

Developing Biblical Literacy in Sunday School Learners

Learning about the Bible can overwhelm learners—children and adults alike—as they consider the task of reading a book that’s usually about 1,000 pages long. Fortunately, there are some basic parts of the Bible that you can teach to help learners develop *biblical literacy*. Some may think of biblical literacy as a person’s knowledge about the stories in the Bible. But biblical literacy can also include familiarity with different parts of the Bible and the ability to locate specific Bible passages. Follow these tips to get started, and brainstorm other ways that you can teach how important it is to learn about and love the Bible!

Begin with the Basics

- Teach learners that the Bible is divided into two main parts: the Old Testament and the New Testament.
- Show the table of contents at the beginning of the Bible. Give learners practice using it. Make sure to point out if their Bibles start over with page 1 when the New Testament begins.
- Many learners (both children and adults!) don’t know where to start reading the Bible. Explain that an easy way to start is in the middle of their Bibles—Psalms.
- Display a map of the important locations in the Bible so learners can see that biblical events happened in places that still exist today.
- Show where Bibles are kept in your class and in other places in the church. Ask if learners know where their family keeps a Bible at home.

Teach the Books of the Bible

- Post the names of the books of the Bible in your class.
- For lower elementary learners, create bingo cards with Old Testament book names. Play bingo occasionally so learners hear pronunciations and see spellings of lengthier names. As the Sunday school year progresses, invite learners to be the bingo caller.
- For upper elementary learners, use crossword puzzles, word searches, and other games to help them practice naming and spelling the books of the Bible.

- Teach the names of the Old and New Testament books with a song or chant.
- Choose two books of the Bible (one book from each Testament), and ask learners to tell you which one is from the New Testament and which one is from the Old Testament.
- Play games to increase learners’ familiarity with the sequence of the books of the Bible. For example, write the names of several books of the Bible on separate index cards, shuffle them, and ask learners to arrange them in order. Depending on the age and experience of your learners, start with only a few books, and increase the number of cards gradually.
- Point out learners who have names that are books of the Bible. Matthew, Mark, Luke, and John may be more obvious names, but your class may have a Ruth, Timothy, or Joel too. Also point out when a learner’s name is the same as one of the people in a Bible story.
- If your church has a library, encourage the purchase of Bible CD-ROMs so learners see how new technology tells the same story as the pages of the Bible.

Personalize the Bible

- Encourage learners to write in their Bibles. Children are often told they should not write in books, but let them know that they can underline, circle, and highlight in their own Bibles.
- Show the children several Bibles from the church or Bibles that you own. Share special stories about each Bible, and point out their different features. Learners may enjoy seeing Bibles written in other languages, Bibles with colorful pictures or lettering, and Bibles that are held together with rubber bands and duct tape because they are read so often.
- Make personalized bookmarks to use in the Bible.
- Encourage learners to rewrite passages or draw pictures from favorite Bible stories.
- Tell learners about some of your favorite Bible verses. Explain why they are important to you. Encourage them to identify verses that have special meaning for them.

- Let learners record themselves reading from the Bible. They could share the tapes with grandparents or other relatives, or with members of the congregation who are hospitalized or homebound. Encourage learners to record themselves at home as well.

Use Bibles Every Sunday

- At the beginning of the Sunday school season, teach learners how to find Bible verses. First, show them the table of contents. Then explain how every Bible passage lists a book, a chapter, and a verse. Help them find each of these sections in their Bibles to reduce the “What page is that on?” question in future sessions. Practice this skill across several lessons. Remember that some may have developed this skill already, while others may need more time.
- Emphasize the dramatic events that occurred to the Old Testament men and women of faith. Learners know about fire, rain, lions, and sibling rivalry! They will recognize these themes in the Old Testament stories.
- Point out the practical wisdom located in Proverbs.
- Tell learners that the New Testament is full of stories about Jesus Christ’s compassionate actions and words.
- Read from the Bible every Sunday so learners see adults reading from the Bible. Make sure that learners read from the Bible every Sunday too!
- Let readers know that there are lots of long words in the Bible. Assure them that you will help them pronounce any difficult words. Be honest if you don’t know the word either!
- Ask individuals to volunteer for Bible reading instead of telling learners they must all take turns. For learners who have reading difficulties or who are uncomfortable with reading in front of people, reading aloud can be very stressful. These learners may be more comfortable reading aloud from the Bible with a partner or a small group.

- Begin each class with the same verse, or with a verse from the same book of the Bible. Similarly, end each class with the same verse or with a verse from the same book. Passages from Psalms and Proverbs are good “bookends.”

Get Creative!

- Use a TV game show format to ask questions about the Bible. Have a range of questions, from easy to difficult, so all have an opportunity to answer correctly. Learners could guess letters to spell out the name of a Bible book, answer questions of increasing difficulty, or work as teams to answer questions.
- Hold a “Find the Verse” race. Use a stopwatch to time how long it takes learners to find a specific passage in their Bibles.
- Many Bible stories have physical objects and activities that can be easily made during the storytelling session. For example, the story of Jesus’ betrayal and arrest has several concrete objects and images that can be made from common household items. Learners can make the pieces of silver from foil, a bird’s beak from construction paper, and the three crosses from pencils and rubber bands. You could even provide a bandage for each learner to place on his or her ear to remember how Jesus healed the severed ear of the high priest’s slave.
- Modeling clay and playdough provide a way for learners to be active and creative while listening to Bible stories. Pass out a lump of clay or playdough to each learner before reading a Bible story, and encourage her or him to form shapes that correspond with parts of the story. For example, learners could form and then smash the walls of Jericho, shape a fish during the story of Jonah, and form two tablets when hearing about Moses and the Ten Commandments.

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