

Ten Tips for Reading Scripture in Public Worship

In workshops and his book [Public Reading of Scripture: A Handbook](#), Clay Schmit, a Lutheran minister and Fuller Theological Seminary professor, offers practical tips and exercises for public reading of Scripture.

Acknowledge that public Scripture reading is an important ministry. If you are asked to do so, say no if you don't have the gift or have no time to get ready. If you accept, be sure to prepare. If you are in charge of finding Scripture readers, look for people who are comfortable working a mike, have an emotional range in their own personality, and are confident in front of a group. "If God hasn't placed such a gift in your church, you might pray it arrives in a new person," Schmit says.

See for yourself how interpretation makes a difference. Consider the words "Her name was Elizabeth." Say it aloud four times, each time emphasizing a different word. How does your emphasis change the meaning of that simple sentence?

Make sure you understand the meaning of the passage you will read during public. Get comfortable with expressing an emotional range. Just for fun during practice, go overboard with gestures and vocal style. Read the same sentence in different ways to suggest different emotions. Try falsetto, trilled "r" sounds, deep, sing-song, staccato, chanted, fake foreign accent, disgusted, whiny, ultra smooth, monotone, and other voices.

Next read some children's books aloud. "When you're reading to kids or talking to kids, you sometimes become *excessively expressive*, don't you? Yes, you *do* Now back it off about a quarter and you'll have a good voice for reading Scripture in church," Schmit says.

Use pauses effectively. Note the difference in these readings of Luke 2:16:

They went with haste and found Mary and Joseph and the child lying in a manger.

They went with haste (pause) and found Mary and Joseph and the child lying in a manger.

They went with haste (pause) and found Mary and Joseph (pause) and the child lying in a manger.

Look up from your reading only to reinforce the message. "Avoid the bobbing head effect," Schmit says. "The eyes are the mirror of thought and imagination, so it's fine to look off into space as you're thinking of an image, say when the father looked up and saw the Prodigal Son at a great distance...or the Psalmist says 'I lift my eyes to the hills.' If you do this, look far off, not at individual people." Other good times to look at worshipers would be on a sentence such as Jesus asking his storm-tossed disciples, "Where is your faith?" or Paul's admonitions in Colossians 3 to "set your minds on things that are above, not on things that are on earth."

Read; don't act. "People understand you are reading, so don't think you have to move your body or gesture a lot," Schmit says. Simply stand tall so your voice projects, use the mike, and read the text. However, do try to read so that your facial gestures are evident, even if you have to hold the Bible above the lectern.

Prepare ahead of time by reading aloud. Simply reading silently to yourself will not help you identify potential problems of pronunciation, pauses, and pacing.

Consider forming a small group of people to meet for six to eight weeks. Together you can practice reading aloud, critique each other (for the congregation's benefit), and gradually invite new people into your group. Schmit says such groups sometimes become ongoing small groups that bond and pray together.

Schmit's [book](#) has further advice on vocal do's and don'ts. [Tim Brown](#) also has good tips for reading Scripture aloud.