

Investigating the Structure of a Text

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Do you know what one of the most underrated parts of our body is? Everyone knows you're dead without a heart, or lungs, or a brain. We call these vital organs. No one undervalues those. But what would a person be without their bones? Just a pile of organs lying on the floor. Our bones give form or structure to our bodies.

And actually, there is a connection between the *structure* of our bones, and the corresponding *function* of that part of our body. For example, if you studied the bones of a hand, you could figure out how the hand is supposed to move and function.

We call this the relationship between **form and function**. **There is a connection between the form of something and how it works**. Or to put it another way, there is a relationship between the *structure* of something, and its *purpose*. We are defining *form and structure*, and *function and purpose* interchangeably here.

So you could study the bones of the hand, look at all the joints, and see which ways they were designed to bend. For example the shoulder joint is a ball and socket joint that can turn in almost any direction, whereas the elbow joint is a hinge joint, that flexes and extends on a single axis.

And we can see these different functions of the arm by looking at its bones. The structure of the bones tell us about the intended purpose of the arm.

In a similar way, every text of Scripture has a form and a function. Every passage has a certain structure that is related to its purpose.

Now imagine you are studying a passage of Scripture, and you want to understand its purpose. We can compare that passage to one of our fingers. To understand the purpose or function of your finger you need to do two things. First you have to look at the structure of the finger and see what makes it up. You have to understand the different bones and joints in your finger. You can't understand the finger until you understand how the parts that make it up work.

But you also can't understand the purpose and function of a finger unless you see how it is part of the hand. You have to understand how the fingers work together to make up the function of the hand, and you also have to understand the purpose of the hand in relationship to the whole arm.

If you just cut off someone's finger and asked an alien who had never seen a human body what it was supposed to do, they would have no idea. What can a single finger do? What is it, a worm? No, the finger finds its purpose in relationship to the hand and also to the whole arm.

In this analogy, once again, the finger is a passage you are studying, the hand is the section of Scripture it is in, and the arm is the book it's in. You understand the purpose of the finger by understanding the form and function of each of its parts, every joint in your finger. But you also understand the purpose of the finger by seeing the form and function of the hand and how the finger fits into that purpose.

So not only does **every passage in Scripture has a structure and purpose of its own, but so also every passage is also part of the structure and purpose of whichever book of the Bible it is in.**

Every passage has parts and every passage is a part of something bigger.

Justin and I like to talk a lot about the **unique contribution** of each section of Scripture. In other words, what would you be missing if your elbow seized up? What couldn't you do? What does the elbow contribute to the overall function of the arm?

Or to put it in the context of Scripture, we could ask, what would be missing if you cut out Ephesians 4:11-16 from the book? What is that chapter's unique contribution to the book? How does 4:11-16 function in the book as a whole? What does it add to the argument of Ephesians?

It's not like if your elbow was seized up you couldn't use your arm at all. Your arm wouldn't be completely useless. But it would affect you. You would be missing something.

In the same way, every passage in Scripture is there for a reason. It has a purpose. If you cut it out of the Bible something is missing. We believe every word in Scripture is inspired.

That means that every word of the Bible as originally given was superintended by God to be there for a specific reason. Every word helps make up the function of a sentence, every sentence makes up the function of a paragraph, each paragraph makes up the function of a section and each section makes up the function of a book. It's all there for a reason.

Now that doesn't mean that every word is equally important. But it's all there for a reason. Just like if you had to pick a single joint in your arm to not work, it would be one of the joints on your pinky finger.

Actually, my dad's pinky finger joint was seized up. He couldn't extend his pinky straight. When we were kids he would challenge us to try to straighten it, and we would pull and pull and could never straighten it. But having a crooked pinky finger didn't impact his quality of life too much.

But if his shoulder was seized up in the same way, that would have had a major impact on what he could do. So we're not saying every word or every section is equally vital, but we are saying it all has a function and it is there for a reason.

My dad could never have been a world class concert pianist. You need all 10 fingers for that. Now your elbow can be seized up and you can still be a concert pianist, but you need all your fingers for playing piano. So the elbow and the pinky have different purposes in the function of the arm.

So our goal, really **our responsibility as Bible students, teachers, and preachers is to understand and show what each passage contributes to the book it's in that is vital for life**. Why did God put that passage in the Bible?

And once again, we are talking about the structure of a passage. Because form and function are related, the structure of a passage helps us to understand its function, or its purpose.

So let's define now what we are talking about when we talk about the structure of a passage.

The structure of a passage is how the author has organized their material. While some passages are more structured than others, we always want to understand how the author has organized their material because that organization reflects the flow of thought of the author.

Now, not all books of the Bible or even all Bible passages have a strong rigid structure. As humans, we are vertebrates, that means we have a strong bone structure. But other animals are invertebrates, they don't have bones. They still have a form and a function, but the structure is more fluid, less rigid. So also some passages have a clear, rigid structure, and other books or passages have a less rigid structure.

But in every case there is some kind of structure, there is a form that is related to its function. And so to understand an author's flow of thought, we need to find the structure of the passage. That means we need to find what major points the author is making, and what sub-points support those major points. That also means discerning the structure of the section that passage is in and discovering what distinct function each passage has in relation to the whole.

In other words, each passage has a unique point that also contributes to the overall point of the book.

We know that we are discerning the proper structure when we see how each part offers a unique contribution to the section it is in, being distinct from the other parts, yet still relating to them.

In other words, when you understand the function of the pointer finger and how each of its joints work together, and see how it is different than the other fingers, but how all the fingers work together in the hand, then you understand the form and function of the hand.

So when we are looking for structure, we are constantly zooming in and zooming out. We look at the structure of a pointer finger, and then we look at the structure of the whole arm. We look for how they work together. You can never understand the purpose of the fingers apart from the arm, and you can never understand the purpose of the arm apart from the fingers.

It's really the same tools for finding the structure of a whole book and finding the structure of a paragraph. We zoom in to see the organization and function of the pieces of a text and then zoom out and see how everything relates.

So to find the structure of a text, I want to introduce you to two concepts in language that are vital for understanding structure: **coherence and cohesion**. These are technical terms in the study of language, but their meanings aren't hard to understand.

Let's start with the concept of coherence. I want you to read a paragraph and tell me what the main point of it is:

I love the book of Ephesians. Pages are full of words, ink on paper. Trees are smashed up to make paper. The Egyptians invented paper, but the book was invented by the Romans. You can also make paper airplanes, but I don't think the Romans did. The Romans are probably more known for their roads than their books though.

What was the point of that? I have no idea, and I wrote it! Actually, there was no point. That is what we would call an incoherent paragraph. It didn't make any sense. It was just random thoughts. Actually, if you go back and read it carefully, you'll see I connected a lot of the words together, the first sentence is about books, the second about pages, the third about trees, and then paper, etc. So there were connections. But the ideas didn't connect, there was no coherent flow of thought.

Coherence is the quality of a text that makes it **meaningful and relevant** to readers. If a text is coherent it means that the text makes sense. A text is coherent when its ideas connect, when the author has a flow of thought.

I'm sure you know this, but I want to emphasize that every book of the Bible is coherent. No book of the Bible is just random ideas. Each book is logical. Every book has a unified flow of thought.

So coherence means that a text has a flow of thought and its ideas connect.

So what is cohesion? Cohesion is the grammar and words that tie texts together. There are connecting words, pointers, and conjunctions that tie a passage together.

Coherent texts will also have cohesion. If the author has a flow of thought and his writing makes sense, the words he uses will connect those thoughts together. Coherence is *ideas connecting* in a text; cohesion is *words connecting* a text together.

So writing is coherent because the author has a train of thought. Not all authors organize their material the same way, but all the biblical authors have points with supporting arguments that they are trying to make. The structure of a text reflects this train of thought and how the author has organized their material.

So when looking at the structure of a text we are looking for what ideas tie a section together. Or put another way, the structure of a text is what flow of thought connects the sentences together. And we are also looking for what specific words like conjunctions and references connect sections together.

We can think of the conjunctions or words that tie texts together as the ligaments in the body. If you tear a ligament in your shoulder, you can't use your shoulder. The ligaments hold the bones together and give them stability. In the same way, the conjunctions and connecting words hold passages together.

When we are trying to trace an author's flow of thought, often the meaning is found in how two ideas relate. So we are always trying to understand the connections. Whether it's the connection between two sentences or the connection between two paragraphs, understanding what connects them means we understand the flow of thought.

For example, we may have two sentences that make claims. But what connects them? Why are they next to each other? I could have two sentences: "I went to church. I sinned." But what's the connection? Is the author saying, "I went to church because I sinned." Or is it, "I went to church in order to sin." The meaning is very different!

So when we are looking for the structure of a passage, we are trying to trace the author's flow of thought so we can understand his purpose. Each section of Scripture will have a point that is supported by sub-points. We have to understand how each part builds upon each other to understand the whole.

I know that's a lot, but we need to lay that foundation so that we can understand how to find the structure and flow of thought of an author.

So what we are doing when we are looking for the structure of a text is we are looking for what holds each part together. How do these sentences go together? What is the overall point of these sentences? Where does this point end and a new point begin?

Just like each finger has a distinct form and distinct function in the hand, so we too are looking for the distinct form and function of each passage.

Put another way, when we are trying to figure out the structure of a text, we are trying to find the author's outline. What are his points? Where does one point end and the next begin? What point is this sentence supporting? Since the author has a flow of thought, that means that the author is making various related points, and we are trying to figure out what those points are.

Each point the author makes will be tied together with cohesion. Maybe an author is making a point and he makes that point in one paragraph. Or maybe a whole chapter is an argument to make a certain point. Our goal is to find what point each section of Scripture is making and how those points tie together into the overall argument of the book.

I want to give you two simple tools to discern the structure of any text. To find the structure of a text we look for **Connections and Changes**. You can see them all listed in the appendix.

The connections are the things that tie texts together. *Connections unify texts.*

So for example, there can be a word connection in a text. That's when one word is used throughout an entire passage. The author may be developing that idea in the passage. An good example would be Ephesians 1. We see the phrases 'in Christ' or 'in Him' over and over in Ephesians 1. Clearly, the author is making a point about Christ in chapter 1.

So we know that Ephesians 1 is a distinct unit in the book. It is all developing this concept of being in Christ. And if we studied Ephesians 1, we would find there are other key words that tie the chapter together as having a single main point as well.

So one of the ways we can tell that Ephesians 1 is a distinct section is the word connections that show all these verses go together. And that implies that chapter 1 has an overarching point to it, all those sentences go together to say something about being in Christ.

Along with word connections, there can also be thematic connections. This is similar, but with a thematic connection, the exact same word isn't used, but rather, the same idea is repeated. Maybe the author is using synonyms or other kinds of related words to unpack a concept. He doesn't keep repeating the same word, but a whole section can all have the same theme or idea running through it.

Next you can have logical connections. This is when you have a logical argument in a text it all goes together. I could say, "If Jesus is fully man, then Jesus was able to be tempted. And if Jesus was able to be tempted, then Jesus has gone through what we go through. And if Jesus has gone through what we go through then He understands us. And if He understands us, then He will be compassionate towards us." And even if I elaborated on some of these ideas in between these statements, there is still this logic. There is a logical train of thought there. It's a chain. All those sentences go together as part of one argument. So logic can tie sections together.

You can also have structural or referential connections as listed in the notes, but those are getting more advanced and so I'll leave them for you to read about and study at another time.

So if you have correctly identified a section, that means that a group of verses will have these *connections* that tie them together. That means they go together as a unit and therefore will have a function or purpose that they are accomplishing together. So when looking for the structure of a section we first look for a group of verses that are connected.

In addition to connections that tie a passage together, there will also be changes, features that separate passages.

So for example if you are reading a passage and the text switches from being a narrative to poetry, that is a text type change. The whole format of the text changed, and very likely, that signals that you are entering a new section.

There can also be a topic change. The author could be talking about one topic, and then switches to another topic. That would indicate a new section.

There can also be tone changes, where the author goes from encouragement to rebuke, or from explanation to exhortation. So for example if you are reading Ephesians 1-3, when you get to chapter 4 you would notice that now Paul is exhorting his hearers to live in light of the truth he has explained. There has been a change. Paul moves from explanation to exhortation, and so that's a new section.

If you are in a narrative, scene changes are very important for understanding the structure of the narrative. You can also have speaker or grammatical changes which I won't get into.

And then lastly in the notes you see we can have a number of different markers that would indicate the beginning or end of a passage or section. The most significant of these would be introductory or conclusion statements, but there can also be certain conjunctions or other kinds of statements that help identify a new section.

Does that make sense? Now we want to admit that finding the structure of a text can be one of the most challenging aspects of studying a passage. But it's also one of the most rewarding. So we want to seek to wrestle with the structure of passages in the Bible. As with any study of Scripture, read and reread your passage to seek to understand what the author is saying and how they organized their text. Like most of Bible study and teaching, this is a skill you refine over time. But as we work hard at it it will yield fruit.

When we see what parts make up our passage and how those parts fit together to make the author's point, we really understand how our passage works. And then when we see how our passage fits into the argument of the book, and makes a unique contribution to its argument, our passage will really come to life. Then we really see how the author intends to form the recipients hearts to follow God by faith.

Connections (things that tie passages together)

- **Word** connections
Repeated words or phrases
- **Thematic** connections
Repeated ideas or themes
- **Logical** connections
Logical arguments that connect verses together (note the conjunctions)
- **Structural** connections
Inclusio, bracketing, chiasm, sandwich, etc.
- **Referential** connections
Pronouns, substitution, ellipsis, "here, there, now, then," comparisons

Changes (things that separate passages)

Changes from one passage to another

- **Text type** or **genre** change
Narrative, argument, poetry
- **Topic** change
The ideas, theme, or argument changes
- **Tone** change
Rebuke, encouragement, explanation, argument, exhortation, warning
- **Scene** change
Time, place, characters
- **Speaker** change
Narrator, direct address, dialog, quote
- **Grammatical** change
Change of verb tense, verb person, etc.

Beginning and ending markers

- **Introduction, conclusion, or summary** statements
Sentences that summarize a section, cf. "Finally," "So then"
- Transition **conjunctions**
Therefore, for, but now, etc.
- **Time** or **speaker** identification
"On the first day," "At that time," "After these things," "Thus says the Lord,"
"The Oracle of the Lord"
- **Parenthetical** or **background** statements
"Now..."
- **Direct address**
Vocative: "Brothers and sisters,"
Interjection: "Behold," "Look"