

How to read the Bible out loud

A DIY training aid

A49 Articles series: Communication


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This article takes the form of a DIY training aid for any church's 'lesson readers'. It aims to excite your readers of the Bible out loud and equip them to do this well. It applies to beginners and old hands alike. It is, in essence, a write-up of my own training on this topic but expressed in my 'Article' format.

1: Introduction

Explanation for church leaders

This material can be used solo but it is better for a group to work at together in one or more training sessions. It is quite detailed so you may prefer to select from it. You might also use this as a text for a trainer who puts an event together around these ideas.

There are a number of practical exercises to take part in throughout. If in a group you can discuss these together and practise reading the passages suggested to each other. There are also 16 hand-out sheets covering headings and exercises marked .

This is written by someone who is not a speech and drama specialist but who is passionate for good communication in churches. I am deeply frustrated at how little attention most churches pay to training in this topic. I long to see Scripture read out loud in a way that grips those who are listening with its powerful message.

Reading out loud in church is a real privilege. You are taking the Word of God and putting its message across to everyone present (and/or online). This is something worth doing well because of the potential for getting God's message through to many people.

But reading out loud is not a task for anyone. Seek out those who can communicate to hearers, which may involve some false starts. Avoid the expectation that anyone not doing too much in church might read the Scriptures aloud – as an easy option to give them something to do. Look for people who have a passion for God's Word, a desire to let people hear it and some gift in using their voice. Then train them.

By all means let children read, because some can do it really well. But look for an aptitude, rather than putting anyone on a rota, or having children for children's sake.

So, study this training outline and then set up a session for your lesson readers. You are welcome to adapt this material within your own local church in any reasonable way without copyright restriction, other than to acknowledge source, please, and point to my website.

It is split into four parts: **Introduction, Delivery, Preparation** and, at a more advanced level, **Creativity**.

There are wider issues that this training aid does not attempt to cover. Do you choose readings from a lectionary or does the preacher choose them? How do you ensure that you balance Old Testament and New Testament, and sections within them, in your selection over time? What if the preacher wants to read the passage chosen rather than have a separate reader? How should you read Scripture to children or in all-age services?

I owe a huge debt to my former Administry colleagues, Lance Pierson and Anna de Lange, for their writing on this subject, and in Lance's case for his training on lesson reading, his checking a draft of this article, and his own reading of poetry, prose and Scripture. See in particular his book *Storytelling* published by Scripture Union and dating from 1997, and Anna's Grove Book *How to... read the Bible in church* (with Liz Simpson) in 2003.

EXERCISE 1

Discuss: Who is your favourite news reader on TV or radio? What is it about how they read that makes them good at their job?

List some similarities and then one or two key differences between reading the daily news and reading the Good News out loud. What one lesson might we take from this?

God's word changes lives

When we read we are handling dynamite (Romans 1:16,17) and words that are God-breathed (2 Timothy 3:16). This is not just poetry (although some is), nor just speech (again, some is), nor just story-telling (and you will know some is), nor just many other things. The words of the Bible have the power to move people in all kinds of ways, because they come from God through their human authors.

So to be a good out-loud reader of the Bible, the first requirement is to have due reverence for the power of Scripture and so to appreciate the privilege of reading it for the benefit of others. This is assumed in all that follows.

People are more used these days to reading

(with their eyes) than they are to listening (with their ears). Some churches encourage people to follow the reading in Bibles or show the passage on screens. But you may want to encourage people not to follow the text but to listen. For that to work well, you need to be a good out-loud Bible reader! Hence this training session.

EXERCISE 2

Share examples of readers you have heard (without mentioning any names!) who have not been able to let you hear God's word well. What caused this problem: speed, volume, tone, or what? What one lesson might you each learn for yourself as you read?

Passages to work on

Before looking at delivery it will help to have some Bible passages in view. The three I suggest you work with are as follows. I have chosen these because they are very different from each other and are good examples of passages to practise on. All quotations here come from the current New International Version of the Bible. You might like to keep a marker in all three passages now as the next part of this training aid makes frequent reference to them.

Psalm 100

The Psalms are of course Hebrew poetry and although they do not rhyme, there is a structure to them that any reader needs to be aware of. Many of them have two parts to each verse, often saying the same thing with different choices of words to add variety. The reader can bring this out by careful use of pauses and emphases. They are not to be read like a novel or a textbook!

Psalm 100 is very short but packed with content. No words are wasted. If the reader charges in, it will all be over before people have realised what is going on. So speed is going to be a key issue. Yet most readers are fearful of going slowly: really, really slowly.

This Psalm has powerful verbs, instructing us what to do. The first phrase is 'Shout for joy'. But look at the sequence: 'shout', 'worship', 'come', 'know', 'enter', 'give thanks'. Each needs a different tone to bring out their meaning.

And there is assurance in phrases such as 'the LORD is God', 'he who made us', 'we are his'. 'the LORD is good', 'his love endures for ever', 'his faithfulness continues'. This is packed with ideas to encourage us. These are the reasons for the commands of the poem. What a privilege to bring out the message of this wonderful Psalm!

Mark 8:22-30

This is a defining moment in Mark's Gospel, a hinge between the chapters up to this point and those that follow. This is a piece of narrative writing with quoted speech within it, like many other passages in the Gospels and Acts.

You, the reader, can see the quote marks, but those who are listening (preferably without a Bible open in front of them) cannot see them, so they need to hear them. How you read the descriptive prose (straight) needs to be carefully distinguished from the spoken words (with key emphases and emotions).

But the two paragraphs here have significant differences. One describes a healing miracle, the other describes a short conversation. So there might be value in a definite pause between the two. In both paragraphs questions are asked, so you need to read those as if you were asking the question, with appropriate pitch to your voice.

Then notice the difference between the very hesitant "I see people; they look like trees walking around" said with incredulity, and the much more certain, "You are the Messiah" said with sudden realisation and assurance. They need to be read differently.

Ephesians 2:11-22

This is neither poetry nor narrative, nor speech. This is carefully worked out textbook doctrine, which needs a different approach from the two passages just listed.

It starts with the word 'Therefore' which gives an immediate problem – and so perhaps you need to

provide a short introduction to the context or the opening sentence makes no sense.

Then there are three paragraphs – so this calls for breaks. And you need to break the sentences up too rather than rushing from one to another. They are quite long sentences which need to be read carefully to bring out the meaning. Then there are lists (look at verse 12). There are also key words to show up the structure. So 'Remember (you were) ... but now (you are)' (v11-13), or 'You are no longer ... but (with the idea of now)...' (v19). 'But' phrases like these are going to call for some kind of change of voice.

So this is a passage where you need to understand the structure and clarify it in the way you read. If you don't do this you are reading word after word without bringing out their linkage to each other and the overall structure of the passage.

I have introduced those three passages because you will now see how making use of the incredible range of the human voice can turn words into sentences of clear messaging. In Part 2 we look at just what you can do with your voice.

EXERCISE 3

Read these passages together now so that you get familiar with them for when we use them as examples in Part 2. Try them in more than one Bible translation. If each one had a newspaper headline, what would these be?

2: Delivery

We now look at the variations you can make in your voice as you read and how wise use of these can bring the passage to life. You need an open Bible as you read this, with the three passages marked. They are:

Psalm 100 + Mark 8:22-30 + Ephesians 2:11-22.

The three sections that follow cover:

Expression | Punctuation | Emphasis. But you will find they all overlap.

1 Expression

In each of these cases, imagine your voice has a range of controls which you can adjust. Here are three adjustable controls for expression.

The volume control

One obvious control adjusts the volume of your speaking, from a loud whisper to almost shouting. Here are points to make about your reading volume.

- **Project your voice**

There is a mistaken view that PA will make your voice loud enough in itself. PA will assist, but you need to do the main work by projecting your voice to the back of the space where people are listening.

Try it when the building is empty and ask a friend to sit at the back. As you stand, rock slightly back on your heels, then forward to your toes before starting. This helps you to breathe correctly. Now read the passage to where they are. Then remember that if the space is full of people you need to be a bit louder still as sound gets absorbed in clothing and bodies.

- **Read 'out' not 'down'**

There is no need to shout but you will keep the volume up if you read 'out' to people rather than looking 'down' to the Bible. So ensure the lectern or reading desk means you are directing your voice outwards rather than downwards, or hold the Bible up if the desk is too low and you cannot change it.

- **Increase the volume**

Certain wording calls for the volume control to be switched further up from this norm. Psalm 100 begins, 'Shout for joy to the LORD...' so that needs the volume up. When Peter says, "You are the Messiah" in Mark 8:29, that needs to come across with confidence and a noticeable increase in volume.

- **Decrease the volume**

Certain wording calls for the volume control to be switched down from this norm. 'Jesus warned them not to tell anyone about him' in Mark 8:30 can give more the sense of secrecy if at a low volume and then contrasts with the higher volume in v29b. Whenever you drop the volume, still keep it loud enough to reach the back of the church or room, aiming to enunciate the words clearly to help people hear.

- **Vary the volume**

What comes across powerfully is variety. So back in Mark 8:29 it might go,

"But what about you?" *(at normal volume)*
he asked *(lower)*.

"Who do you say I am?". *(normal – but see below for the emphasis on 'you')*
Peter answered *(just a bit lower)*

"You are the Messiah." *(higher – and see below for the emphasis on 'Messiah')*

The speed control

You can read slowly or quickly. But, as with volume, the reading comes alive if the pace is varied to suit the words.

- **Don't rush**

If you are nervous you tend to read too quickly without pauses (which come as a separate point shortly). So be prepared to go more slowly than you might want to.

- **Keep the narrative flowing**

In general, a faster pace keeps the passage moving along which can be important in narrative so the story keeps unfolding. A slower pace can be used for emphasis or for important phrases which need to stand out from the background. Or for more concentrated teaching passages where everyone needs a bit more time to take the points in.

- **Don't hurry some passages**

Psalm 100 is short and every word counts. So it deserves to be read pretty slowly – much more slowly than most inexperienced readers will take it at. You might want to slow down more for a key phrase, such as 'For the LORD is good' and give some weight to 'LORD' and 'good'. Do not hurry this Psalm.

- **Slow down for teaching**

Ephesians 2:11-22 is a passage of concentrated teaching which therefore needs a slower speed than for narrative, with close attention to the punctuation so there are slight pauses at commas and longer ones at full stops. More about punctuation shortly. The variety in this passage probably needs to come through changes in emphasis rather than speed but you can speed up a little for the words in brackets in verse 11 because that is an aside.

- **Vary the speed**

Mark 8:22-30 deserves clear variation in speed. Verses 22-23a are narrative and can be read at a normal pace but you can slow right down for the speech in 23b. The man's words in verse 24 can be said really slowly for emphasis because he most likely said them word by word with plenty of hesitation. If you read them at normal speed you lose the impact. Then there is narrative at normal speed, slowing down for Jesus' words at the end of verse 26. And so on.

The mood options

The previous two controls have been linear: low volume to high, slow speed to fast. Mood is a little different in that it has a number of settings and you choose any one or more of them at any time. See it as various buttons you choose to press.

- **Communicate mood**

In general, try to inject something of the emotion within the passage in the tone of your voice. You can communicate all kinds of moods just by the way you speak: terror, hesitation, excitement, sneering. This will normally apply to quoted speech but can also apply to narrative.

- **Feel the mood - 1**

The overall mood of Psalm 100 is joy so let the words you read fill you with the joy that is embedded in them. If you read them deadpan, the whole point of the Psalm is lost.

This is not something to engineer in yourself; it should come naturally if you find the words give you joy, as they should. So be joyful, and then read the Psalm out loud.

- **Feel the mood - 2**

The Ephesians passage is concentrated doctrine – but that does not mean you cannot express emotion because it is really good news! If you read it all deadpan its message is clearly not getting through to you and so it will not get across to your listeners.

So verse 12, your past, can be read straight, but then show an emotional contrast in verse 13 at the staggering fact that you have been 'brought near by the blood of Christ'. This shows how important it is to understand the passage!

- **Express mood in speech**

By contrast, the Mark passage has different kinds of mood within it. The narrative at the start is neutral.

But the formerly-blind man's words in verse 24 are anything but. He is amazed, he cannot, literally, believe his eyes! He did not say 'I see people...' in a deadpan voice. He probably said it hesitatingly, totally overawed, in utter amazement. So read it as though amazed.

- **Vary the mood - 1**

Going on in the Mark passage, even narrative sometimes needs mood injected. So in verse 25 the first half is neutral (Jesus putting his hands on the man's eyes) but the second half is amazement again in the words 'opened', 'restored' and 'saw everything clearly'. Then drop all this for Jesus' words 'Don't even go into the village'.

- **Vary the mood - 2**

Look at Ephesians 19b-22 as a contrast to verse 19a. If you read it as though being foreigners and strangers is just about the same as being fellow citizens and members of his household, the amazing transformation that Christ's death has accomplished will be lost on your hearers.

EXERCISE 4

So there are three controls that you can vary: volume, speed and mood. Take each of the three passages and have a go at reading them out loud with some variety in each of these three along the lines already suggested.

If you are in a group each person does this for one of the three passages and the others then comment on what was good (in the use of the three controls) and what might be improved another time.

Be kind to each other!

The three passages, you will remember, are:

- Psalm 100
- Mark 8:22-30
- Ephesians 2:11-22

EXERCISE 5

Now look at one or all of the following passages in turn and analyse how you might vary the volume, speed and mood as you read them through.

If you have time you might then want to try these out in practice too, as with the previous exercise.

- Isaiah 6:1-8
- John 13:1-11
- 1 Peter 2:4-10

2 Punctuation

As readers you are seeking to put across something in print in a way that people can take in through their ears. So this means you need to 'speak' the punctuation marks that you get in print, which are designed to bring out the meaning of the words by grouping them and separating out different groups.

So here are three more aspects of our voice to consider:

- Structure
- Phrases and lists
- Pauses.

All three are, of course, closely connected.

Structure

There is overlap here with volume, speed and mood controls but structure is an issue worth demonstrating as a separate point. You are seeking to communicate the meaning of the text. Punctuation shows you how to do this for the passage as a whole.

- **Look at the paragraphs**
First, look at the paragraphs and headings to see how the overall passage is structured, then seek to bring this out. Psalm 100 is one unit. Mark 8:22-30 has two clearly defined sections so there needs to be a pause between the two as they are quite different in their content.
- **Look for links**
Ephesians 2:11-22 has three paragraphs, each introduced by a linking word ('Therefore', 'For', 'Consequently'). It is clearly part of a logical argument. So, rather than reading it all through as though one unit, you might introduce breaks at two points and emphasise the linking word.
- **Examine the punctuation structure**
Now look at the punctuation marks. Psalm 100 has each verse apart from the first in two halves with a semi-colon separating them. So it needs a break at each semi-colon to give a sense of the poetic rhythm and a slightly longer break at the end of each verse.
- **Note reported speech**
We have already noted that Mark 8:22-30 has quoted speech so you need to differentiate what is actually said (important), and the linking explanation such as 'he said' (not quite so important)

with different voice tones, volumes and emphases. More on this below.

- **Grasp the grouped words**

In the difficult Ephesians passage, take note of every comma and full stop to enable the hearer to group words correctly. Your voice needs to put across the punctuation which the hearers cannot see.

Phrases and lists

This follows on from structure. You can clarify the meaning of a passage by looking out for lists of items. Sometimes there are just two (joined by 'and'), but often more. Watch also for sub-sections within a sentence, which may be separated out with commas, so that you can emphasise the main sentence and put the secondary phrase into brackets, as it were.

- **Seek phrasing within structure**

Ephesians 2:11,12 forms one sentence. Paul starts off with the instruction 'remember' and then wanders off with some phrases so needing to repeat the 'remember' to get back to where he was. Again, simply understanding this means you will bring it out as you read it aloud.

- **Analyse complicated sentences**

Now look at the construction of verses 14 and 15. 'the dividing wall of hostility' explains 'barrier' whereas the main sentence runs 'who has made the two groups one ...by setting aside in his flesh...'. If you can see how this sentence is constructed you are much more likely to read it in a way that groups the phrases correctly and so helps everyone understand what is going on.

- **Look for lists – 1**

Ephesians 2:12 has a clear listing of points describing the Ephesians before they became Christians. There are five points so in your mind see these as bullets and read them out one by one. If you simply see the bullet points there, your reading will bring that out.

- **Look for lists – 2**

But there is also a list in Mark 8:22-30. In verse 25 there are three things that happened. Visualise a bullet point and read them as though the bullets are present. There is another threesome in verse 28.

- **Spot question marks**

Don't forget to read a question mark as though asking a question. There are four question marks in the Mark passage. Getting them right brings the whole passage alive.

Pauses

One of the clearest indicators of a good reader is their ability to put in pauses at the right point. A pause in a public reading can have a powerful impact. Apart from natural breaks, they can be used either to let an idea sink in or to have people on the edges of their seats waiting for what is to come next.

- **Pause to stress**

In Psalm 100 you can emphasise a word by giving the slightest of pauses before you say it, keeping your pitch up so people know another word is coming. So in verse 5 you might say, 'and his love endures *(slight pause)* for ever *(emphasising 'ever')*.

- **Pause for anticipation**

In Mark 8:22-30 consider inserting a short pause in verse 24 before 'I see people'. That creates anticipation: what is he going to say? And in any case he would have said it in a hesitating way. You can also put a short pause in verse 25 before 'everything' to give emphasis to that word (see 'Pause to stress' above). 'Then his eyes were opened, his sight was restored, and he saw *(pause)* everything *(emphasised)* clearly'.

- **Pause round a phrase**

In Ephesians 2:13 you can give the slightest of pauses after the word 'now' to emphasise it, to create anticipation for what is going to come next, but also to emphasise the three-word phrase coming up (which needs a slight pause after it too).

- **Pause for breaks**

You need a reasonable pause for full stops, section ends and paragraph breaks. We have noted in structure that the Mark 8 passage has two distinct sections to it – so give quite a pause between the two. The Ephesians 2 passage has three paragraphs with a linking word to start, so pause between each one. Here and elsewhere Paul can use pretty long sentences. Pause when one idea moves on to a new one. Don't just keep going.

EXERCISE 6

So there are three more variations to have in mind by understanding structure, phrases/lists and pauses. Take each of our three passages and have a go at reading them out loud with some variety in each of these three along the lines already suggested.

If you are in a group each person does this for one of the three passages and the others then comment on what was good (in the use of the three controls) and what might be improved another time.

Be kind to each other!

The three passages, you will remember, are:

- Psalm 100
- Mark 8:22-30
- Ephesians 2:11-22

EXERCISE 7

Now look at one or all of the following passages and analyse their structure, their phrases/lists and the pauses you might insert. If you have time you might then want to try these out in practice too, as with the previous exercise.

- 2 Samuel 12:1-10
- Acts 2:1-13
- 2 Timothy 3:10-17

3 Emphasis

You can change the meaning of any speech by emphasising different words. Your role is to read Scripture so that the meaning comes through to everyone, so this is a somewhat risky area of voice production. It shows the importance of preparation and coming to a clear understanding of the passage. It is all too easy to misinterpret a passage by the way you read it!

Words to play down

Here is a list of words that we do well not to make too much of. I have noted some of these points under other headings.

- **Asides**

Brackets, asides, etc. I have already mentioned these, as in Ephesians 2:11 with the brackets there.

- **Dialogue explanation**

Phrases such as 'he said' in spoken dialogue. You want the spoken words to come across, not the explanations in between. So in Mark 8:29a the words 'he asked' could be at a slightly lower volume than the spoken words on either side of that phrase.

- **Minor words**

Pronouns, prepositions, articles and other 'minor' words. This goes without saying.

Imagine what it would sound like if you started Psalm 100 as 'Shout for joy'. That sounds as though you are promoting someone called Joy. In verse 2, if you came across as 'come before him' that is an instruction to be in front rather than behind him. And in verse 4, 'enter his gates' warns you not to enter someone else's gates, which may be good advice but is not the point which the passage is making.

But there are exceptions: so in verse 3 it would be right to say 'It is he who has made us, and we are his' because that is the point.

- **Repeated ideas**

Play down repeated ideas which you may have stressed the first time. In Mark 8:22 the key point is that they brought him a blind man. But in the next verse it refers to the blind man again, but don't emphasise 'blind' this time because we already know that.

Words to play up: contrasts

Here it is vital that the reader understands the meaning of the passage or you may emphasise the wrong idea.

- **Contrasting words**

Many passages have contrasts it is good to bring out. So in Mark 8:27 Jesus asks, "Who do people say I am?" and then in verse 29, "But what about you?" he asked, "Who do you say I am?"

The contrast is in the word 'you' which comes twice but it is the second one that really needs the emphasis. Try emphasising any of the other words in those last six and it makes no sense. So although the word 'you' often needs to be in the background, here it clearly needs to be stressed.

- **Contrasting sections**

Psalm 100 is all one piece, but some Psalms have strongly contrasting moods in different sections. If you read on across the divide without changing your voice, this could be muddling to your hearers.

- **Phrases starting 'but'**

There is another contrast in Ephesians 2:13. 'But now in Christ Jesus...' It helps to bring out the meaning if you make something of 'But now' so the contrast is clearly audible. It helps if you have given some emphasis to the word 'formerly' in verse 11 even though it came some time beforehand.

- **Surprises - 1**

In Ephesians 2:14+ Paul has talked about two different groups. Then in verse 18 he uses the word 'both'. That word needs a little emphasis because that is the whole point of what he is saying. The contrast here is that it is not that each group is separate but, surprise, both have access.

- **Surprises - 2**

Here are some other examples of surprising ideas that need emphasis. Psalm 100:5 'for ever' and 'all generations'. Mark 8:25 'he saw everything clearly'. Mark 8:29 "You are the Messiah". Ephesians 2:13, 'in Christ Jesus'. Ephesians 2:21,22 'in him'.

Words to play up: actions, key ideas

- **Lists of verbs**

If the passage is telling us to do something, the verbs need to come through clearly. So in Psalm 100 we are told to 'shout', 'worship', 'come', 'know' and so on. So these words need to stand out just a fraction from lesser words around them. It also helps that in this case they form a list (see above).

- **Key ideas**

Key ideas need stress. So Psalm 100:3 tells us to know that the 'LORD is God'. Those three words are the key idea here. You can emphasise this by emphasising each of those three words with a very slight pause between them. 'Know that the LORD (pause) is (pause) God. The same in verse 5: 'the LORD is good'.

- **Emotive words**

Look for emotive words. Psalm 100 has 'shout', 'praise', 'joy', etc. In Mark 8:22 the people did not 'ask' Jesus to touch the man, they 'begged' him. You can bring in a sense of begging by an urgency in your voice.

- **Pauses**

Note that you emphasise not just with how you say the word but the pauses you put around it too, and by the volume. Everything in these lists links up!

EXERCISE 8

So there are more ideas for variety of voice, this time through emphasising words or playing them down.

Take each of our three passages and have a go at reading them out loud with some variety in each of these three along the lines already suggested. If you are in a group each person does this for one of the three passages and the others then comment on what was good (in the use of the three controls) and what might be improved another time.

EXERCISE 9

We have now covered our three passages,

- Psalm 100
- Mark 8:22-30
- Ephesians 2:11-22

looking at, first, expression, then punctuation and finally emphasis. Now is the time to try all three passages again but this time taking note of all these points. See how you get on!

Next look at one or all of the following passages and analyse how you might emphasise some words while playing others down. Then try to bring in all the three areas we have investigated: expression, punctuation and emphasis, as you read these.

- Zechariah 9:9-13
- Luke 15:1-10
- Revelation 3:14-22

By now you should have a good idea of how to vary your voice as you read any passage.

The more you ponder on these points, the easier you will find to do it all naturally. It really is not as complicated as it sounds once you have been introduced to everything you can do with your voice!

3: Preparation

The three sections that follow cover:

Ten steps to get ready | **Practical issues** | **Six steps to help you improve.**

(You will also find much of this part of this article as Training Notes TN1 in the Resources section of this website.)

Ten steps to get ready

So you have been asked to read the Scriptures out loud in your church service. Here is a suggested 'to do' list before you get to the work we have been putting in in the previous part.

1 Pray ...

...that you will understand the passage and discover something of its meaning for yourself. This is the fundamental key to all preparation. You need to get to grips with the passage yourself. For that you need God's help.

2 Note the type of literature

The Bible is not one book, but a richly varied collection of many different types of writing: narrative, history, story, poetry, prophecy, concentrated teaching. You by now know that your approach for a section of one of Paul's epistles will need to be different from that for a Gospel narrative, which in turn will need to be different from that for a Psalm. So work out what type your passage is.

3 Study the context of the passage

You will probably only be reading a

paragraph or two, and these may make little sense on their own.

Take, for example, a passage which starts 'Therefore ...' (as we noted in Ephesians 2:11) or 'As he was walking ...', or one that comes in half-way through a narrative. What has just happened? Where are we? Who is involved? Why is this happening? You may need to guide people in with a brief introduction, so you need to read round the passage yourself as you prepare. If you use an introduction be careful to keep it brief and not to colour it with your own interpretation!

4 **Grasp the mood of the passage**

You will be familiar with this idea by now so ask, 'What is the mood?'. Is it one of excitement or sadness, of urgency or fun? Moods can change within a passage as in several of the Psalms or consider crucifixion to resurrection in the Gospels.

If the Psalmist commands us to praise the Lord, let's do it! But it is best done by letting it come out naturally from your own engagement with the passage. If you simply switch an emotion on because you think you should, it won't come across as genuine.

5 **Discover the passage's meaning**

What is the central message of this passage? What is the writer saying? What would be the sub-editor's headline? You may need help here, even from a commentary or someone who understands more of the Bible than you do.

You cannot read for others if you do not first understand what you are reading. In this case you will simply be reading out words one after the other, not seeking to put across the underlying message of each sentence and paragraph. To get the meaning across, you need to see the passage as a whole not just as individual sentences.

6 **Visualise your listeners**

What kind of people are they: adults, children, visitors with little Christian background? How will they be feeling at this stage of the service? What are their needs? Do you need to add in more explanation than usual at the start? Will they be following in Bibles or reading the text on a screen (see a comment about this on page 2)? Now turn these thoughts into prayer for these people so that God's

word might have an impact on their lives. You have the privilege of being the channel to allow this to happen.

7 **Practise the passage**

Read it through several times finding what you regard as the appropriate emphasis on different controls as already explained. You practise, first, so that you get the basics right and read without tripping up at any point; next, to bring in the right tone of voice to help people understand the meaning. Now practise out loud, possibly to a friend and perhaps in the building where you will be reading.

8 **Decide to review afterwards**

Determine to improve. Listen to any recording made of the service, ask friends, learn from mistakes. Listen to and observe professionals (for example, TV news readers). If you feel you made a mess of it in some way, take that to God but don't let it worry you (you probably noticed it far more than others). Instead list the lesson you learn so that you don't make the same mistake again.

9 **Pray again**

...all the way through this process for putting the passage across well, for not letting yourself get in the way of God's message to his people (by wrong voice, mannerism or emphasis), and that people will want to go out and study the passage for themselves after the service. It really is a privilege to read Scripture out loud because you are taking the words of God to the people of God.

10 The tenth step I take in a little more detail as 'Practical issues'.

Practical issues

1 **Movements**

It's worth thinking these through in advance.

- Where to sit, so that you can get to the front easily.
- Cue for your reading so you know when it comes (the service leader should ideally give you an order of service unless it is the same every week).

EXERCISE 10 

If in a group, discuss which points in this list of eight you need to take particular note of. Which one do you each find hardest for any reason? What do you do to get over the difficulty? What in practice might you all do to help each other?

- When you should move to the front (eg. during the final verse of a preceding song or hymn).

The secret is to avoid any rush or panic so your movements do not draw attention to yourself. If that happens, the message of Scripture takes second place.

2 Appearance

Again, you must not become the message. So beware of:

- Mannerisms – any obvious movements you make when nervous, such as pushing your hair back or clasping your hands;
- Your clothes – avoid anything in clothing or make-up that stands out and draws attention to you.

3 Bible

There is a range of points to be aware of here such as:

- whether to take your own or use a lectern Bible;
- if your own, is it easier to use a paper or digital one?;
- having the place marked in advance so you don't fumble for it;
- preparing in advance how to pronounce any strange names (don't be afraid to ask for help if necessary).

4 Voice

We've already noted you need to speak out not down. Learn:

- how to get your voice to carry – always project it to the back of the room;
- how to use PA – it assists you, it does not do your work for you;
- to use your lips to enunciate words clearly, especially for any quiet sections.

5 Eyes

You can always use a finger on the page to help you stay on track. There is a balance to maintain here between:

- making eye contact with the listeners from time to time so that you engage with them;
- without losing your place in the text at the same time.

6 Nerves

You may want to do any or all of these:

- hold on to the lectern/stand with one or both hands;
- write out the opening and closing words if your church uses particular forms of wording;
- stand with equal weight on both feet, slightly apart;
- take a deep breath before you start and go more slowly than you expect.

7 Start:

Give the passage reference and, if normal, the church Bible page number, then:

- pause – let people get to the page and settle;
- perhaps repeat the reference so everyone knows where you are;
- if the passage starts 'He...' or 'She...', insert their name.

8 Finish

Don't rush the words to close or make them sound unimportant – nothing is worse than 'This is the word of the Lord' mumbled as though it did not matter!

The aim is for the reader to fade into the background and let the words speak to each person present. Any muddle over these practical issues will probably have the opposite effect. So it is worth working on the points in this list so that none of them gets in the way.

Six ideas to help you improve **1 Listen to or watch a recording**

If your service is recorded, listen to your reading a few days later. Check it out on the points made in this DIY training article.

Better still, if your service is streamed, listen and watch yourself after the event and spot one or two things to improve.

2 **Ask trusted friends**

Ask one or two trusted, honest friends or family how you came across. Were you audible? Did you get the speeds about right? Did the passage come alive to them as you read it? What one thing might you improve on next time?

3 **Use a feedback sheet**

If you want to be more formal, devise a simple feedback sheet listing the points made in this article and ask one or two close friends to fill this in afterwards. This can be painful but it is better to know what

EXERCISE 11

Which one or more of these ideas might you work on? How will you do this?



you need to improve than repeating mistakes every time.

4 **Listen to others**

Listen to other lesson readers at church and note what you feel they did so well, and what they did that you feel they could have done better. You don't want to turn yourself into an assessor who never lets the Scripture passage speak to you, so perhaps do this just occasionally.

5 **Form a group**

Meet with two or three lesson readers who have been through this training and talk back recent readings.

6 **Listen to a pro**

If you get the chance, listen to an expert and learn from them. This might be a famous actor reading a passage (on any topic) on radio, TV or podcast, a 'Bible in a year' type of readings and thoughts available online, or someone who reads a whole Bible book from memory.

4: Creativity

A final part for those who have mastered the basics and want to be somewhat more adventurous!

Ideas for a fresh approach

Now that you have mastered the idea of one person reading a passage of Scripture really well so that people hear what the passage says, rather than reading it or just listening but taking little in, we can think of other ways of putting the Bible reading across. Here are twelve ideas.

1: Appoint a small team

Many churches offer lesson reading as a means of involving a wide group of people. But might it be worth selecting a small group with a clear gift, or training them regularly, and then seeing them as the specialist Scripture reading team?

Advantages

- Good readers will bring the passages to life.

- You show that you take Scripture seriously.

Disadvantages

- You fail to let others offer what they can with such a specialist group.
- It can be difficult to 'retire' people to let you take others on to the team.

2: Change the service order

If you always place the Scripture reading at the same points in the service, consider alternatives. If the passage is the basis for the sermon, might it come better in the sermon itself but not necessarily right at the beginning? If you have an Old Testament and a New Testament reading, might they fit better at different points in the service? If you have a Gospel and an Epistle do

they *have* to come in the same places every week?

Advantages

- This can bring a freshness to each service.
- This might more clearly link sermon and Bible reading.

Disadvantages

- Some people would object to 'improper liturgy'.
- Some people appreciate standard patterns week by week.

3: Use different versions

It may sometimes be helpful to have one passage read in two or more different versions, such as in NIV or NRSV and then in 'The Message' or other 'paraphrase'.

Advantages

- This can bring the meaning out more clearly.
- Some will find a simplified 'translation' easier to understand.

Disadvantages

- Paraphrases can distort some passages.
- It takes a longer time within your service.

4: Involve more than one reader

All you do here is split the passage up into two or three sections – not too many – and get different people to read each one. Have all those reading up by the desk or lectern to minimise the need for movement between sections.

Advantages

- This provides variety for the listener.
- It is less stressful for a new reader or child as part of a 'team'.

EXERCISE 12

Discuss which one or more of this list of 12 ideas might be possible to try in your church. If you have more than one, which might come first?

How would you go about this? Who should be responsible for ensuring you do this? What is the next step in the process?

Disadvantages

- The breaks between speakers may detract from the passage.
- The microphone may not be in right position for speakers of different heights.

5: Ask readers to play characters

This assumes a narrative passage with different characters speaking. You ask each reader to take on a different character, and one to be the narrator.

Advantages

- It makes such passages more real – as though acted on stage.
- You can match genders and ages to the parts concerned.

Disadvantages

- It can sound very disjointed if not done well.
- It may need more than one microphone.

6: Involve the congregation

You can add to the previous point if there are crowd scenes in the passage. 'Crowd' might include just two or three people in the story – or anything introduced with 'They said...' So give the congregation the crowd part. You will need then to put the whole passage up on the screen in some way or people will not know what to say and when.

Advantages

- This helps everyone to be part of the action, not just an audience.
- It brings the passage very much to life.

Disadvantages

- Some may object to this approach.
- The action may detract from hearing the passage read.

7: Read a longer passage

We usually read short passages in a church service, but this often means taking just an excerpt from a narrative or failing to provide the background for what is being described. So why not occasionally agree to give the Scripture reading a longer time in your service and read a much longer section. This does of course need a really good reader (or several).

A set of reminder notes

Encourage your church to prepare a set of guidance notes for readers which you might base on this training aid. For example, cover the following points.

- 1 Your own appropriate summary of the 'God's word changes life' section on page 2, or something similar.
- 2 How any rota/reminder system works – when you will be told the passage – by whom – which version of the Bible to use – your Bible or lectern Bible.
- 3 Your own summary of the 'Ten steps to get ready' list on pages 9 & 10.
- 4 Any relevant points from the 'Practical issues' list on pages 10 & 11.
- 5 How to announce the reading (any standard wording to be used), page numbers if appropriate, give people time, how to close the passage.
- 6 A brief reminder of the kinds of points made in the whole of the 'Delivery' part of this paper on pages 3-9. Or make this a separate paper.
- 7 A note of thanks and the possibility of feedback and ongoing training.

Advantages

- This means you can do justice to a whole section of Scripture.
- It models what church members might do at home.

Disadvantages

- If not well read, this may turn people off the practice.
- Something else in the service may need to be cut back.

8: Invite people to close their eyes

Instead of expecting people to read the passage in their Bibles, suggest they close their eyes and listen without visual distraction.

Advantages

- This can sharpen up the reading quite considerably.
- It helps everyone to concentrate on the words.

Disadvantages

- Some may let their mind wander away from the passage, especially if they are feeling sleepy.
- The quality of the reading is the key to success so you need a really skilled reader to make this successful.

9: Add background music or mime

There may be some passages, such as a Psalm, where you can read it slowly to a soft musical background. Alternatively, with talented mime artists or dancers, you might have a visible display to back up the passage. But you must never let the background take over.

Advantages

- For people who receive messages visually, mime can enhance the passage.
- It makes the reading of the passage rather more special than normal.

Disadvantages

- The mime or dance may detract from the meaning of the passage for some.
- Finding the right musical or visual form may not be straightforward.

10: Add images as background

This may be a better approach. A passage about creation can have a few scenic views on the screen as backdrop, Jesus' parables might be pictured with a plant or farming scene. The Prodigal Son could have the famous Rembrandt painting as background, and so on.

Advantages

- This gives people something helpful to look at as they listen.
- Again, it helps those who take in information visually.

Disadvantages

- You will need to take care over copyright issues for pictures or recorded sound.
- The visuals could detract from the passage.

11: One reader – different voices

If you have a drama specialist in your congregation, they could read a passage with speech in it using different, but appropriate, accents for each person.

Advantages

- This can bring certain passages alive.
- The hearers can understand who is speaking when.

Disadvantages

- Not many people have this ability and it needs to be done really well to work.
- It might seem like a gimmick and detract from the message.

12: Learn the passage off by heart

A reader set free from an open Bible and able to use their body as if on a stage can bring life to any passage. Those who have seen someone read a Gospel from memory will understand.

Advantages

- The reading becomes a dramatic presentation – very powerful.
- It enables eye contact with the audience and body movement.

Disadvantages

- Very few readers will want to attempt this.
- It takes time to learn and rehearse the passage.

Use this material in any way you wish, ideally for one training event or a series for all those who read out loud in church services. But you can also use it for personal training. Over to you!

This article and training aid is available at <https://www.john-truscott.co.uk/Resources/Articles-index> then A49. You will also find hand-out sheets on the same web page. For a shorter version of the Preparation section see Training Notes TN1, *Preparing to read the lesson*. For advice on leading prayers see Training Notes TN47, *Breathing life into the intercessions*.

Contact John if you would like to enquire about the possibility of live training for lesson readers using this material.

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