

Using Literary Skills with the Bible

Though we may not read the Bible in its original languages or have the skills of a Bible scholar, we can all achieve surprising insights into Scripture through the use of literary skills. We have *all* studied stories and language, and we can arrive at some deep insights by reading closely and attentively, paying attention to details, asking questions, and looking for the author's intended emphasis.

A "close reading" pays careful attention to details like:

- Minute choice of words
- Which details are reported
- The pace of the narration (slowing down, zooming in)
- Interconnections in the text

Ask Questions like:

1. What material does the author move *quickly* over?
 - Skipping over = wasn't the author's point
2. Where does he *slow down* or *zoom in* on the details?
 - Slowing / zooming = a spotlight on what's important
3. Where does the author *repeat himself*?
 - Repetition = Key words + motifs, the author's emphasis
4. Is there something that *doesn't seem to fit*?
 - "Insignificant" bits of data are usually important
 - Suddenly interrupting/switching stories is important
5. Is the author highlighting *similarities* between 2 characters or events? *Differences*?
 - The author chooses the order in which he tells the story, sometimes putting two incidents side-by-side for the purpose of comparing, contrasting, or making a theological point
6. How does the story begin and end?
 - Beginning & end with the same theme: The opening, closing and central moment in between usually signal the key theme.
 - Is there reversal between the beginning and ending? This often shows God's sense of poetic justice.

Apply skills from English class! 😊

What is the structure of the story?

- What is the plot? What would you describe as the climax?
- Is there figurative language? Allusions, paradoxes, sarcasm, foreshadowing?
- Is there irony? A twist or reversal? This often shows "poetic justice."

How are the characters portrayed? (Any details given *matter*.)

- We are given a window into the character from just a few details (physical appearance, flattering or unflattering aspects of their character)
- OR, descriptions are given if they matter to the plot (Esau being hairy, Jacob being smooth)

What emotional response is the author seeking to create?

- Are we supposed to laugh at the folly of someone?
- ...to feel sad or disappointed? Comforted? Surprised?