

HOW TO WRITE AN EXEGETICAL ESSAY

The writing of an exegetical essay is a common assessment in theological education. However, frustration for both student and marker is often felt. The cause of this frustration is because of a common misunderstanding of what the task actually is. The writing of an exegetical essay is in fact two tasks. The first is to conduct an exegesis proper. The second is writing the results of that exegesis. It is vitally important that a student views these two tasks as separate. The first task is an actual exegesis. The results of this exegesis might have a number of applications; use in a sermon, basis of a class, private study, or the writing of an essay. Exegesis means “to lead out”, meaning a student goes to the text and draws the meaning out. *Eisegesis* means “into” meaning the student goes to the text and reads a meaning into the text.

How to Conduct an Exegesis

The following is a brief summary of the seven elements that M. J. Gorman has outlined in his book *Elements of Biblical Exegesis* (Grand Rapids: Baker, 2009). The student of hermeneutics might find this model useful. This document lists a number of Gorman’s key points that will be used throughout this document. Two more useful examples of how to conduct an exegesis are found in Fee, G.D. *New Testament Exegesis: A handbook for Students and Pastors* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2002) and Stuart, D. *Old Testament Exegesis: A handbook for Students and Pastors* (Louisville: John Knox Press, 2009)

1. Survey: Preparation and overview or introduction

Read the text, perhaps from a number of different translations. The important aspect here is that time is taken to read the section a number of times. If possible not just the passage under study but the whole chapter, letter, or book.

When writing a formal introduction (like an assignment) you need an introduction. This should include the overall direction of the section, and perhaps some key points. While this will not be written until you have completed your exegesis, it is a work in progress. As you are reading keep notes. Perhaps as you are reading this section for the first time, ask what hits you? Is there something about the text that strikes you?

2. Contextual Analysis: Consideration of the historical and literary contexts of the text

In this section you are looking for the key facts that help a reader understand the background of the text. As you were reading perhaps certain terms, places, or people, were central to the passage. This is where a good Bible dictionary is of great help. What resources do you have in this area? Remember each text was written into a specific literary and historical context. Historical, socio-political, and cultural context are facets of our experiences and, of course, facets of life in ‘Bible times.’

As you consider literary and rhetorical contexts you will be asking yourself the following kinds of questions:

For the Immediate Context:

- What is the subject of the paragraph or two immediately preceding this passage? How does this material lead into the passage at hand?
- Does the material following the passage connect directly at hand?
- Does this passage work in connection with its immediate context to achieve a particular rhetorical goal?

For the Larger Contexts:

- Where does this passage occur in the structure of the book? Of what major section is it a part? What significance does this position have?
- What has 'happened' (whether in narrative, argument, etc.) in the book so far and what will happen later?
- What appears to be the text's function in the section and in the book as a whole? How does this passage appear to serve the agenda of the entire work?

3. Formal Analysis: the form, structure, and movement of the text

What is the genre of the text you are reading? What pieces make up this section of scripture? Are different types of texts put together in similar ways? Are key words used in a certain way? Does the text have a natural flow?

For example a narrative often has the following five pieces to it.

- Introduction.
- Development – often in the form of conflict
- Climax
- Falling action
- Closure/resolution

4. Detailed Analysis: the various parts of the text

This section is often an area where the exegete often causes some trouble. While it is important to look at the parts of the text, it is also important to remember that these parts belong to a greater text. Word studies can sometimes cause people to make conclusions that are incorrect. D.A. Carson offers the example of "butterfly." If this word was broken up into two parts what meanings could you create? You would discover that the origin of the word is about flight and a dairy product!

5. Synthesis: the text as a whole

So what is the text all about? It is easy to get lost in the details of all the parts that might make up the whole of a text but the point of all this work is to discover meaning.



6. Reflection: the text today

When all of the previous work has been completed the exegete now has to think about two horizons. First, what did this text mean for the original hearers/readers? Second, what does this text mean for my faith community today? The challenge here is that there are a number of different tools that might help in offering interpretation.

When different people respond to the same text what might be the reason for seeing it in a different light? The assumption that people often make is that the perspective they have is normative and are often shocked to learn that others disagree.

7. Expansion and refinement of the initial exegesis:

What other tools might help you at this stage? This is the point where commentaries might be useful. This is of course not to say that if you were writing a formal exegesis that you would not use a commentary at this point. Rather, what is suggested is that your work and your written work are separate exercises. In other words you have studied the text and made notes then as you write the exegesis you weave the insights of others into your work.

After this cycle of studying, or perhaps a number of cycles, you have pages of notes. You might have formed ideas, lines of enquiry that were just interesting, or a large amount of questions. This is now your raw data. This is your own work.

How to write a formal Exegetical Assessment

Here are the five headings you should have in your written assignment.

1. Introduction:
2. Remote Context:
3. Proximate Context:
4. The Text:
5. Application:

These five headings for your written assessment do not line up with the headings you have used in the conduct of your exegesis. Rather, these headings are a way in which you can group together the larger ideas that you have uncovered in your exegesis.

1. Introduction: What do you hope to focus on in your paper - perhaps this will be only one line of thought. You will not be able to cover the whole passage but rather only one or two aspects. Students struggle at this stage by wanting to say too much. It is often best to write this last.

2. Remote Context: This helps us think about this passage with a wider view such as what is happening in the rest of the book/letter? This information however must be used to support the key point(s) that you hope to discuss. Students often write about interesting information at this point. One of the key skills in writing an exegesis is what to leave out.



3. Proximate Context: This is about what is happening of either side of the text and where does this passage sit in the immediate situation? What words or terms let you know the passage is starting or ending? For example if you have been tasked to exegete 9:6-15 in a particular biblical book, what lets a reader know that 9:6 is the start of a new thought or that 9:15 is the end of that thought?

4. The Text: What parts of the text itself are important for the theme you wish to develop? Your job here is not to create a new commentary but rather to see how these verses have bearing on the point you are attempting to make.

5. Application. This is where you look at what this text meant to the first readers and what it might mean to us today. This is often called the 'two horizons'. Students often say the application is the same- but is it? What might be the social impact of loving your neighbour in two very different culture contexts?

Some Practical do's and don'ts

Do.

- Read the text a number of time
- Use ATLAS to seek out good quality articles

Don't

- Just reach for a commentary as your write your paper
- Just use the resources that have been supplied to you by ACOM
- Use dated resources because they are free or in your Bible software programme

