

The Word in a Word Processor

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Good inductive Bible study begins with careful observation – What does it say? – followed by thoughtful interpretation - What does it mean? – leading to practical, personal application – What does it mean for me? The most useful instrument in the observation process is a pen or pencil. Circles and arrows and boxes and underlines can help associate ideas, identify names, relate actions, and show other logical connections in the passage. That visual method can begin to uncover the writer’s thought process, laying the groundwork for accurate interpretation.

Another useful tool, after the pen or pencil, is available to many Bible students. Just as the words on a page provide a working area for the pen, putting the words into a word processor can enable you to manipulate the format (not the content!) of the passage. Changing the format or layout of the passage is nothing profound or technical, merely a simple way to gain a new perspective or better observation point on the text.

First, copy the passage of interest into your word processor from one of the many online sources, such as www.BibleGateway.com or www.BibleHub.com. Or even better for the observation process, type the passage in yourself. There may be details in a passage that you overlook until you actually type the text. Once you have the text in your word processor, eliminate verse numbers, section headings, even paragraph breaks. Starting with the bare text can help with the fresh look at what the passage is saying.

For example, consider the first chapter of the Gospel of John, specifically verses 35 through 51. The passage contains a number of encounters among various disciples and Jesus. After reading through the passage a few times, it might occur to the careful observer to mark the passage to identify the various encounters:

Again the next day John was standing with two of his disciples, and he looked at Jesus as He walked, and said, “Behold, the Lamb of God!” The two disciples heard him speak, and they followed Jesus. |

And Jesus turned and saw them following, and said to them, “What do you seek?” They said to Him,

“Rabbi (which translated means Teacher), where are You staying?” He said to them, “Come, and you will see.” So they came and saw where He was staying; and they stayed with Him that day, for it was about the tenth hour. One of the two who heard John speak and followed Him, was Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother. | He found first his own brother Simon and said to him, “We have found the Messiah” (which translated means Christ). He brought him to Jesus. Jesus looked at him and said, “You are Simon the son of John; you shall be called Cephas” (which is translated Peter). | The next day He purposed to go into Galilee, and He found Philip. And Jesus said to him, “Follow Me.” Now Philip was from Bethsaida, of the city of Andrew and Peter. | Philip found Nathanael and said to him, “We have found Him of whom Moses in the Law and also the Prophets wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph.” Nathanael said to him, “Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?” Philip said to him, “Come and see.” | Jesus saw Nathanael coming to Him, and said of him, “Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!” Nathanael said to Him, “How do You know me?” Jesus answered and said to him, “Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you.” Nathanael answered Him, “Rabbi, You are the Son of God; You are the King of Israel.” Jesus answered and said to him, “Because I said to you that I saw you under the fig tree, do you believe? You will see greater things than these.” And He said to him, “Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see the heavens opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man.”

Marking divisions like that can break a longer passage down into smaller, separate sections so that each encounter described can be considered. Using a word processor can make the visual divisions even more clear by separating them into paragraphs:

Again the next day John was standing with two of his disciples, and he looked at Jesus as He walked, and said, “Behold, the Lamb of God!” The two disciples heard him speak, and they followed Jesus.

And Jesus turned and saw them following, and said to them, “What do you seek?” They said to Him, “Rabbi (which translated means Teacher), where are You staying?” He said to them, “Come, and you will see.” So they came and saw where He was staying; and they stayed with Him that day, for it was about the tenth hour. One of the two who heard John *speak* and followed Him, was Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother.

He found first his own brother Simon and said to him, “We have found the Messiah” (which translated means Christ). He brought him to Jesus. Jesus looked at him and said, “You are Simon the son of John; you shall be called Cephas” (which is translated Peter).

The next day He purposed to go into Galilee, and He found Philip. And Jesus said to him, "Follow Me." Now Philip was from Bethsaida, of the city of Andrew and Peter.

Philip found Nathanael and said to him, "We have found Him of whom Moses in the Law and *also* the Prophets wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph." Nathanael said to him, "Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see."

Jesus saw Nathanael coming to Him, and said of him, "Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!" Nathanael said to Him, "How do You know me?" Jesus answered and said to him, "Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you." Nathanael answered Him, "Rabbi, You are the Son of God; You are the King of Israel." Jesus answered and said to him, "Because I said to you that I saw you under the fig tree, do you believe? You will see greater things than these." And He said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see the heavens opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man."

Once the sections of text are separated, reading each encounter may suggest a helpful summary.

John and the Two Disciples

Again the next day John was standing with two of his disciples, and he looked at Jesus as He walked, and said, "Behold, the Lamb of God!" The two disciples heard him speak, and they followed Jesus.

Andrew and the One Other

And Jesus turned and saw them following, and said to them, "What do you seek?" They said to Him, "Rabbi (which translated means Teacher), where are You staying?" He said to them, "Come, and you will see." So they came and saw where He was staying; and they stayed with Him that day, for it was about the tenth hour. One of the two who heard John *speak* and followed Him, was Andrew, Simon Peter's brother.

Andrew and Simon

He found first his own brother Simon and said to him, "We have found the Messiah" (which translated means Christ). He brought him to Jesus. Jesus looked at him and said, "You are Simon the son of John; you shall be called Cephas" (which is translated Peter).

Jesus and Philip

The next day He purposed to go into Galilee, and He found Philip. And Jesus said to him, "Follow Me." Now Philip was from Bethsaida, of the city of Andrew and Peter.

Philip and Nathanael

Philip found Nathanael and said to him, "We have found Him of whom Moses in the Law and *also* the Prophets wrote—Jesus of Nazareth, the son of Joseph." Nathanael said to him, "Can any good thing come out of Nazareth?" Philip said to him, "Come and see."

Jesus and Nathanael

Jesus saw Nathanael coming to Him, and said of him, "Behold, an Israelite indeed, in whom there is no deceit!" Nathanael said to Him, "How do You know me?" Jesus answered and said to him, "Before Philip called you, when you were under the fig tree, I saw you." Nathanael answered Him, "Rabbi, You are the Son of God; You are the King of Israel." Jesus answered and said to him, "Because I said to you that I saw you under the fig tree, do you believe? You will see greater things than these." And He said to him, "Truly, truly, I say to you, you will see the heavens opened and the angels of God ascending and descending on the Son of Man."

This arrangement may even look like the layout of some Bibles, using headings for different sections of the text. The benefit here is that the headings are your headings, derived from your own study and observation. In most cases, this process will provide you with a much better understanding of the passage than simply reading the preprinted headings in your Bible. A fresh look at the text without verse numbers or paragraph divisions or printed headings requires more effort. The extra effort and thought required are often rewarded with better understanding of the Scripture passage.

For even more clarity in seeing the structure of a passage, you can use the "Indent" function of your word processor. The flow of a passage, whether a narrative description or a doctrinal explanation or a historical account, is usually a product of grammar. Ideas are connected or contrasted or related by means of a variety of words. Conjunctions (and, but, or) and prepositions (in, of, with, by, for, and many others) relate different ideas to each other. Relative pronouns (that, who, which, whoever, whichever, and others) describe relationships between words or phrases. Using easily identifiable words like these can help understand the structure of a passage. The structure and organization of the passage can help our understanding of the thought process the writer had in mind.

With that same passage from John 1 describing the encounters between disciples and Jesus, you could use the "Indent" function (or simply the Tab key) to indicate the various elements of the writer's organization of the text:

Again the next day
John was standing
with two of his disciples,
and he looked at Jesus
as He walked,
and said,
"Behold, the Lamb of God!"

The two disciples heard him speak,
and they followed Jesus.
And Jesus turned
and saw them following,
and said to them,
"What do you seek?"
They said to Him,
"Rabbi (which translated means Teacher),
where are You staying?"
He said to them,
"Come, and you will see."
So they came
and saw where He was staying;
and they stayed with Him that day,
for it was about the tenth
hour.

One of the two
who heard John speak
and followed Him,
was Andrew,
Simon Peter's brother.
He found first his own brother Simon
and said to him,
"We have found the Messiah"
(which translated means
Christ).
He brought him to Jesus.

Jesus looked at him
and said,
"You are Simon
the son of John;
you shall be called Cephas"
(which is translated Peter).

The next day
He purposed to go into Galilee,
and He found Philip.
And Jesus said to him,
"Follow Me."
Now Philip was from Bethsaida,
of the city of Andrew and Peter.

Philip found Nathanael
and said to him,
"We have found
Him of whom Moses in the Law
and also the Prophets wrote
Jesus of Nazareth,
the son of Joseph."

Nathanael said to him,
"Can any good thing come out of
Nazareth?"

Philip said to him,
"Come and see."

Jesus saw Nathanael coming to Him,
and said of him,
"Behold, an Israelite indeed,
in whom there is no deceit!"

Nathanael said to Him,
"How do You know me?"

Jesus answered
and said to him,
"Before Philip called you,
when you were under the fig tree,
I saw you."

Nathanael answered Him,
"Rabbi,
You are the Son of God;
You are the King of Israel."

Jesus answered
and said to him,
"Because I said to you
that I saw you under the fig tree,
do you believe?
You will see greater things than these."

And He said to him,
"Truly, truly, I say to you,
you will see the heavens opened
and the angels of God ascending
and descending
on the Son of Man."

The decisions about exactly where to place the indentations and what level (similar to an outline) to make each segment is relatively subjective. One of the benefits of using this process is the thought you will need to give to those very questions – is this the right place to divide the writer’s thought? Is this line a parallel idea to this other line? The reformatting of the passage is not an end in itself. Rather the effort and critical thinking needed to make such decisions will often provide new insight into what the writer was expressing and how he was expressing it.

The reformatted passage can also be helpful in the continuing process of observation in the passage. For example, using the new layout for this part of John 1 may help to see the flow of the various encounters. You might use the new layout to select what seem to you to be the most significant part of each encounter. Those “highlights” might be a place to start to see how Jesus engaged different people, and how those individuals responded to Him:

Again the next day

John was standing
with two of his disciples,
and he looked at Jesus
as He walked,

and said,
“Behold, the Lamb of God!”

The two disciples heard him speak,

and they followed Jesus.

And Jesus turned
and saw them following,
and said to them,
“What do you seek?”

They said to Him,
“Rabbi (which translated means Teacher),
where are You staying?”

He said to them,
“Come, and you will see.”

So they came
and saw where He was staying;
and they stayed with Him that
day,
for it was about the tenth
hour.

One of the two

who heard John speak
and followed Him,
was Andrew,
Simon Peter’s brother.

He found first his own brother Simon
and said to him,
“We have found the Messiah”
(which translated means
Christ).

He brought him to Jesus.

Jesus looked at him

and said,
“You are Simon
the son of John;
you shall be called Cephas”
(which is translated Peter).

The next day

He purposed to go into Galilee,
and **He found Philip.**
And Jesus said to him,
“Follow Me.”

Now Philip was from Bethsaida,
of the city of Andrew and Peter.

This example illustrates the iterative process of

observation in the inductive process. The highlighted

Philip found Nathanael

and said to him,
“We have found
Him of whom Moses in the Law
and also the Prophets wrote
Jesus of Nazareth,
the son of Joseph.”

Nathanael said to him,
“Can any good thing come out of
Nazareth?”

Philip said to him,
“Come and see.”

Jesus saw Nathanael coming to Him,
and said of him,
“Behold, an Israelite indeed,
in whom there is no deceit!”

Nathanael said to Him,
“How do You know me?”

Jesus answered
and said to him,
“Before Philip called you,
when you were under the fig tree,
I saw you.”

Nathanael answered Him,
“Rabbi,
You are the Son of God;
You are the King of Israel.”

Jesus answered
and said to him,
“Because I said to you
that I saw you under the fig tree,
do you believe?”

You will see greater things than these.”

And He said to him,
“Truly, truly, I say to you,
you will see the heavens opened
and the angels of God ascending
and descending
on the Son of Man.”

phrases may lead to other observations and insights

and significant interpretation. Or they may not.

Observation is about gathering information, like the clues gathered by a detective who wants to find the meaning of all the different pieces of evidence. The detective or the Bible student collects clues without prejudging the potential value. Gather the clues and see where they lead. If they are not helpful, try a fresh start. Maybe you will want to use a new copy of the passage using a different approach to the format or the marking. Keep up the hard work until the passage begins to unfold its meaning to you.

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