How to Prepare a Message

Cutting It Straight
How to Prepare a Message

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I. Determine the Proposition of Your Message

A. The proposition is a single statement which expresses the main idea or central theme of your message.

Until you can capsulize the purpose of the sermon in one crisp sentence, you probably do not yet have it clearly fixed enough in your own mind—even if you think you do.

Jay Adams

No sermon is ready until we can express its theme in a short, pregnant sentence. I do not think any sermon ought to be preached or even written until that sentence has emerged.

Henry Jowett

1. The proposition answers the following questions:
   a. What is the point of my message?
   b. What is the essence of what I plan to communicate?

2. The main idea can sometimes be found in:
   a. A single statement, idea, or phrase in the passage

   **Example**

   1 Peter 2:1-3
   Single Statement:
   Verse 2: "long for the pure milk of the word"
   The Main Idea:
   Believers must intensely desire the Word of God.

   **Example**

   1 John 2:15-17
   Single Statement:
   Verse 15a: "Do not love the world"
   The Main Idea:
   Believers must refrain from loving the world.
b. Recurring statements, ideas or phrases in the passage

**Isaiah 40:12-31**

**Recurring Statement:**
Verse 18: "To whom then will you liken God? Or what likeness will you compare with Him?"
Verse 25: "To whom then will you liken Me that I should be his equal?"

**The Main Idea:**
God is incomparable.

**1 Peter 1:6-9**

**Recurring Phrase:**
Verses 6 and 8: "you greatly rejoice"

**The Main Idea:**
Believers rejoice even in the midst of suffering.

**B. The proposition should function as the central theme of all that you have to say.**

If you conclude that the main idea of 1 Peter 1:13-21 is that believers are to live holy lives, everything that you say when you teach this passage (including your introduction, main points, sub-points, illustrations, and conclusion) should be designed to support this central theme in some way.

If the proposition does not function as the central theme of all that you have to say, either:

a. your proposition does not properly reflect the text, or

b. your message is straying from the text to some degree.

**C. The proposition must be both:**

1. **Grounded in the text (i.e., biblically-driven)**

   First discover the proposition of the *original writer* (often called the *exegetical* proposition).
2. Directed at your hearers (i.e., *audience-oriented*)

Then determine the proposition of your message (often called the *homiletical* proposition).

In other words, your proposition should be biblical, but it should also reflect the fact that you are communicating to people in the here and now. For this reason, a distinction can be made between an *exegetical* proposition and a *homiletical* proposition.

### Example

#### The Exegetical Proposition vs. the Homiletical Proposition

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Exegetical Proposition</th>
<th>Homiletical Proposition</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(focuses on original readers)</td>
<td>(focuses on contemporary hearers)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Paul reminds Timothy of three characteristics of Scripture so that he might be encouraged to preach the Word as he seeks to combat false teaching among the Ephesians.</td>
<td>Paul provides three characteristics of Scripture that should motivate you to be more devoted to God’s Word.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Key Question:** How does the second proposition differ from the first one?

### D. The proposition can most easily be expressed with a *plural noun*.

1. The plural noun can consist of something along the lines of the following:
   
   a. “three foundations”
   
   b. “four keys”
   
   c. “two responses”
   
   d. “six imperatives”
2. The plural noun can also include a modifier for appropriate emphasis:
   a. “three essential elements”
   b. “four compelling reasons”

3. The plural noun will help you to narrow the focus of your proposition and lead your hearers into the points of your outline. Notice the difference the plural noun makes in the following four examples taken from above.

   **example**
   
   1 Peter 2:1-3
   
   **Main Idea:**
   Believers must intensely desire the Word of God.
   
   **Plural-Noun Proposition:**
   Peter provides *three ways* to increase your desire for God's Word.

   **example**
   
   1 John 2:15-17
   
   **Main Idea:**
   Believers must refrain from loving the world.
   
   **Plural-Noun Proposition:**
   John provides *four reasons* why you must refrain from loving the world.

   **example**
   
   Isaiah 40:12-31
   
   **Main Idea:**
   God is incomparable.
   
   **Plural-Noun Proposition:**
   Isaiah provides *nine truths* that prove that God is incomparable.

   **example**
   
   1 Peter 1:6-9
   
   **Main Idea:**
   Believers rejoice even in the midst of suffering.
   
   **Plural-Noun Proposition:**
   Peter provides *five keys* to rejoicing in the midst of suffering.
II. Compose the Outline of Your Message

A. A good, clear outline will provide a number of distinct advantages:

1. It will allow both you and your hearers to know exactly where you are at any given time.

   The thing that kills people in what is sometimes called expository preaching is randomly meandering through a passage.

   

   **John MacArthur**

2. It will help ensure that you teach the message of the text.

3. It will better enable you and your hearers to:

   a. remember the message.

   b. apply the message.

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**Key Question:**
Does Rick Holland use Plural-Noun Propositions?

**Ten Examples of Plural-Noun Propositions**
from Holland’s Series on Ecclesiastes
(preached in Crossroads from 9/98 to 8/99)

1. **Three clues** for making sense out of life (1:1-11)
2. **Eight insights** into God’s sovereignty (3:1-15)
3. **Four secrets** to surviving an unfair world (3:16-22)
4. **Four critical instructions** for meeting with God (5:1-7)
5. **Five critical instructions** for repairing your soul (7:15-29)
6. **Eight wise responses** to authority (8:1-9)
7. **Six checkpoints** on the map to the happiest place on earth (9:1-18)
8. **Eight precautions** for preventing spiritual suicide (10:1-20)
9. **Four safeguards** for managing the risks of a broken world (11:1-6)
10. **Three conditions** for living a life of no regret (11:7-12:8)
B. When you compose your outline, try to make sure that each point:

1. fits your plural-noun proposition and coordinates with the other points.

   **example**
   
   If you promise four reasons that we should worship Jesus, don’t give three reasons and one command:
   
   1. Jesus is divine.
   2. Jesus is powerful.
   3. Jesus is holy.
   4. You must love Jesus.

2. flows directly out of the text.

   a. Each point of your outline should capture a complete thought expressed in the text.

   b. Each point of your outline should be informed by the grammatical structure of the text.

   **example**
   
   In 1 Peter 4:7-11, Peter begins verse 7 with a statement of fact in the indicative mood: “The end of all things is at hand.” The next word in verse 7—the conjunction “therefore”—tells you that Peter expects his readers to live in a certain way in response to this truth, and the four commands in the imperative mood in verses 7b-11 set forth how he expects them to live. The structure of the passage, then, looks like this:

   "The end of all things is at hand" (7a)  ind. mood
   "Therefore" conjunction
   1. “be of sound judgment and sober in spirit” (7b) imp. mood
   2. “keep fervent in your love” (8) imp. mood
   3. “be hospitable to one another” (9) imp. mood
   4. "employ [your gift] in serving one another" (10-11) imp. mood

   In letting the structure of the passage inform the structure of your outline, you might set up your homiletical proposition and outline something like this:

   Peter provides four ways you must respond in light of the imminent return of Christ:

   1. You must be sober in prayer (7b).
   2. You must be sacrificial in love (8).
   3. You must be sincere in hospitality (9).
   4. You must be selfless in service (10-11).
3. is clear and easy to remember.

This can be accomplished through the use of alliteration and/or parallelism.

a. Alliteration consists of beginning key words (usually the first word) of each point with the same letter.

\[\text{Consider the following outline of James 1:2-4:}\]
Three ways you must respond when you encounter trials:
1. Consider it all joy (2).
2. Cling to what you know (3).
3. Capitalize on the opportunity (4).

b. Parallelism consists of making sure each word in each point is grammatically parallel to each word in the other points.

\[\text{Consider the following outline from Rick Hollands message on Ecclesiastes 12:9-14:}\]
Four responses to a broken world:
1. Heed the right counsel (9-12).
2. Fear the ultimate authority (13a).
3. Obey the sovereign Lord (13b).
4. Remember the final judgment (14).

Notice that each point follows the same grammatical pattern:
1st word: 2nd-person imperative verb
2nd word: definite article "the"
3rd word: adjective
4th word: noun

4. is applicatory and therefore specifically addresses your audience.

A preaching outline is designed to thrust truth into the midst of lives in order to change those lives.

\[\text{Jay Adams}\]

This involves using either:

a. the 2nd person in general ("you," "your" or "yourself"), or
b. specific exhortations directed toward your hearers.

Example

The Difference an Applicable Outline Can Make:
Consider the following two outlines of 1 Peter 2:18-25:

Outline #1:
Three aspects of your submission to unjust authority:
1. The Mandate (18)
2. The Motive (19-20)
3. The Model (21-25)

Outline #2:
Three ways that you must respond when suffering unjustly:
1. Submit yourself to the authority of man (18).
2. Entrust yourself to the sovereignty of God (19-20).
3. Conform yourself to the pattern of Christ (21-25).

Key Question:
What makes the second outline better than the first?

When you have a difficult time making a point applicable, wrestle with the question of how the writer of the text intended his readers to respond to the truth being enunciated.

Example

In 1 Corinthians 10:13a, the apostle Paul writes, "No temptation has overtaken you but such as is common to man." Because this sentence is a statement rather than a command, it is more difficult to compose a point that is applicable in form. As you reflect on Paul’s intent, however, you realize that his concern is that his readers would have a correct understanding of the nature of temptation. Therefore, your point might be:

Rightly regard the nature of temptation (13a).
III. Prepare the Body of Your Message

A. The body of your message will consist both of the points of your homiletical outline and the “meat” that you put on that “skeleton.”

B. Each point of your outline should contain three main components: explanation, illustration, and application.

1. Explanation (unfolding the meaning of each point)
   a. Articulate the point (and tie it to the proposition as you do).
   b. Explain the point (simply tell the people what you mean).
   c. Read the text (always announcing the verse you’re going to read).
   d. Explain the text
      i. Emphasize your point in the text
      ii. Define key words and phrases
      iii. Capture the flow of the passage
      iv. Repeat significant statements
      v. Restate key points in various ways
         ■ Use synonyms
         ■ Use parallel phrases
   vi. Keep the people "in the text"
   vii. Major on the majors
   viii. Discard the superfluous
   ix. Simplify difficult concepts
      ■ Illustrations (see #2 below)
   x. Use language that is simple and clear
      ■ Use short sentences
Notes

- Use familiar vocabulary
- Use vivid words
- Use concrete terminology

xi. Clarify meaning by way of contrast

xii. Avoid the three pitfalls:
- Don’t zero in so closely on the details that you miss the big picture.
- Don’t bog the people down with language they don’t understand.
- Don’t drown the people in a sea of irrelevant background material.

2. Illustration (illuminating the meaning of each point)

a. Illustrations serve at least two purposes:

i. to make abstract concepts easy to understand

**example**

To illustrate the fleeting nature of human existence, Rick Holland compared life to the steam coming off the top of a cup of coffee.

**Key Question:**

Why is this illustration effective?

ii. to make key concepts easy to remember

**example**

To illustrate both the danger and deception of lust, Rick Holland referred to sexual temptation as “sugar-coated poison.”

**Key Question:**

What makes this illustration so effective?

b. Illustrations should be designed to move your hearers from:

i. the abstract to the concrete

ii. the invisible to the visible
iii. the unknown to the known

iv. the obscure to the clear

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Example

**Illustrating the Word “Correction” in 2 Timothy 3:16:**

Explanation

This word “correction” comes from the verb that means to restore or to set up again, and it refers to the restoration—or the raising up—of one who has stumbled and fallen into sin. The Word of God is profitable or useful for the purpose of restoring that individual to a spiritually upright state.

Illustration

Back when my daughter Jessica was about 10 months old, she wasn’t to the point of standing on her own, but she could stand up if she was holding onto something. So sometimes Julie and I would stand her next to the couch and put her hands on the cushion. And oftentimes after standing there awhile she would lose her balance or her knees would buckle and she would fall down onto her bottom, at which point one of us would come up behind her, reach our hands under her arms, and stand her back up. In other words, we would restore her to a physically upright position. In the spiritual realm, Scripture performs the exact same function. There are times in our lives when we’ve stumbled and fallen spiritually, and Scripture has convicted us of our sin, and we know we’re in the wrong, and yet we find ourselves struggling to turn our hearts away from our sin. It’s at that point, Paul says, that Scripture is able to restore us and stand us back up on our spiritual feet. All Scripture, Paul says, is profitable for correction. (Illustration by Matt Waymeyer)

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c. Illustrations can be gleaned from the following sources:

i. personal experiences

ii. newspapers

iii. current events

iv. books

v. historical accounts

vi. books of illustrations

vii. magazines

viii. your imagination

ix. Scripture

x. quotations
3. Application (*bringing* the meaning of each point *to bear* on people's lives)

a. Application in the proclamation of God's Word is a must. This will come naturally if the points of your outline are applicatory.

b. Application should be woven in throughout your message and not just tacked on at the end.

c. Application involves both:
   
i. pinpointing how God desires His people to respond to the text, and then
   
ii. exhorting them to respond in this way.

Application refers to that process by which preachers make scriptural truths so pertinent that their hearers not only understand how those truths should effect changes in their lives but also feel obligated and eager to implement those changes.

*Jay Adams*

d. Application of the text may be stimulated by questions such as:

i. Is there a truth to believe about God?

ii. Is there a truth to believe about a doctrine?

iii. Is there a command to obey?

iv. Is there a promise to trust?

v. Is there an example to follow?

vi. Is there a principle to follow?

viii. Is there wisdom to shape one's thinking?

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**summary**

When you finish writing the body of the message, ask yourself the following three questions:

1. Have I clearly explained each point?
2. Have I adequately illustrated each point?
3. Have I carefully applied each point?
IV. Write the Introduction to Your Message

A. The introduction of your message should be designed to:

1. capture the listener's attention.

   Until you arrest the people's attention, they will hear nothing that you have to say, no matter how valuable or interesting it may be.

   *Jay Adams*

2. secure the listener's attention by answering the unspoken question:

   Why should I listen to this message?

   What good is it to know something happened or was said unless it has some relationship to me the reader or listener.

   *Walt Kaiser*

3. direct the listener's attention to the purpose of your message.

4. prepare the listener's attention to follow the path of your message.

B. The introduction of your message can consist of or be drawn from things such as:

1. personal anecdotes

2. current events

3. historical accounts

4. biographical accounts
5. popular myths  
6. second hand stories  
7. humorous incidents  
8. biblical narratives  
9. cultural issues  
10. relevant quotations  

C. The introduction of your message should be both:  
1. as brief as possible, and  
2. as long as necessary.  

D. The introduction of your message should lead directly into your plural-noun proposition.  

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V. Formulate the Conclusion to Your Message  

A. Your conclusion deserves careful thought and preparation.  

As an experienced pilot knows that landing an airplane demands special concentration, so an able preacher understands that conclusions require thoughtful preparation.  

Haddon Robinson  

B. Your conclusion should have two primary goals:  

1. to briefly summarize the content of the message (This will enable your hearers to better remember the message).  

2. to forcefully exhort your hearers to respond to the message.  

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Our expectation as the sermon comes to an end, is not merely that people will understand or remember or enjoy our teaching, but that they will do something about it.

**John Stott**

a. Your final appeal must flow from the text.

Your conclusion should be tied directly to the end result that the biblical text requires of the audience.

**Richard Mayhue**

b. Your final appeal must *demand a verdict*.

The conclusion must solicit a verdict from the hearers. They must be forced to choose for themselves whether or not they will conform their lives to the truth of the message.

**Alex Montoya**

c. Your final appeal must *include the 2nd-person pronoun* ("you").
C. Your conclusion may include one of the following:

1. an illustration
2. a question
3. a quotation
4. a hymn or poem

D. Your conclusion should be brief and to the point.

1. Resist the urge to include new material in the conclusion.
2. Resist the temptation to drift back into your sermon.

Some preachers are in their final approach toward the runway when, at an altitude of only a few feet from the ground, they get a new thought and—instead of landing—zoom up into the air again. Then, once more, they circle the field, line up with the landing strip, lower their flaps and start to come in for a landing, only to shoot up into the sky instead.

Jay Adams

The best advice you’ll ever receive is:

Land the plane!