

Leading and Writing a Bible Study from Scratch

In leading a Bible study there are two extremes: do nothing and rely solely on the set booklet or list of questions, or do everything by starting from scratch with only the Bible and your imagination. I'll look at both extremes and somewhere in between.

Doing nothing before leading a study sounds slack and it probably is, but there are times when you are working full time, you've had a busy week, there are a dozen things you have to do at home and it is just too much to sit down and spend time preparing a Bible study. Having the questions already there is such a relief when the rest of your life seems so hectic. The study itself may not be all that good but you get it done and, if you're lucky, some of the other people in the group may take up the slack.

Doing everything means that all you've got to start with is the passage of the Bible or the topic that is going to be studied i.e. no set booklet, no set questions. Here's how I prepare a study from scratch though there other ways e.g. see chapter 3 [Leading Better Bible Studies](#) by Karen & Rod Morris, chapters 4 to 6 [Growth Groups](#) by Colin Marshall and [Writing a Small Group Study](#) by Richard Sweatman.

First you have to **understand the passage** then you can work out some questions that will bring out the meaning and application of the passage. You will have to do that with every passage you use if you are preparing a study on a topic. That's one of the reasons doing topics is so much more work.

To understand the passage read it a few times and **write down things** that occur to you while you are reading e.g. the bits you don't understand (group members probably won't understand those bits either), questions for discussion in the group, themes that might be worth exploring, and personal stories that come to mind. You can explore these things later but you need to write them down before you get distracted and forget them. Keep reading the passage until you feel you've got a good grip on what it is about. Now work out the **context**: the Biblical context, the cultural context, the political context and the historical context. I like to explain the context of the passage before I ask members to read it. Occasionally, I've seen people use Bible passages, out of context, to support their argument but when I looked at the context I found it wasn't related to their argument at all. So I try to avoid that sort of misrepresentation by always giving the context to each passage I use. You should also consider the structure of the passage and the literary type. It seems like a lot of work but with practise you can do a lot of this quickly. There are books to help you like [Postcard from Palestine](#) by Andrew Reid which is presented as a series of Bible studies.

One problem is that you can become so focussed on small passages that you lose sight of **the big picture**. You need to bring out the relevance of the small passage to the book or topic you are studying and even the relevance of the passage to the whole Bible. You should continually move from small passage to big picture and back again with extra questions that encourage this way of thinking. I've got an example of this in my article "Big Picture, keeping it in sight".

Now **work through your notes** that you made while reading the passage multiple times. You may need to do some research to understand the things you had problems with. Work on these until you have a clear and simple explanation for yourself and the group. If there is a common theme for the passage you should work out an interesting opening question which will get the group warmed up. Sometimes a good closing question will also come to mind but it may need to be modified after you've prepared the whole study. If you've got personal **stories** that fit in with the passage work out roughly where to put them in the study. Try not to dominate the study with all your stories. One or two stories,

if they are short, may work out well and prompt other people to tell their stories. By “stories” I mean personal experiences that can be shared with the group and relate to the passage.

There are **different types of questions** that you need to devise i.e. an opening or launching question, comprehension questions, investigative questions, challenging questions, application questions, curly questions and a closing question. Sometimes it is better to come up with good opening and closing questions after you’ve worked out all the other questions. This is because you need an **opening question** that leads into the general ideas of the study (and you don’t know those general ideas until you’ve finished preparing the study) and a **closing question** that sums up the study and/or that encourages members to think further on the general ideas presented by the study. I’ve written more on the opening question in my article “Opening question and its importance”.

Review question. After the opening question it is good to review what you studied last time. I usually write a section in the study called “The story so far . . .” but instead you could have a review question. Here are some examples taken from Writing a Small Group Study p. 75 by Richard Sweatman:

What was the previous study about?

What have you learnt so far from this book?

If you were to choose a soundtrack for this book so far, what would you choose?

Here’s a quiz from our previous studies, best score wins a prize.

Comprehension questions are also called observation questions. These are helpful to make sure members have read the passage, understand what it says and start them thinking. Don’t make these questions too easy or it will seem like you are treating your members like little kids. In Sticky Church (page 71) Larry Osborne says “one of the most annoying things about being in a small group is what I call the idiot questions. It seems as if every workbook and study guide has plenty of them. They’re the questions with blindingly obvious answers. I used to think, “Come on, can’t we skip this stuff?” But in reality we can’t. The idiot questions are a necessary part of the process. They make sure everyone is on the same page and understands the background and context to the more substantive things we’ll talk about later, There’s really no way around them.”

Investigative questions are also called into-the-Bible or interpretation questions. These questions move your group from observing what is there in the passage to understanding what it means. The aim of these questions is so that members can put the author’s ideas into their own words i.e. members will be able to say “I get it”.

Application questions make the group think how they can apply the passage to their daily lives. For example “How can you promote the unity of your church?” or “How is the gospel bearing fruit in your life?”

Challenging questions should get people to think outside the box, maybe challenging long held assumptions or ideas. For example “What role does the Old Testament law play in a Christian’s life today?” or “Is a Bible study group just as much church as what we do on Sundays?” Some studies group the comprehension questions together and the investigative questions together and the challenging questions together. I might have a couple of comprehension questions first then I mix investigative and challenging questions together as they come up in the Bible passage.

Curly questions and challenging questions are similar except that a particularly curly question may be appropriate as a closing question to finish the study and leave members with something to think about. For example “Can you be a Christian and not go to church?” or “How much of what people believe is because of their ignorance and how much is an act of the will?”

Summary question. At the end of the study, instead of giving the summary yourself (see point 7 below) you could ask a question to get group members to summarise what you have studied. For example "If you had to summarise tonight's passage in a single sentence what would you say? Combine your sentence with people from the rest of your group to hone and settle on a summary."

Work out questions that are consistent with the interests, intellectual level and maturity of the group. Don't ask questions that are too easy or they will get bored or think you are being condescending. Ask questions that will stretch the group's thinking but not so hard that they go over their heads. Be careful to word your questions so that it is clear what you are asking. Ask questions which are relevant. Bible studies don't have to be all questions. Use **variety** e.g. film clips or music. (Check out my article "Variety".) Try different things but don't be put off if something doesn't work. Modify it if you can and it may work next time.

Organise it. Once you've worked out what the passage means, the context, the questions you would like to ask, the personal stories you want to use and any creative ideas you've thought of (see my article "Variety") then you've got to organise it into a coherent study for your group.

Try to make the study **look good on paper**. Where applicable add pictures, tables, diagrams, graphs etc. Your study may be given to each member of your group so that they can prepare their answers in advance or your study may be used by other groups or even the whole church. People always look at a piece of paper if you have a picture on it. Leave space after each question so that people can write in their answers. Print out the study and get someone to proof read it.

Now organise things for your presentation of the study to the group.

Timing will be a big factor. You need to know when people arrive for the meeting, how long they take for a chat and something to eat and drink before they settle down, how long the prayer time goes for, what time people want to go home, and how long you will have for the actual study. You will need to organise the study with that time frame in mind. Guess how long it will take for people to answer the questions and tell their stories. If you have too many questions you will have to cut some out. If you cut things out you will need to make sure the study still flows logically from one point to another. When you are actually leading the study at the meeting keep your eye on the time because you may need to make further adjustments. Things may take longer than you thought and you will need to cut bits out while keeping the logical flow of thought and get to the closing question rather than finishing abruptly when the time runs out. It's better to finish earlier rather than later. Often people are getting tired towards the end, or want to go home, or have other engagements. If you finish early members can always chat or eat and drink before they have to go. If you finish late you may be inconveniencing people and they may walk out during the study which is awkward for everyone.

In organising your study it often helps to have a **run sheet**. I use numbers to keep things in order and I write in starting and finishing times. This is how I usually organise my run sheet:

1. Opening prayer by me or I might ask someone else to pray.
2. Opening question(s).
3. Look up the passage in your Bibles while I explain the context or, if we are part way through a book, I'll tell the story so far.
4. Read the passage. If it is a long passage I might get a few people to read a few paragraphs each but I prefer to have one person read the whole thing. It is very distracting if you get different people to read a couple of verses each in different translations with different reading skills.
5. A few comprehension questions.

(When asking a question ask it *before* the passage is read then get someone to read the passage aloud while the others follow it in their Bibles. This way people keep the question in mind

while reading the passage. After the passage is read I ask the same question again and wait for people to give their answers allowing for the possibility of having a discussion on those answers.)

6. Investigative, challenging and application questions as we focus on the relevant verses from the passage, mixed in with stories, videos, music (with the words printed off beforehand and a copy for each person) or any other creative idea I might have come up with.

7. Summary of what has been discussed. The summary should round-off and clarify what has been said and you could suggest areas where people could do more thinking. Sometimes the summary can be replaced by the closing question or visa versa.

8. Closing question.

9. Closing prayer.

Sometimes you prepare studies days or even weeks before you have to lead the study. I suggest you go over the run sheet on the day of the meeting or the night before. Go through it step by step answering the questions as if you were one of the members and not the leader. Imagine what will happen at the meeting. This will refresh your memory and may alert you to something you missed when preparing the study or something you could do better than the way you had planned.

Other things to keep in mind:

Work out your goals/objectives. Work out your goals in leading the study. For some leaders their goal is to get through all the questions. They might succeed in this but they can miss all the other things going on in the group. Others try to impose their knowledge on the group and the Bible Study becomes a sermon rather than a discussion. Other goals might be evangelism, relevance or improving friendships in the group. I try to get everyone participating in the study - my first goal. If I can get everyone talking then that is a fair indication that they are involved. If someone is falling asleep then I usually get them to read the next passage. That wakes them up, at least. I try to cover the material in the study but I like to challenge people to think outside the square – my second goal. If people answer in clichés or “book answers” then I know they are not thinking, just reciting. One way to challenge people is to present them with a practical situation that they may encounter and asking what they would do. For further ideas see my article “Objectives of the group” and Roger Green’s “Objectives and Covenant”.

Richard Sweatman in Writing a Small Group Study looks at goals differently. He thinks that the leader should work out goals in terms of what members should understand by the time the study is finished. I think this approach is mistaken because it is about what the *leader* wants for the group rather than what the Spirit might be trying to teach. You can be so focused on achieving your goals that you can neglect or completely miss other things that are happening for people during the study. Rather than the leader setting these types of goals let the passage/God set the agenda as you work through the passage. Setting goals in terms of what you want people to understand may be more appropriate in school/college/university settings than in a Bible study situation.

Thinking on your feet. (I’ve quoted from parts of my article called “Listening”.) If you are well prepared you can comment on what people say and carry the conversation into interesting directions. To do this you need to think on your feet i.e. react to what people say rather than always reading out your prepared answer. You may even anticipate the questions people may ask. Go with the flow of the discussion rather than stopping the rapport by moving too quickly to the next question.

It is helpful if you are a good listener. But this is not just about listening for the “correct” answers. Listening is about people – how they react, detecting what they are like and where they are coming from – and remembering who said what so that you can get back to them.

Listening will give you some idea about what the group understands from the Bible passage. You need to react to those answers to decide if you need to ask another question to clarify the point or if you can go deeper into the topic or move on to the next question.

One thing that can be very encouraging is that, if the leader is listening well, he or she can say something like “Bill brought up that idea earlier, can you say something more about it?” or “I can see Sue’s point of view but from what Bill said earlier I don’t think you would agree with her would you?” Or, if you don’t want to put Bill on the spot ask “What do the rest of you think?” It shows that you are listening to people, valuing their answers and allowing their words shape where the study is going rather than ploughing through question after question from a prescribed script. You need to listen to what people say, remember who said it and mention their name when referring back to what was said.

Be flexible. The meeting does not always go as you have planned. All sorts of unexpected things can happen e.g. you got the timing all wrong, someone has a crisis that they are going through and it can’t wait, a particular aspect of the passage grabs the group and the discussion becomes more relevant and interesting than anything you’ve prepared, someone starts crying, people go way off beam and it is difficult to get them back on track, someone dominates the group and it is hard to get him/her to let other people have a say. You need wisdom and flexibility to handle these things. You don’t have to stick legalistically to what you have prepared. The study is not all about the leader and what he/she wants to do. It is for the good of the group.

Group dynamics. How do the people react to each other? Who likes whom? Who always seems to disagree with whom? Why are people falling asleep? How will a new person effect the group? What if a non-Christian comes into the group? What do you do with someone who answers every question so that no-one else gets a word in? Some people talk so much you have a job trying to stop them. Other people say so little that when they do say something one of the “talkers” will interrupt and talk over them. I like to handle this by going back to the non-talker when the talker has finished and probe into the non-talker’s point by asking questions to get them to expand on their thoughts. These are all questions about group dynamics. I’ve already touched on some of this in “4. Thinking on your feet”. More useful information can be found in books like Leading Better Bible Studies by Karen and Rod Morris (ch 6 Sustaining group members) and Growth Groups by Colin Marshall (ch 7 The games people play).

Now let’s look at areas that are **in-between doing nothing and doing everything**. Say there is a set booklet or list of questions that have been provided for the group. Before you look at the booklet or set questions read and re-read the Bible passage and note down your own ideas and questions as explained earlier in this article. Bible study groups are personal and it is important that something of your personal touch and your character comes out while you lead the study. The set booklet or list of questions will have the author’s personality stamped on it but that may be a lot different to what you are like. Look at the booklet and use bits of it if you think it is worthwhile. The booklet may explain a difficult idea better than you can, so quote it. You may find that some of your thinking on the passage is wrong so you may need to change things in your study. Your approach to the study may be a lot different to the booklet’s approach. That doesn’t necessarily mean you are wrong. You may have a much more interesting and helpful take on the study so you should stick to that approach.

Feedback from wise and discerning members can help you prepare better next time. Saying it was good doesn’t help much. I’d rather have critical analysis on specific areas. Criticism is an opportunity to find your mistakes and be better prepared next time.

If you’ve got time ask other Bible study leaders to read your study and give you feedback. Can they suggest anything different or innovative? Have you missed any key ideas? Does the study flow from one idea to another? Are the questions too personal or not personal enough?

The success of a Bible study doesn’t necessarily depend on the extent of preparation by the leader. One of the best studies I went to was led by a lady who admitted to not having much time to

prepare and she wasn't sure how it would go. In that case the study was a success because it encouraged more conversation and involvement in the members. But this is not an excuse for poor preparation. Do whatever you can in the time you have available.