

## A Guide to Writing an Exegesis Paper

An exegesis paper offers *a close, thoughtful analysis of one passage of scripture*. The passage should generally be less than a chapter in length with an identifiable beginning and ending. Although you are offering interpretation of the passage, an exegetical paper is different from a sermon or Bible study. After familiarizing yourself with your text (see guidelines below), you will incorporate the insights and research of scholars to inform and support your interpretation. Keep in mind that you are writing for a particular class, and a particular professor, and you need to pay attention and follow all of the specific instructions you receive from them.

### **First, familiarize yourself with the text:**

- Read through it several times. Make an outline of it. Note any questions that you have, unfamiliar words/characters, etc. Pay attention to what comes before and after the passage. How might the location of the passage within the larger book matter for its interpretation? Read through the passage in several different translations.
- Consider the historical, social, economic, political, and religious background of what is in the text and of the time when it was written (the two may not be the same – think about a novel that takes place in the Middle Ages but is written in the 20<sup>th</sup> century). What ancient social or religious practices need to be understood or clarified in order to provide context for the passage? Look up words or phrases in different Bible dictionaries (Anchor Bible Dictionary, Harper Collins, Eerdmans, Mercer). Look at maps to locate any places named in your passage. Think about how physical location might affect the interpretation of your passage.
- Consider the language and literary elements of the passage. What type of text is the passage – A parable? Healing story? Hymn, poem, or song? Controversy story? Teaching? Note features of the passage's diction (word choice, language used), syntax (sentence structures such as questions, exclamations, long or short sentences), and figures of speech (symbols, metaphors, similes, puns, alliteration, etc.)

### **Then, after reflecting on these questions and forming your own initial interpretation of the text, consult commentaries and journal articles that offer a close analysis of your passage.**

- Reading the work of scholars can help you to confirm, clarify, expand, correct, or perhaps even discard some of your own analysis. Do not rely heavily on only one scholarly source; reading from multiple scholars allows you to see points of difference and nuances of interpretation.

### **Finally, organize your thoughts and prepare to write.**

Your introductory paragraph should let the reader know clearly what passage you are analyzing and why, and it should hint at conclusions you will be moving toward. In the body of your essay, you should quote some (possibly all) of the passage you are interpreting; it is usually more effective to do this a few verses at a time. Your conclusion can summarize key points of your analysis and/or speak to why or for whom the interpretation matters. Throughout your paper, you should draw judiciously on the secondary sources that have been most helpful in shaping your interpretation. Always provide appropriate citations for any research sources you use.

### **Important Guidelines for Using Research Sources**

Avoid excessive quotation of research sources. Make sure that you are using research to support or clarify what *you* are saying. Intersperse your analysis with the research material. For example, rather than writing a paragraph with five consecutive sentences that contain cited material, alternate a sentence with cited research material and a sentence that contains only your thoughts.

Remember that if you paraphrase from a scholarly work (meaning that you put their idea in your own words), you still need to cite it. Be careful not to paraphrase large portions of research material and then put one footnote at the end of the paragraph. Be clear about which ideas come from another scholar/author and which thoughts are yours.

Excellent Commentary Series:

*Abington New Testament Commentary*

*Anchor Yale Bible Commentary*

*Ancient Christian Commentary on Scripture*

*Brazos Theological Commentary*

*Hermeneia*

*International Critical Commentary*

*New Interpreters*

*Sacra Pagina*

The ATLA database is a great way to find scholarly journal articles for your research. You can also use the Scripture Searches resource to find articles specific to your text. Both can be accessed through the Divinity Research Guide available at [guides.zsr.wfu.edu/divinity](https://guides.zsr.wfu.edu/divinity).