

Sermon Outline

Having some sections or divisions or headings will make your message easier to follow and easier for your listeners to remember. Few people, if any, will remember everything you have said but if they have memorable markers along the way, or 'pegs', they will more easily recall the accompanying detail.

Pointers about Points

- i. Keep them separate
Each new point or section should not just be a rehash of the previous one. It should introduce a new element of teaching or emphasis.
- ii. Keep them moving
Each point or division should clearly lead to the next. Arrange your points in order to build up your argument and press home the main theme or burden of your message. Sometimes you will do that by following the sequence of the scriptural passage, but other times you may want to reverse or alter the biblical sequence in order to make your point, and you are free to do so as long as in so doing you don't alter the meaning of the text.
- iii. Keep them natural
Don't fall into the trap of trying to be clever in identifying your points or divisions. Be natural as far as both the text and you are concerned. The bones of the sermon should be based on the bones of the text, and often from the text we will see not only where the bones are but what we could call them. Alliteration can be helpful and memorable but don't force it, and vary your approach.

By way of example, I recently preached on 1 Peter 4vv12-19 as part of a series working through that letter. The burden of this section is how to react to suffering for the sake of Christ and, though given to alliteration, I saw some very natural headings within the text itself and used them, so my three sections were:
 - Don't be surprised (v13)
 - Don't be ashamed (16)
 - Think of the alternative (v17)
- iv. Keep them consistent
Your divisions, and the labels you give them, should combine to reinforce the overall burden of your message. In the example above, each of the divisions goes part of the way to do just that, as each is part of the answer to the question, 'how should believers react to suffering for the sake of Christ?'
- v. Keep them persuasive
It is worth a little extra thought to make our divisions more than just breaks, or milestones, along the way but actually part of the teaching of the message. Division should be more than just descriptions of what the text says. Make them part of the application so that as people remember the divisions they also remember what they are supposed to do in response to God's Word.
- vi. Keep them illustrated
This is a big and important subject, meriting a session all of its own, but here are a few ground rules. Make good use of illustrations. Well-chosen illustrations are like windows in a dark building throwing light where you want it.

Illustrations should help

- explain the point you are teaching
- bring the point home to the listeners
- help the listeners remember the point you are making.

You can glean illustrations from the Bible, from every day life, from the news, etc. and you should begin NOW to look out for and collect them, as you never know when one will be useful.

Warnings:

- a. don't use an illustration for the sake of it; only use it if it will accomplish the three objectives identified above
- b. don't use someone in the congregation or possibly known to the congregation as an illustration without their express permission
- c. don't use too many illustrations; some messages are like blocks of high rise flats – one story on top of another. Any more than one good and apt illustration for each point you are making is probably too many.

vii. Keep them few

Though often the subject of ridicule and laughter, the often caricatured 'three pointer' is hard to beat as a good model of teaching. Generally people find it hard to retain interest if there are more than three, or at the most four, main divisions in a message, and even harder to remember them. Regard three as normal and four as maximum though, as with most guidelines, there will always be exceptions