

What Type of Literature Is This?

Before ever launching into a study of a book in the Bible, the first thing a reader needs to know is what that book's author meant it to be. In other words, what kind of literature was he writing? What literary form did he employ? Literary genre is crucial to interpretation. A genre is a style that characterizes a group of compositions or an artistic category. The more experience you gain, you'll discover that there are different styles of Scripture—all God breathed, to be sure, but distinctive in terms of literary form. The more you understand about a given form, the better you'll be able to interpret the Scripture.

All of us can become better Bible students if we'll learn more about literary form. Doing so will sharpen our observations by making us more aware of what to look for. It will refine our interpretations by lending perspective and insight into how the biblical writer chose to communicate. And it will strengthen our applications by giving us confidence that we have met the author on his own terms, in his own world, so that we understand him well enough to cull out truths that will transform our world, even though many centuries separate us.

Listed below are an introduction to 6 kinds of writing that appear in the Bible and how they influence our understanding:

1. **Exposition** - An exposition is a straightforward argument or explanation of a body of objective truth. It is a form of writing that appeals primarily to the mind. The argument usually has a tight structure that moves from point to point in logical fashion.
 1. Paul's letters are outstanding examples of the expositional form in Scripture. The book of Romans is a tightly reasoned explanation of the gospel. Paul argues like a lawyer presenting a case before a court, which is no surprise because we know that as a young man Paul had extensive rabbinical training.
 - For instance, he links his paragraphs and chapters together with transitional, connective words such as *for, therefore, and & but*. He makes extensive use of the rhetorical question (for example, 2:17-21, 26). He uses long, elaborate sentences (for example, 1:28-32). On the other hand, he also employs short, rapid-fire passages that buffet the mind (for example, 7:7-25).
 2. Expository books are ideal if you're just getting started in Bible study. Their meaning lies close to the surface and they appeal to the average person's preference for logic, structure, and order. The key to understanding exposition is to pay attention to its structure and the terms it employs.
2. **Narrative and biography** - Narrative means story. The Bible is full of stories which is one reason why it's so popular. The four gospels tell the story of Jesus from four different points of view. One of them, Luke continues the narrative in the Acts of the Apostles, as we have seen. Within the accounts of Jesus, we find stories that He told to His followers.
 - Stories make for interesting reading, but it also makes for interesting interpretation. What are we to make of the stories in the Bible? How do we determine their meaning and significance?
 - First, what is the plot? What movement is there in the story? This could be physical, spiritual, or relational. The question is, what development is there in the story? What is different at the end of the book, and why?
 - Another element to study is *characterization*. Who is in the cast of characters? How are they presented? What roles do they play? What decisions do they make? How do they relate to each other, and to God? What progress do they make? Do they fail? If so, why?
 - A third issue to consider is in what ways is this story *true to life*? Remember, that was one of the clues to look for under Observation and it's also a doorway to understanding.
 - The stories of Scripture show us life as God wants us to see it.
 - So we can ask: What questions does this story raise? What problems do the characters have to deal with? What lesson do they learn or not learn? What things do they encounter that we should be sure to avoid? What did they discover about God?

REAL TALK FROM THE WORD

- If we start by asking ourselves these questions, we'll go a long way toward understanding what the stories are about.
3. **Parables** - Closely related to narrative is the parable and its cousin, the allegory. A parable is a brief tale that illustrates a moral principle. By far, most of the parables in Scripture come from the teaching of Jesus.
- Parables are simple, memorable, and entertaining and most are easy to understand. They deal with everyday matters such as fishing, farming, travel, money, and human relationships.
 - Parables are usually intended to have a powerful impact and jolt the listener into awareness by using basic ethical principles such as right and wrong (the sower and the three kinds of seed) and justice and mercy (the Pharisee and tax collector).
 - It's worth noting that parables are a form of fiction, but that by no means implies that they do not convey the truth. They communicate truth that cannot be communicated in any other way. It compels you to see some aspect of life in a completely new way.
4. **Poetry** - The distinctive feature of poetry is its appeal to the emotions, as well as the imagination. That's why the psalms are so beloved. They express some of the deepest feelings, longings, rapture, and pain of the human heart. But when you study a biblical verse, you have to understand the dynamics of Hebrew poetry.
- First of all, most psalms were meant to be sung, not read. They were composed for worship, and many include prefatory or introductory notes on what kinds of instruments were to accompany them.
 - One of the main features of Hebrew poetry is its extensive use of "parallelism."
 - For instance, if you look through the psalms, you'll notice that the majority of the verses have two lines. The two lines work off each other to communicate meaning. The second line will reinforce what the first line says by repeating its thought.
 - For instance, Psalm 103:15 says, As for man, his days are like grass; As a flower of the field, so he flourishes. Another key to Hebrew poetry is to recognize *hyperbole*, extreme or exaggerated language that makes its point overkill (Psalm 139).
 - A few more things to consider when approaching poetry of the Bible is: Who composed this material? What is the central theme of the poem? What questions does it ask? What does the poem say about God?
5. **Proverbs and Wisdom literature** - In this genre, the writer assumes the role of a wizened veteran of life who is sharing his insights with a younger, less experienced, but teachable reader. A Proverb is a short poignant nugget of truth, typically practical, and often concerned with the consequences of a course of behavior.
- Proverbs make strategic use of parallelism, especially the pairing of opposites. The Proverbs come right to the point, and of all the biblical material, they are perhaps the easiest to understand, though sometimes the hardest to apply.
 - One word of caution, though: a proverb contains a principle, not a promise. A proverb tells you: this is how life basically works. What is left unsaid is the qualifier: life does not always, 100 percent of the time work this way. Ex Proverbs 21:17
6. **Prophecy and Apocalyptic** - The final and perhaps most challenging type of literature in the Bible is the prophetic. We tend to think of prophecy as a prediction for the future. And certainly the prophetic books look ahead. But a more striking feature is their tone of warning and judgement, and the use of a formula to denote direct words from God: "Thus saith the Lord!"
- In reading the prophets, it is critical that you re-create the situation and bombard the text with the six questions of Bible reading-who, what, when, where, why and wherefore.
 - A special category of prophetic literature is apocalyptic, of which Revelation is the primary example. As the term implies, apocalyptic literature deals with cataclysmic or disastrous events of global proportions having to do with the end of the world.