

Suggested Method for New Testament Interpretation Papers
(or "How to Get an A")
by Jim L. Papandrea

1) After choosing a text, read the passage over several times. Take notes on anything that strikes you as important or difficult to understand. Look at the place your passage occupies in the larger context - in the chapter, and in the book as a whole. You should at least read the entire chapter, and/or adjacent chapters if your text is at the beginning or end of a chapter (remember the chapter and verse divisions were not put in there by the author!). If you can't read the whole book, at least look at an outline of the book, often found in the introduction to the book in a study Bible. Does what comes before or after the passage have a bearing on the meaning of the text? Is it possible that the author put certain passages next to yours because of a common theme? Note figures of speech such as metaphor, simile, irony, hyperbole, euphemism, etc. Begin to think about how much of this passage should be understood literally, vs. non-literally.

2) Look up the passage in a few other translations. Good translations to use are the NRSV, NAB, and NASB, but feel free to use others. Compare the passage in different translations. Keep in mind that if you're looking at a paraphrase (NIV, or similar) it is not a word for word translation of the Greek text. How might the differences in translation shed light on the meaning of the Greek text? Make a list of any particular words that stand out as being theologically significant, or difficult to understand.

3) If your passage has parallels in other writings (such as gospel stories or parables found in more than one gospel), read the parallels. If you have access to [Gospel Parallels](#) (by Throckmorton), or a similar gospel synopsis, these can be helpful. As you compare the passage to its parallels in the other gospels, note what the different gospel writers chose to include or omit. What might be the significance of these differences? However, do not focus too much of your paper on these differences. Focus on one text, and use the parallels to shed light on the possible meaning(s) of your text.

4) Go through your list of theologically significant or difficult words, and look them up in a [Concordance](#). If your Bible has a concordance in the back, it's OK to use that, but keep in mind that it is not exhaustive. Also, for a concordance to work properly, it has to be one that matches your Bible translation. Now look up other passages in the Bible that use the same words, to determine how the word is generally used in the Bible, and what it's assumed meaning is. Use a [Bible Dictionary](#) to look up any words or concepts that still seem unclear.

5) Go to a Bible encyclopedia, like [The Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible](#), and look up any names, places, or other things that are unfamiliar to you. How does an understanding of the historical background of the elements in the text affect the meaning of the passage?

6) Begin to formulate your interpretation of the meaning of the passage. Think of two levels of meaning: Interpretation - what the passage meant for its original audience; and Application - what it might mean for believers today. What are the bottom line issues? What's the point? Is there a moral to the story? What behavior is expected as a result of the hearing of the message?

7) Finally, look up the passage in at least two [commentaries](#). How does the author's interpretation match yours - or differ from yours? You do not have to change your interpretation if the commentator disagrees with you, however you should keep an open mind to things you may not have thought of.

8) Write your paper. You do not have to say everything that's ever been said about this passage (that would be a Ph.D. dissertation). Include appropriate citations of all thought that it not original to you. If your thoughts about the passage changed at all after reading the commentaries, explain that. Print the paper and proofread a hard copy. Have someone else read it, too, and not just for typos. Rewrite anything your proofreader did not understand.