

SEARCHING THE SCRIPTURES FOR DOCTRINAL UNDERSTANDING

(revised 2017-12-17)

- The focus here is on tools that you can use for the rest of your life, not on specific examples.
 - Give a man a fish and feed him for a day; teach him how to fish and feed him for a lifetime.
 - Education is what you still know (how to fish) after you forget all the stuff you learned (fish).
- This handout does not comprehensively cover every scripture study tool out there. But it does provide a conceptual framework for thinking about scripture study tools, and it covers enough to make you effective.
- Also see: LDS Gospel Library App > Lessons > Institute > [Scripture Study: The Power of the Word](#).

1. Searching Is One Part of Reading the Scriptures

1.1. One of the Reasons for Scripture Reading is to Obtain Doctrinal Understanding

- Three things should happen as we spend time in the scriptures, either in class or at home. In class we should additionally learn *how* to make these three things happen when we go back home.
 1. Testimony: *Read* to get a 15-30 minute daily dose of the Holy Ghost, like eating, exercising, or shaving;
 2. Doctrinal Understanding: *Study* to learn doctrines of general application as taught by the prophets; and
 3. Personal Application: *Read or study* to trigger promptings that apply to our personal lives.
- Lesson: There is a difference between a doctrine of general application and a prompting that may apply to your personal life but is not what the prophet was teaching.
 - Doctrines of General Application: Moses tells us in Genesis that Jacob worked seven years as agreed but then got the wrong bride. Perchik (Fiddler on the Roof) says the moral is “Never trust an employer.” This is a laugh line because we all know it is not the doctrine that Moses intended to teach.
 - Promptings for Personal Application: The story of Jacob might nevertheless trigger inspiration to Perchik about something that is true and important in his personal life, such as not trusting his current employer.
- Strategy: In addition to whatever I might read into a passage for myself (personal application), I consciously look for what the author actually intended to teach (doctrinal understanding) ([2 Pet 1:20-21](#); [3:16](#)).

1.2. Doctrinal Understanding Requires Searching and Pondering

- The general toolset for seeking understanding is: (1) search; (2) ponder; and (3) pray ([3 Ne 23:1](#); [17:2-3](#)).
 1. **Searching** is lower order thinking that gets external information created by others into your head.
 2. **Pondering** is higher order thinking that analyzes and synthesizes things you know in order to create new information or understanding of your own.
 3. **Praying**, and having your heart drawn out in prayer, seek to supplement your natural abilities.
- Thinking comes in two modes. We switch back and forth between these two modes.
 1. **Focused Mode** is being highly attentive to something, such as playing a video game, working a math problem, or driving downtown in an unfamiliar city at rush hour. Searching happens in focused mode.
 2. **Diffuse Mode** is letting your brain draw connections without close control. The extreme example is dreaming while you sleep, but you are also often in diffuse mode while wide awake. Although pondering happens in both modes, it may be helpful to think of pondering as making connections in diffuse mode.
- Always learn well enough to teach. Who says you have to wait for a teaching assignment to scare you into learning something well enough to teach it? Search, ponder, and pray – even when learning only for yourself.

1.2.1. Searching

- Searching requires diligence ([3 Ne 23:1](#); [D&C 88:118](#)). It often takes thirty minutes on task before I start learning. And if you want to become proficient at something, there is no substitute for accumulated time on task over an extended period of time.
- General Strategy: For decades I have spent 5-10% of my scripture study time not studying the scriptures, but thinking about *how* I study the scriptures and seeking smarter ways of searching. This is stopping to sharpen my axe so the remainder of my study time will be more efficient.
- Strategy: Use your brain and make notes when you study any important subject, including the scriptures. Make notes on paper or computer, and look at resources, just like studying a novel before a college exam. In the October 2017 General Conference, [Elder Nelson](#) (Then President of the Quorum of Twelve Apostles) said that he writes out notes when seeking to understand the scriptures. I occasionally spend scripture study time reviewing several notebooks and a computer subdirectory full of my old notes. I can relearn what I have forgotten much more quickly than I can figure out something new, and I am often pleasantly surprised at what I used to know.
- A major purpose of searching is to just get things into your head so you can ponder them. Do not try to memorize, just become as familiar with a passage as you are with the story of The Three Little Pigs, or any other story that you could tell in your own words in either a thirty second condensed version, a ten minute embellished version, or anything else in between.
- Lesson: It is much easier to recognize the relations between concepts in my head when those concepts actually are related in ways that just have to be recognized.
 - Strategies: [Parts 2.1](#) and [3.3](#) below explain specific strategies that can be used to identify chunks of text that are likely to be related to each other by significant relations. This reduces the time spent looking for relations among chunks of text that are not in fact related, or perhaps are not even cohesive chunks.

1.2.2. Pondering

- Much of pondering is looking for connections between the ideas in your head while the Holy Ghost guides and confirms. Brainstorm and reason until you finally stumble onto something the Holy Ghost can confirm.
 - Step back from the trees and look at the entire forest until you can see it as a well planned orchard.
 - Often my best pondering is while showering or driving down the highway, while *not* staring at the page with my brain in focused mode, but with my brain relaxed in diffuse mode.
- Lesson: I recognize the relations between concepts much more quickly when I already know the answer.
 - Strategy: Once I identify a group of concepts that are likely related to each other, I see if I can explain the relations between them with a framework that I already know. When this works, it increases the efficiency with which I can recognize the relations among a group of concepts. It also helps me to understand that group of concepts in broader or more generalized terms.
 - For example, a generalized relational framework I often use in my topical study is Head (beliefs), Heart (desires), and Hands (abilities). I first recognized this framework one evening before I went to bed while my brain was in diffuse mode. Over the next two hours I remained awake as every fifteen minutes or so I recognized how this framework also explained the relations among yet another group of concepts:
 - Deliberate Action: Lectures on Faith says faith is a principle of action because you would not act to plant in the spring unless you believed you would harvest in the fall. I see three principles or preconditions to deliberate action. You will not mow someone's lawn: (1) if your Head does not believe that you will

get paid; or (2) if your Heart does not desire the offered payment more than it desires to go swimming; or (3) if your Hands lack the ability to mow because your leg is broken.

- Agency: When (1) your Head has accurate information about the choices available to you; and (3) your Hands are at liberty to act upon those choices; then (2) you are free to pursue the desires of your Heart.
- Good Social Institutions: The Book of Mormon discusses two social institutions that protect agency: (1) the church provides your Head with accurate information about the nature of your choices; and (3) the state protects the liberty of your Hands to act upon those choices.
- Bad Social Institutions: Good institutions are opposed by: (1) anti-Christ's that seek to fill your Head with false information; and (3) secret combinations that seek to tie your Hands.
- Devil: Satan largely tries to: (1) fool the Head; (2) entice the Heart; and (3) force the Hands.
- Fruits and Gifts of the Spirit: (1) Fruits of the Spirit provide your Head with information by confirming truth, teaching, and bringing things to your remembrance; and (2) sanctify the desires of your Heart and provide it with motivation and comfort; while (3) Gifts of the Spirit, or miracles such as healings, supplement the natural abilities of your Hands.
- Faith, Hope, and Charity: (1) Faith is the Head's belief in the reality of the path that Lehi saw leading to the tree of life; and (1) Hope is the Head's belief that you are actually on that path and moving forward; while (2) Charity is the Heart's desire to reach out and help others join you on that path.
- God's Characteristics: (2) God's Heart is fully constrained by traits such as truth, justice, and mercy; while (3) his Hands are unconstrained and omnipotent; and (1) his Head is unconstrained and omniscient.

2. Strategies for Searching Based on the Form of Communication: Universal Forms of Communication Based on Biology

2.1. Chunking, Relation, and Importance

- Linguists have identified several tools for reading a text that are based on how the human brain works. I think this one is both the single most important and the easiest to learn. It is also the foundation for Part 3.3 below.
- Cognitive Psychology tells us that the human brain (much like a computer) has two kinds of memory:
 - **Working Memory (WM)** acquires new information, and it can process both new and old information to transform it. WM is very powerful, but capacity is limited to only a few items at once and to only a few seconds. Adding a new item to WM usually pushes out an old item, and WM fades very quickly. This is much like loading a computer program into RAM memory in order to run.
 - **Long Term Memory (LTM)** simply stores information for retrieval. Huge capacity. Very long term. No processing power. This is much like a computer hard drive that simply archives vast amounts of information until retrieved for use somewhere else.
- Cognitive Psychology tells us that, without consciously thinking about it, the human brain uses three strategies for getting information into LTM while working around the limitations of WM:
 1. **Chunking.** We acquire information in small chunks and combine them into larger meta-chunks. We identify chunks and meta-chunks by looking for cohesion. In a narrative story or movie, a new chunk begins when there is a change of scene or break in cohesion (or in unity of time, place, character, action).
 2. **Relation.** We relate new chunks to old information that is already in LTM so the new information can be retrieved from LTM. WM quickly chunks and indexes new information before storing it in LTM.
 3. **Importance.** Information that is perceived as important is held longer in WM, is processed more times while in WM, and is related to more concepts for better retrieval out of LTM.

- Psycho-Linguistics tells us that we learn through trial and error to use communication strategies that succeed, and to abandon communication strategies that fail, again without consciously realizing.
 - Lesson: My dog can communicate in simple sentences (Go away. Feed me.). But most human communication involves concepts too complex to fit in chunks as small as single sentences. Most human communication is therefore organized hierarchically into larger meta-chunks as we combine sentences into paragraphs, paragraphs into chapters, and then into groups of chapters and entire books.
 - Lesson: People learn unconsciously to express complex ideas in ways that accommodate WM. They do this by using **cohesion** to indicate where each chunk begins and ends, **linking** those chunks to indicate how they are related, and using **prominence** to indicate which chunks are especially important.
 - The story of **The Three Little Pigs** is easy to comprehend because it does an excellent job of accommodating WM. The story consists of four primary chunks: an introduction that we usually forget about until we start telling the story, plus three episodes in which the wolf tries to blow down the three houses made of straw, sticks, and bricks. The story’s use of the same repeated pattern in each of these three episodes gives cohesion (or stick-togetherness) to each episode, thus helping us to recognize each episode as a separate chunk. This repeated pattern also links the three episodes together in a way that excludes the introductory chunk, thus helping us to recognize which chunks are related to each other as a group, or which chunks we need to think about as a group in order to understand the author’s message. Because the organization of this story does such a good job of accommodating WM, even young children can easily recognize that each of the three episodes is a separate chunk, that the three chunks are related, and that the relation among these three chunks teaches an important message.
 - A well written essay also makes it easy for WM to comprehend new information. An essay uses periods and paragraph breaks to indicate cohesion, transitions to link or explain the relations between paragraphs, and a thesis sentence followed by topic sentences that state key points in prominent locations. Once I began to think of essays as a way to accommodate the limitations of WM, my writing immediately improved. I wish I had known to think this way about essays back in high school.
 - Strategy: I spend a lot of energy looking for an author’s use of cohesion to identify chunks, linking to indicate how the chunks are related to each other, and prominence to indicate what is most important.
 - Strategy: Cohesive chunks often do not follow the verse and chapter breaks in the scriptures, so I have pasted the scriptures into my word processor where I can re-chunk the text and add my own headings.
 - Strategy: Once I recognize a meta-chunk and the smaller chunks that comprise it, I get them into my head and ponder the relations between them as I drive or shower (like the episodes in The Three Little Pigs or the paragraphs of an essay). Again, this is when I most often get significant flashes of understanding.
 - Lesson: It is possible to understand every single sentence in a book, yet miss the author’s main point, if I do not understand how the train of thought develops from one chapter to the next.
 - Strategy: I spend a lot of energy pondering the relations between the largest meta-chunks in a text because I find that this is often the best key to understanding the author’s overall message.

3. Strategies for Searching Based on the Form of Communication:

Forms of Communication Based on Ancient Israelite Culture

Lesson: Nephi says that, to fully understand ancient Jewish scripture, we must learn “the manner of prophesying of the Jews” ([2 Ne 25:1, 5](#)). I am aware of three culturally-based communication strategies in ancient Israel that are often not learned in western society: (1) symbolism; (2) historical parallelism; and (3) literary parallelism. In each case we must first recognize *how* something is said in order to understand *what* is said.

3.1. Symbolism

- Lesson: The Israelites frequently used symbols, metaphors, and allegories.
- In church we usually learn to recognize some major symbols: atonement and cleansing; shepherd, sheep, and lambs; vineyard and fruit; mountain and temple; marriage supper of the bridegroom.
- Less familiar symbols common to the ancient Near East:
 - Oceans and other large untamed bodies of water: death, evil, chaos ([Rom 6:3-5](#); [Acts 27](#); [Ether 6:5-11](#)).
 - Air or wind: life, spirit, Holy Ghost ([Gen 2:7](#); [Acts 2:2-4](#); [Ether 6:5-11](#)).
 - Horses, chariots, sometimes locusts: armies, war, invasion ([Isa 2:7](#); [Joel 1:4-6](#); [Rev 9:7](#)).
- Numbers
 - 3: presidency or presiding
 - 4: all, as in the four winds, four corners of the earth, or four directions of the compass
 - 7, 70: completion, fulfillment, or perfection
 - 8: accountability
 - 40: preparation
- I usually interpret symbols in the broadest and least specific way possible. For example, the number 3 often stands for presidency, and in Revelation the number 6 stands for imperfection or evil. So I interpret the number 666 to simply stand for being evil and in charge. I do not care that the numerical values of the Hebrew letters in any particular individual's name can be made to add up to 666. I just look for a type or a pattern that I can recognize and apply wherever I see it out in the world.

3.2. Historical Patterns or Parallelism

- Lesson: The Israelites used past historical events as types or patterns for future historical events.
- Exodus Pattern: (1) leave a home of plenty and comfort but limited opportunities for growth; (2) mature through adversity; until (3) qualify for a promised inheritance. Examples: Moses, Lehi, LDS Pioneers, Adam & Eve leaving garden, all of us coming to mortality, kids going off to college.
- The Book of Mormon was written by four authors who each used a different device for teaching historical prophecy: Nephi (Isaiah), Jacob (Zenos), Mormon (Nephite history), Moroni (Jaredite history).
 - Nephi quoted Isaiah, who described (1) the Israelite world: (a) Egypt; (b) Assyria; (c) Israel; (d) Babylon.
 - Mormon described a similar (2) Nephite world: (a) Nephites; (b) Lamanites; (c) church; (d) worldliness.
 - The Book of Mormon was written to the last days ([Morm 8:34-35](#)), and Isaiah's words "have been and shall be" ([3 Ne 23:2-3](#)), so we should also look for parallels in (3) the last days: (a) rich liberal democracies; (b) expansionist authoritarian states; (c) LDS church; (d) worldliness.
 - Nephi delighted in Isaiah ([2 Ne 11:2, 4-6](#)). He was familiar with (1) Isaiah's day ([2 Ne 25:5-6](#)), saw in vision (2) Nephite days and (3) last days ([1 Ne 12-14](#)), and thus could recognize the historical parallels.
 - In the last days we can likewise understand Isaiah ([2 Ne 25:7-8](#)). We have records of (1) Isaiah's day and (2) Nephite days, and we are familiar with (3) the last days, so we can likewise recognize the historical parallels and understand Isaiah.
 - Strategy: It is easier for a Mormon audience to understand Isaiah if you replace every appearance of (1) (a) "Egypt" and (b) "Assyria" in Isaiah with (2) (a) "Nephites" and (b) "Lamanites."
- Strategy: Again, I focus broadly on *what* a historical symbol is rather than specifically on *who* it is. Iraq today is not Babylon. Japan today is an Egypt, but a hundred years ago it was an Assyria.

3.3. Literary Patterns or Parallelism

3.3.1. How Literary Parallelism Works

- While the communication strategies of cohesion, linking, and prominence are universal (See [Part 2.1](#) above), these global strategies are often implemented in ways that are specific to a particular culture.
- Lesson: The author's outline in ancient Israelite scripture is often a patterned repetition of concepts, frequently in the form of assertions and analogies that our culture would not call logical proofs. This is the least familiar concept in this handout, and it will require time and effort to become proficient.
- Strategy: When reading two passages as a pair, you can read them like an impressionist painting, focusing on the overall image rather than individual brush strokes or words (see [Isa 3:18-23](#) where you can understand the message without understanding every word). This is not always the best way to read, but often it is.
- There are four generalized patterns of repetition:
 1. a-a' - b-b' - c-c' - d-d' (**parallel lines** that rhyme content, just like couplets that rhyme sound) – [Isa 2](#)
 2. a - b-c-d - a' (**inclusion** or inclusio) – [D&C 121:34-40](#); [3 Ne 27:13-21](#); [Joshua 19:17-23](#)
 3. a-b-c-d - a'-b'-c'-d' (**parallel lists**) – [Amos 1-2](#) (eight times); Luke-Acts (twice, [see p. 8 below](#))
 4. a-b-c-d - d'-c'-b'-a' (inverted parallelism “>” or **chiasmus** “X”) – [Alma 36](#); Daniel 1-9 ([see p. 8 below](#))
- Chiasmus is the ancient Jewish equivalent of the modern five paragraph essay. Both forms of writing employ cohesion, linking, and prominence to indicate chunks, relations, and importance. But chiasmus implements these strategies with a set of cultural conventions that are unfamiliar to the modern West.
 - **Cohesion to indicate chunking.** The beginning and endpoints of a chiasm (a ... a) indicate where the large meta-chunk begins and ends, thus providing the entire chiasm with cohesion (or stick-togetherness). The pattern of inverse repetition within a chiasm also helps to identify each of the smaller chunks (abcd - dcba) contained within that larger meta-chunk.
 - **Linking to indicate relations.** The pattern of inverse repetition also links certain chunks to certain other chunks (a to a', b to b', c to c', and d to d').
 - In the West, we are used to comparing and contrasting stories and main characters. In chiasmus, blocks of text that are opposite each other in parallel positions should likewise be read as a pair. In [Daniel 3](#) the king is *unable to harm* the three friends who *refuse to pray* to an idol. In the opposite or parallel story of [Daniel 6](#), the king is *unable to preserve* Daniel who *insists on praying* to God. In both cases God does preserve those who are faithful to him, and God is thus shown to be more powerful than even the king.
 - Location within a chiasm matters. Why did the author say *this*? Why did the author say *this here*? The visions of four beasts in [Daniel 7-8](#) are placed out of chronological sequence in order to place them opposite, and thus indicate a relation to, the vision in [Daniel 2](#) of the statute with four parts.
 - **Prominence to indicate importance.** The most prominent location in a chiasm is always at the very middle. That turning point is where the main lesson or point of the entire chiasm or meta-chunk will always be found. Often there is a second location of next greatest importance at the very edges, or at the beginning and end of the chiasm. And often the concepts found at the middle and at the edges reinforce each other, thus making the most important message even clearer.
- The point of using literary tools is to understand the author's message, not to force square pegs into round holes. These patterns are only useful to the extent they help us understand what the author intended to say.

- Highlighting and cross-referencing are often sufficient to unlock the meaning of a verse or short passage. But to unlock a chapter or a book, you must be able to follow the author’s train of thought from one passage or chapter to the next. You must understand the outline (or “literary structure”) of what the author has written. In other words, at the level of the chapter or book, you must understand *how* an ancient Israelite author says something in order to unlock *what* they are saying.
- Literary structure often reveals hidden questions that then become easy to answer. In 1 Ne 3-4 (>[4:24-25](#)), Nephi takes the plates *and Zoram*. This surprised me. But once I recognized the prominent position in which this statement was made, I quickly recognized a whole lesson in the parallel stories about how the Lord will treat wicked leaders like Laban (3x to destroy) differently than followers like Zoram who are unable to see past the trappings of authority and are therefore misled in ignorance (3x to preserve).
- Literary structure often reveals *where* the main point is before I understand *what* the main point is. In Gen 37-50 (>[44:6-17](#)), I recognized, years before it finally clicked in my head why, that the cup in Benjamin’s sack is the center of the entire Joseph cycle. At the beginning Joseph has a vision of his brothers bowing to him, in the middle they agree to be his servants, and at the end it is Joseph who establishes the House of Israel by caring for his servant-brothers, rather than all scattering as in the previous three generations.
- [Leviticus 16:7-10](#) (the scapegoat on the Day of Atonement). The five books of Moses literally point to Christ’s atonement like a “>”. This does not instantly make every passage in the five books of Moses easy, but it does tell you to read them as supporting, or in light of, this central concept.
- Do not be constrained by punctuation or by chapter and verse divisions. They were all added much later. Also, while English punctuation is now based on the logic of grammar, it used to be based instead on the need that public speakers had for clues about where to pause for breath, and how long to pause for best effect (wherever you see colons used like periods, commas, and semicolons, you are seeing that older system).
- “I know it when I see it.” You are qualified to make your own subjective judgments about literary structure. Yes, like beauty, it is often found “in the eye of the beholder,” and others may disagree with what you see. Some scholars, understandably, want to reach academic consensus by applying objective statistical analysis, and that approach may have some use. But in my opinion, patterned repetition was intended to assist understanding and memory, not to hide meaning until the invention of higher math. People in ancient Israel were expected to recognize literary structure as the scriptures were read aloud, even without doing calculus-based statistics in their heads in real time. You were better fed as a child than the average Israelite peasant, you are better educated, you have greater access to the scriptural text, and you will probably live longer. So if Israelite peasants could be expected to understand a passage, then so can you, once you likewise become proficient in the manner of prophesying of the Jews.

3.3.2. Examples of Literary Parallelism

[D&C 111](#) (chiasmus: a-b-c-d - d'-c'-b'-a')

- a. I forgive your follies (1)
- b. Much treasure (2)
- c. People in city, promptings (3-4)
- d. Concern not yourselves about ... (5)
- d'. Concern not yourselves about ... (6)
- c'. People in city, promptings (7-9)
- b'. More treasures than one (10)
- a'. Be wise (11)

Daniel (chiasmus: a-b-c-d - d'-c'-b'-a')

- A. The king's food, personal purity (1)
 - B. Vision of the statue in four parts, last one with ten toes (2)
 - C. Three friends in the fiery furnace (3)
 - D. King Nebuchadnezzar's pride and insanity (4)
 - D'. King Belshazzar's feast and destruction (5)
 - C'. Daniel in the den of lions (6)
 - B'. Vision of the four beasts, last one with ten horns (7); also the vision of two beasts (8)
- A'. When will Jerusalem be purified (9)
 - B''. Vision of the two warring kingdoms (10-12)

Revelation (chiasmus: a-b-c-d - d'-c'-b'-a') - you can get the main point without sweating every detail

- A. John's commission (1)
 - B. The imperfect church as it exists in the world today (2-3)
 - C. God and Christ praised by the righteous; the imperfect first six seals in which man rules (4-7)
 - D. Transition to seventh seal: Seven trumpets sound (8-11)
 - E. The real underlying conflict between the dragon and the Lamb (12-14)
 - D'. Transition to seventh seal: Seven bowls poured out (15-16)
 - C'. Fallen Babylon lamented by the wicked; the perfect seventh seal in which Christ conquers the dragon and reigns on earth (17-20)
 - B'. The perfected church as it will exist at the end of time (21-22a)
- A'. John's commission (22b)

Luke-Acts (parallel lists: a-b-c-d - a'-b'-c'-d')

What happened to Paul at the [end of Acts](#)? If Acts is read by itself, then we don't know. Paul appealed to be tried before Caesar in Rome, but we do not know how the trial turned out. But if Acts is read in parallel with Luke, then everything that happened in Luke in the life and ministry of Christ is repeated in Acts in the life and ministry of his followers. Now we understand that Paul and everyone on the boat symbolically died and were resurrected, and that this will happen to everyone. Now the ending is both satisfying and profound.

- | | |
|--|---|
| A. <i>Luke 1-4a</i>
Four pairs of episodes mostly with John / Jesus
(merged pair when Mary visits Elizabeth) | A'. <i>Acts 1-5</i>
Four pairs of episodes with Peter & John /
full body of apostles |
| B. <i>Luke 4b-9</i> | B'. <i>Acts 6-12</i> |
| C. <i>Luke 10-19a</i>
Christ's Judean ministry
Three times: I must go to Jerusalem
> In Jerusalem: Jews rejected (13:34-35) | C'. <i>Acts 13-21a</i>
Paul's missionary journeys
Three times: I must go to Jerusalem
> In Athens: Gentiles invited (17:26-27) |
| D. <i>Luke 19b-24</i>
Christ's four trials, death, resurrection,
seen of many | D'. <i>Acts 21b-28</i>
Paul's four trials, shipwreck, seen of many at
Rome, no fifth trial recounted |

3.3.3. Examples of Light Bulb Moments: I See a Repetition – Is It Intentionally Patterned?

These repetitions each caught my eye and caused me to search the larger passage for more repeated elements. This is what patterned repetition looks like to me when I first start to see it but have not yet worked it out.

- D&C 6 – a gift, another gift ([10-13, 25-28](#)); a witness, another witness ([14-17, 22-24](#))
- First Nephi – each half has three stories, a hard steel object that does not save, and a soft brass one that does
 - edited to be silent about tools used to build the boat since that would confuse the parallel symbols
 - “brass and steel” can teach the concepts of symbolism and literary parallelism to a young child
- Mosiah – compares Benjamin at the beginning and Noah in the middle to draw a lesson at the end
 - and in between groups go down to the land of Nephi, and then groups return to Zarahemla
- Third Nephi 11-30 – Christ settles doctrines about which there is to be no more contention ([11, 27](#))
 - Old World scriptures given to Nephites ([12-14, 24-25](#))
 - discourses on the scattering and gathering of Israel ([15b-16, 20b-23a](#))
- Ether – two great faith speeches ([3-5, 11](#))
 - two sets of main characters: Jared and his brother ([1-6](#)), Coriantumr and Ether ([12-15](#))
 - camp four years before crossing water ([2:13-14](#)) and before final destruction in battle ([15:14](#))
 - Jaredites arrive in eight boats ([3:1](#)) and are wiped out in an eight day battle ([15:15-31](#))
 - Jared’s four sons decline the throne ([6:14, 27](#)), Coriantumr’s four challengers ([13:23; 14:3, 11, 16](#))
 - Coriantumr twice fights battles involving both Moron and Akish ([14:4-6, 11-14](#))
 - two periods of great prosperity ([9:16-20; 10:19-28](#))
- Matthew has five major speeches – parables of apostasy and restoration ([13](#))
 - instructions on growing the church through missionary work ([10](#)) and on administering the church ([18](#))
 - Sermon on the Mount ([5-7](#)) and Olivet Discourse (or sermon on the mount of olives) ([24-25](#))

3.3.4. Practice Exercises to Develop Proficiency with Literary Parallelism

1. Without looking at any resources, work through and diagram [Alma 36](#), then read [Daniel 1-9](#) and diagram the relationships between the chapters (don’t worry about the vision in Daniel 10-12). You can do your diagram in a word processor or on a sheet of paper. It may take multiple drafts.
 2. Then read [Esther](#) and [D&C 1](#) while referring to the outlines ([Esther, D&C 1](#)) on the LDS-oriented scripture wiki at [FeastUponTheWord.Org](#) (it also has historical background and other resources in various stages of progress).
 3. Then read [Ether](#) and [Amos](#) while again referring to the outlines ([Ether, Amos](#)) on the same site, or printing or reading the oversized pages of newspaper-formatted text ([Ether, Amos](#)) that I post online. After reading Ether, tackle the [Question in Part 6](#) below for [Ether 8:20-26](#). The point of answering the question this time is not to test content mastery, but rather to demonstrate to yourself how you can better understand Moroni’s train of thought by thinking in terms of this question and searching for cohesion, links, and prominence.
- It will take time to get comfortable with Ether or Amos. This is study, not just reading. Fluency in any form of communication takes practice, and there is no substitute for time on task. You will get better as you practice thinking in terms of symbolism and patterned repetition of chunks. You will become proficient more quickly if you go through these exercises in sequence than I was able through trial and error.
 - Working through these exercises will also teach you how to evaluate for yourself, when someone else points out a repeated pattern, whether it is intentional and, if so, what it means.

4. Strategies for Searching Based on the Content of Communication

This Part 4 finally gets past *how* something is said to instead focus on *what* is being said.

4.1. Starting Out

- Just read. Before you start searching out the meaning of a book of scripture, you have to be somewhat familiar with it. At some point you will want to move from just reading what is said to thinking about what it means. But the very first step of all is to just read and become familiar with a book of scripture.
- Skim through chapter headings to quickly remind yourself of the big picture of what you have previously read.
- You can memorize passages if you want. But do not let memorization turn into blindly sequential recall. Understanding is more likely to flow from hierarchical recall based on relations of meaning. People who memorize sequentially can freeze up without any sense of where they were headed conceptually.

4.2. Reading Individual Authors

- Strategy: Take each author on their own terms. For example, not every prophet uses every word in exactly the same way as every other prophet. Alma uses the word “hope” in [Alm 32](#) to mean you would like for something to be true, but you do not yet have any confirmation that it is in fact true. But when Moroni uses the word “hope” in [Moroni 7](#) in the middle of “faith, hope, and charity,” it means an expectation of personal salvation that, like faith, is based on a confirmation by the Holy Ghost. So do not automatically assume that all of the associations one author has attached to a word or idea automatically attach to another author’s use of the same word or idea. They often do, but not always.
- I think the debate is overblown regarding Paul’s emphasis on grace and James’s emphasis on works. I think it is easy to reconcile the two if that is your goal. But the debate does at least highlight the importance of reading each author on their own terms.
- Strategy: Think about the situations in which characters find themselves, how they see those situations, and how they respond.
- Strategy: Think about the message being taught at each level of writing or editing. Ask: What message is Alma trying to communicate to his original audience? and: What message is Mormon trying to communicate to his modern audience by including that speech in his account of Nephite history?
- Strategy: Look for statements by the author of the reason for writing. This is most frequently provided in the Gospels and the Book of Mormon. “Now this is written to you so that ...” “And thus we see ...”

4.3. Topical Study Across Multiple Authors

- Topical study is about synthesizing doctrinal concepts across multiple authors rather than analyzing an individual author’s message. This is a big part of why we read, but it is different than reading to understand the points an author is trying to make in a chapter or book.
- Strategy: Highlight and cross reference significant passages. Follow the footnotes at the bottom of the page in the LDS edition of the scriptures. Build scripture chains. Follow the scripture chains in books (Articles of Faith, A Marvelous Work and a Wonder) and in talks by church leaders. If you cannot figure out how to do this when reading electronic scriptures, then you need to either read a paper copy you can mark on, or else organize your scripture chains in notebooks or computer files.
- Strategy: Use the [Topical Guide](#) to study a word, a subject, or a symbol. Or use the ability to search for words in the online scriptures at [lds.org](#) or in the LDS Gospel Library app.

5. Strategies for Searching that Look Outside the Written Text

- Discourse analysis (linguistics) seeks to understand a passage in light of its **context**, **text**, and **co-text** (defined below). When I study a book of scripture, I look for a “bookshelf” of resources that collectively address all three of these approaches. Some of these resources do not exist for some passages, but this is the ideal.
- This Part 5 adds two more ideas to what has already been covered:
 - Reading the text and co-text in light of their situational context; and
 - Reading commentaries in order to get a head start rather than trying to figure out everything for yourself from scratch. Just remember that scholars are fallible, often disagree with each other, and are often incentivized to publish new ideas regardless of whether the old ideas were already correct. So take what they say as food for thought, evaluate their conclusions for yourself, and feel free to disagree.
- **Context (or Setting)**. A text is often intended to address a specific situation. Understanding that situation can help you better understand the text. The meaning of “Fire!” depends on whether you are waking up at a cold winter campsite or sitting in a crowded movie theater. It is worth pondering a text, not only in light of related chunks and symbolism as discussed above in Parts 2-3, but also in the context of its situation. For the Old Testament prophets, the New Testament epistles, and the Doctrine & Covenants generally, that situational context is largely missing and must be obtained from outside resources. Context can include:
 - Historical setting (including the immediate situation of the story, and of the author and original audience).
 - Doctrinal setting, or the religious beliefs and understanding (correct or incorrect) of the audience.
 - Cultural setting, or the cultural literacy and customs of the author and original audience.
 - Geographic setting, including climate and political neighbors (pictures, videos, maps).
 - Biographical sketches of main characters when none is provided in the story (Doctrine & Covenants).
- **Text**. Text refers to the actual words you are studying.
 - Original text, or critical text showing textual changes over time (such as Royal Skousen’s work on the Book of Mormon text).
 - For those like me who do not read Greek or Hebrew, alternative Bible translations. I like and trust [NIV](#), [RSV](#), [NASB](#), [Amplified](#), JPS (purchase the 1985 ed in print), [Gileadi/IIT](#). Also refer to [Strong’s Greek](#) and [Hebrew Lexicons](#) ([BibleGateway.com](#), [Biblia.com](#), [Blueletterbible.org](#), and [BibleHub.com](#)).
 - Identify passages in the text that quote from other earlier scriptures.
 - Linguistic analysis (discourse analysis) of the text, outline of the text, and reformatted text with headings. These should be based on the communication strategies discussed in Parts 2-3 above. You can do much of this for yourself, and it will force you to engage with cohesion, linking, and prominence.
- **Co-Text**. Chunks of text should be understood in light of their larger meta-chunks, or the surrounding co-text. I look for resources that treat the text as part of a larger whole, or as contributing to the main points of the entire book. I usually find it unproductive to try, or to read commentaries that try, to extract every last ounce of possible meaning from a verse. My experience is that when people communicate, they generally intend to clearly make one or two main points, not to simultaneously make several points that are subtly hidden.
- **Interpretative Commentary**. Interpretation of the text, or telling what the text means, can be based on: (1) the reasonableness of logic applied to the context, text, and co-text; and/or (2) the authority of inspiration. The following types of interpretive commentary occupy different points along that continuum:
 - Scholarly commentaries and LDS course manuals.
 - Uncanonized statements about the text by church leaders ([BYU Citation Index](#)).
 - Subsequent scriptures that quote or interpret portions of the text, and the Joseph Smith Translation.

6. Comprehension Self-Test Question

- Lesson: Learning is faster (though sometimes blindered) when given focus by good questions. A good question (a fishing tool) is thus often more valuable than a good answer (a fish).
- In Lectures on Faith the overall structure is a series of three questions: (1) What is it?; (2) How do you get it?; and (3) What are its effects? I have expanded upon and reused that set of questions with regard to hope, charity, meekness, humility, etc., which makes the set of questions I got from Lectures on Faith just as valuable as its answers about faith.
- Strategy: I seek out and develop sets of questions that I can use over and over again. I have developed the following self-test question for use in my study of scriptural books and passages:

Discuss the following passage: _____ by:

- (a) Identifying the principal message(s) the author attempts to convey in this passage;
 - (b) Explaining why you believe this is the author's principal message, including:
 - (i) describing the situation that gave rise to the events or statements recorded in this passage, the situation of the audience for whom it was recorded, etc.; and
 - (ii) outlining the author's train of thought in developing this message throughout the passage;
 - (c) Identifying any larger units of thought to which this passage belongs (group of chapters, book, etc.) and explaining how this passage supports and develops the principal message(s) of those larger units; and
 - (d) Identifying any significant applications or doctrinal contributions of this passage, either alone or in conjunction with other specific passages.
- To fully answer this question, I have to address all of the approaches described in this handout.
 - I have to account for hierarchically organized chunks, the relations between those chunks, and relative importance. When applicable, I should also account for symbolism, historical parallelism, and any other tool for understanding a text that I learned from literature or linguistics (Parts 2-3).
 - I have to address the context, the text, and the co-text (Part 5).
 - I have to cross reference across authors throughout the scriptures (Part 4).
 - I have to decide what doctrines of general application are being taught and what personal applications I should draw from the text (Part 1.1).
 - This question is open book, open note, and can be answered in bits and pieces in the car or shower. I just have to say the answer. This is a great way to ponder a passage out loud.
 - Strategy: When I am unable to answer part of this question, then I have identified a question that can focus my study on something likely to yield significant new insight. Hooray for efficient learning strategies!

7. Three Final Thoughts

- **Don't be intimidated.** Nobody with a day job has yet satisfied this ideal for the entire scriptures.
- **Don't lose focus.** The ultimate goal in mortality is sanctification, not intellectual understanding. Scripture study is intended to support personal development and good works, not to replace them.
- **Do** talk with family or friends about what you learn regarding how to study and about the new insights you have. You will likely learn more together than either of you would on your own.