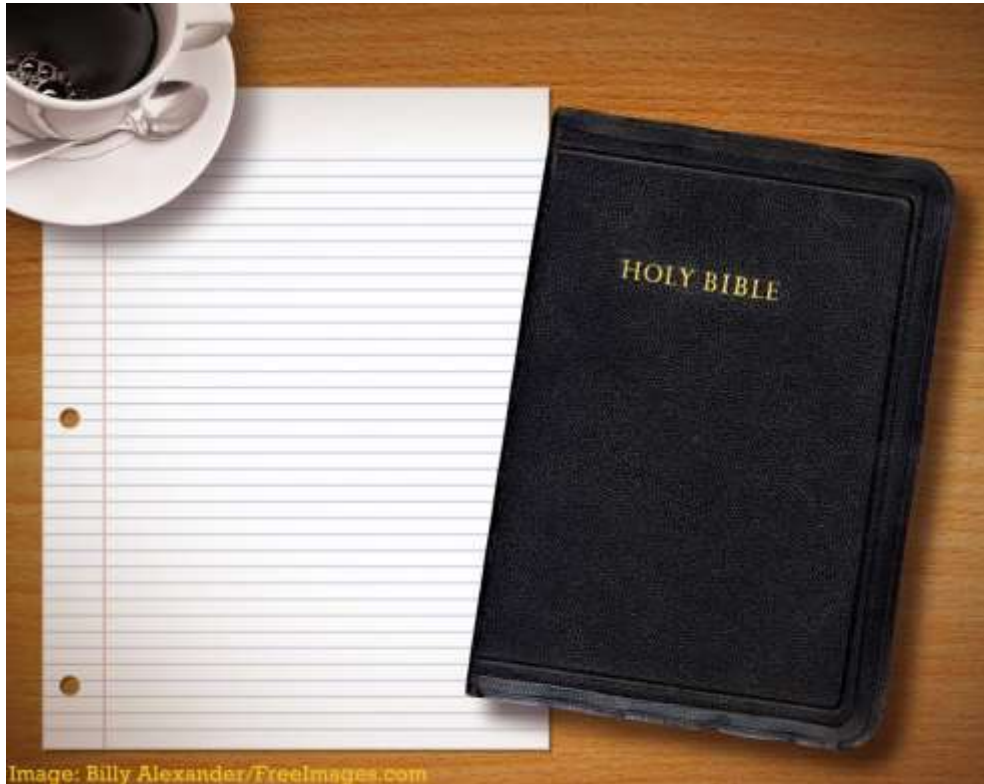


# Five Methods of Left-Brain Bible Study



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An Excerpt from [Sweeter Than Chocolate: Developing a Healthy Addiction to God's Word](#), ©2014 Christy Bower.

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**F**or many left-brained students, “follow your curiosity” may not seem structured enough. For those who want a more structured approach, you might want to choose from one of these methods. But if you’re more of the right-brained type, hold on until the end, where I’ll give some simple adaptations that will make these structured methods of study a little more fun.

## Traditional Method (Observation, Interpretation, Application)

This traditional method has been taught for years in churches and seminaries, so it is the benchmark of Bible study for many people. It involves three steps: observation of the text, interpretation of the text, and application of the text.

**Observation.** The first step in studying a passage is to observe what it actually says. Observation involves reading the text to make simple statements that are true according to the text: Matthew is a tax-collector. It's easy to read into the text things that are implied or correlations our mind produces (assumption: Matthew is greedy), but observe the text alone before jumping to conclusions.

When making observations, look at terms, structure, context, and setting. Ask who, what, when, where, why, and how questions.

- Who is involved?
- Where is it happening?
- When is it happening?
- What is happening?
- Why is it happening?
- How is it happening?



By making simple observations, we ground our interpretation in the actual text. Observations also give us a list of possible areas for further investigation.

**Interpretation.** The next step is to get at the original meaning of the text. Interpretation gets beyond the facts and delves into meaning. What does the text mean? It's not a matter of what it means to us (that's application), but what it meant to the author and original recipients.

Interpretation is the place to investigate the historical background of the book of the Bible, the author, the recipients, the main characters, the locations, and other relevant subjects (for example, perhaps the text mentions an idol or false god).

This is also the place to use your concordance to do some word studies. Once we understand what the text meant to the original readers, we can apply that to our own lives. And keep in mind that one point of interpretation can yield many applications.

**Application.** Application asks: how does the truth of God's Word relate to my life situation and what am I going to do about it? Application begins by first developing a principle based on the text. A principle is a broad statement of biblical truth that may be applied to anyone but a personal application is a specific statement of how the principle becomes practice in your life. Relate the truth to your situation (not to someone else). And never alter the truth to fit your experience.



## Christy's IDEA Method for Bible Study

For those of you who prefer a casual but structured approach to things, I have a simple but effective plan for you to follow. I call my approach IDEA. When you want to get the main idea of a passage: Identify, Define, Explore, and Apply.

**Identify.** Look very carefully at what the passage says—not what you *think* it says or what you've been taught it says. Look at what it actually says. Also, make note of what it doesn't say (we tend to fill in other ideas as we read).

**Define.** In order to understand a text, you need to be sure you understand what it is saying. Start with good old *Webster's Dictionary* and look up words—even if you think you know what they mean. You can often gain surprising new insights from this habit without even investing in other Bible reference books. Then expand your query by looking up people, places, and other nouns in a Bible dictionary. This is the best way to gain biblical background and context for any passage. A Bible dictionary contains a wealth of information.

**Explore.** Take those people and places and explore them more thoroughly. Look up places on a map or Bible atlas. Look up people and cultural information in other reference books to gather a broader understanding. In short, follow your curiosity.

**Apply.** What good is it to study the Bible if we don't intend to do what it says? James addresses this issue when he writes: "But don't just listen to God's word. You must do what it says. Otherwise, you are only fooling yourselves" (James 1:22).

Consider whether there is an action to take, a warning to heed, or an example to follow. Keep a journal, if you like. Write down a specific action you can take, even if it is as simple as "I will reflect on this verse today."

Studying the Bible doesn't have to be a complicated process. You can do this. Just follow your curiosity, whether you follow specific steps or not.



## Biographical (Character) Study

Character studies are enjoyable and rewarding. I like to begin by looking up the person in a Bible dictionary to get an overview of this person.

Then I move to an exhaustive concordance to look up every reference to the person. Be aware that narrative sections should be read as a whole, and not just isolated verses that use the person's name. So look up a verse and take time to read the whole chapter for surrounding context.

After reading the relevant Bible passages, make a list of events or an outline of the person's life. Notice any comments the Bible makes about that person and list those separately. For example, in the New Testament, James spoke of Elijah as a model for prayer (James 5:16-18). That was not a biographical reference, but a commentary on Elijah's life. Such a commentary gives us reason to look closer at the prayer example of Elijah.

When doing biographical study, decide what life lessons this person learned, especially in their relationship with God. Apply those life lessons to your life in specific ways. Decide how to act on them.



## Outlining and Chart Making

Outlining and chart making are methods of synthesis or boiling it down to its core elements. This is a big picture approach to Scripture and less about examining the minute details.

Identify sections and paragraphs within a larger section of Scripture. Look for changes in subject matter, repeated phrases, phrases that mark an introduction (*now concerning*), or phrases that mark a conclusion (*therefore*).

Give each paragraph a 2-5 word title that captures the main idea of the paragraph in relation to the context. It may help to just capture the idea for the moment. After you have captured the idea of each paragraph, you can go back and evaluate them or brainstorm how to word them in similar ways. Some people like to have each title start with the same letter, for instance, or use the same form of grammar. That's often what pastors do in their sermon points.

This approach can be used for a traditional outline or a visual outline, such as a chart. I've seen some very elaborate charts, even ones with tiny drawings as visual reminders of the text. For a seminary project, some of my classmates chose to outline the Gospel of Matthew in pictures on one sheet of paper. That was an impressive feat, if you ask me.

If you like to draw, this might appeal to you. Many left-brained people like to organize information in charts. If that's you, you'll know how to chart the Bible text. It can be a unique learning experience that embeds the text in your heart and mind for years to come.





## Word Studies

Word studies are probably the most popular form of Bible study for many folks. Sometimes this is borne out of need, such as a realization that you would like to have more peace in your life, so you look up all the verses that talk about peace to see what you can learn.

This kind of study can be as simple as looking up the verses in an English concordance. Or it can be more involved, looking up the original Greek or Hebrew words and expanding your study accordingly (as described in the section on how to use a concordance).

Whether you choose a simple word study or get more involved, word studies can be an effective and rewarding way to study the Bible. But be careful not to make this your only method for studying the Bible or you will miss out on a lot of the Bible that's not covered in random word searches.



Image by asolario/FreshImages.com

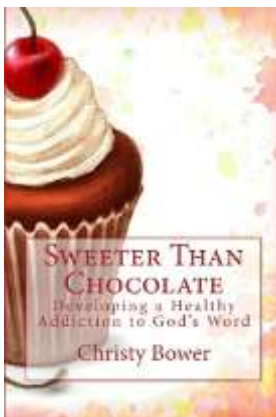
## Making Study More Fun

Wake up, you right-brained folks! If this kind of rigid, detailed study bores you, I have a few suggestions. Look for ways to study in a more creative way.

When you do a word study, underline all the words or verses in a particular color. Later, as you look through your Bible, you'll know that green verses are about peace, blue verses are about heaven, and pink verses are about love.

Write verses out on colored notecards. Make an outline or chart with artwork, a collage, or different colors for each section. As part of your character study, draw a picture of your character for the cover of your Bible study.

It's okay to approach linear, logical Bible study with some creative flourishes to make it more fun. We'll discuss much more on right-brained approaches to the Bible in the next chapter.



This is an excerpt from “Chapter Five – Carve Up the Chocolate Sculpture: Studying God’s Word,” [Sweeter Than Chocolate: Developing a Healthy Addiction to God’s Word](#), © 2014 Christy Bower. If you found this excerpt useful, you’ll want to [purchase](#) the book so you can read it in its entirety.

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