

# How to Write an Expository Sermon: A Step-by-Step Guide

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Learning how to write an expository sermon is hard work. Thankfully, we live in a day with plenty of preaching resources that can point us in the right direction. In this post, I will walk you through step-by-step on the sermon writing process for an expository sermon.

We'll use Bryan Chapell's seminal book, [\*Christ-Centered Preaching: Redeeming the Expository Sermon\*](#) as a guide. While the entire book is gold, on page 352 there is a pyramid that shows you how to write an expository sermon.

The pyramid looks like this:



Figure A4.1 “Sermon

Preparation Chart” from page 352 of *Christ-Centered Preaching* by Bryan Chapell, copyright (C) 1994, 2005, 2018. Used by permission of Baker Academic, a division of Baker Publishing Group. All rights reserved.

We'll cover each step. Much of the content below is derived from Chapell. Please note that this is merely one approach. While it may be the best approach for beginners, there is no cookie-cutter formula for writing an expository sermon. It will vary based on your ministry context, personal experience, and the text you'll be preaching on.

**Note:** If you'd like to see a concrete example of what this looks like, see my [Expository Sermon Example](#) post.

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### 1. Spiritual Preparation: Piety, Planning, and Prayer

We first must get spiritually prepared to preach. This means pursuing holiness on a macro and micro level, ensuring that you're living out the text you will prepare to preach, and developing a rich devotional life. It also means planning. You need to plan what to preach. Often, the best route is to pick a book of the Bible and preach through it verse-by-verse. This is the best way, but not the only way. You are free to use prudence as you best prepare what you think your congregation needs to hear. Before we work on the sermon, we must work on the preacher.

Then, of course, we must pray. I once heard that sermon prep is 20 hours of prayer. I'm not sure that is feasible for every sermon, but the idea is to be praying for both yourself and your hearers a rigorous amount as you prepare to preach.

## **2. Read and Digest the Thought of the Text**

This is one of my favorite parts of the sermon process. This is where you read the text over and over and over again. No helps. At least not yet. Just you, your Bible reading skills, and the Holy Spirit's aid.

Here it is best to ask potential questions your audience may have on the passage and answer them. Also, keep a note of things that stand out to you. Try to figure out the big idea or the main theme of the passage on your own. Read the texts before and after the one you are preaching to ensure you are reading the passage in its proper context. In short, you want to interrogate the text, trying to figure out as much about it on your own as you can. But most of all, you simply want to get the text deeply into your head, allowing it to marinate in your mind throughout the week.

## **3. Identify the Fallen Condition Focus**

It's called the FCF for short. This is probably the most distinctive aspect of Chapell's work on preaching and one of the most important parts of the sermon preparation. Without this, you're not yet ready to preach. What's an FCF?

Writes Chapell, "The Fallen Condition Focus (FCF) is the mutual human condition that contemporary persons share with those to or about whom the text was written that requires the grace of the passage for God's people to glorify and enjoy him." (pg. 30)

In other words, it's the struggle or burden of the passage that the people to whom the author wrote and to the people to who you will preach both shares. The FCF drives application, and since application is crucial, spending time figuring out the FCF is needed to craft the rest of the sermon appropriately.

It's helpful to understand the *why* behind your FCF. Why was this a burden for Paul's original audience? Why do you and your people struggle with this? If you get behind the why, you'll be better equipped to preach to the heart and see true life change, right there on the spot.

## **4. Research the Text**

This is where you learn about the history, grammar, and exegetical issues of the passage. This is similar to step number two, only now you get to use helps. Get out the study Bibles. Open up those commentaries. Look at the original languages. Use any and all helps that are needed in an appropriate way to learn the technical aspects of the passage.

While much of what you learn in this part won't make the sermon, it will help to ensure that you are understanding and explaining the text properly.

## **4. Consider Specific Applications**

"Application is the hardest part of preaching." These are words uttered by my homiletics professor in seminary. Many of us struggle with this step. It takes years and years of preaching and a deep understanding of your audience to do this well.

According to Chapell, sermon application answers four key questions:

**1. What does God now require of me?**

- What = Instructional specificity
- Give instructions that align with the biblical text, telling people what the text requires them to do.

**2. Where does he now require it of me?**

- Where = Situational specificity
- If you do not provide the “where,” instruction remains an abstraction.
- “Love your neighbor” is vague and already assumed. It’s better to say “Love people who laugh at your faith at work.” Be specific.
- Situational specificity is often a mark of powerful preaching.

**3. Why must I do what he requires?**

- Why = Motivation
- Provide proper motivation. Even Pharisees can obey rules.
- Listeners must know why they must obey the application.
- Motivate by grace, not by guilt or greed.

**4. How can I do what God requires?**

- How = Enablement
- Give the means of how they can obey.
- Don’t just tell people what to do, but how to do it.
- Give the practical steps and spiritual resources that make the aims of the sermon application attainable.
- Do not assume people will seek divine help. They won’t. You must encourage divine dependence.
- Point people to the Holy Spirit.
- Without this part, you’re telling a drowning person, “Swim!” True, but they need help.

Those are some key points by Chapell in his chapter on application (See pg. 187-201). I would also add to try to make your sermon applications as communal as possible. This is one way to help fight against [expressive individualism](#).

**5. Collect Developmental Matter**

According to Chapell, this is where you add quotes, stats, illustrations, key terms, and commentary data into the sermon. Myself, I find the process of using commentaries an extremely important and stimulating part of the sermon prep. To find the best commentaries, see my post entitled [How to Find the Best Commentaries](#).

**6. Create a Homiletical Outline**

Some preachers use an outline. Others don’t. While sermon outlines will vary, Chapell encourages you to start with an explanation, then illustration, and then the application. So you explain the text, illustrate the text, and apply the text *for each main point*. And then repeat. You don’t need an

illustration for each main point (at least I don't think so), but there should be exposition and application in every sermon.

## 7. Place Developmental Matter in Outline

Place all of your hard work into the outline. Dump it all in. Like writing, good preaching requires editing. It's best here to edit every needless word after you fill your outline.

## 8. Write Conclusion and Introduction

The sermon introduction is increasingly becoming one of the most important aspects of a sermon. As our attention spans get worse, it's important to be able to capture the attention of your hearers right away, although you don't want to be fake, dramatic, or over the top enthusiastic. And we can't forget about our sermon conclusions, either. How the pilot lands the plane is important. So is the end of your sermon.

What's the purpose of the sermon introduction? Chapell says it's to: (1) Arouse interest in the message, (2) to invoice the subject of the message (3), to make the subject personal, and to (4) prepare your listeners for the proposition (or main point) of the sermon. (pp.220-223).

Chapell goes on to list various suggestions for your sermon introduction:

- **Human-Interest account** – A brief story of someone's experience.
- **Simple assertion** – An arresting, straightforward, and pithy statement.
- **Startling statement** – Helps jolt the congregation to attention.
- **Provocative question** – Here you're trying to provoke thought.
- **Catalog** – "Grouping or listing items, ideas, or persons in such a way that they reveal the central concept of a sermon is a standard form of an introduction."
- **Other options** – More suggestions: Interesting quotations, striking statistics, object lessons, and more.

What about your sermon conclusion? The purpose of a sermon conclusion is for recapitulation (final summary), exhortation (final application), elevation (climax), and termination (an ending) (pg. 234-236). An illustration is a good way to end a sermon. And of course, the end of your sermon is a good time to show how the text points to Jesus.

## 9. Write Sermon Body

Write every word you'll say. Be clear. Delete any and all needless words. It varies, but this usually includes around 3,800 – 5,000 words.

## 10. Reduce to Outline

I've heard many say that they write a full-blown manuscript for clarity's sake, but then they reduce that to an outline to bring into the pulpit. I'm assuming Chapell is suggesting this to ensure you're not stuck to your notes when preaching. While your sermon manuscript is written for proclamation and not publication, it's helpful to edit as much as possible to foster clarity.

## **11. Practice**

Some like to practice the sermon before they preach. I heard of one pastor who reads aloud his sermon or extended outline at least six times. That's a lot. One of my pastor friends says he doesn't like to practice his sermons before he preaches because it loses the "freshness" of the sermon. This will largely depend on your personality and preaching experience, but I think some sort of method for practicing the sermon will help.

I like to practice my sermon aloud once. And I read it over and over again, always making sure I look through it at least once on Sunday morning. The point here is to become so familiar with your material that you are prepared to present it well without having to look at your notes much.

## **12. Pray**

We're back to praying, which really should be included as much as possible through the process. Prayer is essential. Don't rely on your intellectual capabilities and homiletical skills alone. You need God's supernatural power to raise the dead, encourage the afflicted, and afflict the comfortable. Without God's help, your sermon will fall on deaf ears.

What else to pray for? Suggestions: boldness, faithfulness to the text, spiritual fruit, illumination, for the people to whom you will preach, freedom in the pulpit, that God's Word will not return void, that you will be yourself and forget yourself. And whatever else is needed or comes to mind.

## **13. Preach**

It's time to preach. You have prayed, studied your passage, put together the best sermon you can, and you're ready to go. It's time to dress appropriately, get to church early, and do whatever is needed to help you preach. As Martyn Lloyd-Jones says, "Preaching is theology coming through a man who is on fire."

Hope this was helpful. Be sure to check out [Bryan Chapell's book on](#)