

How to Teach Effectively from Notes

Mary stuffed several notebook pages into her Bible, reached for her purse, and scurried off to church. Arriving late, she did not have time to organize her notes before she had to teach.

“Today’s lesson is found in 1 Samuel chapter . . . um, let’s see, I think it was 21. No, that’s not it. Was it 24?” Quickly Mary shuffled through her notes. At last she located page one and arranged them in order in her Bible. Five minutes of class time were gone.

“Oh yes, Chapter 27. Carol, look up here please. Jeannie, put your hairbrush away. Denise, Bridget – is anybody listening?”

Once the lesson was underway Mary continued to be plagued by inattentiveness. Just when she wanted to drive home a main point, one of the pages of notes went sailing across the room, and three girls dived after it. She repeated herself too and left out important parts of the lesson, because she kept losing her place in her notes. The writing was so small and cramped – and there was so much of it.

Mary went home feeling discouraged. “Why did my class flop today?” she wailed. I was so well prepared – I had pages and pages of notes! All those hours of study – for nothing! I think I’ll just give up teaching.

Mary would never admit it, but she has something in common with Janet across town. Janet doesn’t teach her Sunday school lessons from voluminous notes. In fact, she doesn’t study or prepare much at all. Each week Janet comes to class armed with her teacher’s manual and student workbook. She has each student take turns reading from the pupil book. Here and there Janet reads from the teacher’s manual, just for variety. If there is extra time, she fills it by having the students read the memory verse in turn. Janet’s students are as bored as Mary’s.

It looks like Mary and Janet are at opposite poles. One prepares ahead; the other doesn’t. One uses notes; the other a quarterly. One spends a lot of time, the other only a minimum. One does most of the talking; the other has the pupils read. What do they possibly have in common?

Neither of them has learned one of the cardinal rules of good teaching, maximum study-minimum notes. I discovered this rule some years ago, after experiencing many of the difficulties Mary had. I found that with thorough preparation and perhaps one practice teaching session, I was able to teach much better with fewer and simpler notes.

Notes that are written in story form, with complete sentences and paragraphs, lend themselves to only one thing – reading. And when a teacher reads, he loses eye contact and interest if he reads for long.

Notes are much easier to teach from when written in outline form using only phrases or words. They are easy to follow, compact so they fit readily into a Bible, and are not readily visible to the student.

I always include the Bible chapter and verse on which the note idea is based. If I intend to read it or have a student read it directly from the Bible, I circle the reference. Using abbreviations takes very little space and keeps me from floundering about in the Bible looking for the exact location of a verse.

Notes are a good place to indicate where you will bring in a salvation emphasis. I have found that the easiest way for me to do this is to weave “Gospel Points” throughout the story when I can, leaving only the invitation for the end. (I use the ‘Gospel Points’ I learned from Child Evangelism Fellowship):

God Loves You
Only Son of God is Jesus
Sinners All
Poured Out His Blood
Everliving Saviour
Let Him In!

Each point is indicated on my notes by the large capital letter circled in red. For instance, in talking about the unselfish love Jonathan had for David, my notes may read:

(G) Jonathan's love – unselfish

In class I would elaborate on how Jonathan's love was unselfish, and then draw in the fact that God loves each of us in the same unselfish way.

Or I could indicate on my notes:

(G) Jonathan's love – unselfish

In that case, I would talk of God's love which prompted Him to send His Son Jesus to pour out His blood for us on the Cross.

If I am certain that each member of my class that day is saved, I dwell longer on the life application for the Christian.

Another symbol I have found helpful for use on my notes is PAS – personal application to the saved student. When I see PAS on my notes, I bring in the main goal of the lesson at that point. For instance, if the main goal of my lesson is to incite Christians to pray, each time I see PAS on my notes, I will challenge each Christian to pray. Such symbols speak volumes but take little space.

Of course, minimum notes is an impossibility without maximum study and preparation. Teaching from an outline – a word skeleton – demands filling in from memory. The notes are only a reminder – an organizer.

The benefits of maximum study – minimum notes are many, but they can be summed up in two statements: It's easier to teach that way, and it's easier to learn that way – more fun too! Why not look your students in the eye for a change? Try minimum notes next week!