

# **Disciple-Making and Sentence Diagramming**

A Mini-Series by Timmy Brister  
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# INTRODUCTION

Last week, I made [the following tweet](#):



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I believe EVERY Christian should know how to do thought-flow/sentence diagramming of Scripture. Pastors, equip your people to know God's Word!

Since May, I have been leading a disciple-making training at Grace, and for the past six weeks the focus has been on the various ways to take in God's Word (hearing, reading, memorizing, meditating, and studying). When it comes to the study of Scripture, the most popular approach is the "inductive" method, which focuses on (1) observation, (2) interpretation, and (3) application. **The goal of Bible intake should be life transformation, which is the goal of disciple-making.** So, it makes sense then, that disciples should have a solid grasp of studying Scripture on their own.

In simple terms, better *observations* of the text lead to more faithful *interpretation* of the text, which should lead to greater *application* of God's Word for the transformation of our lives. If I want disciples to be transformed by the Word, then it stands to reason that I must begin with observation – showing them **how to be good "seers" of the text**. Disciples should learn, for instance, to look for things emphasized, things related, things repeated, things alike or unlike, etc. They should see logical and grammatical connections in the flow of an argument, including main verbs, conjunctions, prepositions, etc. Could stuff so rudimentary be really essential to the disciple's goal of becoming more like Jesus? I believe so.

One of the most practical ways of deepening my study of Scripture in the area of observation has been **sentence diagramming** for the purpose of observing the thought flow of the text. It is “rightly dividing the word of truth” with training wheels. In fact, I never preach or teach a passage without the first step of diagramming a text. What that said, I know the temptation is to think such a method is reserved for pastors or those responsible for leading the church in pastoral ministry. I would like to challenge that line of thinking and encourage all believers, especially those intentionally seeking to be **reproducing disciples of Jesus** to seriously consider employing sentence diagramming for greater Bible intake, ultimately leading to greater life transformation through the Spirit’s work through His Word.

In the follow up blogposts, I will give the basics for doing this and how to do it with others, providing some examples I’m currently working through with others in my disciple-making class. I had several folks on Twitter and Facebook ask specifically for resources and tips on how to do this, and my hope is these articles will serve your purposes of knowing God’s Word and applying it to your life.

## STEP 1: SET UP

In his “high priestly prayer,” Jesus prayed, “Sanctify them in the truth; your word is truth” (John 17:17). A disciple of Jesus simply cannot function apart from the Spirit and the Word. And I would argue that the Spirit is not impressed by mystical attempts of understanding the Bible. We are to love God with all our minds. That means we should expect to exercise our minds in focused engagement of the Scripture the Holy Spirit inspired to put in words, sentences, paragraphs, and books. A mystical approach to Scripture, in my opinion, undermines the Spirit’s intention of communication of God’s thoughts through words and ultimately divorces the instrumentality of the Word from the agency of the Holy Spirit.

Disciples of Jesus are not intellectual elites nor are they anti-intellectual. The Bible is not gnostic. There are no codes to decipher. I believe in the perspicuity and clarity of Scripture, but that does not mean the meaning of the text is always on the surface. God expects us to do work. The work of the disciple is to rightly handle the Word of God in order to share it and explain it to others that they may know and understand God. We should discourage shortcuts to Scripture, like study Bibles which make it hard to know the difference between the inspired, infallible text above the line and uninspired, fallible text of a favorite teacher below the line. We should strive against anti-intellectualism by challenging disciples of Jesus to use the mind God has given them to think God's thoughts after Him.

The Bible is a compilation of books, which are a compilation of paragraphs, which are a compilation of sentences, which are a compilation of words. The basic building block for understanding a text is a **proposition**, which is simple a phrase making an assertion or point. One verse may have several propositions. The key to becoming a good "seer" of Scripture (observation) is by discovering the various propositions in a text and their relation to one another. In doing so, a disciple learns how to see what the author is saying and how he is seeking to make his point. The practice of sentence diagramming, then, is to simply delineate the propositions in a text, understand their relationship to one another, and from there discover the meaning in the text.

## WHERE TO BEGIN

So you're new to this, and you want to learn how to dig into texts and see more of God's Word through sentence diagramming. Where should you start? Here's how I encourage you to begin.

1. **Take a small book of the Bible** like 1 John or Philippians or Galatians as the focus of your study. Eventually, you want to work through the entire book paragraph by paragraph, having diagrammed the thought flow of the text.

2. I recommend that you **use a computer and word processor** for the first half of sentence diagramming. Here's how I set up sentence diagramming through MS Word.

- ▶ Open a new document. Set margins at 0.6 on all sides for maximum space allowed in document.
- ▶ Copy and paste from online Bible the text you are studying (I use [ESV Bible online](#)). Clean up the formatting by making all the font the same (I use Helvetica) as well as size (I use 11 or 12 point size should work).
- ▶ For marking purposes, make line spacing either 1.5 or 2.0 (double space). To do this simply select all the text, go to format » paragraph » line spacing » 1.5 and you should be good.
- ▶ Start by separating each verse on separate lines (each verse should begin on far left of the page).
- ▶ Once you are finished, the document should look like this...

## 1 John 1:1-10

**1** That which was from the beginning, which we have heard, which we have seen with our eyes, which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, concerning the word of life—

**2** the life was made manifest, and we have seen it, and testify to it and proclaim to you the eternal life, which was with the Father and was made manifest to us—

**3** that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, so that you too may have fellowship with us; and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.

**4** And we are writing these things so that our joy may be complete.

**5** This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you, that God is light, and in him is no darkness at all.

**6** If we say we have fellowship with him while we walk in darkness, we lie and do not practice the truth.

**7** But if we walk in the light, as he is in the light, we have fellowship with one another, and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.

**8** If we say we have no sin, we deceive ourselves, and the truth is not in us.

**9** If we confess our sins, he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness.

**10** If we say we have not sinned, we make him a liar, and his word is not in us.

The set up part at first may seem to take a little bit of time, but after doing it a couple of times, you can do it rather quickly. Next comes the part of breaking down the verses in propositions and seeing the relationship between them.

## STEP 2: PROPOSITIONS

Continuing in this mini-series on sentence diagramming, I want to keep the focus on two things: (a) make it as simple and understandable as possible and (b) explain why this is important to the disciple-making process. There are more technical ways for breaking down texts of Scripture, but I will leave that for your Greek syntax and exegesis class in seminary. The goal behind this mini-series is to help disciple makers employ a very practical method for training believers to handle Scripture, consequently bringing greater confidence and consistency in applying it to their lives.

In the previous post, I explained the basic set up for sentence diagramming. In this post, I want to explain propositions and their relationship to one another. Remember, a proposition is simply a phrase that makes an assertion or point, and a verse may have several propositions therein. **Coordinate clauses** are propositions of equal importance. **Subordinate clauses** are propositions that modify or explain the lead proposition. Knowing the difference between the two will determine how you diagram a sentence and learn the thought flow of the text. To be clear, we are not seeking to diagram the *grammar* of the text (relationship between words); rather, we are diagramming the *concepts/ideas* in the text (relationship between propositions).

Once the document is set up (see part 2), the fun begins.

- ▶ Start with putting the main clause/proposition in the upper left hand corner of your document/paper.
- ▶ Indent all subordinate clauses.
- ▶ Line up all coordinate clauses.
- ▶ Connect related main clauses.
- ▶ Finally, explain the relation between clauses/propositions.

One point should be made here. You are going to have to make subjective calls on whether propositions or subordinate or coordinate clauses. The important thing is that you are consistent throughout your diagramming and focus on the flow of the text (there is no inerrant or perfect sentence diagramming!). The benefit of using a word processor is that you can make changes rather easy in the diagramming process. Once the propositions are diagrammed by coordinate and subordinate clauses, the next step is to determine the relationship between them.

Before we jump to learning the various types of coordinate and subordinate clauses, let's revisit 1 John 1 from my last post and update the sentence diagramming. What you will see is how I determined coordinate and subordinate clauses.

## 1 John 1:1-4

- 1 That which was from the beginning,  
which we have heard,  
which we have seen with our eyes,  
which we looked upon and have touched with our hands,  
concerning the word of life—
- 2 the life was made manifest,  
and we have seen it,  
and testify to it  
and proclaim to you  
the eternal life,  
which was with the Father and was made manifest to us—
- 3 that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you,  
so that you too may have fellowship with us;  
and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.
- 4 And we are writing these things  
so that our joy may be complete.

5 This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you,  
that God is light,  
and in him is no darkness at all.

6 If we say we have fellowship with him  
while we walk in darkness,  
we lie and do not practice the truth.

7 But if we walk in the light,  
as he is in the light,  
we have fellowship with one another,  
and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin.

8 If we say we have no sin,  
we deceive ourselves,  
and the truth is not in us.

9 If we confess our sins,  
he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all  
unrighteousness.

10 If we say we have not sinned,  
we make him a liar,  
and his word is not in us.

So that I don't unload everything all at once, part 4 will focus on explaining the relationship between clauses now that we have the idea/thought flow diagrammed.

# STEP 3: LABELING

So far, we have set up the diagramming template and marked propositions along with coordinate and subordinate clauses. In this post, I simply want to explain the relationship between the clauses with regard to the propositions. Again, we are not diagramming grammar (words); rather, we are diagramming concepts/idea (propositions), so the key is not so much how words relate to one another as how propositions relate to one another.

Let me say from the outset that beginners in sentence diagramming may find this step of labeling propositions over their head. Let me encourage you to not give up or bypass this step entirely. You may need to work yourself into learning these labels and how to classify clauses, and no one becomes experienced in doing this overnight. So as a word of caution and exhortation, let me say I recognize this may be a sticking point for some. My hope is that you would press on and benefit from the massaging these labels in your thinking because, over time, they will become natural in your thinking whether you are diagramming a text or simply reading it devotionally.

There are basically ten different types of propositions. I first learned of these propositions from Dr. Jonathan Pennington while in seminary, who also employed Richard Young's *Intermediate New Testament Greek* book. Here are the ten labels/classifications for clauses/propositions.

## 10 CLASSIFICATIONS FOR CLAUSES/PREPOSITIONS

**1. Temporal** – Describes the time or occasion when the proposition will occur. A temporal clause answers the question “when?” || Key Words: when, while

**2. Manner/Means** – Describes the means or the manner in which the proposition is carried out. || Key Words: by, through

**3. Grounds** – Describes the cause, reason, or grounds for the proposition or action. || Key Words: because, since, for

**4. Inference** – Describes the logical conclusion or result that comes from a previous proposition. || Key Words: therefore, thus, consequently

**5. Purpose** – Describes the purpose for a proposition or action. They answer the question “why?” || Key Words: to, in order that, so that

**6. Result** – Describes result/outcome of the proposition. || Key Words: so that, with the result that

**7. Condition & Corollary** – This is a paired set of labels that should be used together. Together a pair of condition-corollary phrases describes a potential condition for the proposition or action to occur. These will very often appear in the form of an “if . . . then” clause, though not always. || Key Words: “If...then”

**8. Concessive** – Describes a circumstance in spite of the proposition or action. || Key Words: though, although, yet, but

**9. Content** – A content clause gives another proposition that describes or qualifies a preceding one. || Key Words: that, lest

**10. Description/Explanation** – A classification for clauses not easily definable with other categories but modifies a proposition with additional information (either by describing or explaining the proposition).

Now let’s go back to 1 John 1 again. In the first image, I showed the text simply copy, pasted, and formatted in a word document. The section image shows how I broke down the text in propositions, Now in the image below, I show the relationship between the propositions with the above classifications.

**Note:** P=proposition | C=coordinate clause | S=subordinate clause.

## 1 John 1:1-4

- 1 **C** That which was from the beginning, Description  
**C** which we have heard, Description  
**C** which we have seen with our eyes, Description  
**C** which we looked upon and have touched with our hands, Description
- P** concerning the word of life—
- 2 **C** the life was made manifest, Explanation  
**S** and we have seen it, Explanation  
**S** and testify to it Explanation  
**S** and proclaim to you Explanation
- P** the eternal life,
- C** which was with the Father and was made manifest to us— Description
- 3 **C** that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you, Description  
**S** so that you too may have fellowship with us; Purpose  
**S** and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ. Explanation
- 4 **S** And we are writing these things Explanation  
**S** so that our joy may be complete. Result
- P** 5 This is the message we have heard from him and proclaim to you,  
**S** that God is light, Description  
**S** and in him is no darkness at all. Description
- 6 **P** If we say we have fellowship with him Condition  
**C** while we walk in darkness, Temporal  
**S** we lie and do not practice the truth. Corollary
- 7 **P** But if we walk in the light, Condition  
**C** as he is in the light, Description  
**S** we have fellowship with one another, Corollary  
**S** and the blood of Jesus his Son cleanses us from all sin. Corollary
- 8 **P** If we say we have no sin, Condition  
**S** we deceive ourselves, Corollary  
**S** and the truth is not in us. Corollary
- 9 **P** If we confess our sins, Condition  
**S** he is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and to cleanse us from all unrighteousness. Corollary
- 10 **P** If we say we have not sinned, Condition  
**S** we make him a liar, Corollary  
**S** and his word is not in us. Corollary

In this passage, there's a lot of similarity between propositions. In other words, there's a rhythm of sorts in the thought flow of the text. As I mentioned in my original post, the goal is to make disciples greater "seers" of God's Word. The better you "observe" the text, the better you should be able to interpret the meaning of the text. Ultimately, faithfulness in understanding God's Word becomes fertile ground for life transformation and provides multiple action points for applying truth to others based on what has been revealed in Scripture.

The next step I take in sentence diagramming is marking up the document in order to illuminate observations. Once those observations are visibly marked, I conclude my observations by summarizing what I have seen from the text and move to interpretation (determining the meaning of the text). This step will come in my next post.

## STEP 4: CONNECTIONS

As for sentence diagramming, we have come to what I would consider the final part as "seers" (observation) of the text. After the relationship of propositions have been made (Part 4), I follow up with marking connections, emphasis, and key words in a text. There are several things specifically I'm looking for here:

- ▶ Things emphasized in the text
- ▶ Things repeated in the text
- ▶ Things related in the text (connections)
- ▶ Things set in comparison or contrast in the text (like/unlike)
- ▶ Things connected sequentially or in the flow of logic

Going back to our sample text in 1 John 1, here is how I marked up the text (note: I used an iPad app to do this digitally for blogging purposes, but I normally print out the sheet at step 4 and do step 5 with pen and highlighters).

1 John 1:1-4

1 C That which was from the beginning,  
 C which we have heard,  
 C which we have seen with our eyes,  
 C which we looked upon and have touched with our hands,

(P) concerning the word of life—

2 C the life was made manifest,  
 S and we have seen it,  
 S and testify to it,  
 S and proclaim to you

(P) the eternal life

C which was with the Father and was made manifest to us—

3 C that which we have seen and heard we proclaim also to you,  
 S so that you too may have fellowship with us;  
 S and indeed our fellowship is with the Father and with his Son Jesus Christ.

4 S And we are writing these things  
 S so that our joy may be complete.

(Experimental)

Description  
 Description  
 Description  
 Description

eyes  
ears  
hands  
↓  
mouth

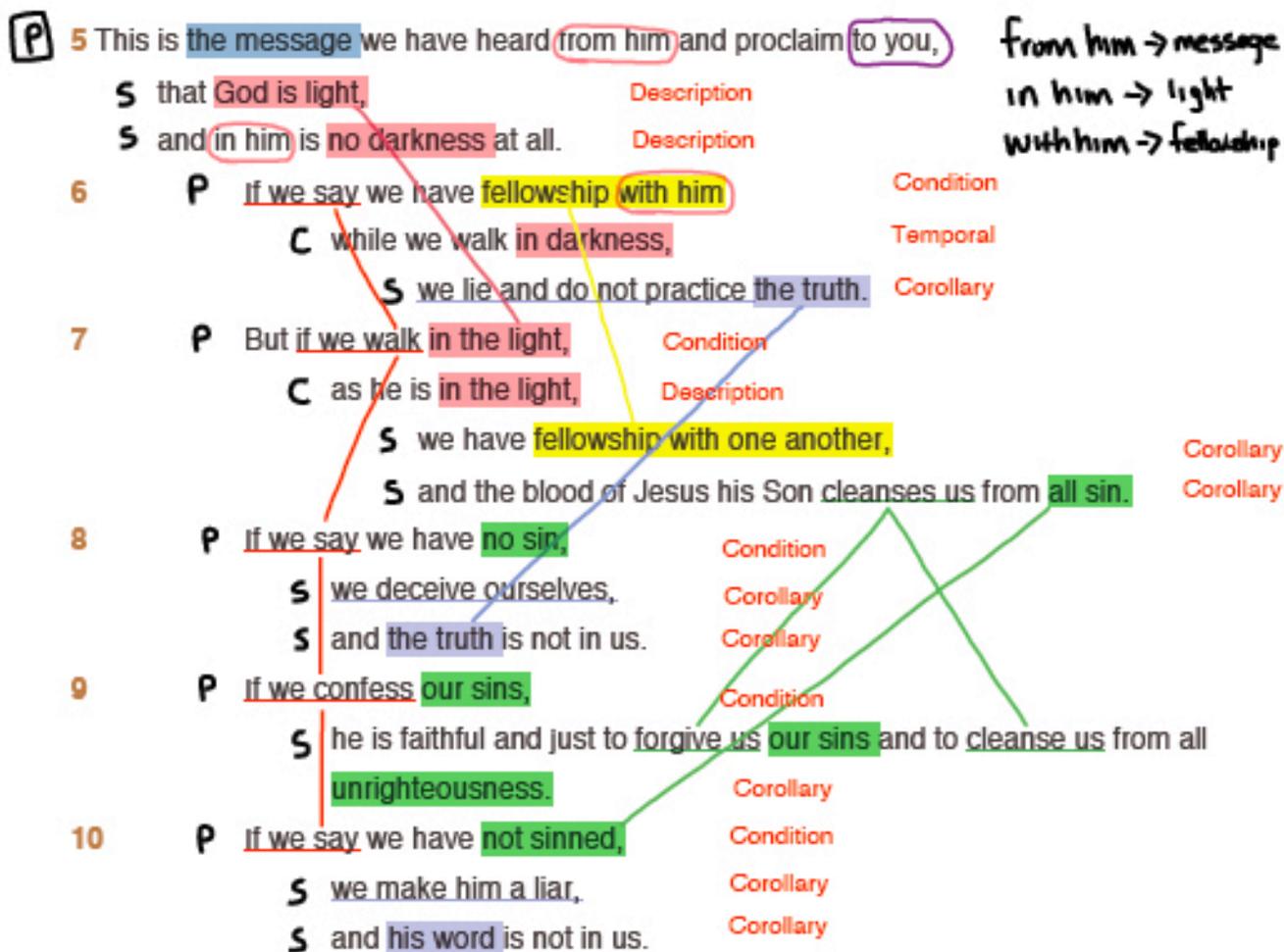
1st HAND  
Witnesses  
testify  
proclaim

Explanation  
 Explanation  
 Explanation  
 Explanation

Life manifested TO US  
 Life proclaimed TO YOU  
 Our fellowship is with Father & Son  
 Your fellowship is with us

Description  
 Description  
 Purpose  
 Explanation  
 Explanation  
 Result

Communion --> Mission --> Communion --> Joy	Was made manifest	Purpose/Result
Steward experience for mission	Personal	Fellowship/Communion
Word of life	Experiential	Joy Completed
From the beginning	Testimonial	
With the Father	Missional	
Eternal life	Communal	

**Contrasts:**

Light - Darkness  
 All our sin - No sin  
 The truth - lie/liar  
 Walk/Practice - If we say

**Who God is:**

Light (no darkness)  
 Faithful and just

**What God does:**

Forgives us  
 Cleanses us

**Walking in darkness:**

We lie and do not practice the truth  
 We deceive ourselves and the truth is not in us  
 We make him a liar and his word is not in us

**God is light:**

Holiness (sinless perfection)  
 Righteousness  
 Omniscience (complete knowledge)  
 Revelation/Truth

**Two ways to live:**

Denial & Self-Deception or Truth & Self-Revelation  
 Professing Hypocrite or Confessing Repenter

God is standard of our fellowship with one another  
 God is the means by which we can experience fellowship  
 God is the goal of our fellowship (to enjoy more of God)

As you can see, I tried to put some of the observations together below the line. As for the markings and the aforementioned bullet points....

- ▶ **Things emphasized** – fellowship with God, Jesus as “life”, God as “light”, sin as darkness/deception
- ▶ **Things repeated** – what was seen, heard, touched; light/darkness, sin/lying
- ▶ **Things related** – the word of life-eternal life-that which was from the beginning; what was manifested to us-we proclaimed to you; light-truth; darkness-deception; confession-cleaning-communion
- ▶ **Things set in comparison/contrast** – light v. darkness; truth v. deception; saying v. doing; cleansed from all sin v. saying have no sin; two ways to live (deception or repentance)
- ▶ **Things in sequence/logical flow** – ears, ears, and hands leads to mouth (experience leads to proclamation); vertical fellowship with God is grounds of horizontal fellowship with others; fellowship with God is conditioned upon a life a repentance and faith, rather than performance-based self-righteousness; God is the standard, the means, and the goal of our fellowship with one another (triperspectively speaking); his word in us will reveal our real self-knowledge as sinners which leads to a life of confession and repentance which leads to walking in the light which leads to blood-bought fellowship of redeemed sinners called to be saints

There’s more that I point out in my markings than what I just bulleted, and if you have some time, take a look at them. Perhaps you see some things I did not see in the text. I tried to use different colors and markings in order to separate the things I saw, along with lines to help show the connections in the thought flow.

Now that this has been done, where do we go from here? I’d like to do a few things: (1) I’d like to show how this can be worked out as a regularly rhythm of disciple-making by taking normal Bible intake disciplines and incorporating them here; (2) I’d like to show how helpful this level of engaging the text is for understanding the meaning of the text (biblical interpretation). As I said earlier, the better “seer” you are of the text, the better interpreter you will be. The goal is not to have a well-marked up text; the goal is to have a thoroughly transformed life by applying the truth of God’s Word to every facet of our existence. I don’t

think that goal is possible with a superficial reading of Scripture. Sentence diagramming and thought flow examination gives us training wheels for better study of Scripture, employing other disciplines of Bible intake (meditation) and other means of grace (prayer, community, etc.) in the process.

In my next post, I will try to show how this process can become a normal pattern of bible intake and can be done with others so that those you disciple can have a stronger grasp of Scripture.

## STEP 5: ASSIMILATION

The past five posts in this mini-series is intended to give very simple, practical steps to diagramming a text to gain a deeper understanding of the Bible. A disciple needs to be skilled in all three aspects of Bible study: observation, interpretation, and application. This mini-series focuses on the first aspect of observation, with the intention of equipping disciples of becoming better “seers” of the text.

The question I want to answer in this post is how to implement this kind of studied approach to Scripture in the disciple-making process. Can any Christian do this? Does this require too much time to feasibly incorporate this in the life of a disciple of Jesus? This looks important for pastors or teachers, but is it really important for every disciple of Jesus to put into practice?

A disciple is a follower or *learner*. It is true that our learning incorporates all of life (behavior, attitude, practices, relationships, worldview, etc.), but it is certainly not less than learning Scripture. In fact, I don't believe the other aspects of learning are capable of becoming normative apart from learning Scripture well. The reason for this is because Scripture, rightly understood, will apply to all of the other areas of learning how to be a Christian. In other words, Scripture is not just a manual of Christian truth, but it is also a means of life transformation.

My recommendation for incorporating this method as a regular rhythm of Bible intake is to begin with a small book of the Bible. If your Bible breaks down passages in paragraphs, use those paragraphs as the building blocks of your sentence diagramming. In order to not overwhelm your study, simply take one paragraph at a time, meaning you will likely only do 1-2 paragraphs each week. That may not sound like much, but when you incorporate biblical meditation, prayer, and even memorization, you will have a saturation of Scripture over a sustained period of time that will be with you for good.

Here is how I recommend employing sentence diagramming over the course of a week and in context of disciple-making:

**Day 1:** Determine the text you plan on studying, asking the Holy Spirit to guide you in your study

**Day 2:** Set up your document for diagramming (or journal if you don't use a computer) ([see part 2](#))

**Day 3:** Determine propositions, coordinate and subordinate clauses ([see part 3](#))

**Day 4:** Label/classify the clauses and propositions ([see part 4](#))

**Day 5:** Make connections and mark observations ([see part 5](#))

**Day 6:** Meditate on the text, assimilating observations

**Day 7:** Meet with discipler to share insights of what you learned with one another

Each day, you should expect to spend roughly 20-30 minutes doing the work. As with anything, the more you do it, the more natural it will come and the more quickly you will make observations/connections. Remember, the end goal is not to have a well-marked up text properly diagrammed. The goal is to transition to interpreting what you have seen and drive the meaning of the text to shape the meaning of our lives (application). Could it be that our lives are not being shaped by God's Word to the degree they ought? Could it be our lack of life transformation is due to lack of truly understanding Scripture? Could our lack of understanding Scripture be due to a lack of properly handling and seeing what God has made known to us in His Word?

If I can be of any more practical help to any of you in this process, let me know. I am a learner, too. We're in this together. And what I desire, as explained in my original tweet, is that disciples of Jesus would be better equipped to handle God's Word. Those who know God best (through His Word) are most adequately equipped to speak well of Him to others. The more you see and hear, the more you will have to speak to others. May God open our eyes and ears, and loose our tongues to speak much of Him!