



CATHOLIC EDUCATION OFFICE
DIOCESE OF SALE

Teaching and Learning About Scripture



**Diocese of Sale:
Biblical Genres**



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Introduction



The Bible: a book of books

- It is strange to think of the Bible and genres, but it is very important to do so!
- The Bible is a library of books...it contains more than 75 individual books written by more than 75 authors.
- Just as it is important to know what you are reading everyday (in a newspaper for example) so it is important to know what you are reading in the Bible.



The Bible: a book of books

- The most common genre in the Bible is narrative but there are other genres too: recount, parable, poetry and song to name a few.
- What makes the writing in the Bible special is that Christians consider the Bible 'sacred' – the Bible is called 'the word of God.'
- However, although the Bible is called 'the word of God', the Church insists that words we see on the page are the words of human authors.

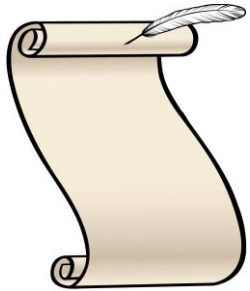
Dei Verbum states that God chose writers who made full use of their human powers and faculties to consign to writing what God wanted written 'and no more' (DV 11). The words of God in Scripture are, therefore, 'expressed in the words of men[sic] . . . in every way like human language' (DV 13).^[1] As a result, interpretation of Scripture must begin by carefully searching out the meaning 'which God had thought well to manifest through the medium of [the sacred writers'] words' (DV 12). *DV* reiterates that attention must be paid to the culture and time of writing and to the particular literary form employed, 'both [to] the customary and characteristic patterns of perception, speech and narrative which prevailed at the age of the sacred writer' (DV 12).

^[1] This point is first made in paragraph 12 where the document states that God speaks 'through men[sic] in human fashion.' *DV*, 12.



The Bible: a book of books

- That means that when we read the Bible, one of the first things we need to do is determine what genre we are reading...then we will know how to interpret it.
- Each time you read a passage, you need to find out what genre it is. Most often it will be a narrative (although watch out, the Bible has many different types of narratives) or a recount.



Narrative



Narrative

- Most of the Bible is written in narrative style.
- The purpose of a narrative is to entertain or inform.
- Because the Bible is set in a specific historical time, the narratives are sometimes called 'historical narratives.'
- Historical narratives contain details (characters, events and settings) which may well be factually accurate, but their purpose is not to relay details. Instead it is to tell something which the author thinks is important; a value, behaviour; an attitude; a belief.

Teachers should note that every passage taught on this CD will have its genre stated at the beginning of the PowerPoint which supports it. Literary activities taken from the teaching of literacy generally may be quite suitable for noting the implications of reading a particular genre. Links between the reading of Scripture and the reading of literature in general are to be encouraged.



Narrative

- Narratives follow a distinctive pattern and structure.
 - Orientation (Introduction of characters and setting)
 - Development of a problem or conflict
 - Resolution of the problem
 - Coda (where we often see the result of what has happened)



Narrative

- Narratives often contain...
 - A clear plot
 - Defined characters
 - Lots of detail
 - Dialogue
 - Language which keeps you
 - Lots of verbs
 - A climax





How does a narrative convey meaning?

- A narrative is a story. It conveys meaning not necessarily in the literal detail (although it may contain factual information), but rather through the connections it makes between the characters and the reader or listener.
- Usually, one of the characters undergoes a change in their thinking or behaviour and this prompts the listener to think about their own behaviour, to learn a lesson or to find a message.

Any change in the characters is usually evident in the resolution section.



How does a narrative convey meaning?

- When you read and interpret a biblical narrative spend more time thinking about what the story teaches, rather than the detail it contains.
- The important question is 'What does it mean?', **not** 'Did it happen that exact way?'
- An important point to remember though is that the story was written for people who knew the world of the story. We don't – so you might need to do some research on the history of the passage before you are sure about what it means.

The question of factual accuracy in accounts becomes obvious when passages are compared. It is important to guide students away from focusing on the detail in a passage to what the passage might mean – what the author hoped to convey, the “so what” question for us. Changes made by an author may then be explored as a response to their own community circumstance rather than ‘untruths.’



A special type of narrative: The Parable





Parable

- A parable is a type of narrative: it is made up. **However**, it *could have* happened.
- In a parable, two 'things' are compared.
- Sometimes the 'things' being compared are actions (e.g., the parables of the kingdom of God compare the kingdom of God and a human activity).
- Sometimes the things being compared are the actions of people (e.g., the Good Samaritan compares how the characters behave).

The best way of understanding how parables work is to remember that they are actually based on a metaphor: something is compared to something else. By actually 'doing' (ie writing down) the comparison you are able to see more clearly the many layers of meanings they convey.



Parable

- In order to understand the parable, you need to find out what is being compared and actually **do** the comparison!
- Be careful though: if you think it's easy it's not!
 - Parables are intended to make you think. Usually there is a twist in them somewhere.
 - And remember! When you think about the things being compared, try to think as a person from the time of Jesus. Think like them...not us!



How does a parable convey meaning?

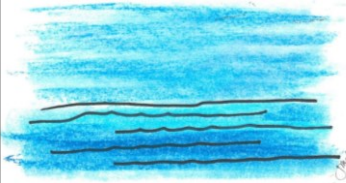
- Parables make us think. In fact, the comparison is *designed* to make us think. Parables are different from ordinary narratives in that possible meanings (and there will most likely be plenty of them) are found as we explore!
- Meaning is found as we sift and sort out what might be a lesson or message for us.
- Example parables (such as The Good Samaritan) make us think about who is a good example for us: they give us an example of how to behave and how not to behave.

Parables are like diamonds: they are multifaceted! As the comparison is done, many lessons or messages are likely to become evident.



A special type of narrative:

The Myth





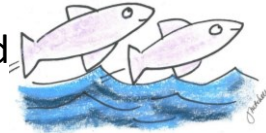
Myth

- A myth is a type of narrative.
- It is a non-literal form of writing, that means that although myths might seem to explain how something came to be, they are not meant to be read as scientific explanations or descriptions. Myths are narratives, stories.



Myth

- In the Bible, the two accounts of the creation of the earth in Genesis are myths. These myths do not try to offer a scientific account of what happened at the beginning of time; instead they try to teach important lessons. Rather than try to explain *what* happened, they try to explain the authors' understanding of *why* they happened, important things we can learn about God and creation





How does a myth convey meaning?

- Although myths are not to be taken literally, they do tell wonderful truths.
- Like other narratives, they are interested in teaching an important moral, value or message.
- When we interpret the creation myths we need to ask about meaning; about what we learn about God, ourselves and creation, not about science.





How does a myth convey meaning?

- The creation myths in Genesis contain some of the most important truths of our faith, sacred truths about God and about us. These are some of the truths the creation myths convey.
 - That God is a creative God
 - That God loves creation: creation and all in it are God's
 - That we are made like God – to be creative, generous and life giving!
 - That creation is good – very good.





Recount





Recount

- The purpose of a recount is to list or describe a past experience by retelling what happened and when.
- Recounts have a very similar structure to narratives
 - except that there may not be a problem.
- The structure of a recount is...
 - Orientation (which introduces the characters and setting)
 - Description of events, in chronological order
 - A personal comment or opinion about what has happened



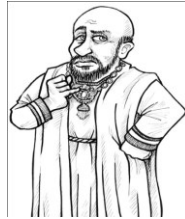
Recount

- Recounts are generally...
 - Written in the past tense
 - Written in the first person (although in the Bible they are written in the third person)
- Recounts often contain...
 - ‘Time’ words which connect events...(e.g. next, later, when, then, after, before, first, as soon as, eventually)
 - Lots of description: verbs, adverbs and nouns
 - Reported or direct speech (He said)
 - Short sentences to increase tension...or
 - Longer sentences to provide contrast and detail



How does a recount convey meaning?

- When you read and interpret a biblical recount remember it is the *authors interpretation* of what happened.
- In this sense a recount is like a diary entry, a journal or a letter: the author has a view about the person, the events or the situation and they wish to share it. A recount is not a report.





How does a recount convey meaning?

- Remember also, that a great deal of time (years and years!) has elapsed between the event which is being described and the recount you are reading.
- The author has had a lot of time to think about what happened and what it might have meant. Their recounting of the event is, therefore, closely linked to what they believe.



How does a recount convey meaning?

- When we look for meaning in a recount, we look for what we can learn...about the characters, the actions or about life in general!
- In that way, finding meaning in a recount is like finding meaning in a narrative: meaning is not necessarily in the literal detail (although the recount will contain factual information).
Meaning is more likely to be in what we can learn about or from the people and the events.



Summary Story





Summary Story

- Every passage has a genre. However, some passages seem to have *two* genres. First, a passage might be read and understood in its ordinary, face value sort of way. However, at a second look, the same passage might look like an allegory which summarises the life of Jesus; where each person or event has a parallel with something in Jesus' life.
- There are three summaries in the Gospels which help explain this genre.
 - The visit of Boy Jesus to the Temple
 - The parable of the Sower and the Seed
 - The parable of the Wicked Tenants.





Summary Story

– Luke’s recording of Jesus’ visit to the Temple when he was 12 (Lk 2:41-52) looks, at first, like a simple recount which tells of the boy Jesus visiting the Temple. But a careful reader will notice that the story has a lot in common with the death and resurrection of Jesus. At the end of his life, Jesus will again come to Jerusalem at Passover, he will again be ‘lost’ and three days later, he will again be ‘found’ by those who love him. When asked what he has been doing, he will again say he has been doing what God asked of him.

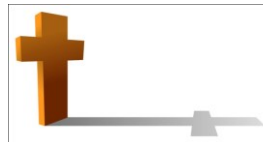
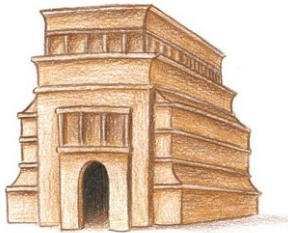


The Gospels were originally written to be read out loud to a listening audience, perhaps in one or two sessions. Summaries kept them up to speed with what was going to happen.



Summary Story

- So the story of the Boy Jesus at the Temple acts as both a recount AND a summary of the death and resurrection of Jesus.



The Gospels were originally written to be read out loud to a listening audience, perhaps in one or two sessions. Summaries kept them up to speed with what was going to happen.



- The parable of the sower and the seed (Lk 8:4-8) reads at first like a regular parable...but a closer look reveals it is also a summary of how people will respond to God's word (which is the seed).
- The parable of the Wicked Tenants (Lk 20:9-19) explains that God (the vineyard owner) trusted creation to people who did not care for it. It summarises the work of the prophets and Jesus, (the vineyard owners son) who are either attacked or killed.



How does a summary convey meaning?

- You would think that because two genres are recognised in a summary that they would convey meaning in two ways: wrong!
- Summaries only convey meaning in their 'face value' genre, that is as a recount or narrative.
- The fact that a passage acts as a summary does not add to the meaning it conveys – its purpose as a summary is simply to act as a marker or pointer for what is about to happen.

The Gospels would have originally been read out loud to an audience in two or three sittings. Summary stories kept the audience on track even though they knew the end of the story as it began.