

Part 7: Logic and rhetoric: How does the passage flow?

Rhetoric and purpose



Golfers, like writers, have a goal in mind (photo Wikimedia)

People write for three main reasons: to entertain, to inform or to persuade. Most texts have two, or even all three, of these goals, but usually one predominates. Jokes are told mainly to entertain, manuals are written to inform, political speeches persuade. Much of the Bible is “entertaining” (especially stories, but also poetry), much provides information (e.g. descriptions of building the tabernacle), yet the primary goal is almost always persuasion. The art of persuasion is called “rhetoric”.

The genealogies of Jesus in Matthew (1:1-17) and Luke (3:23-38) provide information, but they are included in the gospels so readers realise that Jesus, a “son of David”, rightly fulfils the messianic prophecies. In Old Testament histories it is striking that information is given almost only

with inspirational goals. King Omri and his son Ahab gave the Northern Kingdom (Israel) its time of greatest economic and military power. Yet the Bible dismisses Omri's reign in a few lines, and Ahab's is told through the conflict between him (and Jezebel his wife) with Elijah. The theological, not the economic, impact of their reigns matters. The Bible is about God, and aims to encourage us to love and serve him alone.

As we read we should ask: What change (in ideas or actions) did the author want from their audience? Or what did they want to reveal about God?

Articulation (how parts join and work together)

We used this "big word" talking about conjunctions earlier, and the idea was prominent last time too (in "the thigh bone is connected to the hip bone"). Articulation is significant at the level of sentences:

*House and wealth are inherited from parents,
but a prudent wife is from the LORD. (Prov 19:14)*

Spotting the articulation of parts of whole Bible books is also helpful. Thus Paul's letters often start with theological arguments, before moving to their practical implications in the closing chapters.

In between these extremes, noticing how paragraphs or sections interact to work together is really helpful. For example, Jonah's psalm (Jonah 2:2-9) read on its own sounds like a song of praise for deliverance from drowning. But when read with the story in the first chapter in mind, we spot how almost every line is ironic. (For more on this watch the video in last month's material)

Conclusions and introductions

Often the introduction to a book, section or chapter will help us recognise the author's purpose. Even more often, in fact

almost always, if there is a conclusion it shows the intention clearly. So the book of Jonah concludes with God asking the prophet *“should I not have compassion on Nineveh?”* (Jonah 4:11). The answer to this question is the key to the book’s purpose, and Jonah’s answer is not recorded!

1 Cor 13 concludes: *“And now faith, hope, and love abide, these three; and the greatest of these is love”* this is what Paul wants us to recognise and accept, in connection with his talk of spiritual gifts in chapter 12. The opening words in 13:1 show us Paul intended us to make this link between the chapters.

What does God say?

Since the Bible is about God, and inspired by God, what God says must be determinative of a passage’s meaning. The exception is when a character, and not the narrator, reports God’s words, they might be mistaken or lying (like Hananiah was in Jer 28). This was the clue we used to notice that what Job’s friends say in the body of the book is problematic, and not a solid foundation – though we had to read to the last chapter to find out!

Who is speaking to whom?

Relational language (talk within a family, between lovers or among friends) works differently from literal language (like textbooks or manuals). In relational language: *“I’ll never speak to you again!”*, means precisely the opposite of what it says. *“I hate you!”* can mean *“I love you, but you have hurt me so much I wish I hated you.”* Relational language often exaggerates: *“You are the most beautiful woman”* is probably not true. Like all relational language, it reveals what the speaker feels.

Relational language is particularly common in speeches in narratives (OT histories, Gospels, Acts...) and visions of prophets or Revelation. It is really important to notice who

is speaking to whom, and what is “going on” in their relationship at the time. The Bible is God’s love-letter to humanity, so God speaks “relational language”. See Isaiah 1:11-14 for example (and compare it with e.g. Lev 1:9,13,17).

With relational language context matters. What God desires or plans for Jeremiah’s Judean hearers is very different between Jer 29:11 and 19:7. The circumstances are different also, giving two very different examples of relational language. In Jer 29, Judah faces defeat by Babylon and seventy years exile (see the earlier verses), but in chapter 19, all this is future, Judah’s leaders then were still confident in their own power and politics.

Paragraphs

Someone who “keeps changing the subject” is confusing. So writing needs to be organised into sections dealing with different topics. These sections are called “paragraphs”, and in modern writing are marked by gaps and/or new lines. For maximum understandability each paragraph deals with one aspect, moving to another related aspect in the next.

In Bible times people did not mark paragraph breaks. They were added later, somewhat differently in different traditions. Spotting sensible paragraphs (or using the ones printed in your Bible) and summarising in one simple sentence what each is about, really helps us see how a book, or section of a book, works.

Homework

Read the book of Philemon (it’s just 25 verses :) and see how many of the things discussed above you can see at work in this little book.