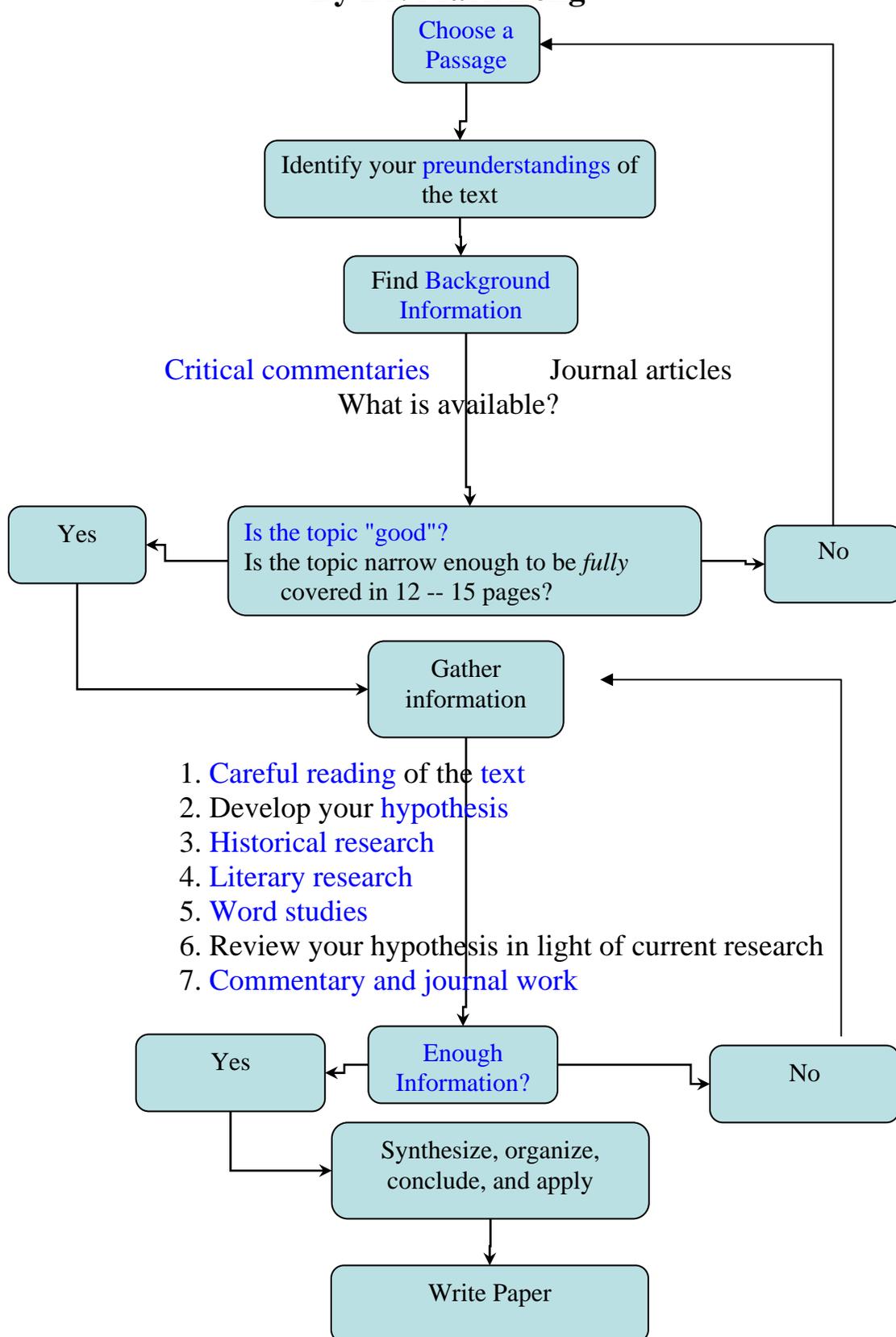


Writing an Exegetical Paper Flowchart

By Dr. Mark Long



Choose a passage Pick a passage that contains a complete thought or narrative. The passage may be a subsection of a larger section, but it must be a complete thought/story. The object of exegesis is to analyze a text as thoroughly as possible, so pick a passage that is short enough to cover in a 12 -- 15 page paper (the content section), yet long enough to fill about 12 pages.

Preunderstanding What you believe the text means before you even research and analyze the text. We all have preunderstandings of texts based on upbringing, church experiences, and life experiences. We approach the hermeneutical task from the viewpoint of a journey. The first step of a journey is to leave the place where you are. Our desire is not to abandon sound biblical truth, but to make sure that we allow as few prejudices and false assumptions as possible to hinder God revealing himself to us through his word. Take the following steps to help reduce the effect your preunderstanding has on your conclusion of your text.

1. Write down what you believe the text means.
2. Try to identify why you believe the text means what you believe it means.
3. Make a covenant with God that you will not force the text to mean what you already believe it means, but allow him to reveal to you what it means and how it applies to today through the process of the hermeneutical journey.
4. Do not forget the importance of the spiritual aspect of biblical interpretation. Remain in a state of prayer throughout the hermeneutical process.

Background information At this point you are not trying to research or find information to interpret the passage. Your goal is to discover if there is enough information available to fulfill the length requirements of the assigned paper. If you look in several **critical commentaries** and see that there is very little discussion or analysis of the text you have chosen, you probably want to expand your passage or pick a different passage to exegete. This does not mean the passage is not inspired or true, but that it does not lend itself to the requirements of the assignment at hand.

Critical Commentary For the purposes of this assignment, a critical commentary is one that shows, through analysis of the biblical text, why the author believes the text means what it means. Commentaries that simply state what a passage means, but do not explain why, are considered devotional or expository commentaries, and not desirable for this project.

Is the topic "good"? This refers to the passage's suitability to meet the requirements of the assignment at hand. Does the passage contain a complete thought/story? Is the passage a complete pericope, point, or sub point? Is there enough information to meet the minimum page requirements of the paper (without a bunch of meaningless "filler")? Is the passage short enough to *fully* analyze and explain within the page limits of the paper?

Careful reading Make observations as described in chapters 2 -- 4 of *Grasping God's Word*. Read the **text** through several times to get a grasp on the **text** itself. Reading commentaries and journals is the last step of exegeting a biblical passage. You need to get a firm grasp on the text on your own *before* you read other people's opinions and conclusions on the text. This way you keep the Bible as the object of study, and commentaries will help you analyze the Bible.

Text "Text" refers to the biblical text. We treat the Bible as a primary text. For a good discussion of primary and secondary sources see <http://www.ithaca.edu/library/course/primary.html>. The point of the exegetical paper is to exegete a biblical passage, not commentaries on the Bible. Consequently, the focus must be on the biblical text, not commentaries. Reading a commentary on a biblical text too early can prejudice you as to the ultimate conclusion on the text. Get a firm grasp on the text first (using

observation, historical, literary, and word study). Then use commentaries to help you analyze the text.

Hypothesis A hypothesis is your guess or theory as to the conclusion of your study. After you have performed a thorough, careful reading of the text write down what you think you will conclude based on your initial observations. Do not make these observations concrete. Be willing to revise your opinion as you continue to research and analyze the text.

Historical research The background of the biblical book and any cultural and religious issues contained in the text (e.g., marriage/divorce, idolatry, foot washing, etc...). Research as thoroughly as possible to understand these issues from the perspective of the original author *and* audience.

Literary research How does the specific passage of your study fit into the larger passage? How does it fit into the narrative/cognitive flow of the book? Identify the type of genre of your passage and any ramifications for interpretation.

Word studies Identify a few, if any, major terms/ideas and determine the specific meaning of the term/idea in your particular context. Keep in mind the difference between denotative and connotative meanings. Study the term/idea in enough passages in various contexts to be able to determine the specific usage in your passage.

Commentary and journal work Take careful notes, keeping detailed source information. Make sure to use commentaries to help you analyze the text, not "tell" you what the text means. Focus on **critical commentaries**, not devotional or expository commentaries. Use the commentaries' analysis to help you analyze the text.

Enough Information? Do you have enough information to soundly conclude what the text likely meant in its original context to the original readers/hearers? Are you able to identify the theological principles in the text. Do you have enough understanding to apply the theological principles to current day situations?

Grasping God's Word

Duvall, J. Scott, and J. Daniel Hays. *Grasping God's Word: A Hands-On Approach to Reading, Interpreting, and Applying the Bible*, 2nd ed. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2005.