

How to Teach Biblical Research

To help your students engage in meaningful exegesis of a biblical text, it is important that they know and understand how to use the essential tools of biblical research. Although students may be quite familiar with doing research in other fields such as history or science, biblical research can present its own questions and complications. Helping students to develop these basic skills will allow them to be more confident in their interpretation of Scripture.

Though no systematic or mechanical process can be followed in doing exegesis, some basic steps can help students know where to begin. These basic steps, along with a certain amount of common sense and intuition, will help them determine the most relevant exegetical method for their chosen text.

- Remind the students to distinguish between library resources available on the Internet and other items that are simply posted on it. Even though some quality research may be available on the Web, it is best to begin with those resources that have been evaluated and determined to be academically sound.
- Discourage the students from going directly to biblical commentaries and articles that offer interpretations of their chosen text before they have had the opportunity to raise their own questions or issues related to the text. By starting with the biblical text first, then referring to other resources, they will build their own understanding rather than simply reiterating another's interpretation of the text.
- Encourage the students to read and reread their chosen passage several times.
- Tell them to list questions about things in the text that do not seem to make sense. These questions may relate to words and their meaning, phrases and their significance, and references to particular people, groups of people, or geographic areas.
- Once the students have developed their questions, direct them to the following resources. Ideally, your school library would have many of these resources to help students with their research:
 - *Saint Mary's Press® Essential Bible Dictionary*
 - *Saint Mary's Press® Guide to Biblical Life and Times*
 - *The Anchor Bible Dictionary*
 - *Dictionary of New Testament Background*
 - *Dictionary of Jesus and the Gospels*
 - *Dictionary of Paul and His Letters*
- After the students have researched the words, phrases, people, and places they did not understand, encourage them to reread their texts. As they untangle the meaning of these words and the context in which they were said, the students should be able to raise more questions about their biblical texts.



- As particular words stand out or recur in the text, it is important for the students to refer to a biblical concordance, such as *Saint Mary's Press® Essential Bible Concordance*. In this way, they can locate other passages in the Bible where the same word or phrase occurs. By analyzing and comparing the use of the same word or phrase across Scripture, the students may begin to see a pattern in its use and the word's or phrase's background in the Old Testament, or they may simply develop a better understanding of its meaning.
- At this point, one exegetical method (e.g., literary criticism, sociohistorical criticism, or ideological criticism) may begin to stand out as the best tool for interpreting the text. The students will need to consult other resources such as an encyclopedia of biblical literature, as well as one-volume commentaries such as the *New Jerome Biblical Commentary*.
- With these tools, the students can begin to form some interpretation of their chosen text. They will need to ask themselves, What does this biblical passage mean? What question, issue, or tension is raised in this passage?
- The final piece of the students' biblical research should be to locate articles and other resources about their chosen scriptural text. It is important that the articles and commentaries inform the students' research, but it should not replace the work of engaging in meaningful dialogue with the text.

As your students become budding exegetes, encourage their curiosity about Scripture and its meaning. Because the students may not feel as comfortable doing biblical research as they do in other subject areas, it is important that they are supported with the proper tools and resources to make the exegetical process an engaging journey of discovery. With the proper skills and tools, your students can continue to explore Scripture and appropriate more fully and deeply their faith in Jesus Christ.

