

PHRASING

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INTRODUCTION

Phrasing is a hermeneutical technique that is designed to help you see the structure of an author's writing, the relationship between phrases and clauses, and the basic flow of thought through a passage. It separates the main ideas from the secondary and highlights parallel thoughts. It forces you to identify the relationships between thoughts. In my experience of teaching intermediate Greek, next to developing a facility in the language, phrasing is the most significant tool my students learned.

Phrasing is not grammatical diagramming. Because we are trying to discover the meaning of the passage and because the phrase is often the smallest unit that can be analyzed for meaning in a specific context, it is not helpful for our purposes to break the verses down into even smaller units, except in specific circumstances such as a list. Phrasing makes use of grammatical relationships, but they are unusually at the phrase level, not the word level. This also makes phrasing less frightening to students, whose exposure to high school grammatical diagramming may have left a bad taste in their mouth.²

Phrasing's basic approach is to separate a passage into its phrases (main clause, relative clauses, prepositional phrases, etc.) It looks somewhat like an outline. It has only three basic principles.

1. *The more dominant phrases are further to the left on the page.*
2. *Subordinate ideas are indented, placed under (or over) the concept to which they are related.*
3. *Parallel ideas are indented the same distance from the left.*

3:22 δικαιοσύνη δὲ θεοῦ
 διὰ πίστεως
 Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ
 εἰς πάντας τοὺς πιστεύοντας

3:22 But the righteousness of God (is)
 through faith
 in Jesus Christ
 for all who are believing.

¹ William D. Mounce, *A Graded Reader of Biblical Greek: Companion to Basics of Biblical Greek and Greek Grammar Beyond the Basics*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1996), 156-60, hereafter GRBG.

² We use the word "phrase" in a non-technical manner. Often a "clause" or an individual word will constitute a "phrase" in our terminology.

The basic thought in Romans 3:22 is the righteousness of God (δικαιοσύνη δὲ θεοῦ). It is placed furthest to the left. We are told two things about God's righteousness: it is through faith (διὰ πίστεως); it is for all who have faith (εἰς πάντας τοὺς πιστεύοντας). Notice how they are subordinated under "righteousness" (δικαιοσύνη) since they modify that concept. Notice too that they are indented the same amount, meaning that they are parallel to each other. In this case the phrasing highlights the parallelism of the two prepositions, διὰ and εἰς. Paul further specifies that the faith is in Jesus Christ (Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ).

Phrasing has a minimum number of rules because it is a personal exercise. What helps one student see the structure of a passage may not help another. What is important is that you adopt the basic approach and then modify it to suit your own tastes and needs. be consistent.

Basic Procedures of Phrasing

1. **Break the passage into its basic phrases.** At this point, do not indent the phrases (Colossians 1:3-5)

Εὐχαριστοῦμεν τῷ θεῷ πατρὶ τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ
πάντοτε περὶ ὑμῶν προσευχόμενοι,
ἀκούσαντες τὴν πίστιν ὑμῶν ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ
καὶ τὴν ἀγάπην ἣν ἔχετε εἰς πάντας τοὺς ἁγίους
διὰ τὴν ἐλπίδα τὴν ἀποκειμένην ὑμῖν ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς,
ἣν προηκούσατε ἐν τῷ λόγῳ τῆς ἀληθείας τοῦ εὐαγγελίου

We give thanks to God the father of our Lord Jesus Christ
Always concerning you praying
Hearing your faith in Christ Jesus
And the love which you have among all the saints
Through the hope which has been laid up for you in heaven
Which you formerly heard in the word of the truth of the gospel

Notice that already we are doing exegesis, since we decided that "always" (πάντοτε) goes with the following, not the preceding phrase. Sometimes such decisions are necessary; you can always change your mind later.

Look for the following:

Main clause
Prepositional phrases
Adverbial phrases
Participial phrases
Compound sentences (καί)
Relative clauses
Conjunctions like ὅτι, ἵνα, etc.

2. Identify the main thought and keep it furthest to the left.

By “main thought” we are thinking in terms of semantics, the meaning of the passage. Often the main thought will be in the main clause, but sometimes it is in a grammatically subordinate clause.

It is helpful to keep the chapter and verse reference to the left.

1:3 Εὐχαριστοῦμεν τῷ θεῷ πατρὶ τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ

3. Find those phrases that directly modify a word or concept in the main thought and indent them under it.

1:3 Εὐχαριστοῦμεν τῷ θεῷ πατρὶ τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ
πάντοτε περὶ ὑμῶν προσευχόμενοι,

Paul gives thanks (Εὐχαριστοῦμεν) always (πάντοτε) in his prayers (προσευχόμενοι). This verse illustrates the type of question that phrasing was designed to help answer: “What is the relationship among ‘always’ (πάντοτε), ‘give thanks’ (Εὐχαριστοῦμεν), and ‘praying’ (προσευχόμενοι)?” Does he always pray (as above), or does he always give thanks (as below).

1:3 Εὐχαριστοῦμεν τῷ θεῷ πατρὶ τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ
πάντοτε
περὶ ὑμῶν προσευχόμενοι,

Phrasing, of course, does not give you the answer; only context can. But phrasing does force you to ask the question, and this is its primary value.

In an “if...then” sentence you may prefer to think of the “if” clause as semantically subordinate to the “then” clause, as it would be if you changed it into a non-conditional sentence (John 15:10).

15:10 ἐὰν τὰς ἐντολάς μου τηρήσητε,
μενεῖτε ἐν τῇ ἀγάπῃ μου

The ἐὰν clause comes first, so it is written higher to maintain word order, but it is subordinate to the μενεῖτε phrase and is therefore indented. This situation explains why we added “or over” in our second principle: *Subordinate ideas are indented, placed under (or over) the concept to which they are related.*

Problem of Extent

To what extent do you subdivide a phrase? The first line in Colossians 1:3 above could be divided into many further levels.

1:3 Εὐχαριστοῦμεν
τῷ θεῷ³
πατρὶ
τοῦ κυρίου
ἡμῶν
Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ

The question you just answer is, “What do I gain by further subdividing the phrase? Does it help me see the structure more clearly? Does it demonstrate parallel thoughts?” If the phrase is one thought, leave it on the same line. However, if it is a list or series, then put each item on a separate line, as in Colossians 1:16.

1:16 ὅτι ἐν αὐτῷ ἐκτίσθη τὰ πάντα
ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς καὶ
ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς,
τὰ ὀρατὰ καὶ τὰ ἀόρατα,
εἴτε θρόνοι
εἴτε κυριότητες
εἴτε ἀρχαὶ
εἴτε ἐξουσίαι·
τὰ πάντα δι’ αὐτοῦ καὶ εἰς αὐτὸν ἔκτισται·

Difference Between Phrasing and Grammatical Diagramming

Herein lies the basic difference between phrasing and grammatical diagramming. Phrasing is not primarily concerned with the grammatical relationship of every word. It is concerned with the relationship of ideas. If nothing is gained by further subdividing, then do not.

This also illustrates the subjective, personal element of phrasing. What is significant to one person will not necessarily be helpful to another. That is okay.

4. Locate the phrases that relate to subordinate ideas.

Place them under the word on which they are grammatically dependent. If multiple phrases depend on the same word, be sure to indent them the same distance.

1:3 Εὐχαριστοῦμεν τῷ θεῷ πατρὶ τοῦ κυρίου ἡμῶν Ἰησοῦ Χριστοῦ
πάντοτε περὶ ὑμῶν προσευχόμενοι,
1:4 ἀκούσαντες
τὴν πίστιν ὑμῶν ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ καὶ

³ Notice that θεῷ and πατρί are in apposition. The increased space between τῷ and θεῷ, along with the parallelism of θεῷ and πατρί, show they are parallel in thought. See below, *Specific Problems #10*.

1:5 τὴν ἀγάπην
 ἣν ἔχετε εἰς πάντας τοὺς ἁγίους
 διὰ τὴν ἐλπίδα
 τὴν ἀποκειμένην ὑμῖν ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς,
 ἣν προηκούσατε
 ἐν τῷ λόγῳ τῆς ἀληθείας
 τοῦ εὐαγγελίου

Paul tells us two basic facts about what he heard regarding the Colossian Christians. The first is that they have faith (πίστιν), and the second is that they have love (ἀγάπην). “Love” is explained with a relative clause (ἣν...). They have this love for all the saints (ἔχετε εἰς πάντας τοὺς ἁγίους), and the love comes through their hope (ἐλπίδα).

But then once again Paul branches off to tell us two things about their hope. First, it is a hope that has been laid up (ἀποκειμένην) for them in heaven. Second, it is a hope that they heard before (προηκούσατε) in the word of truth.

Finally, he adds by way of apposition that this word of truth is in fact the gospel (εὐαγγελίου).

Problem of Word Order

Sometimes the subject can be separated from the main verb. You may want to connect them with a dotted line (Romans 8:3).

8:3 ὁ θεὸς
 \ τὸν ἑαυτοῦ υἱὸν
 \ πέμψας
 \ ἐν ὁμοιώματι σαρκὸς ἁμαρτίας καὶ
 \ περὶ ἁμαρτίας
 κατέκρινεν τὴν ἁμαρτίαν
 ἐν τῇ σαρκί,

You may also want to use a dotted line when drawing lines through text (Romans 8:6-7)

8:6 γὰρ
 τὸ...φρόνημα τῆς σαρκὸς θάνατος,
 δὲ
 τὸ...φρόνημα τοῦ πνεύματος \ ζωὴ καὶ εἰρήνη.
 \
 8:7 διότι
 τὸ φρόνημα τῆς σαρκὸς ἔχθρα εἰς θεόν,
 γὰρ
 τῷ...νόμῳ τοῦ θεοῦ οὐχ ὑποτάσσεται

Examples of Specific Phrasing Problems

1. As a writer's argument progresses, it will be natural to **move the bulk of the text further to the right** until it is physically no longer possible to phrase the writing on paper. In the following examples, the second phrase is so close to the right side of the paper that it has wrapped around onto another line, thus making it appear that there are two phrases modifying ἐλπίδα (Colossians 1:5).

1:5

διὰ τὴν ἐλπίδα

τὴν ἀποκειμένην ὑμῖν ἐν τοῖς
οὐρανοῖς,

There are several solutions. (1) one is always to double-space between different phrases. when you see two single-spaced lines, you will know it is just one phrase.

- (2) Another solution is to move the subordinate phrases farther to the left, and draw a line connecting them to what they modify.

διὰ τὴν ἐλπίδα

τὴν ἀποκειμένην ὑμῖν ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς,

You could use a simple line if the subordinate phrase is not a relative clause, and an arrow if it is a relative clause (see below).

- (3) A third solution is to indent the second line slightly, enough to show it is not a second phrase but not so much that the second line appears to modify the first word in the first line.

διὰ τὴν ἐλπίδα

τὴν ἀποκειμένην
ὑμῖν ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς,

2. **Indicate the antecedent of a relative pronoun.** If you cannot place the relative pronoun directly under the antecedent, use an arrow to connect the pronoun to its antecedent. (An arrow can distinguish it from a simple connection, as above, although this is not necessary.)

1:4

ἀκούσαντες

τὴν πίστιν ὑμῶν ἐν Χριστῷ Ἰησοῦ καὶ
τὴν ἀγάπην

ἣν ἔχετε εἰς πάντας τοὺς ἁγίους

Often a relative clause will have to be moved to the left because of space problems on the page, so the arrow will help that situation as well. In the same way, connect clauses beginning with οὖν and γάρ to the preceding phrase. If it is referring to the entire preceding verse, draw the line to the verse reference.

3. Sometimes the **main subject and verb do not appear at the beginning of the verse**. In this case, indent the subordinate phrases, even though they are prior to the main thought (Romans 3:21).

3:21 Νυνὶ δὲ
 χωρὶς νόμου
δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ πεφανέρωται
 μαρτυρουμένη ὑπὸ τοῦ νόμου καὶ
 τῶν προφητῶν,

Especially in this situation you might choose to underline (or double underline) the basic thought of the verse.

3:21 Νυνὶ δὲ
 χωρὶς νόμου
δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ πεφανέρωται
 μαρτυρουμένη ὑπὸ τοῦ νόμου καὶ
 τῶν προφητῶν,

The last two phrases are a good illustration of how to handle the situation where two phrases depend on the same word, such as two objects of the same preposition. They could both be listed under the preposition, but that unnecessarily increased the number of lines.

 μαρτυρουμένη ὑπὸ
 τοῦ νόμου καὶ
 τῶν προφητῶν,

We recommend putting an extra space between the preposition and its first object, and then lining up the second object with the first.

 μαρτυρουμένη ὑπὸ τοῦ νόμου καὶ
 τῶν προφητῶν,

4. **To emphasize the parallel nature of phrases, even though they may not appear consecutively, you can use vertical lines to identify them.**

3:21 | Νυνὶ δὲ
 | χωρὶς νόμου
δικαιοσύνη θεοῦ πεφανέρωται

| μαρτυρουμένη ὑπὸ τοῦ νόμου καὶ
τῶν προφητῶν,

5. The vertical lines will also help indicate when several phrases are indented the same amount for grammatical reasons but are **not parallel in thought**, as in Colossians 1:16.

1:16 ὅτι ἐν αὐτῷ ἐκτίσθη τὰ πάντα
| ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς καὶ
| ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς,
τὰ ὁρατὰ καὶ τὰ ἀόρατα,

6. To help see the flow of thought through a discussion you can **underline the key words**, especially if synonyms or cognates are being used (John 15:12-13, 20). Do not overdo this or you will lose the basic flow of the passage.

15:12 Αὕτη ἐστὶν ἡ ἐντολὴ ἣ ἐμὴ,
ἵνα ἀγαπᾶτε ἀλλήλους καθὼς ἠγάπησα ὑμᾶς.

15:13 μείζονα ταύτης ἀγάπην οὐδεὶς ἔχει,
ἵνα τις τὴν ψυχὴν αὐτοῦ θῇ ὑπὲρ τῶν φίλων αὐτοῦ.

15:20b ... εἰ ἐμὲ ἐδίωξαν,
καὶ ὑμᾶς διώξουσιν.
εἰ τὸν λόγον μου ἐτήρησαν,
καὶ τὸν ὑμέτερον τηρήσουσιν.

7. **The placement of connectives** (e.g., καί) between parallel phrases is a personal decision. They can be placed (1) at the end of the first phrase or (2) the beginning of the second (John 15:11).

15:11 Ταῦτα λελάληκα ὑμῖν
ἵνα ἡ χαρὰ ἣ ἐμὴ ἐν ὑμῖν ᾗ καὶ
ἡ χαρὰ ὑμῶν πληρωθῇ.

15:11 Ταῦτα λελάληκα ὑμῖν
ἵνα ἡ χαρὰ ἣ ἐμὴ ἐν ὑμῖν ᾗ
καὶ ἡ χαρὰ ὑμῶν πληρωθῇ.

(3) Fee wants each connective to be placed on its own line. We have found it helpful to indent them half an inch in from the left side of the phrase (John 15:20b).

15:20b εἰ ἐμὲ ἐδίωξαν,
καὶ
ὑμᾶς διώξουσιν.

εἰ τὸν λόγον μου ἐτήρησαν,
καὶ
τὸν ὑμέτερον τηρήσουσιν.

The advantage is that you can look down the column of the connectives and clearly see the flow of the discussion. We follow this procedure except for lists, and then we usually place the connectives on the same line as the first phrase.

When a connective introduces not a parallel idea but a subordinate idea, we also keep the connective on the same line as the phrase.

8. It is best to **maintain the Greek order of words**. Sometimes this will not be possible, so you can repeat a word but place it in parentheses and perhaps mark its original place with an ellipsis (Colossians 1:16).

1:16 τὰ πάντα (ἐκτίσται)
δι' αὐτοῦ καὶ
εἰς αὐτὸν...

This will happen frequently with postpositives (Mark 8:35)

8:35 γὰρ
ὅς...ἐὰν θέλῃ τὴν ψυχὴν αὐτοῦ σῶσαι ἀπολέσει αὐτήν·
δ'
ὅς...ἐὰν ἀπολέσει τὴν ψυχὴν αὐτοῦ
ἕνεκεν ἑμοῦ καὶ
τοῦ εὐαγγελίου
σώσει αὐτήν.

9. Use a **single space** to separate similar but different ideas, double spaces to separate major sections. You could also use headings to show major divisions.
10. Words in **apposition** should be indented the same amount from the left. Some indicator should show they are not both modifying the same word, but that the second is in apposition to the first. Perhaps a double vertical line would work for you (Colossians 1:14).

1:14 ἐν ᾧ ἔχομεν || τὴν ἀπολύτρωσιν,
||
|| τὴν ἄφεσιν τῶν ἁμαρτιῶν·

11. One of the few times you should break a phrase down in to smaller units is when they are a **list** (Colossians 1:16)

1:16 ὅτι ἐν αὐτῷ ἐκτίσθη τὰ πάντα
| ἐν τοῖς οὐρανοῖς καὶ

| ἐπὶ τῆς γῆς,
 | τὰ ὁρατὰ καὶ τὰ ἀόρατα,
 | εἴτε θρόνοι
 | εἴτε κυριότητες
 | εἴτε ἀρχαὶ
 | εἴτε ἐξουσίαι·
 τὰ πάντα δι' αὐτοῦ καὶ εἰς αὐτὸν ἔκτισται·

Sometimes the vertical lines are unnecessary, as in the second part of this example.

12. If parallel ideas are separated by several subordinate clauses, you could use **colored pens** to show the parallel thoughts, or perhaps number them down the left margin. Colored pens are also good for marking key words/phrases/thoughts throughout a passage (cf. Gordon Fee, *New Testament Exegesis: A Handbook for Students and Pastors*, 3rd ed., 72f.).⁴

Limitations of phrasing

1. Phrasing is not very effective with narrative material, where the flow is more obvious. It works best with theological passages.
2. Phrasing helps show immediate relationships, but not the larger relationships. If you want to take phrasing one step further, read Duvall and Guthrie's book outlining their method for indicating semantic relationships.⁵

⁴ Gordon Fee, *New Testament Exegesis: A Handbook for Students and Pastors*, 3rd ed., (Louisville: Westminster Press.)

⁵ Scott Duvall and George Guthrie, *Biblical Greek Exegesis: A Graded Approach to Learning Intermediate and Advanced Greek*, (Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 1998).