

Literary genres...composing information with style...

With over 40 different authors, the Bible is made up of a variety of writing styles. Literary genre describes the type of literature that is similar in content, tone, or structure. For hermeneutics, literary genre helps us know how to read and understand the text better. For instance, a history book wouldn't be read and understood in the same way as poetry. By knowing the literary genre, one is more prepared for observation, and verses are better understood within their context.

Note: several literary genres may exist in each book of the Bible.

Literary Genre	Examples	Characteristics	Observation Tips
Legal	Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -This represents a treaty with Israel <i>after</i> God establishes their relationship and just prior to entering the Promised Land. -The treaty is the agreement of the blessings and punishments for loyal or disloyal behavior. -Numbering over 600 laws, there are three categories of Old Testament Law that God instructed Moses: 1) moral, 2) civil, and 3) ceremonial. -While the Old Testament Law is the Word of God, not all is a command to Christians. -Some laws, which Jesus repeated, have been renewed and are commands to Christians. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -What does each law reveal about God's standards, and justice? -Which laws do the prophets and Jesus repeat? -How is the Old Testament Law is used to lead people to Christ? The Old Testament Law reminds us of our privileged status; the Law no longer dictates our behavior.
Narrative/ Historical/ Biographical	Genesis, Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, Deuteronomy, Joshua, Judges, Ruth, 1&2 Samuel, 1&2 Kings, 1&2 Chronicles, Ezra, Nehemiah, Esther, Jonah, Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Haggai, Matthew, Mark, Luke, John, Acts	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -These are stories of what God did to and through people. -The stories may not have a moral or direct teaching as they record history whether good or bad. -The stories emphasize God's nature and revelation and teach in a manner that no other literary genre can. -God is the heroic protagonist! -Some stories will be difficult to understand; we are not always told how and why God did things. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Read each story as a unit. -Understand the plot. -Study the character(s). Note that the characters may be bad examples, but observing what not to do can be just as important as what to do. -Compare the same story that may be narrated elsewhere in a different book. -Because the stories are so true to life, they can help us understand our own lives.

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Literary Genre	Examples	Characteristics	Observation Tips
Poetry	Job, Psalm, Lamentations, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Hebrew poetry is supposed to be sung. It is worshipful, intensely emotional, and appeals to the imagination. -About 40% of the Old Testament is poetic. -Lacking the traditional elements found in poetry, Hebrew poetry is essentially parallelism. Much of Hebrew poetry cannot be appreciated because of the loss of its subtleties through translation. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Read poetry slowly and in short sections. -Study the imagery. -Look for literary devices. -Look for a central theme. -What is being said about God? -What is being said of God's people?
Proverb / Wisdom	Job, Proverbs, Ecclesiastes, Song of Songs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -These books are all poetic. -There are two types of wisdom: practical and speculative. Practical wisdom refers to guidelines that will lead to a holy and happy life. Speculative wisdom refers to the deeper issues such as the meaning of life and the existence of evil. -The poetry teaches wisdom in a concise and compressed language. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Observe this as you would poetry. -Examine the metaphors and similes. -Look for the behavior and their consequences.
Parable	Matthew, Mark, Luke, John	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -These short stories are loved for their simplicity and memorable morals. -They are the hallmark of Jesus' teachings. -These true to life stories, while recorded, may never have historically occurred. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Understand the characters in the story. -Who heard Jesus' parables? How did each identify with the story? -Compare the different Gospel accounts of the same parables.

"No man has a right to say, as some are in the habit of saying, "The Spirit tells me that such or such is the meaning of the passage." How is he assured that it is the Holy Spirit, and not a spirit of delusion, except from the evidence that the interpretation is the legitimate meaning of the words?" Alexander Carson

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Literary Genre	Examples	Characteristics	Observation Tips
Logic	Romans, 1 & 2 Corinthians, Galatians, Ephesians, Philippians, Colossians, 1 & 2 Thessalonians, 1 & 2 Timothy, Titus, Philemon, Hebrews, James, 1 & 2 Peter, 1, 2, & 3 John, Jude	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -These were expository letters written to either a friend or church usually in response to something brought up by the reader (except Philemon and possibly James and Romans). -While principally not a theological thesis, the letters exhort with a logical presentation of truth or doctrine for particular action to a church problem. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Read the whole letter in one sitting. -What prompted the letter? -Who are the recipients of the letter? -What is the mood of the letter? -What does the letter exhort? -Do a syntax study.
Prophecy / Apocalyptic	Isaiah, Jeremiah, Ezekiel, Daniel, Hosea, Joel, Amos, Obadiah, Jonah, Micah, Nahum, Habakkuk, Zephaniah, Haggai, Zechariah, Malachi, Revelation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -Most prophecy dealt with the future of Israel and Judah and the nations surrounding them. These prophetic predictions were largely fulfilled. Some prophecies have yet to be fulfilled. -Prophetic predictions are not its primary function. Instead it is to proclaim the words of the Lord for the sole purpose of bringing people back to Him. The prophet is the spokesman for God. -The message of the prophets is similar in content as when God spoke to Moses. -Prophets were analogous to “enforcers” of the covenant. -The tone of warning and judgment is ominous and there are many words directly from God. -These books are challenging to understand, but typically end with hope and restoration for God’s people and promises. 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> -What’s the main problem -What images are used? -What does it say about God? -What happens? -Why did God include this in the Bible?

For more information on literary genres, read [The Literature of the Bible](#) by Leland Ryken.