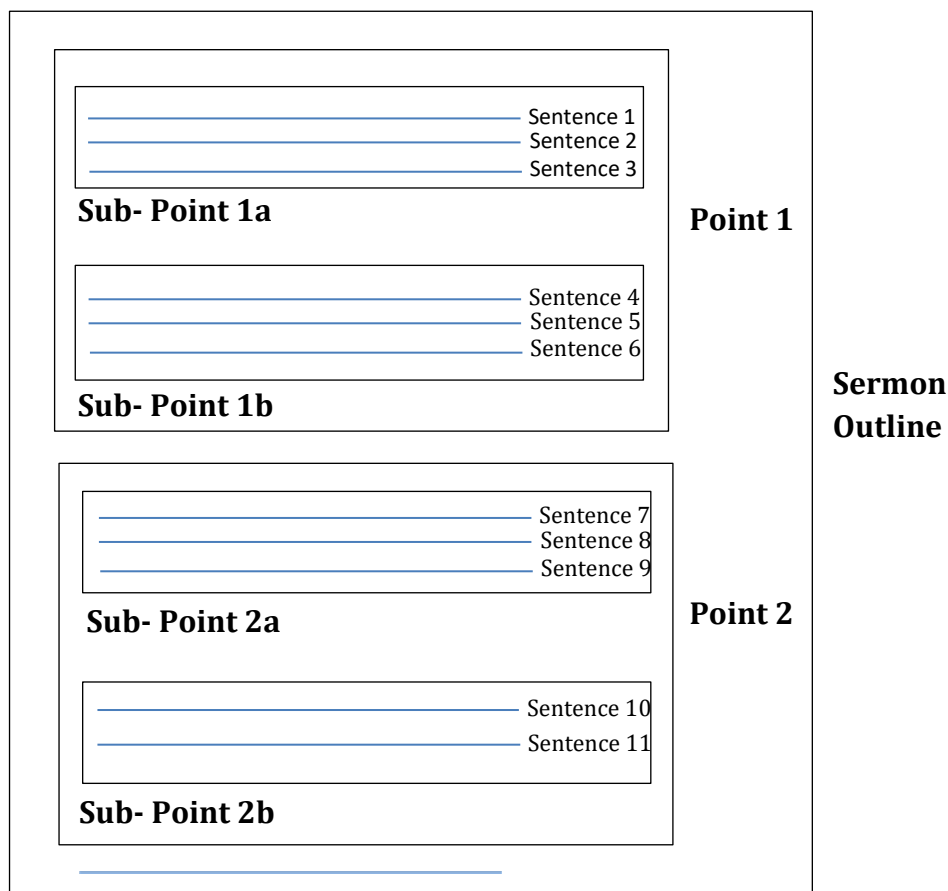
Recap:

See Module "Overview of sermon preparation process". Writing & editing the full-text sermon script is Step 5 and 6 of the 7 Step sermon preparation process.

What makes a piece of writing clear? (see diagram below)

Clarity comes from a combination of:

- a. Clear structural/logical thinking at the macro, sermon outline level (Step 2-4 of the Sermon preparation process)
E.g. Is there a clear structural break between Point 1 and Point 2?
Does Point 1 lead logically to Point 2?
Is there a clear relationship between Sub-point 2a and Sub-point 2b?
- b. Clear english expression at the micro, sentence level (Step 5-6 of Sermon prep process)
E.g. Can my hearers understand the big, technical words used in Sentence 1?
Can my hearers get the point of the very long sentence 7?
Is the phrase used in Sentence 4 the most striking way to get the point across?



In this module, we deal mainly with clear english expression at the sentence level. For clear structural/logical thinking at the macro, sermon outline level, look at Modules “Basic Bible Handling Training Part 1” (see section on Integration), “The shape of an expository sermon” and “What goes into the body of a sermon”

Resources

The first 5 tips are adapted from George Orwell’s rules for clear writing (from his essay "Politics and the English Language.")

The 8 tips for writing clear sermon scripts

1. Try not to use an expression which you are used to hearing/seeing in print

When you use an over-familiar phrase (e.g. “Jesus paid the penalty that you deserve”, “gospel-centred”, “The Christian life is like a race”), you lessen the chances of your hearer being impacted by your point because they’ll gloss over the super familiar phrase without a second thought.

2. Never use a long word where a short one will do

Use ordinary, everyday words. You’ll be clearer to more people. The aim of the sermon is to communicate, not impress with “higher level” words.

Long words	Short, ordinary words
ascertain	find out
commence	begin
initiate	begin
terminate	end
exhort	urge
transmit	send
utilize	use

3. If it is possible to cut a word out, always cut it out

Before cutting	After cutting
Basically, the first guy pretty much surpassed the second guy in overall performance.	The first guy performed better than the second.
He considered the second car an unneeded luxury.	He considered the second car a luxury.
The test revealed a tumour that was aggressive in nature.	The test revealed an aggressive tumour

Shorter sentences pack more punch because they are more direct and use up less of the hearer’s attention span.

4. Never use the passive voice where you can use the active voice

A sentence written in the active voice means the subject of the sentence (i.e. the one performing the action) comes first in the sentence and performs the action that the rest of the sentence describes. In the 3 examples below, the subjects are Jesus, Paul and the girl. The actions they perform are “healed”, “urged” and “ran back” respectively.

Passive voice	Active voice
The woman was healed by Jesus	Jesus healed the woman
Timothy was urged to continue in the Scriptures	Paul urged Timothy to continue in the Scriptures
The house was where the girl ran back to	The girl ran back to the house

The main benefit of an active sentence is that it creates a clear image in your hearer’s minds about what is happening. The passive sentence puts the subject at the end of the sentence (sentence 1 and 3) or omits the subject altogether (sentence 2). This makes the sentence harder to follow and makes it unclear who is doing the action.

5. Never use a jargon-y word if you can think of an everyday English equivalent.

Jargon-y word	Everyday equivalent
Partake	Eat and Drink
Supplication	Asking for something
Eschatological	About what happens at the end

Jargon-y words create tribal identity (“All of us know the secret, insider language”) but they alienate people who don’t know what those words mean.

6. Write the way you speak

The sermon script is meant to aid you in verbal communication. It is not a piece of written communication. This means you should write your script in the way you normally speak¹.

- a. Short sentences

Verbal communication	Written communication
The crippled man called out to Jesus. But Jesus was busy with the crowds. They were pressing in on him. Urging him to heal the sick. And exorcise the demon-possessed.	The crippled man called out to Jesus who was at this time busy with the crowds that were pressing in on him, urging him to heal the sick and exorcise demon-possessed folks.

¹ This means weird stares from people in the cafe/library/wherever you write your script because they see you muttering under your breath as you type on your laptop

The culprit for long sentences are usually the relative pronouns. These are words like “who”, “that”, “which”. The relative pronouns are usually the places where there can be a sentence break.

b. Ignore grammar

When you speak, normal grammatical rules go out the window. This is because verbal communication in a sermon is more informal. Here are some examples.

Grammatical written communication	Sermon
I want to follow Christ, but it is so hard.	I want to follow Christ. (pause) But it's so hard! (Grammatically, connecting words like “But”, “And”, “Because” are not supposed to start a new sentence)
Would you give your life for your enemy? I would never do that! However, Jesus gave his life for his enemies.	Would you give your life for your enemy? I would never! But, Jesus did. (Grammatically, this is a fragmented, incomplete sentence. “I would never” is incomplete. “Jesus did” is incomplete)

Your sermon script should sound like you speaking!

c. Contract

In informal verbal communication, we often contract the following words.

Uncontracted	Contracted
It has/It is	It's
We will	We'll
They have	They've
Can not	Can't
He would/He had	He'd
Will not	Won't

d. Use colloquial language

Colloquial language is informal everyday language particular to the part of the world/culture you belong to. Example: Football/Soccer in the UK/US. Macs/Macca's in Singapore/Australia.

e. Use Modern language

Don't write your script (and therefore preach your sermon) in the style/form of some dead 16th century guy. The ideas of the dead guy might be great. And there's nothing wrong with letting his ideas shape you. But speak like someone born in recent decades!

7. Use "In other words"

Saying something in a different way ("in other words") is a great way to make sure an important point is understood. Example:

But Jesus comes and performs spiritual surgery. He's the chief surgeon that goes in deep and cuts away at this enslaving cancer. So that now, we can say NO to sin. We don't have to obey our former slave master anymore!

***In other words**, Christians are new persons,...free to grow and live for God!*

8. Give verbal cues upfront about what you're going to say next

This helps your hearer have a mental box into which to put what they're about to hear. If you don't give upfront cues, they'll have no idea why you're saying what you're saying. See the following examples.

No verbal cues	With verbal cues
The gospel is A. It..... The gospel is B. It.... The gospel is C. It.... These are the 3 things we learn about the gospel from these verses.	Here are 3 things we learn about the gospel in these verses. First, the gospel is A. It.... Second, the gospel is B. It.... Third, the gospel is C. It....
"Jesus is the Christ"	"Here's Mark's key point: Jesus is the Christ"
"Paul's got 2 points today: First... Second... These 2 points shows the Roman Christians that they're sons of God"	"We're going to see how Paul convinces the Roman Christians that they're genuine sons of God. He's got 2 points: First... Second...."

Practical wisdom on the format of sermon scripts

The format of the script refers to the way that the script looks on the A4 page. The guidelines below aim at making the script visually easy-to-use.

Example sermon script for Ephesians 2:17-3:21

But there's a twist in the tale...

Did you notice who it is that God wants to show off his wisdom to?

It's a very specific group of folks. Look at Vs 10 again

*10 so that through the church the manifold wisdom of God might now be made known to the **rulers and authorities in the heavenly places.***

Who are these guys?

We don't find out for sure until 6:12 [PPT]

*¹² For we do not wrestle against flesh and blood, but **against the rulers, against the authorities, against the cosmic powers over this present darkness, against the spiritual forces of evil in the heavenly places.***

So, rulers and authorities in the heavenly places are evil spiritual forces: Satan and his minions!

So here's the picture:

Satan and friends are staring at the church

They're looking in at this church in Ephesus

Small, Wobbling, Discouraged

They're looking in today at Bethesda Church Bukit Arang (REAL!)

And God says

"Here's my display piece.

Here is the evidence that my **wise plan of salvation is happening**"

Tip 1: 1 sentence per line (makes text easy to read at a glance)

Tip 2: Use boxes for turning points/surprises in the sermon/places you want to slow down and emphasise

Tip 3: Italicise bible verses

Tip 4: Indent to distinguish between the mainline flow of the sermon and the supporting points

Tip 5: Use lines to remind yourself that this is the place for a speaking pause

Tip 6: If 2-3 sentences need to be said consecutively without long pauses in between, make sure sentences don't get interrupted by a page break

Exercise

Take the script for a recent talk you gave. Take 3-4 paragraphs of the script. Then edit those 4 paragraphs using the 8 tips above. Then preach the original and edited versions to someone and ask them which was better and why!

Happy editing!