

How to Write an Exegesis

An **exegesis** is a critical examination or close interpretation of a text. An exegesis paper is typically like any other essay with an introduction and thesis, body paragraphs that support your thesis, and a conclusion.

Most important tip: **Follow the particular instructions of your assignment.**

The Process

1. Pick a biblical passage. If you are not assigned a passage, think carefully about where you should begin and end your pericope.
2. Before looking at what other people say: read your passage a few times and ask what you think it means, what you find interesting about it, what questions you have.
3. Examine what comes before and after your passage, what is the focus of the book/section of the Bible where it is found?
4. Look at a few different translations of the same passage and note similarities and differences (especially those that create a significant shift in the meaning of the text). Read the passage in its original language if you have those skills.
5. Look up any key terms or unknown words in Bible dictionaries.
6. Read about the passage in biblical commentaries. Pay attention to the historical, social, political, economic, geographic, and religious background and context. Investigate the language, genre (prose, poetry, song, etc.), and literary devices (repetition, imagery, metaphor, etc.) used in the passage.
7. If you decide to write on a particular theme or term in the text for which you need more information, search for relevant articles and books.
8. Think more about the context- the difference, if any, in what the text meant to its original audience, to historical audiences, to contemporary audiences.
9. Examine the theological significance of the text and how it is similar to or different from other theologies in its chapter and in the Bible as a whole.
10. Think about the application of the text—how it applies to our lives today and what a congregation could glean from it. How might you use this text in a sermon or Bible study?

The Paper

Reminder: Follow your assignment instructions which may request a different format and content.

Introduction

Provide context for your paper. Discuss the question you are trying to answer and the significance of your question (why should anyone care about your question). State your claim (your thesis). Your thesis statement makes an argument (something that people could agree or disagree with)—it is not a factual statement.

Do Not: Repeat the language of the assignment, use a dictionary definition of a term, or overgeneralize.

Body

Address each verse or a small group of verses at a time. An exegesis gives a line-by-line examination of the passage.

You might begin with some overall thoughts on the history/background or the genre, etc. depending on what you are focusing on in the rest of your paper.

Throughout your examination of the verses, incorporate your ideas and research on:

Literary Criticism: genre, language, syntax (the way words or sentences are placed together), rhetorical devices, translation choices

Context: historical, social, political, economic, geographic, and religious background; history and origins of the text itself, history of the author or debates about authorship, information about the likely intended audience.

Theological Themes: what does this text say about God, humanity, the world, etc.

Application: how does this text apply to your life, to others' lives, to a congregation, etc. This section could be part of the conclusion.

Conclusion

Summarize key points. Restate your claim more thoroughly than in your introduction. Answer the "So What" question—why is this significant? You might include additional significance, possible applications, or additional research needed.

The Sources

Dictionaries: Anchor Bible Dictionary, New Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible, HarperCollins Bible Dictionary, Eerdmans' Dictionary of the Bible, etc.

Commentaries: Anchor Bible Commentary Series, Word Biblical Commentary, JPS (Jewish Publication Society) Bible Commentary, Westminster Commentary Series, etc.

Other Publications: Atla Religion Database, Journal of Biblical Literature, etc.

Potential Resources: concordances (can look up a word and see where it appears elsewhere in the Bible), atlases (if knowing geography is helpful for your passage), biblical parallels (lay out where similar verses/stories appear in various parts of the Bible)

ZSR Divinity Research Resources: <https://guides.zsr.wfu.edu/divinity>

Citing the Bible

You should put in parentheses the translation you are using when it is different from the main one used in your paper (NIV) (The Message).

When referring to a biblical text in a sentence, write out the full name of the book, then use numbers to show chapter and verse. Example: In Matthew 5:1-11, Jesus begins by focusing on... Not: In Matthew chapter five verses one through eleven... Not: "In Matt. 5..."

When quoting or paraphrasing a biblical text, give the proper reference in parentheses following the sentence. Use standard abbreviations and numbers. Example: The opening verses of John echo another beginning: "In the beginning when God created the heavens and the earth" (Gen. 1:1).

If your sentence already clearly indicates what book of the Bible you are discussing, then the parenthetical reference should provide whatever information is missing in the sentence. Example: The rhetorical high point of 1 Corinthians is the hymn to love (ch. 13).

Note: The period always goes after the parenthetical reference at the end of the sentence.