



What is an Exegetical Paper?

The word exegesis means “to lead out of.” Exegetical papers should be written to communicate both an explanation of a text and the writer’s interpretation of its meaning. Exegesis does not force the Bible to conform to a preconceived interpretation; instead, proper exegetical papers enhance a reader’s ability to agree with the teachings of scripture.

Before Beginning the Paper

Research the historical-cultural and literary context of the passage. Ask questions such as:

- What things from the history or culture in which the text was written might affect the way the passage is understood?
- What can be learned about the original audience?
- What insight does the text before and after the selected passage have to offer about its purpose?
- In what ways does the passage fit into the context and message of the chapter, book, and entire Bible?

Study the passage from a literary perspective. It may be best to make a photocopy of the passage so that repetitive words, critical terms, and other technical aspects of the writing can be easily spotted.

When researching, select reputable commentaries, atlases, encyclopedias, and dictionaries in print and online. It is best to stick with commentaries that have been published within the last 30 years, unless it is a classic author of merit such as John Calvin or Martin Luther.

Content Outline

The following outline is for a 10-13 page paper. If the professor requires less than 10 pages or more than 13 pages, be sure to proportion the various sections of the paper so that every element is included within the page limit. For longer papers, add content to each of the sections; for shorter papers, lessen the content in each section.

I. Title Page (1 Page)

Unless stated otherwise by the professor, use the standard Turabian title page format with the name of the selected passage of scripture as the title.

II. Main Idea and Outline (1 Page)

State the passage and then summarize the main idea of the passage in a single sentence. Following this, present a complete outline of the passage. For each main point, show the corresponding verses in parentheses. Be sure to include every verse from the passage.

Example:

Matthew 6:43-48 Jesus commands God's children to love all people, including their enemies, because God loves all people.

- I. Jesus' standard of love goes beyond human rationale. (v. 43-44)
 - a. Love and pray for ones' enemies
- II. God's love shows no favoritism. (v. 45)
 - a. Bad things happen to followers of Christ
 - b. Good things happen to those who do not follow Christ
- III. Unless God's people love their enemies, they do not distinguish themselves from ungodly people. (v. 46-47)
 - a. There is no reward for loving only those who return the love
 - b. All people love those who love them
- IV. God's children should live holy lifestyles. (v. 48)

III. Introduction ($\frac{1}{2}$ -1 Page)

Attract the reader's attention and present the main idea of the scripture passage.

IV. Context (1-2 Pages)

First, discuss the historical-cultural context of the passage, chapter, and/or book. What must a reader know about the biblical writer, the original audience, and the historical background of the period in order to understand the meaning of the passage? Second, describe the literary context of the passage. Note the author's purpose and style in writing the passage, and be sure to discuss how the passage fits into and develops the overall purpose of the passages before and after it.

For example, if the selected passage is the account of the woman caught in adultery found in John 8:1-11, the historical-cultural context could possibly include a discussion about the Law concerning adultery and the fact that John's gospel was written to Gentiles, not Jews. The literary context might include something about how John's book deals with literal and spiritual levels of meaning and how his work is different from the synoptic gospels.

V. Content (5-8 Pages)

This is the main part of an exegetical paper, and the main points from the Outline section should function as subheadings that help organize the paper. Explain what message the text is trying to convey, including elements of the previously established context. Explain any critical words or concepts, and make use of commentaries and other resources required by the professor in addition to your own thoughts. An exegesis should not be a summary of a commentator's thoughts; it is acceptable to disagree with a commentary. Since the purpose of this section is to explain the meaning of the text, intentionally move beyond description and illustrate what message the details have to tell. Do not merely rephrase the text.

VI. Application (1 Page)

Put forth several possible applications of the passage for a contemporary audience. This section needs to be realistic and practical.

For instance, do not just say that 1 Corinthians 13 is a good passage to read at a wedding. Look at more than one angle of application. One possibility is to consider how the passage can be used to minister to a person who has been wronged by someone close to them or how it can encourage someone who feels unworthy after making a mistake.

VII. Bibliography (As many pages as your sources require, typically 1-2 pages)

Use the standard Turabian bibliography format, unless directed otherwise by the professor.

Final Exegetical Checklist

- The paper meets the professor's requirements for length, format, and scripture content
- The main idea is a single sentence summary of the entire passage
- Every verse is included in the outline
- The main points of the outline serve as subheadings for the main part of the paper
- Both historical-cultural and literary context are included
- Critical words are defined and explained
- The required amount and types of resources were used (commentaries, dictionaries, etc.)
- Multiple possibilities for contemporary application are included
- Each body element (Outline, Context, Content, and Application) is properly included
- The bibliography and in-text citations follow the correct format style (Turabian unless stated otherwise by the professor)

This handout is adapted from the following sources:

Culbertson, Howard. "Exegesis Paper Instructions." *Missions Mobilizer*, 2016.
<https://home.snu.edu/~hculbert/exegesis.htm>

Duvall, J. Scott, and J. Daniel Hayes. *Grasping God's Word*. Zondervan, 2012.

"What is the Difference Between Exegesis and Eisegesis?" *GotQuestions*, 2016.
<http://www.gotquestions.org/exegesis-eisegesis.html>