

Biblical Genre & How it Impacts Our Understanding

The Bible is literature. The specific style of a Bible book impacts how we should understand it. The Bible includes roughly six to eight different literary genres, depending on how its broken down. The following is a brief overview of 8 biblical genres with tips for understanding them.

1. **Narrative** – This includes the history books of the Old Testament and the book of Acts. This genre tells us what happened, not necessarily what should have happened or what we should do. Narrative often teaches indirectly, with implicit meaning.
Tips: Narrative is *descriptive, not prescriptive*. Look for what the story teaches us about God’s character, nature, and ways.
2. **Law** – This includes parts of Exodus, Leviticus, Numbers, and Deuteronomy. The Law gives details of God’s covenant with the nation of Israel and is not binding under the New Covenant unless specifically renewed.
Tip: Look for principles for living in community with God and others.
3. **Poetry** – The psalms are musical poetry, intended to appeal to our emotions. They are words to be spoken to God or about God, and not specifically as doctrine, though they reflect doctrine. They include literary devices like hyperbole and metaphors that aren’t to be taken literally.
Tips: Consider each psalm as a whole, it is a unit. Watch for ways to worship, pray, meditate, and express yourself honestly to God.
4. **Wisdom** – This includes Ecclesiastes, Proverbs, Job, and Song of Songs. This genre provides wise practical principles for living. It is NOT promises.
Tips: Watch for figurative language. Look for the practical principle that fosters wise, godly living.
5. **Prophecy** – The OT includes 4 major and 12 minor prophets. The prophets were God’s covenant enforcers. They gave God’s Word to a specific people in specific historical situations and included a lot of poetry. Scholars estimate that up to 99% of biblical prophecy has been fulfilled.
Tips: Keep the context in mind. Watch for multiple levels of fulfillment.
6. **Gospels** – Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John uniquely combine teachings of Jesus with stories about Jesus. Each author had a primary audience and a primary purpose.
Tips: Keep the historical and cultural context in mind. Consider the literary devices Jesus used in His teaching like parables, hyperbole, similes, and metaphors.
7. **Epistles** – These letters were written to a particular person or a group in a particular point in time and place for a specific purpose.
Tips: Know the context and keep it in mind. Determine what is relative to only the 1st century audience and what is also relative to us today. When the exact situation isn’t relative, look for the underlying spiritual principle that is!
8. **Apocalyptic** – This is primarily the book of Revelation but can also be found in sections of some of the OT prophets like Daniel. This genre is highly symbolic and stylized. It’s meant to teach in whole picture, not necessarily through details.
Tips: Keep the big picture in mind and don’t get bogged down in the details or chronology. Keep the historical context in mind. For instance, Revelation was originally written for the 1st century church who suffered at the hands of Rome.