

TheWordWorks

Small Group Bible Study Module 1: For the bible study group leader How to write a bible study

How to write a bible study

The shape of a bible study

When we think of the shape of a bible study, we can break it down into 4 major sections.

1. Introduction – a question that raises the key theme/issue or establishes the situation of the passage
2. Main body – questions to clarify meaning about the passage
3. Conclusion – a question to integrate and summarise findings from the main body
4. Application – questions which help apply the purpose of the passage in concrete ways for members

Now that we are familiar with what makes up a written bible study, let's step through each of these different parts and think about how we can write them.

The remainder of this module will draw on working that we have acquired from Colossians 1:1-14 in SGBS_M1_2 on *How to prepare for a bible study*. Here's a summary of the working that we'll be using:

Colossians 1:1-14 working

Situation:

Colossians 2:8-23

- Paul's readers were in danger of moving away from the gospel towards a certain false teaching that has arisen
- The nature of the false teaching concerned how you continue growing in the Christian life – 2:23, also note repeated usage of 'growth' and 'maturity' language throughout the letter

Structure:

Colossians 1:1-2 – Greetings

Colossians 1:3-8 – The gospel you first received from Epaphras causes growth

Colossians 1:9-14 – The gospel is all-sufficient for ongoing spiritual growth

Main Point:

The gospel you received is ALL-sufficient for ongoing spiritual growth

Purpose:

Know that the gospel you received is ALL-sufficient for ongoing spiritual growth

1. Writing the Introduction

Introduction questions serve 2 main purposes:

- Firstly, it's to help break the ice – helping members who've just arrived at bible study to ease into the study, helping to engage newcomers or non-Christians who may be less familiar with the bible
- But secondly, and more importantly, the introduction question is also meant to help prepare members for the upcoming discussion about the passage

In that regard, a good introduction will typically do one of the following or both:

- Prime people's thinking by raising a key theme/issue that will be further examined in the passage
- Help people to understand the original readers' situation by raising a relatable current day situation that is similar to the original readers' situation

If this is done well, an introduction will prepare members to understand and apply the passage well.

Checklist for writing introduction questions

1. Looking at my **Main Point** and **Purpose** – what is the *key* theme/issue that this passage examines?
2. Avoid raising tangential or minor themes/issues
3. What have I learnt about the **Situation** of the original readers?
4. What aspects of the original reader's situation is immediately relevant to this passage I'm studying?
5. Ask - what is a relatable current day situation that members may have experienced?

Now consider the examples in the box below. How would you assess them according to the principles we've just highlighted above?

Examples of Introduction questions for Colossians 1:1-14

1. When was the last time you prayed for a friend? What did you pray for and why?
2. What are some common things that Christians depend on to help them continue growing spiritually?
3. In today's passage, we learn about a man named Epaphras who faithfully shared the gospel. Share about the last time you shared the gospel with someone.

2. Writing the Main Body

The purpose of the main body of a bible study is

1. To help members understand *what* the passage is saying (i.e. the Main Point)
2. To help members understand *why* this passage was written (i.e. the Author's Purpose)

The main body will typically consist of the following types of questions:

1. Observation questions – there are questions that clarify meaning and structure of the passage (these are usually the What? questions)
2. Interpretation questions – these are questions that clarify the **significance** of what is written (these are typically How? or Why? questions)
3. Supplementary questions – follow-up questions which help members along if they get stuck.

The first 2 kinds of questions help people to do the Investigative work that we talked about in SGBS_M1_2 on *How to prepare for a bible study*.

Checklist for writing main body questions

1. Look at your **Structure**. From there, work out how many questions to ask (at least 1 question per section)
 - You'll need at least 1 question per section of your structure.
 - **Usually** 2-3 questions are sufficient to help unpack a section
2. As you write the questions for the main body, constantly refer back to the **Main Point** and **Purpose** as you write your study. This will help you not to get side-tracked with exploring tangential or minor points
 - I like to keep a post-it note with the Main Point and Purpose on the page I'm working on so I can easily refer to it as I'm writing questions
3. Are there key pieces of context that are required in order to understand this section? If so, provide appropriate amount of context as part of the question. Some examples include:
 - Definitions - what does Propitiation mean?
 - Allusions to the OT
 - Historical or cultural context information – the significance of place names
 - How much context should you give? The rule of thumb is – how much context is needed for people to get to the main point or purpose?

Other things to consider

1. The general principle is to focus on interpretation questions which push deeper and get people thinking about the author's purpose
2. More observation questions may be required for groups where members who have less experience reading the bible and are a helpful way of building confidence in reading the bible
 - a. Especially relevant for kids and youth ministry
 - b. Groups with new Christians
 - c. Or ESL (English as Second Language) bible studies

Now consider the examples in the box below. How would you assess them according to the principles we've just highlighted above?

Examples of main body questions for Colossians 1:1-14

Observation questions

1. Who is Paul writing to in 1:2?
2. In 1:6, Paul talks about the gospel's global impact. Where else in the world has the gospel spread to by this point in the New Testament?
3. In 1:3-8, what effect has the gospel had on the world? The Colossians?

Interpretation questions

1. Any thoughts on what the fruit in 1:6 is referring to?
2. How does Paul's prayer for his readers in 1:9-14 relate to his thanksgiving for them in 1:3-8?
3. What hints does the passage give us about what 'the knowledge of God's will' (1:9) might refer to?

Supplementary questions

How does Paul's prayer for his readers in 1:9-14 relate to his thanksgiving for them in 1:3-8?

1. *PANICS* tells members the answer
2. What do the connecting words at the start of verse 9 tell us about the logical connection between the two sections?
3. What are some repeated words/ideas that might link both sections?

3. Writing the Conclusion

The purpose of the conclusion of a bible study is to

1. Help members **Integrate** what they've learnt about the passage into a Main Point and Purpose statement for the passage
2. To **check** the members' understanding of the main point/purpose of the passage

Both the **Integration** and **Checking** are crucial final steps to establish before the passage can be accurately applied in the next section.

One generic conclusion question you can use for your studies is

Given what we've looked at in Passage X, how would you summarise 1) its main point and 2) the author's purpose?

4. Writing Application Questions

The purpose of the application section of a bible study is for members to

1. understand the passage's implications and to see how it concretely applies to their lives

Types of application questions

1. Head - questions that challenge or affirm our thinking about an issue or our worldview
2. Heart - questions that challenge or affirm how we feel about an issue
3. Hand - questions that challenge or affirm how we behave

As we talk about application it's probably worth addressing the common misunderstanding that application is about *doing* things. Yes, it can be, but application is much more than just *doing*. In fact, the bible often focuses on shaping our thinking and our emotions, thus changing our worldview and attitudes, which eventually leads to behavioural change.

Checklist for writing application questions

1. Look at the verb in the **Purpose** statement. What kind of verb is it? Is it about knowing? Feeling? Or doing? The type of verb in the purpose statement (head/heart/hand) shapes the kind of applications you want to focus on
2. Look at the **Situation**. What is a current day situation in the lives of your members that is similar to the situation of the original readers?
3. What does a purpose-driven application look like in their situation?

Further principles for applying well

1. Beware of applying issues mentioned in the passage that are tangential to the central aim
 - This is not to say that we can't ever have *secondary* applications, but for the sake of training, we want to make sure that all of us as teachers of the bible are clear about what the *main* application is and what are just *secondary* applications, so we don't end up majoring on the wrong thing.
2. Beware of raising new concepts that have not been discussed during the main body of the study during the application
3. Avoid the classic tack-on applications
 - a. Pray more
 - b. Read your bible more
 - c. Tell your friends about Jesus more

While those are good things to do - they may not be what the passage is really talking about

Again, consider the examples in the box below. How would you assess them according to the principles we've just highlighted above?

Examples of application questions for Colossians 1:1-14

1. How can we be more like Epaphras?
2. How can we pray like Paul?
3. How might today's passage challenge our perception about the gospel's place in our ongoing spiritual growth?
4. What are some things that we turn to other than the gospel for our ongoing spiritual growth?
How does today's passage correct our perspective on how we continue growing as Christians?

Further principles on writing good questions

1. Open-ended not closed – questions should be phrased in a way that encourages discussion rather than closing off discussion. Avoid 'yes or no' questions or 1-line questions.
2. Avoid questions that can't be answered from the passage.
3. Looking down not looking up - a good question will encourage members to look down at the bible to see what it has to say, rather than encourage them to look up and merely express their own opinions. Direct people in specific verses in your questions.
- e.g ***In 1:3-8, what effect has the gospel had on the world? The Colossians?***
4. Questions should be expressed clearly and simply, not complicated – avoid technical jargon, multiple clauses, complex phrasing. Used short sentences and simple words whenever possible.
5. Questions should always build towards the main point and purpose of the passage. Avoid tangential or minor issues. Instead, major on the majors.
6. When you write a question, always consider what answers bible study members will give, not what answer you want. Anticipating how bible study members will answer questions will help you to better phrase questions.

Sample bible study on Colossians 1:1-14 (by no means the perfect bible study!)

Introduction question: What are some common things that Christians depend on to help them continue growing spiritually?

- Have this spiritual experience
- listen to this guru
- go for this conference
- sign up for this course

1. In 1:1-2, we learn Paul is writing to the Colossian Christians. If we flip forward to 2:8 and 2:16-23, what are some things that we learn about the situation of Paul's readers?

Supplementary question: What was the nature of this false teaching? i.e. What might these false teachers have been promising?

- The Colossians were in danger of being deceived and taken captive by false teaching – 2:8
- According to human tradition, not according to Christ – 2:8
- Involved adherence to religious and ceremonial practices (2:16), the experience of the mystical (2:18)
- This false teaching claimed to be able to stop the indulgence of the flesh, i.e. false teaching that claims to help you in your godliness and fight against sin - 2:23

2. From 1:3-8, what impression do we get of the Colossian Christians?

- Christians who Paul gives thanks for – 1:3
- Christians who have gained a reputation for their faith in Jesus and love for the saints – 1:4, 8
- Christians who have started well - received the gospel from Epaphras – 1:5
- Christians who are growing - the gospel is still bearing fruit and increasing among them – 1:6

3. In 1:3-8, what effect has the gospel had on the world? The Colossians?

Supplementary question: what effect has the gospel had on the Colossians in 1:3-5?

- The gospel bears fruit and increases around the world – 1:6a
- The gospel has transformed the Colossians – the Colossians now trust in Jesus and love the saints (1:4) because of the heavenly hope they heard of in the gospel (1:5)
- Just like it does in the rest of the world, the gospel continues to bear fruit and increase in the Colossians since the day they heard it (1:6b)

4. How does Paul's prayer for his readers in 1:9-14 relate to his thanksgiving for them in 1:3-8?

Supplementary question: what are some repeated words/ideas that might link both sections?

Supplementary question: What do the connecting words at the start of verse 9 tell us about the logical connection between the two sections?

- Paul prays for his readers in this way **because of** what has happened to the Colossians in 1:3-8
- Similar ideas of bearing fruit/increasing/growing – 1:6, 9, 10, 11
- ‘And so...’ – i.e. Because you received the gospel, have been transformed by it and are growing in it (1:3-8), therefore I pray that you will grow in knowledge of God’s will so that you might grow even more (1:9-14)

5. What hints does the passage give us about what ‘the knowledge of God’s will’ (1:9) might refer to?

- In 1:9, this knowledge refers to knowledge of divine things which leads to spiritual growth (1:10-12)
- In 1:5, the gospel refers to knowledge of divine things which leads to spiritual growth (1:6b, 1:3-6a)
- The effects of the gospel and the knowledge of God’s will are similarly described – as resulting in ‘bearing fruit’ and ‘increasing’ (1:6 and 1:10)
- The passage seems to suggest that the knowledge of God’s will = gospel knowledge

6. According to 1:9-14, how does Paul describe the extent of spiritual growth which results from growing in gospel knowledge?

Supplementary question: what are some repeated words/ideas in 1:10-12?

- The spiritual growth which results from growing in gospel knowledge is complete and absolute
 - o **ALL** spiritual wisdom and understanding
 - o Walking in a manner **FULLY** pleasing to God
 - o Bearing fruit in **EVERY** good work
 - o Being strengthened with **ALL** power
 - o For **ALL** endurance, patience with joy

7. Given what we’ve looked at in Colossians 1:1-14, how would you summarise 1) its main point and 2) the author’s purpose?

- Main Point: The gospel is all-sufficient for ongoing spiritual growth
- Purpose: Know that the gospel is all-sufficient for ongoing spiritual growth

Application

How might today’s passage challenge our perception about the gospel’s place in our ongoing spiritual growth?

- Misconceptions: Gospel is old news, basic stuff for baby Christians. Perhaps it’s what gets you through the door, but after that, you need to move on to more advanced things

What are some things that we turn to other than the gospel for our ongoing spiritual growth? How does today’s passage correct our perspective on how we continue growing as Christians?

- In a world where there are competing claims on how Christians continue to grow spiritually (spiritual experiences, listen to this guru, go for this conference, sign up for this course), Paul reminds us that the gospel is everything we need for our ongoing spiritual growth!