

How to Do a Word Study

Purposes and Principles

The Bible most of us use is easy to read and understand. Many good English translations and paraphrases are available to us. The authors of the Bible did not write in English but in Hebrew, Aramaic, and Greek. Because the words of these languages do not always have exact equivalents in English, a knowledge of the original languages is a great help in studying the Bible. Most of us, however, are not scholars. We must use our English Bible and the aids for Bible study that are available to us. Word studies allow us to discover the original meanings of the words that appear in our English Bible.

You will use a six-step procedure for completing a word study.

1. *Select the word to study.* Until you have developed your skills in doing a word study, you should not select a word with a broad meaning. Select a word with a meaning narrow enough to study easily. A narrow word is a word that has a rather limited meaning and usage. In contrast, a broad word deals with a theme of the Bible that is large and prominent.
2. *Define the word.* Look up and record the definition from an English dictionary; include synonyms and antonyms.

Imagine you are doing a study of *sanctification*. What is the dictionary definition? Summarize it below.

List synonyms for *sanctification*.

List antonyms for *sanctification*.

3. *Discover Bible usages of the word.* A concordance is a valuable tool for completing word studies. This resource lists Bible words and gives references to their usages. Find and list Bible passages where the word is used.

Find the word *sanctification* in a concordance. Record references of passages in which the word is used.

Part of this step is discovering the meaning of the word as it is used in the Bible. You do not have to be a scholar to do this. A Bible dictionary or a good reference Bible will help you understand Bible words. Some study Bibles contain an encyclopedia that explains many Bible words.

Use a Bible dictionary or a study Bible to discover meanings of the word *sanctification* or *sanctify*. Write a couple of these below.

You probably discovered that the word is used in both the Old Testament and New Testament and that the English words *consecrate*, *holy*, and *holiness* are sometimes used to translate the words that are usually translated *sanctification*. These words mean *set apart* or *separated to God*.

Using a concordance, write references of the verses in which the words *consecrate*, *holy*, or *holiness* appear.

Modern English versions give additional information about the meanings or shades of meaning the word may have.

The word *holiness* appears in Romans 6:19 in the King James Version. Use at least two modern English translations and write below words that are used instead of *holiness*.

You will also want to make notes about the contexts in which these words are used. Observe the books in which the words appear, the writers who use the words, and the usages of the words in the texts where they appear.

Write three of the references you found for *sanctification*, *sanctify*, *consecrate*, *holy*, or *holiness* and your comments about how the words are used.

1.

2.

3.

Comments you might make about each verse include the motivation toward sanctification, the means of obtaining sanctification, and what is included in sanctification.

4. *Define the Bible meaning.* Write a definition that expresses the way the word is used in the Bible.

Based on what you have discovered, how would you define *sanctification* as it is used in the Bible?

Looking up a word in *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance* is an excellent way to determine its Bible meaning. This concordance not only lists references to verses in which the word is used but also cross-references the word to a dictionary that gives meanings from the original language in which the word was written.

Check the definition you wrote against the one found in a concordance.

5. *Summarize what you have learned about the word.* The summary may be an outline of biblical teachings about the word, or it may be an original paragraph that you compose. Your summary is important because it opens the door for the applications you will plan in the next step.

Summarize what you have learned from your word study of *sanctification*.

6. *Plan applications.* Write ways you can apply your word study to your relationship with God, to your life, to your relationships with others, and to the church.

See if you can apply your study of *sanctification* to—

your relationship with God:

your life:

your relationships with others:

the church:

Practicing a Word Study

Now that we have studied the six steps for completing a word study, let's practice.

1. *Select the word to study.* Decide on the Bible word you want to study. For the purpose of practice, we will do this step for you by assigning you the word *anxious*. This study will be spiritually helpful, and the word is narrow enough that you can follow it easily.

Write the word *anxious* at the top of the worksheet "Word Study" on the following page. Complete the remaining sections of the worksheet on your own before reading further. Refer to the previous steps if you need to review.

Let's look at your work one step at a time. Your work does not have to match ours; your work will reflect your own spiritual walk.

2. *Define the word.* A good dictionary made it easy to list synonyms, but our dictionary did not suggest any antonyms. However, examining the synonyms gave us clues about the antonyms. How does our list compare with yours?

Word Study

Word:

Dictionary definition:

Synonyms:

Antonyms:

Bible usages:

Bible meaning:

Summary:

Ways to apply the study—

- to your relationship with God:

- to your life:

- to your relationships with others:

- to the church:

Synonyms

Care
Insecurity
Worry
Concern

Antonyms

Assurance
Certainty
Confidence
Trust

3. *Discover Bible usages of the word.* If you were working with the King James Version, you might have been surprised to discover that the word *anxious* does not appear. What did you do then? We started checking out the synonyms and discovered several passages related to *care* and *carefulness*. That got us started. Were you able to work with a Bible dictionary or a concordance such as *Strong's Exhaustive Concordance*? If so, did you discover several meanings for *care* and *carefulness*? You should have discovered that some care is not worry but is interest and goodwill. You probably got an indication of this when working with the dictionary definition. We trust that you confined your search in the concordance to words that show a kind of care that causes worry, fret, or anxiety. Did you look up the words *anxious*, *care*, and *worry* in the concordance of your study Bible? Check your findings against ours.

- Verses that use the word *anxious*:

Matthew 6:25	Matthew 6:34	Luke 12:26
Matthew 6:27	Matthew 10:19	Philippians 4:6
Matthew 6:31	Mark 13:11	

- Verses that use the word *care*:

Genesis 50:24	Ezekiel 34:12	1 Corinthians 12:25
Psalms 8:4	Mark 4:38	1 Timothy 3:5
Psalms 142:4	Luke 10:34	1 Peter 5:7

- Verses that use the word *worry*:

Luke 8:14	Luke 10:41	Luke 12:29
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We hope that as you studied the various passages, you made careful notes about who was using the word and the books in which it is used. Failing to do this as a part of your study is taking a dangerous shortcut. Another dangerous shortcut is not taking time to study the same passage in modern-English translations. It helped us see how other translations used words like *being bothered* or *fretting*.

Record one word or phrase you found that was helpful or interesting to you.

4. *Define the Bible meaning.* As you studied these verses, you probably noticed that some of them refer to being concerned in a legitimate way. Care and concern are not always wrong.

Arrange the verses from step 3 in the two categories in the following chart.

Legitimate Concern

Harmful Anxiety

5. Summarize what you have learned about the word. The way you wrote your summary is not important. However, it is important that you identified relevant teachings.

- How concerned should you be about things?
- What attitude should you have about the future?
- What attitude should you have about life's nonessentials?
- What should your attitude be about life in this world?
- What does the Bible teach about trying to please the wrong people?

We hope you were careful to note that in some cases a certain amount of care is healthy and productive. In other cases, care is wrong.

What cure for care is suggested in I Peter 5:7?

That cure should be an important part of your summary.

6. Plan applications. Application is the step that determines whether your Bible study will be academic or life-transforming. Even though this assignment was a practice exercise, we hope you were serious enough to pray about the applications you identified and to commit yourself to them.

Word study is an informative method of Bible study. This method focuses intensively on the small details of word meanings. To get the most from word study, combine it with other study methods so that you can get a full picture of what God is saying.

Adapted from Thomas D. Lea, *God's Transforming Word: How to Study Your Bible* (Nashville: LifeWay Press, 1986), 158–68. Out of print.