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Although being knowledgeable about a certain topic is useful, literacy is more than that. Literacy is about how we learn.

Developing Scripture Literacy: What Good Scripture Readers Know and Do

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This article identifies ten practices¹ that can improve youths' abilities to make sense of scripture in ways that get them underneath the words to the principles and doctrine that they so desperately need but may struggle to understand.² These ten scripture reading practices are based on decades of reading research and empirical work that examine Latter-day Saint youths' literacy practices and the motivations that drive them.³ I also include examples, where appropriate, from a two-year ethnographic study of Latter-day Saint youths' experiences with scripture literacy.⁴

Being familiar with what good scripture readers know and do can give teachers and parents a clearer understanding of the knowledge and skills that youth should develop in order to understand the truths in scripture. When this familiarity occurs, we are better positioned to develop instructional practices that can support young people's strategic use of meaning-making tools that can enhance their scripture literacy. Youth can also benefit from some clarity about how to read scripture, because this knowledge can demystify what should happen when they crack open their Bibles or tap their scripture apps. Additionally, having a clearer view of what good scripture readers know

and do can draw much needed attention to the processes that youth use to make meaning of scripture, which can complement and considerably enhance the focus we have traditionally placed on the content of scripture.

In what follows, I articulate a conception of literacy as the work that we do to construct meaning, and scripture literacy as a special type of meaning-making that attends to the knowledge and faith development associated with sacred texts. I then identify ten practices of good scripture readers and make a case for the practices' importance in developing scripture literacy.

Literacy

We hear a great deal about literacy: mechanical literacy, mathematical literacy, computer literacy, and historical literacy. But what do these phrases really mean? The way they are used can suggest that literacy is knowing about fields of study, such as history or math, or knowing about objects, such as computers or cars. Although being knowledgeable about a certain topic is useful, literacy is more than that. Literacy is about *how* we learn. Specifically, literacy can be understood as the process of constructing and producing knowledge. In this article, I conceptualize literacy as the mental, emotional, and spiritual work required to make sense of texts. This can include reading, talking, thinking, and even feeling, all of which come bundled together to broaden and deepen traditional views of literacy as simply knowing a lot about something.

If we consider literacy as the way we construct meaning, literacy employs a number of different approaches that we learn to use skillfully through socialization or culturally informed practice. Because there are many different cultures, there are many different ways to make meaning, even of the same text. As such, there are many ways to be literate. We might, therefore, profitably view literacy as a family of meaning-making practices, rather than as a single, monolithic skill we call reading. It may be disingenuous to talk about the “best” way to read a text and more honest to talk about the variety of ways we might construct knowledge from texts. Clearly, literacy is an important tool for text-based learning. If youth are to learn from texts—including scripture—then they must be able to unlock them. Moreover, if youth struggle constructing knowledge from scripture, then they are limited in what they can understand from it, which unduly narrows how they apply it to their lives. Living the truths in scripture starts with being able to learn them. And that means developing literacy.

Scripture Literacy

Scripture is clearly important. It can bring us to “rejoice in Jesus Christ [our] Redeemer” (Alma 37:9), convince us of the error of our ways, enlarge our memories, and bring about “the salvation of [our] souls” (Alma 37:8). Given the importance of scripture, without seriously studying it we may become as the Lamanites of old who suffered “in ignorance . . . not knowing the mysteries of God” (Mosiah 1:3) and dwindled in unbelief until they “[knew] nothing concerning” the Lord (Mosiah 1:5). Elder D. Todd Christofferson addressed a modern-day dwindling when he cautioned against “a growing scripture illiteracy” that has resulted in many of us forgetting truths about God and Christ that previous generations knew.⁵ One way to address the current scripture illiteracy is to not only return to scripture but return to it more faithfully, purposefully, and skillfully. As Elder Christofferson said, “Our need for constant recourse to the scriptures is greater [now] than in any previous time.”⁶ Elder Richard G. Scott said, “Feasting on the word of God each day is more important than sleep, school, work, television shows, video games, or social media.”⁷

The words Elders Christofferson and Scott use to talk about reading scripture are important. “Recourse” and “feasting” are process words that hint at *how* we should read scripture, not simply *that* we should read it. Specifically, we should be returning, even running, back to scripture constantly (recourse) and indulging ourselves in scripture study every day (feasting). Both of these words suggest more than simply saying the words and hoping that they stick in our minds. To develop scripture literacy, we might think of engaging in the difficult but rewarding work that is necessary to translate the ideas on the pages of scripture into something meaningful, powerful, and beautiful in our lives.

Scripture literacy is a special type of literacy focused on the ways that we make sense of sacred texts to develop our understanding of religious principles and to deepen our faith. This will differ from one context to another, based on the ideologies, traditions, and practices valued in those contexts, whether they are across faiths, within a faith, or within a single congregation. In one congregation, for example, Relief Society sisters may value exactly what scripture says, so they might practice memorizing important verses word for word. In the same congregation, the young men could value the ability to retell scripture narratives in ways that make them approachable and meaningful for other youth, so they might spend their time learning the stories and practicing retelling them. In Sunday School, it could be important for youth

to raise personally important questions about scripture, so the teachers might instruct the youth in the types of questions they could ask, the value of asking questions, and give them time to explore their questions in class. And for the young women in the same congregation, constructing meaning of scripture could revolve around making personally important connections to their lives, so they might read scripture seeking connections, insights, and application.

Each of these represents a specific way of making meaning of scripture according to the various commitments and expectations within a single congregation. As with general literacy, in scripture literacy there is no “best” way for everyone to read scripture. Rather, there are a variety of ways to be scripturally literate, each of which may be appropriate if it adheres to the important religio-cultural ideologies that guide it. In the previous examples, the purpose, value, and manner of making sense of scripture differed from one setting to another. Therefore, each group read scripture differently based on the values of that group. When we conceptualize scripture literacy in terms of making meaning, or as a meaning-making process with sacred texts, then we may begin to realize that scripture literacy includes a family of practices that help youth learn from scripture.

Developing Scripture Literacy

The following ten practices of good scripture readers are by no means inclusive of all of the things that effective scripture readers should know and do. And there is no particular importance in their order. However, they constitute an important starting point for beginning a conversation about what it means to develop scripture literacy in the Church. Moreover, the following ten practices can offer teachers and parents insights for explaining and clarifying the scripture reading processes for youth.

Practice 1: Understand Scripture Reading as a Problem-Solving Process

Struggling scripture readers often assume if they read every word, then they will understand a passage. Good scripture readers know reading is more than just saying the words. It is about getting to the principles, knowledge, and insights that the words can represent when they are strung together. However, to get to the ideas buried beneath the words involves hard work that often revolves around the myriad problems readers face when they try to construct meaning. As such, good readers understand that reading scripture is often about solving problems. Good readers do not assume they will read

an entire chapter without any trouble. They expect to encounter unfamiliar words, complex sentence structures, abstract concepts, confusing syntax, nuanced character relationships, and a host of other problems as they read. Indeed, good readers count on scripture to give them problems because they understand scripture is rich and complex and that as they read scripture they must constantly solve a variety of problems if they hope to get everything they can out of each chapter and verse. Anticipating reading problems prepares good readers to handle them when they arise. Good scripture readers do not get thrown off course or give up when troubles come. Troubles will always come. But good scripture readers engage the problems skillfully and eagerly—because they have prepared for them—perhaps in the same spirit with which David readied himself and “hasted, and ran” to meet Goliath (1 Samuel 17:48).

Practice 2: Monitor Thoughts and Feelings

Good readers understand that their minds and emotions must be active during the reading process and that the heart and mind are what drive their understanding of scripture. Good readers recognize that they are thinking and feeling things as they read. For example, good scripture readers may read 3 Nephi 11 and wonder what it might be like to see the Savior come down from heaven, or how it might feel to hear his voice, or they might be picturing the looks on people’s faces and trying to imagine the feelings in those people’s hearts. In addition to recognizing that they are thinking and feeling as they read, good scripture readers can also control those thoughts and feelings to keep them focused on constructing meaning. To control their thoughts and feelings, good scripture readers must decide which thoughts to tuck away and come back to later, which ones to focus on to keep their hearts and minds in the chapter, and which ones to ignore because they are distracting them from understanding what they are reading.

When students cannot monitor their hearts and minds, their words, ideas, and even feelings can mush together into an unrecognizable lump. A student may read every word in 3 Nephi 11, only to find that when he gets to the end of the chapter, he cannot remember what he just read and may have only the vaguest impression that it was about Jesus. This is a common problem for readers who cannot pay attention to their mental and emotional experiences with scripture. Fortunately, this can be addressed by helping scripture readers

develop the ability to recognize and manage their thoughts and feelings during the reading process.

Practice 3: Recognize and Tolerate Confusion

Because good readers monitor their thoughts and feelings, they recognize when they are confused because they realize when a passage stops making sense. When asked, good scripture readers can pinpoint exactly where they began to get confused. As I was listening to a young Latter-day Saint woman read Alma 32, she stopped and said, “Well, I am confused.” Then she explained in great detail her confusion about the difference between being humble and being compelled to be humble. She concluded her explanation confessing, “I don’t understand what he is saying.” Interestingly, this young woman did not accept unwarranted solutions to her confusion simply because they were easily available or because she needed them to give her uncertainty a nice, although unsatisfying, conclusion.

In addition to recognizing confusion, good readers also tolerate confusion. This means that they do not give up when things get tough. Good readers can wallow in ambiguity without losing hope because they have learned to hold the confusion in their minds until things become clearer. About five minutes after she expressed her confusion about the “being humble” phrase, the same young woman said, “Oh! He says that he doesn’t mean that everyone was sort of pushed into humbling themselves, but he thinks that there are some people . . . that would have humbled themselves no matter what the circumstances.” Because she recognized and tolerated her confusion, this young woman found her way through a complex piece of scripture, demonstrating that good readers understand that confusion is simply part of the experience of reading difficult texts.

Practice 4: Reread

Many young readers think rereading is a form of cheating or at least a waste of time. They tend to believe they should be able to read a text once, understand it, and then move on to the next one. I find myself falling into this trap on occasion, believing that I can understand complex new ideas on a single read because of my background knowledge, reading experience, and knowledge of the reading process. For the most part, I am wrong, and have to go back and reread. Given the complexity of scripture, single-shot reading has very little value for developing gospel knowledge and testimony. Can you image



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Rereading helps readers gain conceptual and narrative coherence.

trying to understand scripture by reading each passage once, and only once? Of all the things that good scripture readers do, rereading is probably the most undervalued—but potentially the most powerful.

Rereading helps readers gain conceptual and narrative coherence by giving them the time and opportunity to reexamine big ideas or principles in the passage they are trying to understand. Rereading also gives them time to think and feel. For example, in a recent reading demonstration for a group of teachers in the Church, I found myself rereading the first few lines of 3 Nephi 11 at least five times in different ways, at different speeds, attending to different words to orient myself to the chapter and find my way into it. I felt like I needed that time to process the lines and give me a sense of where the chapter might be going.

As young readers reread words, phrases, verses, or longer passages, they can revisit places, stories, and doctrine in chunks that are just the right size for them. Rereading is like putting a magnifying glass on the specific parts of scripture that are unclear. And just like a magnifying glass, rereading can bring into focus what our youth need to see by helping them view the fuzzy parts more clearly. When reading complex texts, most experienced readers reread constantly, often unconsciously, and for a variety of purposes. Certainly, rereading takes a little more time, but good scripture readers are willing to put in the time because they know it is necessary if they hope to understand and apply what they read. As John Hilton suggests, if we want to move from reading scripture to feasting on scripture, we should follow The Three Rs: “Read the chapter once. Read the same chapter a second time. Read it again!”⁸

Practice 5: Understand Text Structures

Good readers understand that scripture passages often have a primary structure and a few secondary structures within them. Possible structures include compare and contrast, problem-solution, description, list, and argument. When students understand the structure of a text, they are better equipped to not only understand each part of the text but also how the parts fit together to create a larger whole. I often demonstrate the importance of structure by showing students a bar of random music notes and asking them to identify the song. They cannot because the sequence of notes has no recognizable order. Then I show them the same notes organized into the first bar of “I am a Child of God.” I explain that being able to see the structures in scripture is the difference between seeing a string of individual notes—this happened,

then that happened, then the song is over—and knowing how the notes work together to produce the music.

A simple example of text structure might be 1 Nephi 16. One structure in this chapter is problem-solution: Nephi is faced with the problem of getting food for his family without his or his brothers’ bows, so he tries to solve the problem by making a new bow and arrow and asking his father where to find food. Simply recognizing the problem-solution structure brings the problem and the solution parts of the chapter together, which is critical for understanding the larger narrative and the spiritual implications of what Nephi did. Ultimately, knowing how “the notes” fit together helps students know where to find the information they need, determine what is important in a passage, and develop a high-level consciousness of how scripture and specific passages are organized, all of which can improve students’ understanding and appreciation of what they read.

Practice 6: Break Apart the Text

Good scripture readers do not simply read from the first word to the last word. They often mentally and physically break the text into smaller chunks for in-depth investigations of appropriately sized pieces of scripture. To understand the overall structure of Mosiah 9–22, for example, good readers might chunk it chapter by chapter to explore what is going on and how each chapter fits into a larger chronological and geographic whole. Breaking apart the text can help clarify the chapters and their relationship to each other, which can improve youths’ understanding of this section of the Book of Mormon. On a smaller scale, good readers also break apart texts sentence by sentence, or phrase by phrase, to clarify their understanding of each piece and how the pieces fit together. This micro-level chunking may be appropriate for understanding how Christ is both the Father and the Son in Mosiah 15:1–5. Knowing that they can break apart a text and look at the specific pieces that cause them trouble can be liberating for young people. It can free them from believing they have to read and understand entire passages all at once, which is not only unreasonable, it is also unfair. This is simply not how good readers engage with difficult texts. And it is not how young scripture-readers should do it either.

Practice 7: Know and Use Fix-It Strategies

When they realize they are confused, good scripture readers have a repertoire of strategies they can use to fix their understanding. These include the following:

- Taking a break
- Using resources in scripture
- Asking someone for help
- Reading on
- Rereading the passage
- Activating prior knowledge
- Reflecting in writing
- Using context clues
- Retelling what was just read
- Adjusting reading speed
- Stopping and thinking

As another Latter-day Saint young woman that I worked with read 3 Nephi 12:13 about “the salt of the earth,” she said, “I’m thinking this is kind of a confusing verse for me. I know I had it explained before, but I forget what it means.” Having identified her confusion, she tried to fix it. First, she activated her background knowledge about the phrase “the salt of the earth.” This did not seem to work, so she moved onto her second fix-it strategy: rereading. After she reread the verse, she said, “I guess it is saying that we are the faithful ones, and that [laughs] . . . I don’t know.” I asked her what she thought she should do next. She responded with her third fix-it strategy, stating, “I’d probably look at the footnotes and see if there is anything that can help me.” She reviewed the footnotes and decided she did not want to look up any of the suggested passages. While in the footnotes, she was led to her fourth strategy: looking up *salt* in the index. This did not work for her either. I asked her what she was thinking, and she confessed, “I don’t know.”

Working hard to repair her confusion, this young woman identified and used a number of fix-it strategies with varying degrees of thoroughness and skill. Although ultimately unsuccessful at understanding the verse, her efforts showed that she worked hard to fix her confusion, that she did not fixate on one fix-it strategy, and that she used a number of different strategies as required by the passage and her reading purpose. Some of us may be bothered

that she did not repair her confusion by coming to understand what “salt of the earth” meant, but it is important to keep in mind that knowing what this phrase meant may not have been a high priority for her. It was clearly interesting to her based on the time and effort she put into trying to repair her confusion, but other things were clearly more pressing, such as finishing the chapter, or finishing the interview, or not wanting to be seen as a floundering reader. In the end, the work this young woman did to fix her reading confusion demonstrates how good readers deal with scripture-based confusion.

Practice 8: Read Purposefully

Reading without a purpose is like driving without knowing where we are going. We may be in a car, but if we do not know our destination, then it does not matter where we go, the path we take, or when we stop driving. The same is true for reading. We may be saying all of the words, but if we do not know our reading purpose, then it is difficult to know how quickly or slowly to read, which parts to focus on, when to skim, and when we have learned what we need to learn. One of the characteristics of good scripture readers is that they are purposeful. Knowing why they are reading gives them direction, focus, and resolve. It also helps them know what to think about as they read. We should, therefore, be clear about why we have asked our students to read certain passages. Even if they are not given a purpose for reading, good scripture readers develop their own authentic purposes to guide their reading. Good readers also know purpose matters a great deal with regard to what they get out of a text. Take Moroni’s words on faith in Ether 12. A student could read the passage for a variety of purposes:

- To compare it to other passages about faith
- To see which examples of faith Moroni uses
- To generate ideas for helping a doubting friend
- To overcome personal fears about serving a mission, talking to a bishop, or moving to a different school
- To learn what faith is
- To feel the Spirit

Because each of these reading purposes is different, each one is likely to yield different experiences with Ether 12. This means students are likely to learn different things from the chapter. I do not think it is too much to say that

purpose is one of the key drivers of scripture literacy. Try this experiment to see how purpose influences reading:

- Read Ether 12:6–9 to define faith.
- Read the verses again with the following question in mind: “How can I strengthen my faith?”
- Read the verses a third time to examine what “the heavenly gift” (Ether 12:8–9) might mean and how it relates to faith.

This brief experiment can demonstrate that reading purposes matter a great deal. They influence what and how we learn from scripture; specifically, that *why* we read (purpose for reading) influences *how* we read (manner of reading) and *what* we take from our reading (learning from reading). The same is true for our youth.

Practice 9: Activate Background Knowledge

Good readers understand that they do not come to scripture as blank slates with nothing to draw from to help them with the material; that is, they realize their knowledge, attitudes, opinions, and experiences can be used to make sense of scripture. When Nephi and Lehi are in prison, surrounded by a cloud of darkness (see Helaman 5), a good reader might activate her background knowledge about doubt, fear, sin, and the history of the Lamanites to understand what is going on. She might think about her own dark times when she felt afraid and uncertain, and she might reflect on the ways she overcame them to predict what might happen in the chapter with this particular cloud of darkness. Good readers do not read in a vacuum. They realize that their knowledge and lifetime of experiences influence how they read and what they get out of scripture. Notice in this example that the student activated the appropriate background knowledge and experiences to help her understand the passage. Had she activated irrelevant prior knowledge or fixated on experiences that did not relate to the passage, then her understanding of the passage would have likely suffered, not improved.

It is important to remember that everything our youth learn becomes prior knowledge immediately after they have learned it, which means they can instantly draw from it to improve their scripture literacy. This might help us think about creating prior knowledge in our students before we jump into a chapter. If, for example, our youth are unfamiliar in a general way with the

scattering and gathering of Israel, then helping them develop that understanding could give them just the right background knowledge they need to find their way through Jacob 5, making important connections and learning important lessons about Heavenly Father’s relationship with Israel as they go. Without this background knowledge, Jacob 5 is simply a jumble of loosely connected conversations between a master and his servants about trees, grafting, and fertilizing.

Creating the knowledge that youth need to engage more carefully and deeply with scripture is an important way to think about the role of prior knowledge in scripture literacy. Ultimately, students’ use of prior knowledge can improve their understanding of scripture, their ability to infer meaning and generate sophisticated insights, and their skill at drawing out lessons from specific passages. It is worth our time to think carefully about creating and activating our youths’ prior knowledge as it relates to specific scripture passages.

Practice 10: Expect Scripture to Make Sense

Many young people do not know that scripture is supposed to make sense. As I teach youth and young adults to read scripture and other types of texts, I often ask them, “What is reading?” and “How do you know when you’ve read something?” Most of them talk about reading as knowing all of the words, finishing a section of text, or saying all of the words without making any mistakes. Most students never talk about reading in terms of what they have read making sense to them. Some youth have told me, “Reading is looking at all of the words,” “I know I’ve read something because I’ve turned the page,” and “I know I’ve read it because I’ve *touched* the page” (emphasis added). These young people have not yet made the connection between saying or silently reading the words and making sense of what they read. Meaning is not *in* the words, it is in the relationships that exist *among* the words.

For many youth, understanding what they are reading may feel like magic—something that just happens mysteriously, even magically as they move their eyes across the page and down. Sometimes it happens. Sometimes it doesn’t. Good readers, however, understand that scripture is intentional and purposeful, and not a random collection of words. They realize that the words in scripture work together verse by verse, page by page, to say something meaningful and to convey ideas that are bigger than the words themselves. Good scripture readers expect scripture to have meaning, and

they actively look for the meaning as they read, even if it takes a lot of mental and spiritual effort and requires them to ask questions, reread, and do a little in-depth investigation. When youth understand that scripture is supposed to make sense, they are no longer adrift in a sea of words. They have something to anchor them in the text: the search for spiritually important meaning.

Final Thoughts

Although partial, these ten practices identify some of the most important things that scripture readers should know and do to become literate with scripture. The good news is that all of these practices can be taught. Some youth may have developed these practices before they even enter our classrooms, but most often good scripture readers are not born, nor do they enter our classrooms fully formed. Instead, they are made day by day, verse by verse, through their own hard work and the careful scripture literacy instruction of informed teachers and parents.

As we think about what we might do with these practices in our scripture literacy instruction, it is important to remember that they are not a checklist. We cannot simply explain them to our students and expect them to do them on their own; rather, students should practice these skills regularly, naturally, and with various scripture passages to help them accomplish their own scripture reading purposes. As we introduce new approaches for developing scripture literacy, like the practices in this article, we might consider the following:

- Clearly demonstrate what the practice looks like and make a case for its value.
- Make the practice explicit by talking about it as we model it.
- Demonstrate the same practice across various scripture passages.
- Demonstrate how to use several practices together.
- Give students opportunities to use the practice strategically and flexibly to construct gospel knowledge and deepen their faith.

It is also important to remember that these practices are tools. They are meant to improve youths' understanding of scripture, or to develop their scripture literacy, by helping them get inside of the ideas, principles, and doctrine in scripture. To develop these tools, youth benefit from clear explanations of

what the tools are, teacher models of how they work, and some flexibility in their implementation. **RE**

Notes

1. "Knowledges and practices" more accurately conveys the thrust of the article because it identifies some of the things that good scripture readers should know (knowledges) and do (practices) when they read scripture. However, "knowledges and practices" can be unwieldy, so I use "practices" as shorthand throughout the article.

2. See Dennis A. Wright, "Realities of Scripture Literacy" (faculty forum, McKay School of Education, Brigham Young University, Provo, UT, February 1997).

3. See Eric D. Rackley, "How Young Latter-day Saints read the Scriptures: Five Profiles," *The Religious Educator* 16, no. 2 (2015): 129–47; Rackley, "Latter-day Saint Youths' Construction of Sacred Texts," *Interpreter: A Journal of Mormon Scripture* 19 (2016): 39–65; Rackley, "Motivation for Religious Literacy Practices of Religious Youth: Examining the Practices of Latter-day Saint and Methodist Youth in One Community" (PhD diss., University of Michigan, 2010); Rackley, "Religious Youths' Motivations for Reading Complex Religious Texts," *Teachers College Record* 119, no. 3 (in press); and Rackley, "Scripture-Based Discourses of Latter-day Saint and Methodist Youths," *Reading Research Quarterly* 49, no. 4 (2014): 417–35.

4. See Rackley, "Motivation for Religious Literacy Practices of Religious Youth."

5. D. Todd Christofferson, "The Blessings of Scripture," *Ensign*, May 2010, 33.

6. Christofferson, "The Blessings of Scripture," 35.

7. Richard G. Scott, "Make the Exercise of Faith Your First Priority," *Ensign*, November 2014, 93.

8. John Hilton, *Please Pass the Scriptures: From Reading to Feasting* (Salt Lake City: Deseret Book, 2007), 124.