

A Reference for Inductive Bible Study

* = Optional items, those that require more time and study

Inductive Bible study

In general there are two ways of reasoning, deductively and inductively. Deductive reasoning reasons from the whole to a part, from the general to the particular. Inductive reasoning reasons from a part to the whole, from the particular to the general. Neither of is inherently better than the other, and both are useful in math, logic, and debate.

These ways of reasoning can be applied to studying the Bible. **Deductive Bible study** brings principles to the text to determine if there are supporting details. The student of God's Word is asking, "Can I find support in this text for my viewpoint?" For example, I might assert, "The Bible condones a homosexual lifestyle," and with this assertion in mind I begin to study the Bible looking for supporting evidence. Using deductive Bible study, people have arrived at all sorts of erroneous interpretations because it places the locus of authority upon the student not the Bible.

In contrast, **inductive Bible study** (IBS) examines the details of the text to determine the principles. The student is asking, "What does the text say?" For example, I might decide to study John 15:1-11. I decide, "Whatever this passage teaches me about the Christian life, that I will believe and obey." Using IBS, people have a much greater chance of arriving at the correct interpretation of the text because it placed the locus of authority upon the Bible.

There are many benefits to studying the Bible inductively, including:

- Inductive Bible study keeps you faithful to the original meaning.
- Inductive Bible study protects you from taking texts out of their contexts.
- Inductive Bible study increases your authority when applying the text to your life or teaching it to someone else.

IBS is a three-part process:

- Observation – looking at the text to see what it says
- Interpretation – determining the original meaning of the text
- Application – applying the original meaning

Observation:

The first step of IBS is observation, which answers the question, "What does the section say?" Most Americans live a fast-paced, way-too-busy lifestyle. It's difficult to relax, slow down, and observe details. Yet this is exactly what you want to do in this step. The text itself provides many more details than you might expect.

Read the Text

The first step in observation is to read the text. Read it slowly and carefully; take your time. Using a more literal translation,¹ and observe every word, every phrase, every clause, every sentence, and the relationships between them. Try to see as many details in the text as you can. Let the section explain itself; this requires “recognizing and noting details in the wording of the text and their significance for its meaning.”²

As you read the section carefully and see the details, take time to write them down. If you have questions, write them down as well.

Ask the Reporter Questions

The second step in observation is asking the reporter questions. Pretend that you are reporter looking for clues to help you understand your section. Ask and attempt to answer these questions from your section; write down what you learn:

1. “Who?” helps us to find out who are the people in the section. “Who questions” may relate to people who lived at the time the book was written, to biblical figures who lived in the Old Testament, to God (the roles of the Father, Son, or Spirit), or to someone else.
2. “Where?” helps us to find out where are the locations in the section. “Where questions” may relate to New Testament locations, Old Testament locations, or even non-earthly locations. The locations may be cities, regions, countries, or empires.
3. “When?” helps us to find out when the events in the section happened. Some events happened in eternity past, some during Old Testament times, some during New Testament times, some have not yet happened, and some will occur in eternity future.
4. “What?” helps us to find out what things are. Some are spiritual things, some are physical things, and some are conceptual things (e.g., ideas, values).
5. “Why?” helps us to know the reason for something. “Why questions” get at the intentions of people and God.
6. “How?” helps us to explain something in more detail. How questions can cover a wide variety of situations.

Compare Translations

The third step is to read through your section of text carefully in at least 4 different translations. Choose from among the following: NASB, ESV, HCSB, NET, NKJV, ISV, and NIV. Let the translations complement each other and help you see and understand the section. For example, if a word is translated two or three different ways, then you have learned different meanings for that word. This may answer some of your questions; it may raise new ones. Write down what you learn.

¹ Such as the NASB, ESV, or LEB.

² MacDill, *The 12 Essential Skills For Great Preaching*, 43.

Look for Literary Clues*

The fourth step in observation is looking for literary devices. Look for these items and write down what you learn:

- **Cause and effect** is when one thing makes another thing happen. In 2 Timothy 2:12 Paul used three cause and effects in a row, “If we endure, we will also reign with Him; if we deny Him, He will also deny us; if we are faithless, He remains faithful” (HCSB). Sometimes there are words that indicate the cause and effect relationship, such as “if...then,” “so that,” or “therefore.”
- Sometimes the author **raises a question and then answers** it himself. He is leading his readers to the right answer. In Romans 6:1 Paul asked, “What should we say then? Should we continue in sin so that grace may multiply?” In the next verse he answered it, “Absolutely not!” Some questions are rhetorical, meaning the answer is so obvious that no explicit answer is necessary.
- A **comparison (or contrast)** is when the author compares (or contrasts) one thing to another thing, thus further explaining some aspect of the first thing. In 1 Thessalonians 5:2 Paul used a comparison, “For you yourselves know very well that the Day of the Lord will come just like a thief in the night.” In 1 Thessalonians 5:7-8 he used a contrast, “For those who sleep, sleep at night, and those who get drunk are drunk at night. But since we belong to the day, we must be serious.”
- When an author **repeats** a word or phrase, it often signals an important theme in the passage. The repeated words can be different parts of speech (i.e., verb, noun, adjective, or adverb). In his eulogy to God beginning in Ephesians 1:3, Paul signaled the primary theme with repeated words, “Blessed be the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, who has blessed us in Christ with every spiritual blessing in the heavenly places” (ESV).
- **Commands** are imperatives, instructions that must be obeyed by the reader. In Paul’s letters, they are typically more prominent in the second half. In Ephesians 4:25-27, Paul commanded, “Therefore, having put away falsehood, let each one of you speak the truth with his neighbor, for we are members one of another. Be angry and do not sin; do not let the sun go down on your anger, and give no opportunity to the devil.”
- **Promises** are guarantees of God’s actions. Sometimes they are conditional and sometimes unconditional. In Philippians 4:6-7, Paul reminded his readers of God’s promise of peace, “Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.”

Answer Character Questions

Every passage teaches us something about God and about ourselves. This will be an important part of considering the Gospel (in the Interpretation step), but it’s helpful to begin thinking about this now. So the fifth step is to answer these two character questions:

1. What does this section teach you about the character of God?
2. What does this section teach you about the character of man?

Create a Structural Diagram*

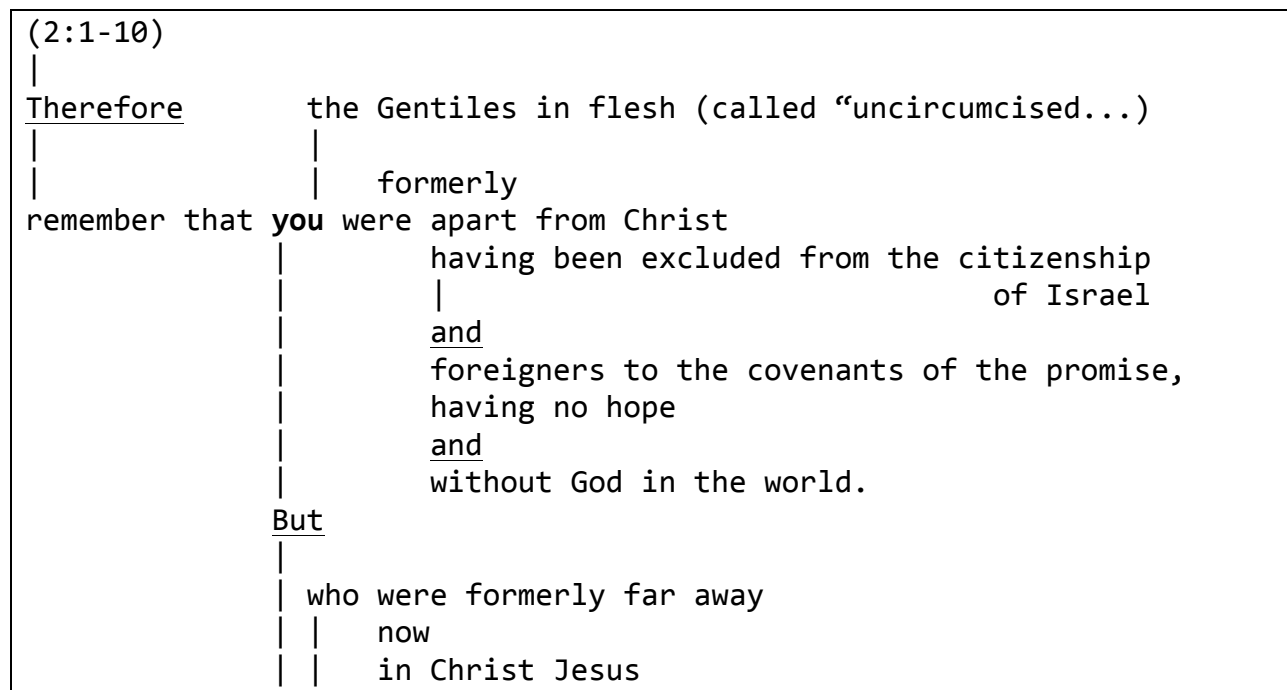
The sixth step is to create a structural diagram, a technique for visualizing the relationships between clauses and phrases within the paragraph. It makes it easier to see the main ideas within a section. This tool is most valuable in explanation or argumentation, such as Paul's epistles.

When you create structural diagrams, do so from the NASB, ESV, LEB, or some other literal translation, as they best preserve the sentence structure of the original language.

Here are the steps to create a structure diagram for your section:

1. Align every main (independent) clause to the left.
2. Identify all connectives (conjunctions) and underline them. Connectives are important little words that "connect" words and phrases in the text with other words and phrases and show the nature of the relationship of a word or phrase to those that precede or follow it.³ Examples include "and," "but," "so that," and "which."
3. Align every supporting (dependent) clause above (if it comes before) or below (if it comes after) the word it modifies. Draw lines to clarify as needed.
4. Do the same for phrases.
5. Delete verse markers and punctuation.
6. Move terms of address out of the way (or delete them).
7. Add implied words if needed for clarity.

The following examples illustrate structural diagrams. This diagram from Ephesians 2:11-13 helps us to see Paul's before and after contrast. The Ephesians were apart from Christ but now they were brought near to Christ:



³ Dr. Heisler, preaching class, SEBTS.

you were brought near
by the blood of Christ.

This diagram from Philippians 1:9-11 helps us to see that Paul's main thought was his prayer for their growth, and that the purpose of their growth was to determine the things that are valuable and to be sincere and blameless:

(Paul longed for them)

And

this I pray

that

your love might keep growing

| abundantly

| more and more

| in full knowledge and all discernment,

so that

you may be able to determine the things

| by examination

| which are valuable,

in order that

you might be sincere and blameless

until the day of Christ,

having been filled

with the fruit

of righteousness,

which is thru Jesus Christ

to the glory

and praise of God

This diagram from Romans 12:1-2 helps us to see that Paul urged the Romans to do two things. One, they were to present their bodies. Two, they were to not be conformed (negative) but be transformed (positive). The result of these things is that they would be able to prove God's will:

Therefore I urge you

| by the mercies of God,

to present your bodies

| a living and holy sacrifice,

| acceptable to God,

| which is your spiritual service

of worship.

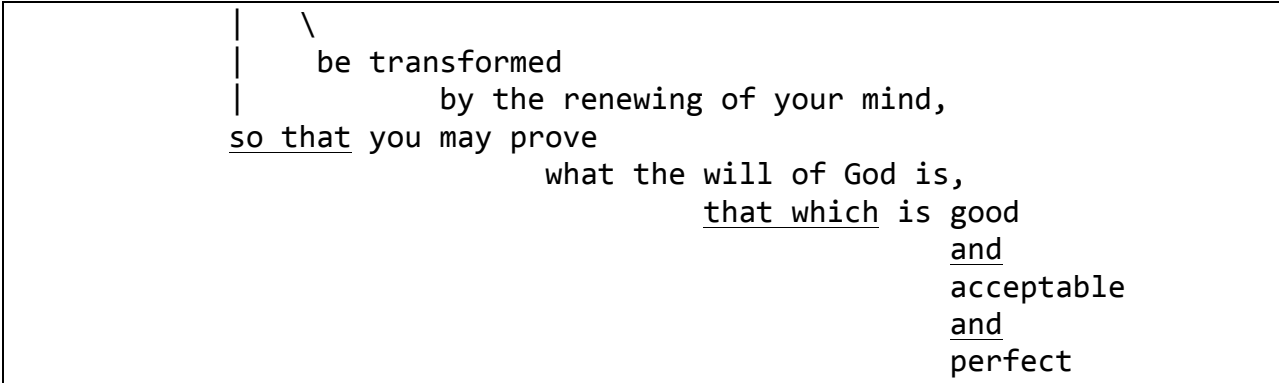
do not be conformed

/ to this world,

/

And but

| \



Structural diagramming can really be hard, but it has benefits. One, it soaks you in the text (again). Two, it forces you to evaluate clauses and phrases and see how they relate to each other. Three, it reveals new details you haven't see before.

Outline the Text

The seventh and final step of observation is outlining the section. Create an outline of the main points of the section. Connect this outline to your outline for the book.

Interpretation:

The second step of IBS is interpretation, which answers the question, "What does the section mean?" The purpose is to understand the meaning of the text as intended by the author. Some have described this as "thinking God's thoughts after him." Interpretation flows from observation, and as you gain experience, they may blend together.

It's important to understand the nature of truth. The meaning of a section is not your opinion (e.g., "This is what I think the section means" or "This is what the section means to me."), nor is it your response (e.g., "I like this" or "This feels right to me."). It is the meaning that the author intended when he wrote it. This is objective, not subjective, truth.

Interpretation is necessary because you are 2,000 years removed from the most recently written books in the Bible, because the Bible was written in a dead language that's not your native tongue, and because you live in a completely different culture than that of the authors. These not only make interpretation necessary, they also make it difficult. The simple reality is that you may not always find the right meaning of the text. That's ok; study anyway. There's lots that is very knowable.

Answer your Questions:

The first step of interpretation is to use your secondary sources⁴ to help answer the questions that remain from observation.

⁴ A secondary resource is any resource used to help you study other than the Bible.

Bible Dictionary

One of the best ways to find answers for Who? Where? and What? questions is to use a Bible dictionary. For each person, place, or thing that you want to learn more about, look up its meaning in a Bible dictionary. If the meaning helps you answer a question, write it down.

New Testament Dictionary (Lexicon)*

Words have one or more meanings, and it's often very helpful to understand these meanings. The meaning of a word is found in a dictionary (aka lexicon), specifically a dictionary of New Testament words. (In other words, an English dictionary like Webster's is not really a useful tool for this task. You need a dictionary written for Greek words as they were used in the New Testament.) Perhaps the best dictionary you can buy for New Testament word studies is *The Complete Word Study Dictionary: New Testament* by Spiros Zodhiates. For each word that you want to understand, look up its meaning in the dictionary. If the word has multiple meanings, attempt to discern which meaning best fits the context. Look to see if the dictionary lists your text, which is a big help. If the meaning helps you understand the word and answers a question, write it down.

The difficult part of this step is knowing how to look up words in the *Word Study Dictionary*. Since it is organized by Strong's numbers, you have to find the Strong's number for the word you're looking for. Several tools have this number, including the NET Bible web app (<https://net.bible.org>). If you hover your mouse over a word, it will display the Strong's number for you.

Study Bibles, One-Volume Commentaries, and Concise Commentaries

To find information about a specific verse, read the notes in your study Bible, your one-volume commentaries, and your concise commentaries. Commentaries are best all-around tool. They cover all aspects of study from word studies to historical context to application; they can double-check your observations, answer your hard questions, and help you see the things you missed. A really good commentary is well worth its price.

Study Bibles combine the Bible and some commentary into one convenient package; the amount of commentary, however, is very limited. There are many good study Bibles, including:

- *MacArthur Study Bible*
- *The HCSB Study Bible*
- *The ESV Study Bible*

One-volume commentaries cover the entire Bible (or perhaps an entire Testament) in one book, making it a good general reference for any verse you need help with. But like a study Bible, the amount of information they contain on any given verse is limited. Two good one-volume commentaries are:

- *Bible Knowledge Commentary*
- *The MacArthur Bible Commentary* by John MacArthur
- *New Bible Commentary*

Concise commentaries cover only a single book of the Bible and contain more information than study Bibles or one-volume commentaries. (They are concise only when compared to pastoral or technical commentaries). They are generally to the point, giving only one point of view and a short explanation. Examples of concise commentaries include:

- The *Be* series by Warren Wiersbe
- The *Founders Study Guide Commentary* series by Curtis Vaughan
- The *Everyman's Bible Commentary* series by various authors
- The *Tyndale New Testament Commentaries* by various authors

If your reading helps you in any way, write down what you learned.

Pastoral and Academic Commentaries*

Pastoral commentaries are generally similar to what you would learn by listening to an expository sermon. They explain the text, and they may also include illustrations and applications. Examples of pastoral commentaries include:

- The *MacArthur New Testament Commentary* series by John MacArthur
- The *NIV Application Commentary* series by various authors
- The *Life Application Commentary* series by various authors

Academic commentaries are generally the longest and most thorough. They will explain more of the text and in more detail. They may give multiple interpretations of the text and the pros and cons for each. These will be more difficult to understand than concise or pastoral commentaries—many delve into the original languages—but they are also the most valuable resources for inductive Bible study. Examples of academic commentaries include:

- The *New American Commentary* series by various authors
- The *Pillar New Testament Commentary* series by various authors
- The *Baker Exegetical Commentary on the New Testament* series by various authors

If your reading helps you in any way, write down what you learned.

Systematic Theology*

The Bible has many theological concepts, such as

- The inerrancy of Scripture
- The existence of God
- The nature of man
- The atonement
- Election and regeneration
- The perseverance of the saints
- Church government
- The gifts of the Spirit

But information on these concepts is spread throughout the Bible. Systematic theology books gather this information and put it together into one organized location, so for each

theological concept you find in your section, look up its meaning in a systematic theology. One of the best systematic theology books is *Systematic Theology: An Introduction to Bible Doctrine* by Wayne Grudem.

If your reading helps you understand the concept and answers one your questions, write it down.

Online Tools

Purchasing good secondary resources, such as a Bible dictionary, good commentaries, and a book on systematic theology, is always a good investment, and you should steadily build your library. But there are also many good resources you can find online for free.

You can find many Bible translations at Bible Gateway:

- <http://www.biblegateway.com/>

You could also download an MP3 or video of a sermon on your section, which are like having a pastoral commentary. There are some excellent sermons available online:

- John Piper (<http://www.desiringgod.org/resource-library/sermons/by-scripture>)
- John MacArthur (<http://www.gty.org/video/scripture>)
- Danny Akin (<http://www.danielakin.com/?cat=75>)

You could use the NET Bible app, either online or on your iPad. It provides the NET Bible and its footnotes, translation comparison, Strong's numbers, a simple New Testament dictionary, and a commentary by Thomas Constable.

- <https://net.bible.org/#!/bible>

The NET Bible has a very notable feature: Footnotes. There are over 60,000 footnotes from their translators that are included with the translation. Some are very technical, but many are quite helpful in understanding what the translator was thinking as he translated a verse.

Write your understanding of each verse

At this point you have answered all your questions, thus you should have a pretty good idea of what your text means. The second step of interpretation is to write your understanding of each verse. List what you understand the verse to mean and why you understand it this way; include information both from your observations and your secondary sources. In short, write down everything you know about each verse. You might find it handy to keep this question in mind: If you came back to this document one year later and re-read it, would it tell you everything you needed to understand this verse?

Paraphrase the text (aka rewrite in your own words)

Now that you've written everything you know about your text, the third step of interpretation is to summarize your understanding by rewriting each verse in your own words. This is like writing your personal paraphrase of the text. This step forces you to express your understanding in a concise manner, focusing on the main thought of each verse.

Find the Main Idea

The fourth step of interpretation is to determine the main idea of the section. Every passage has a main idea, a central truth that the author was communicating to his recipients. This main idea is the single most important part of inductive Bible. All your work in observation and interpretation leads you to the main idea, and all your application flows from the main idea.

Use the following steps to discern the main idea:

1. List the author and recipients of the book. If you completed an introductory study of the book, then you already have this information. If not, then a Bible handbook, study Bible, or commentary can help you find them.
2. Look through the section, find all the themes, and write them out. These may be words in the section or words that summarize what's going on in the section.
3. From the list of themes, determine which is the dominant theme, the one-word primary theme of the section that answers the question, "What is the writer talking about?" The dominant theme will cover all of the section (not just part of it) and will receive more explanation than any other theme. It might be a summary or compilation of other themes.
4. Looking at the dominant theme and at the other themes, then determine how the author limits the scope of the dominant theme. This is called the theme limiter, and it's a one-word subordinate theme of the section that focuses and defines the dominant theme and answers the question, "How does the writer limit the scope of what he is talking about?" Often the dominant theme is huge in scope (e.g., faith, love, obedience), but typically an author only deals with one specific aspect of it.
5. Write out the main idea as a clear and comprehensive one-sentence statement that summarizes the dominant theme as limited by the theme limiter. Write it in the past tense, include historical elements associated with the text, and anchor it to the author's intent. Write it in the following form:

(Author) wrote (this section) in order to (some action verb) (recipients)
(dominant theme and theme limiter).

Here are some examples:

- Paul wrote Galatians 4:12-20 in order to plead with Galatian believers to stay free in Christ.
- Paul wrote Ephesians 4:1-6 to order to exhort believers in Ephesus to live a life worthy of their calling.
- Paul wrote Philippians 1:9-11 in order to teach the Philippian church how to pray for love to abound in their lives.

The main idea should be specific not vague. It should be unique to this passage; that is, it should not be re-usable with any other passage in the Bible. It should cover the entire passage, not just part of it.

Consider the Gospel*

The fifth and final step of interpretation is to consider the gospel. On the road to Emmaus, Jesus began with Moses and the prophets and explained to his disciples the things concerning himself in all the Scriptures (Luke 24:27). The focal point of the entire Bible is God's plan of redemption through the death and resurrection of his Son, Jesus, which brings the Father glory. This means that every section in the Bible has some relationship to this grand theme of redemption through the gospel. To consider how your section relates to the gospel, answer these three questions:

1. What does this text teach you about yourself, a person who needs redemption through the gospel? What need or deficiency in your life does it expose?
2. And what does this text teach you about the character of God, the one who provides redemption through the gospel? How does it reveal God's grace to meet your need?
3. How does this text relate to the gospel? Does it look ahead to the gospel, describe the gospel itself, or result from the gospel?

Application:

The third step of IBS is application, which answers the question, "How does the text relate to me?" The purpose is to take the meaning of the text and apply it to your life. "But prove yourselves doers of the word and not merely hearers who delude themselves" (James 1:22). Kay Arthur said that application takes place when you are confronted with the truth and respond to it in obedience; the glorious end is transformation.

Based on the Main Idea, What Does God Want Me to Believe?

The first step of application is to answer this question: Based upon the main idea, what does God want you to believe? The section you are studying was written to help you think correctly (i.e., from God's point of view). So from this section, what does God want you to know, understand, and embrace?

Now that you know what God wants you to believe, you want to begin believing it. Compare what God wants you to believe with what you currently believe by answering these questions:

- Is there something false that you need to stop believing?
- Is there something true that you need to start believing?
- Is there an existing belief that you need to change?

If the answer to any of these questions is "yes," then you need a plan of action. What concrete steps will you do to change your beliefs? Perhaps you need to memorize a verse from this passage. Perhaps you need to spend five minutes before breakfast meditating on a truth from this passage. Perhaps you need to share with someone who will encourage you to believe this.

Based on the Main Idea, What Does God Want Me to Obey?

The second step of application is to answer this question: Based upon the main idea, what does God want you to obey? The passage you are studying was written to help you live correctly (i.e., from God's point of view). So from this passage, how does God want you to live?

Now that you know what God wants you to do, you want to begin doing it. Compare what God wants you to do with what you are currently do by answering these questions:

- Is there something you need to stop doing?
- Is there something you need to start doing?
- Is there an action that you need to change how you do it?

If the answer to any of these questions is "yes," then you need a plan of action. What concrete steps will you do to change your actions? Perhaps you need to confess sin to God or to someone else. Perhaps you need to avoid going to places where you are strongly tempted. Perhaps you need to begin practicing right actions in anticipation of a chance to do the right action. Perhaps you need to share with someone who will encourage you to obey in this area.

Further Reading

For more information on inductive Bible study, read one or more of these books:

- *How to Study Your Bible: The Lasting Rewards of the Inductive Method* by Kay Arthur
- *The New How to Study Your Bible: Discover the Life-Changing Approach to God's Word* by Kay Arthur
- *Living by the Book* by Howard Hendricks and William Hendricks