

HOW TO 'MIRROR READ' A PRE-PREPARED BIBLE STUDY

Any study of the bible begins with God and 'just you'. So begin by reading through the passage quietly and prayerfully, taking careful note of what God has for you at this time in this passage. This may also prove helpful later, as you begin to help your group think through the application of the passage in their lives.

The Big Idea

A good Bible Study has a single "Big Idea" which is central to the unit of text. Hopefully, it will have one point, maximum two. Read all the questions of the study through first to see if you can track down the intended big idea. Read the text through yourself, see how that big idea 'works' from the text.

Clear goal(s).

See if you can establish the aim of the study. This should be evident from the kinds of application questions. Ask yourself, what should be different for a person in the group after having done this study.

The goal might be something to learn, to do, to evaluate, to change, to comprehend, etc. Remember, the overall goal of any Home Group should be transformation: living out our true calling/identity as Christians (Eph 4: 1).

When leading your group through the questions, have this goal clearly in your mind

Strategy

Good questions ought to lead your group discussion along a pathway of discovery through the passage. The goal at the end of the pathway is the 'Big Idea': you want your group to say, "Aha! We have discovered what this passage is all about and how it applies to us. Aren't we clever!". The sequence and direction of the questions ought to be carefully and constructed to help lead your group to this point of discovery.

Inductive Structure¹

1. **Engagement:** spark interest, consider implications: this study is worthwhile!
2. **Observation:** what the passage says
3. **Interpretation:** what the passage means
4. **Application:** what are you going to do about it?
5. **Integration:** how will this passage impact other issues, ideas or areas of my life

¹This is not the *only* way of structuring a Bible Study, but it will always produce a reasonable result. Once you can use this method of writing confidently, you might like to branch out into more creative styles and activities.

Exercise 1

Using the three example bible studies, identify (i) the big idea and/or goal of the overall study, and (ii) the purpose of each question in the study.

Exercise 2

Read Ephesians 5:1-20.

- Write 3 observation questions based on the passage.
- Write 2 interpretation questions based on the passage
- Write 1 application question based on the passage
- Write 1 integration question based on the passage
- Write 1 engagement question based on the passage.

10 Tips (not rules!) for Good Questions

(i) Concise

Good questions cover only one idea at a time

(ii) Complete

Make sure the participants have all the information they need to answer the question. If they cannot possibly know all the information required (who can?) it is quite OK to ask their opinion or to invite comments on the matter. For example, “What do you think Peter had in mind when he wrote....,” “In your opinion, how does,” “What might you conclude from the way Paul uses the word ‘grace’ in verse 4...”

(iii) Clear

Questions must be understandable, unambiguous and at the level of the group.

(iv) Connected

Keep questions connected together, logically leading to the “Big Idea” of the passage. Avoid tangents.

Inductive bible studies lead the group along a path of discovery. You are hoping that they will discover the “Big Idea” and then apply it to their lives.

(v) Conclusive

The logical flow of your questions should lead to a conclusion on ‘the big idea’ of the passage.

(vi) Conversational

For most groups, the aim of a question is to open up conversation and engage the minds of the participants in the issues arising from the text. A straight “question -> answer, question -> answer” format tends towards a classroom/teaching experience for the members². Questions that begin, “What do you think the passage is saying about.....,” or “In your opinion, why did....,” help to promote discussion in the early part of the study. After conversation about the passage has been opened up, you will need to move to more factual, “observation” questions. Remember that a Bible Study is not about shared ignorance, its about guided discovery. Questions in the latter part of your study should be more direct

The best discussion questions do not have a right and wrong answer— they tend to be open ended and require some thought. If you find yourself wanting to ask a “right or wrong” question, it is probably better to make a statement³.

²In some cases, depending on the nature of the group and the intent of the study, this may be OK.

³Some people object to being asked a question which they think you already know the answer to: “If you already knew the answer, why did you embarrass me by asking me to display my ignorance?”

(vii) Challenging

Ask questions which stretch people and challenge their understanding, their presuppositions, their commitment, and/or their comfort zone.

(viii) Creative

Beware of writing Bible Studies to a formula. Try to be as creative and constructive as possible (hints: see last week's handout). Get group members to look at an issue from an angle they may not have thought of before. For example, tell a story containing an unresolved issue and ask participants to solve it.

The only bad question is the one you use every week!

(ix) Controversial

Where the context allows, don't be afraid to be controversial. See if you can provoke a response from the group which might take them to a new level of understanding. Where the passage raises a "controversial" issue, you may like to raise the issue by adopting an extreme view. Or, you may offer some alternative scriptures which seem to contradict the one you are studying.

Sometimes this may mean playing "Devil's advocate." When you are taking this role, make sure that people know that the view that you are propounding is not really your own. Use this method sparingly and with discernment.

(x) Considerate

Try not to embarrass or get too personal too soon. Particularly in new groups, questions that dig too deep may keep people from coming back next week. Be aware of those issues which will cut particularly close for certain members.

It is OK for people to volunteer highly personal information about themselves, but I have some ethical questions concerning the propriety of direct questions which are too personal or too pointed.