

Cognition and Communication in Theological Education

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Cognition & Communication

Individual vs group-based communication

High- vs low-context communication

Holistic vs analytical thinking

Abstract vs concrete thinking

Deduction vs induction

Literacy vs orality

Implications for theological education



Individual vs group communication



Different views of the self result in different communication styles and perceptions of the communication of others

Individual vs group communication

The interdependent self



Communication is usually a group phenomenon

- The central perspective is “we” when speaking or listening
- Communication of group thoughts and opinions
- Personal thoughts and opinions are withheld, especially when different than those of others
- Speakers must have the right to speak for the group

Individual vs group communication

Ezra 10:12 Then all the assembly replied with a loud voice, “It is our duty to do exactly as you have said!”

John 6:30–31 So they [*the crowd*] said to Him, “What then are You doing as a sign, so that we may see, and believe You? What work are You performing? Our fathers ate the manna in the wilderness; as it is written: ‘HE GAVE THEM BREAD OUT OF HEAVEN TO EAT.’”



Individual vs group communication

The independent self

Communication is usually an individual phenomenon

- The central perspective is “I” when speaking or listening
- Each person speaks their own mind
- Personal thoughts and opinions are spoken openly and freely, even when in conflict with those of others
- All individuals have the right to speak for themselves



Individual vs group communication

Mark 8:29–30:

²⁹ And He continued by questioning them [p/], “But who do you [p/] say that I am?”

Peter [sg] answered and said to Him, “You are the Christ.”

Whose opinion is this, Peter’s personal opinion
or the opinion of the all the disciples?

³⁰ And He warned them [p/] to tell no one about Him.



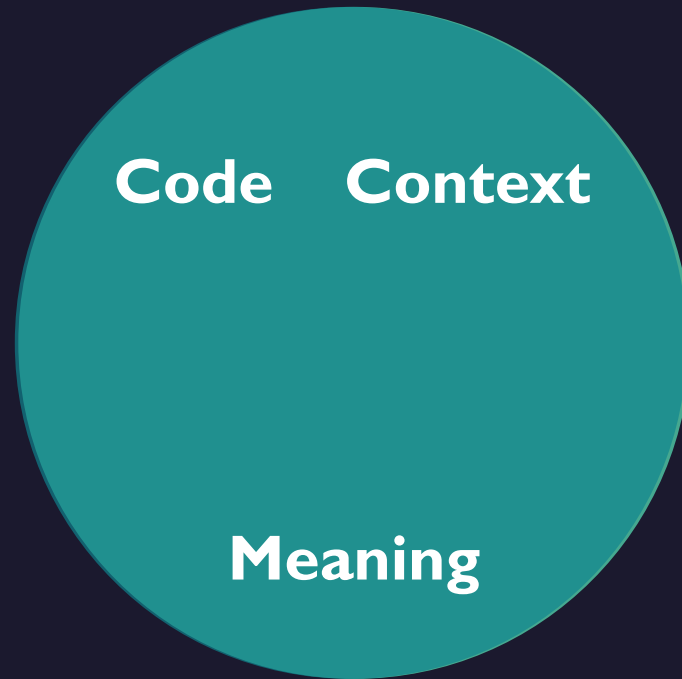
Individual vs group communication

Contrasting values lead to different perceptions of what is important in the communication of others

A group of Western missionaries and Africans were asked to tell the main point of the story of Joseph:

- **The individualist missionaries** noted how Joseph, as an *individual*, remained *faithful to God* no matter what happened to *him*
- **The collectivist Africans** observed that he *never forgot his family* no matter how far he travelled away or what he endured from his brothers

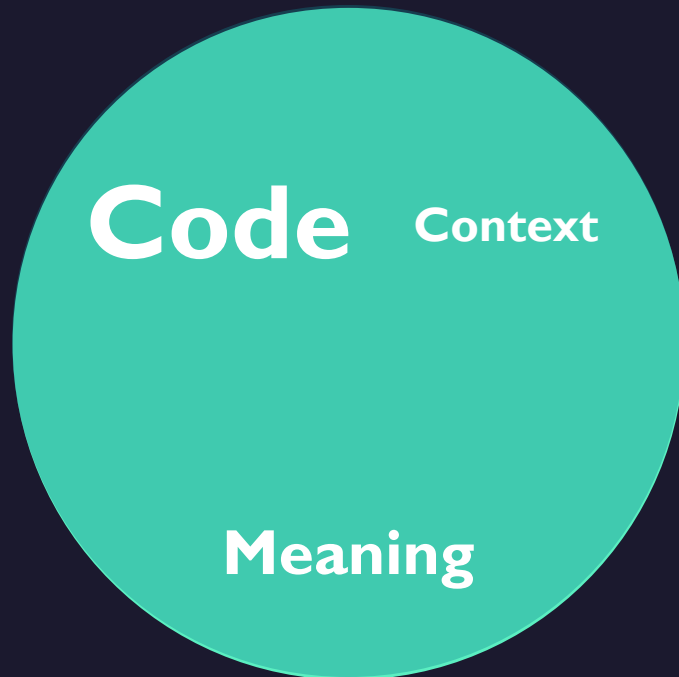
High- vs low-context communication



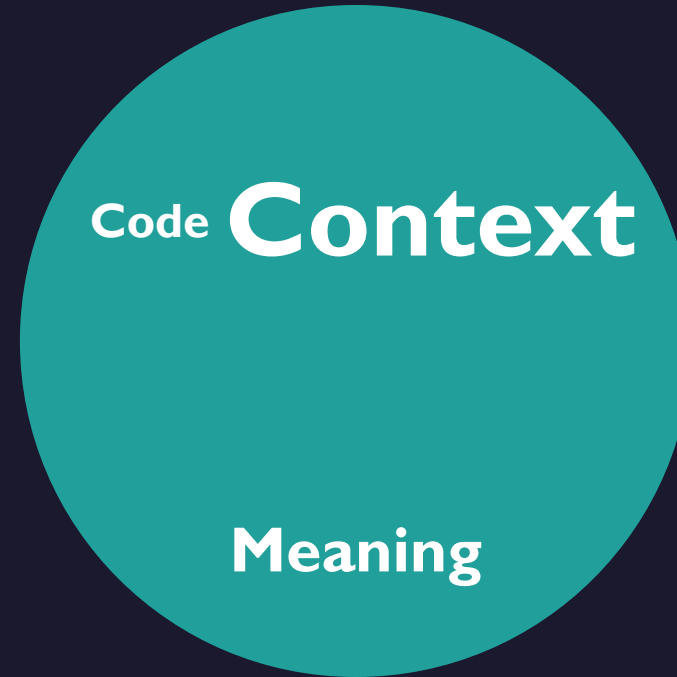
High- vs low-context communication

High- and low-context refer to the amount that context contributes to the meaning

LOW CONTEXT



HIGH CONTEXT



High- vs low-context communication

High-context communication



- Used by people who share history and physical context in close or closed communities
- Communication relies heavily on layers of shared context: historical, social, relational, and situational
- Concise because less meaning is invested in the code, while much more is implied by the context
- Greater significance of nonverbal code: gestures, physical appearance and proximity, the use of time
- Reinforces group identity through insider information; promotes group harmony by reducing threats through indirect speech
- Direct & explicit speech (LCC) is threatening

High- vs low-context communication

- Necessary for individuals living in melting-pot societies where few people share history or context
- Most of the information is invested in the code, resisting dependence upon context
- Precise, detailed, and explicit, allowing the words to speak for themselves
- Open & direct since group harmony is less important than individual goals and freedom of expression
- Don't trust high-context information: (1) they lack the shared context to decode it (seems subjective), (2) they only trust the explicit information

Low-context communication



Holistic vs analytical thinking



Focuses on and prioritizes the whole
Associated with collectivism



Focuses on and prioritizes the parts
Associated with individualism

Why?



Individualism & collectivism

One's view of social space, whether independent or interdependent, influences one's processes of attention, perception, and reasoning.

- Richard Nisbett, *The Geography of Thought*, 35–36

Holistic vs analytical thinking

What's the first thing you see?



Holistic vs analytical thinking

The relationship between the whole and its parts



Analytical thinkers (object oriented)

- Perceive the parts first
- Prioritize parts over the whole
- Miss the forest for the trees
- Greater need for structure

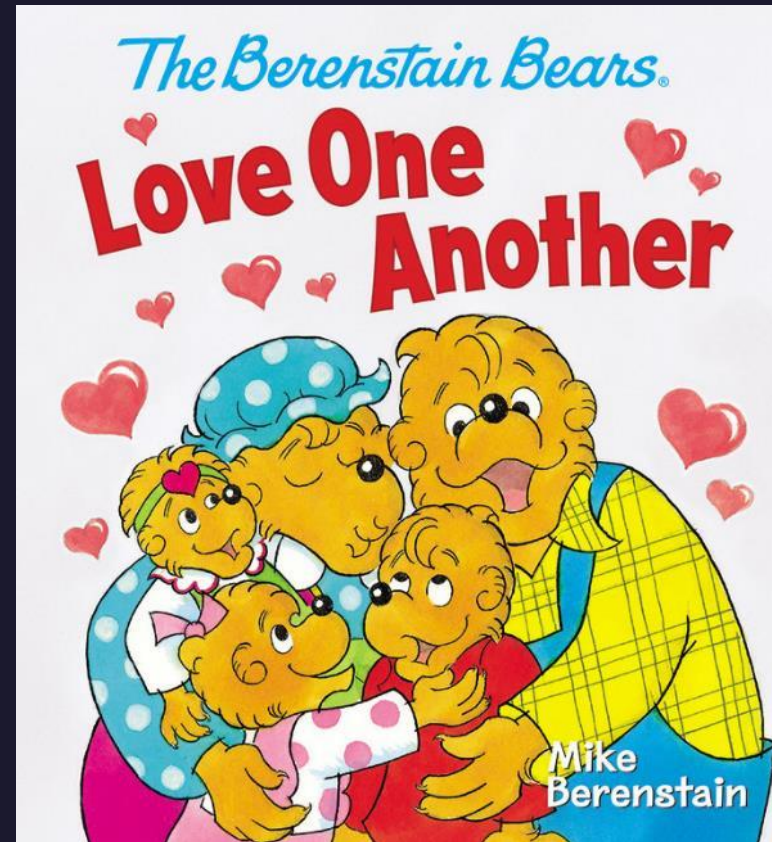
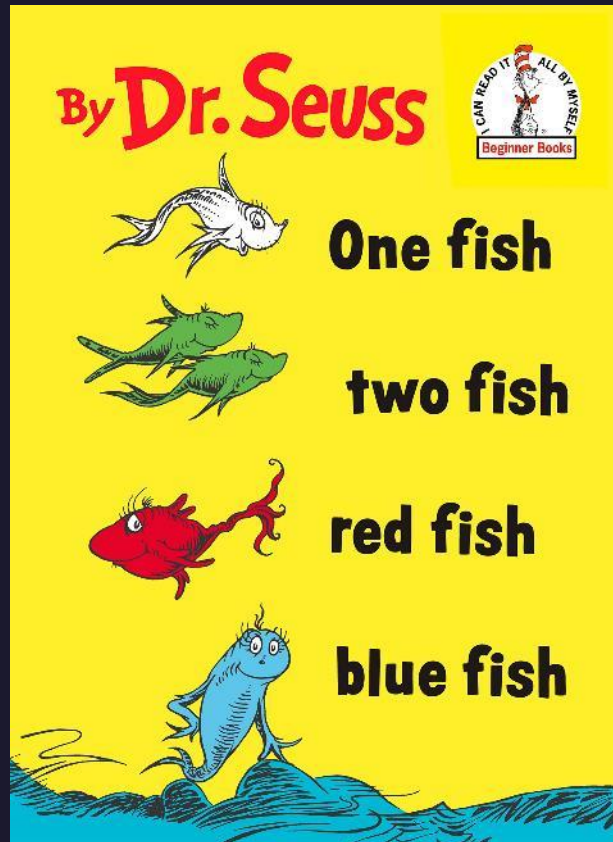


Holistic thinkers (context oriented)

- Perceive the whole first
- Prioritize the whole over its parts
- Miss the trees for the forest
- Less need for structure

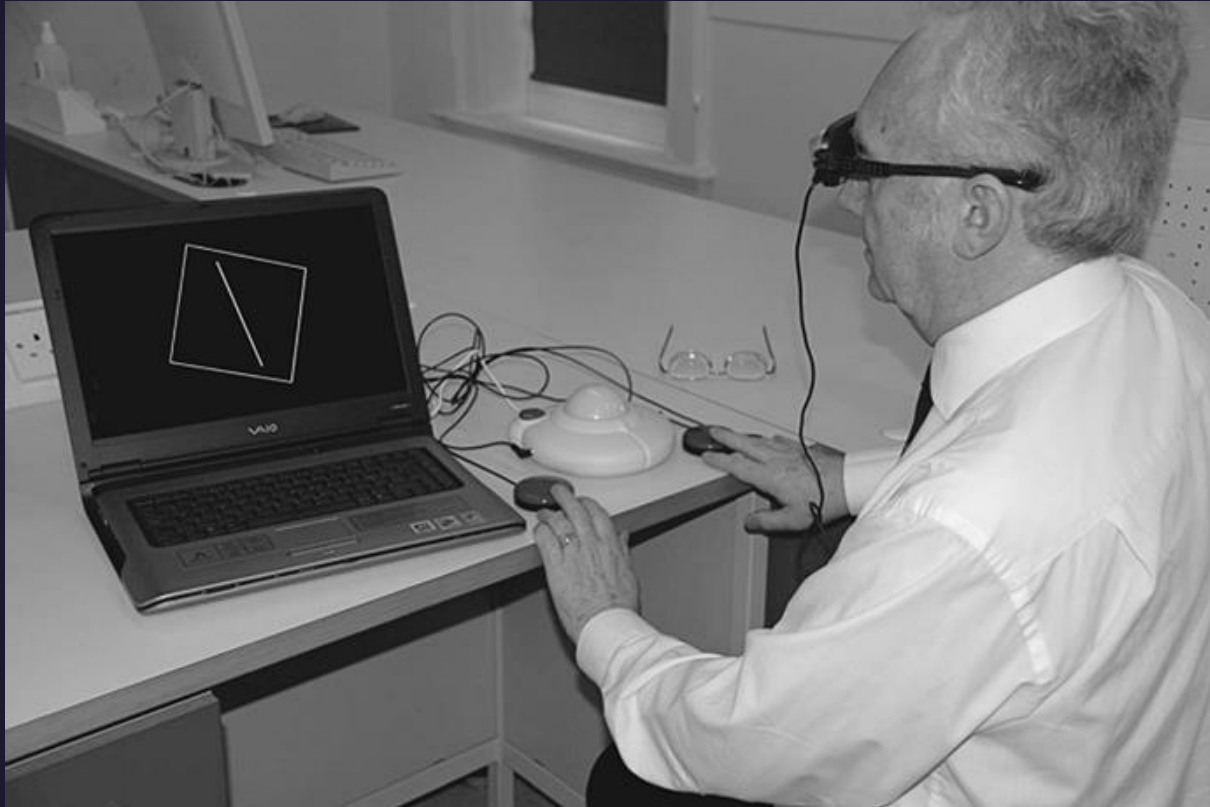
Holistic vs analytical thinking

Characteristics of objects or the relationships between them?

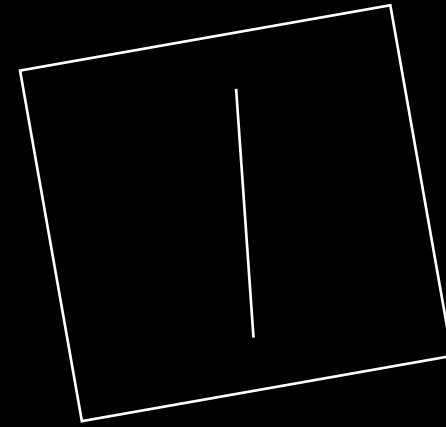


Field dependence

The frame & rod test

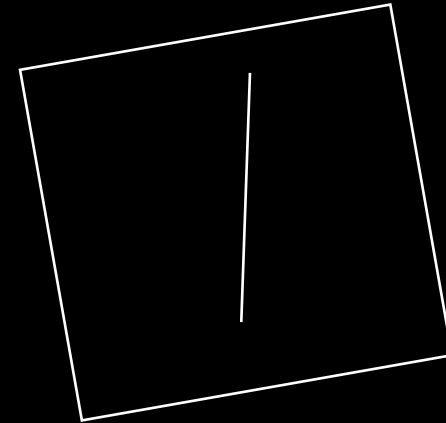


Field dependence



External frames of reference

Field independence



Internal frames of reference

Field dependence

Field dependent people

- Rely on external frames of reference
- Lower cognitive skills
- Higher social skills
- Extended families and complex social structures (social interdependence)

Field independent people

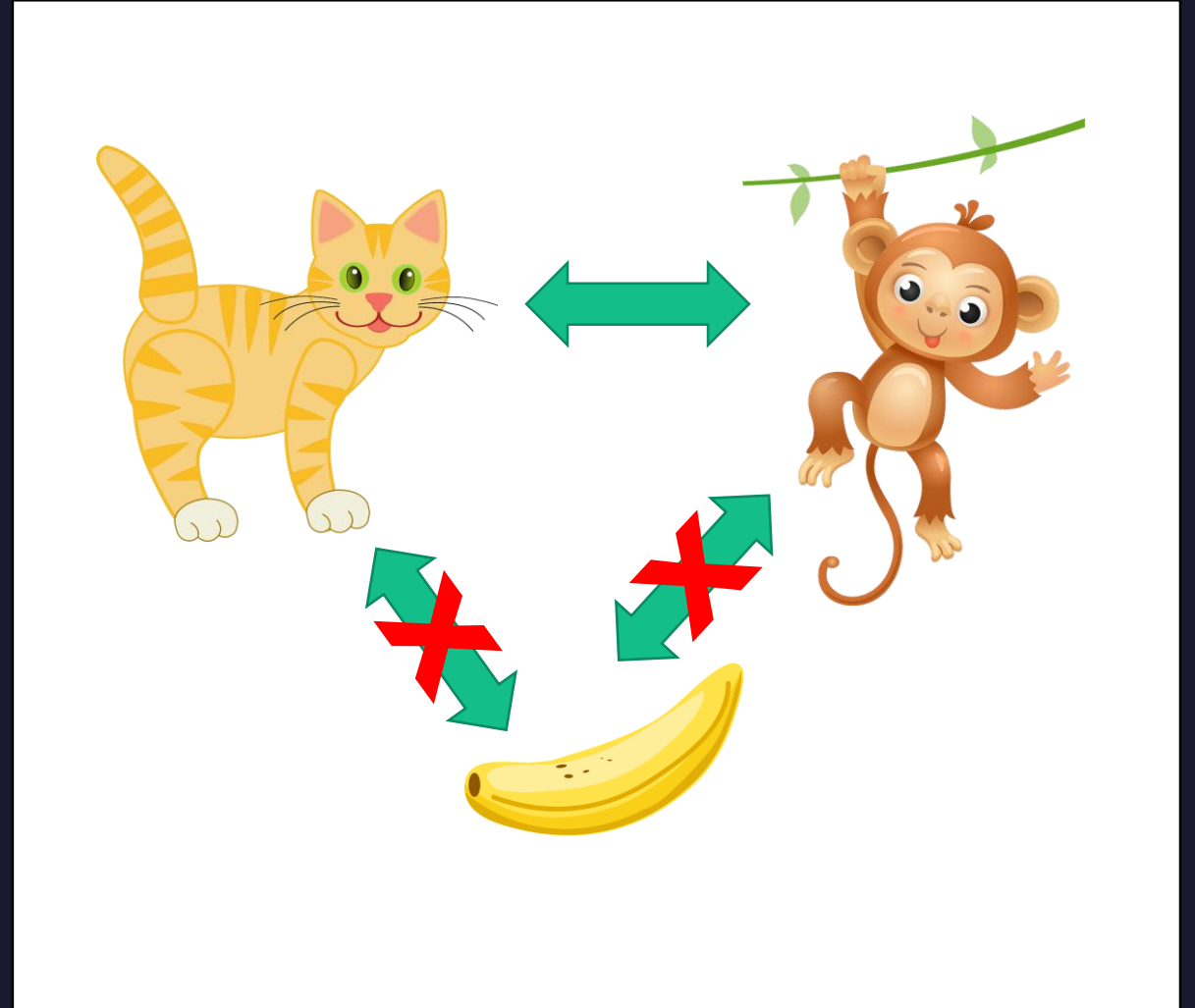
- Rely on internal frames of reference
- Higher cognitive skills
- Lower social skills
- Nuclear families and loose social structures (social autonomy)



Holistic vs analytical thinking

Which two of these belong together?

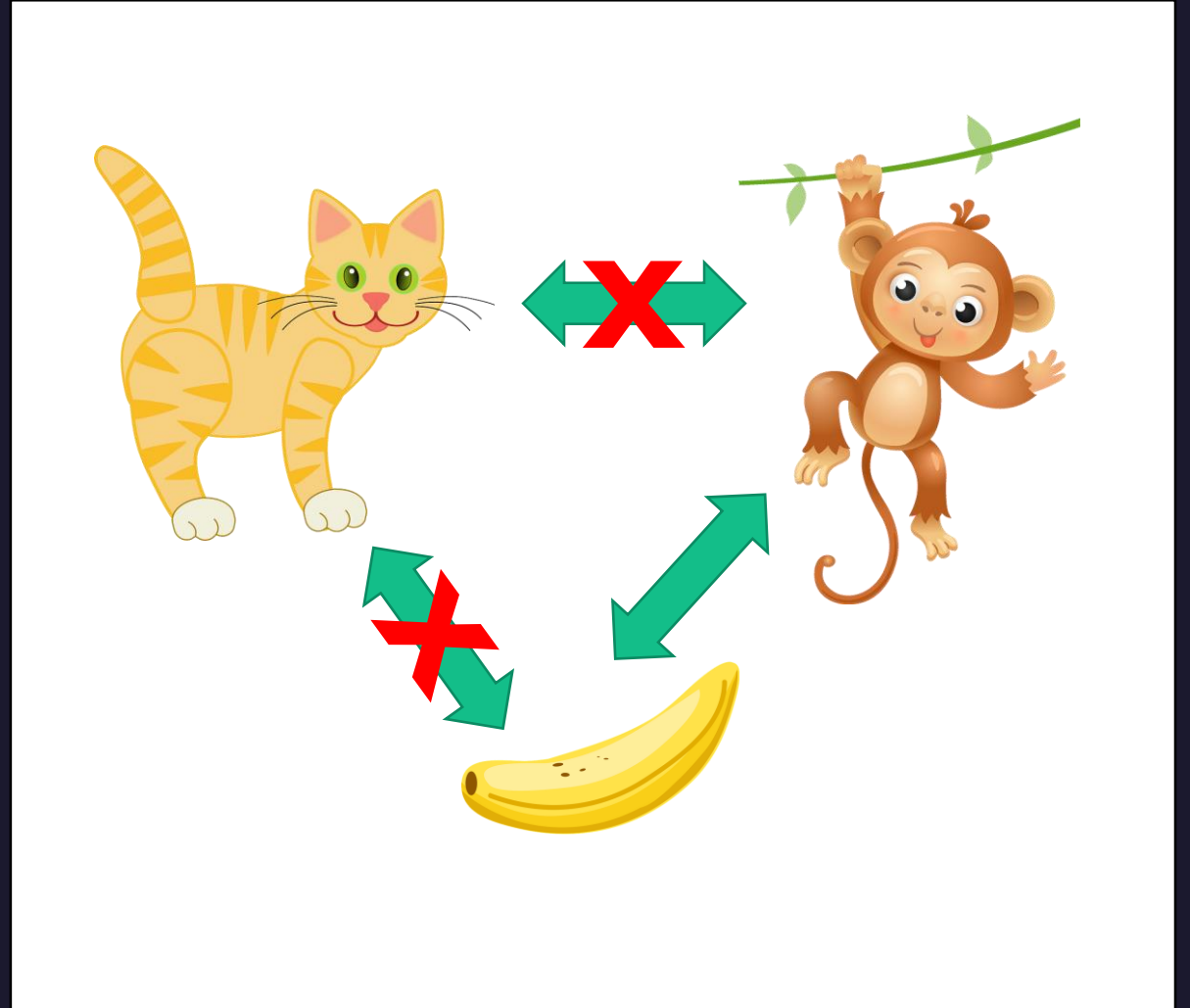
- **Object orientation:**
Based on intrinsic characteristics
The cat and monkey are both animals
- **Context orientation:**
Based on extrinsic relationships



Holistic vs analytical thinking

Which two of these belong together?

- **Object orientation:**
Based on intrinsic characteristics
The cat and monkey are both animals
- **Context orientation:**
Based on extrinsic relationships
Monkeys like bananas, but cats don't like bananas or monkeys.



Abstract vs concrete thinking



Abstract vs concrete thinking

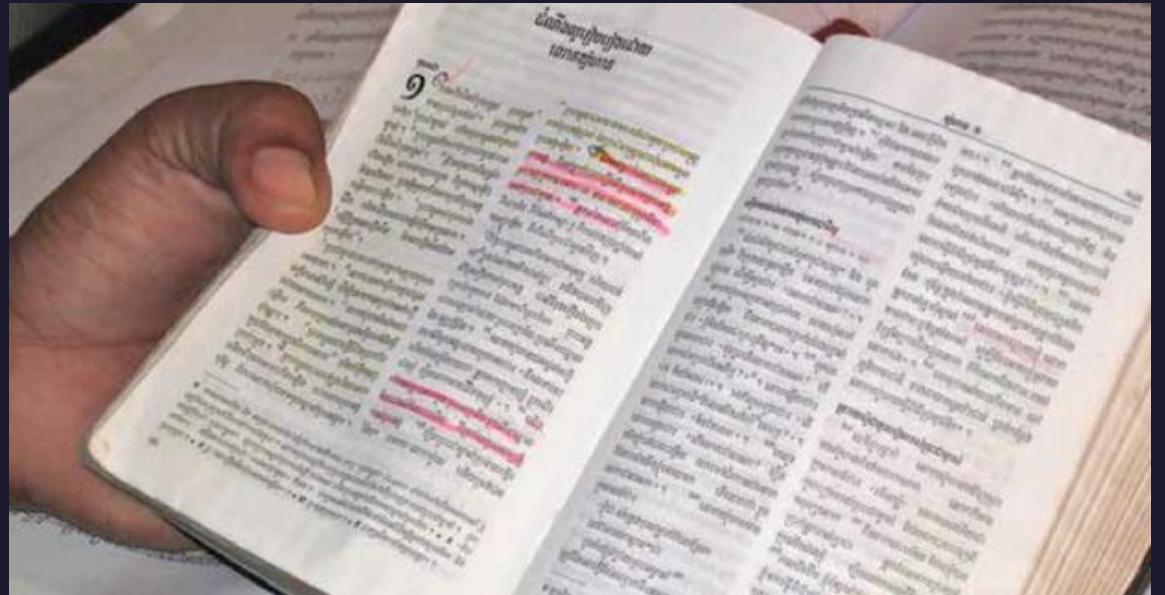
- **Abstract thinking** is disassociated from specific events or objects, such as thinking in concepts, ideas, generalizations, categories, qualities, etc.
- **Concrete thinking** is directly associated with actual events or objects.



Abstract vs concrete thinking

The homiletical point of I Samuel 17:

“In this passage we learn that if we first give God the glory, then he will give us the victory.”



Abstract vs concrete thinking


The research of Alexander Luria among illiterate, uneducated peasants of the Kashgar people in Uzbekistan

- When presented with syllogisms, they refused to draw inferences based on logic, even if one of the premises was rooted in their own concrete experiences.

Cotton grows well where it is hot and dry.

England is cold and damp.

Can cotton grow there or not?



“I’ve never been to England! How should I know if cotton grows there?”

Abstract vs concrete thinking

The research of Alexander Luria among illiterate, uneducated peasants of the Kashgar people in Uzbekistan

- When presented with syllogisms, they refused to draw inferences based on logic, even if one of the premises was rooted in their own concrete experiences.
- When asked to define certain objects, they refused to provide a verbal, logical definition of objects and did not group items in abstract categories. They gave visual descriptions of items being used in practical, concrete situations in relationship to other items.



Abstract versus concrete thinking



Abstract

Hammer : *n.* A hand tool consisting of a solid head set crosswise on a handle and used for pounding



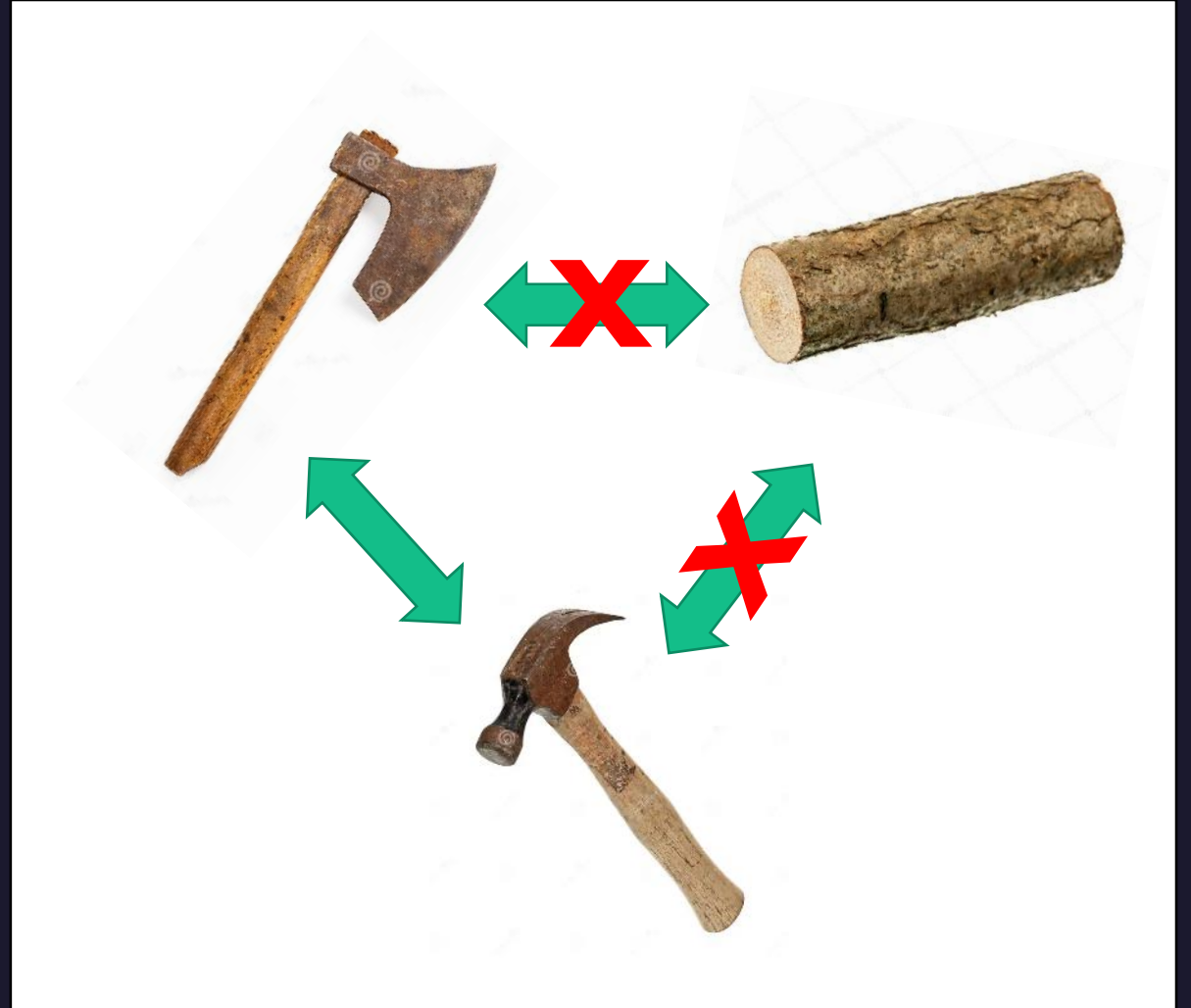
Concrete

“An axe is used to cut down trees or split wood. It looks like a hammer, but a hammer can’t be used to cut down trees. It’s used for pounding in nails.”

Abstract vs concrete thinking

Which two of these belong together?

- **Abstract thinking:**
Based on abstract categories
The axe and hammer are tools
- **Concrete thinking:**
Based on concrete situations



Abstract vs concrete thinking

Which two of these belong together?

- **Abstract thinking:**

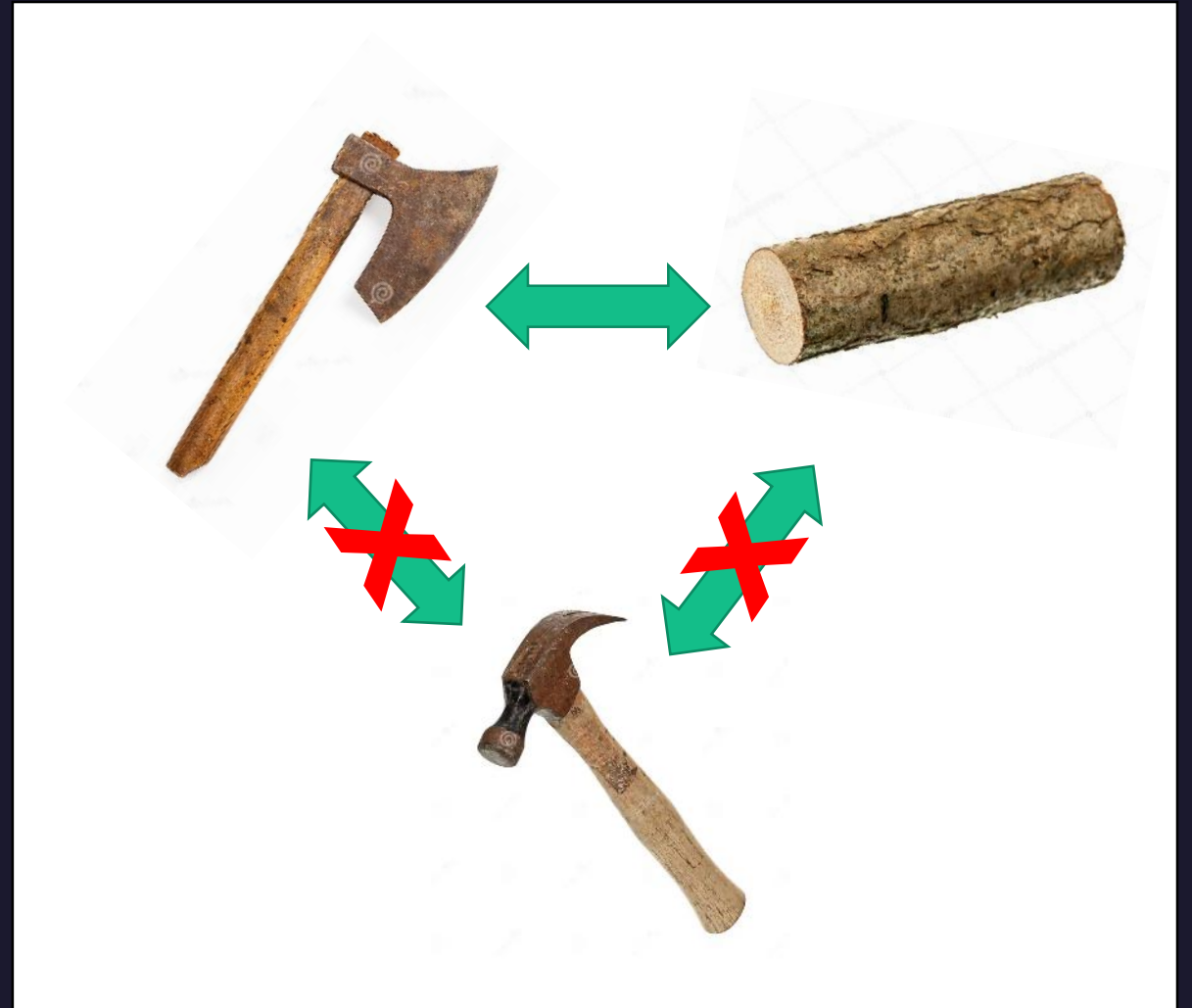
Based on abstract categories

The axe and hammer are tools

- **Concrete thinking:**

Based on concrete situations

The axe can chop the wood. But the hammer can't be used on the wood without nails, and the hammer and axe are not used on each other.



Environmental factors

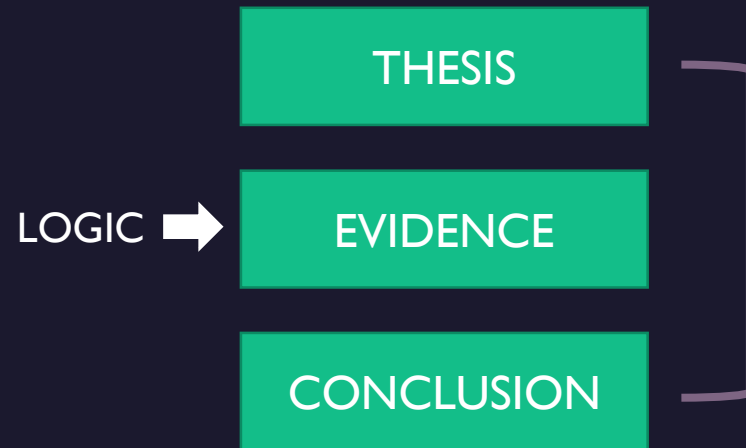
Factors that lead to abstract and analytical cognitive style:

- The ability to read
- Western education
- Wage employment
- Urbanization
- Exposure to people from other cultures

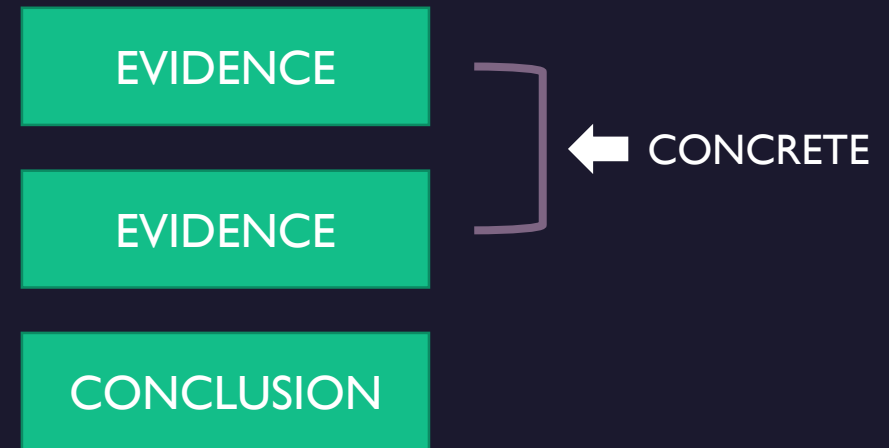


Deduction vs induction

Deduction is to arrive at a conclusion by reasoning



Induction is to arrive at a conclusion by observing particular instances

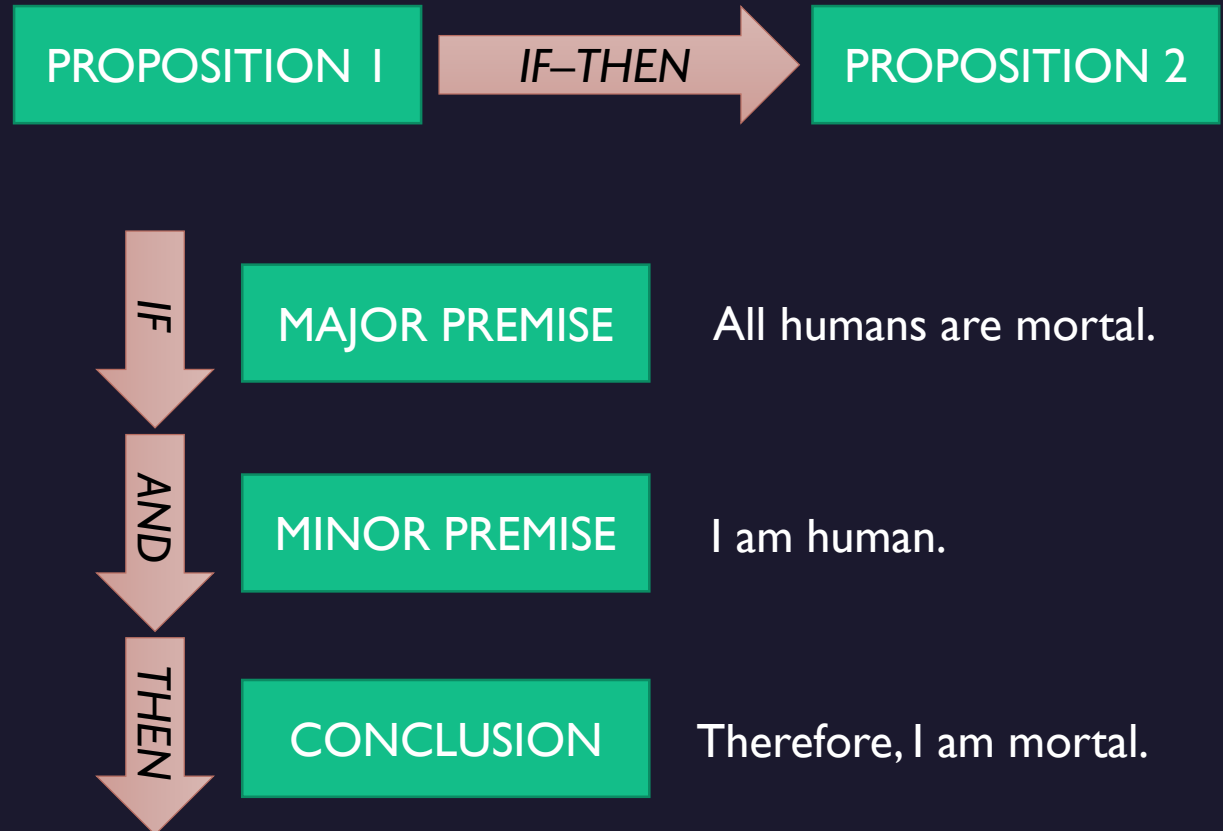


Deduction vs induction

Deduction is usually dependent upon Western logic

- The conclusion is stated at the beginning & end
- Linear cause-effect relationships between abstract propositions
- The syllogism

What other types of evidence might prove a statement to be true or false?



Deduction vs induction

Induction draws conclusions by observing concrete objects, actions, and events in the real world

- The scientific method
- Telling stories

Telling a story



Literacy and orality

By “literacy” I don’t mean the ability of an individual to read and write.

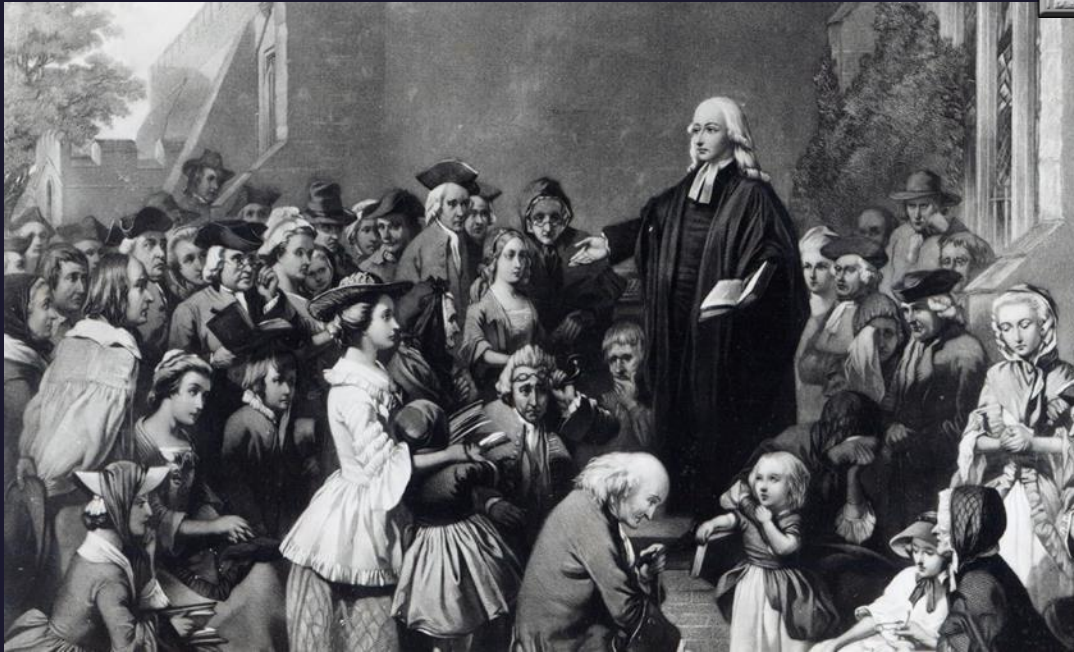
I’m speaking of literacy as a broader cultural phenomenon, or how society and culture change when everyone knows how to read and write.



Literacy and orality



How did we get from here...



...to here?



Literacy and orality



Before the printing press:

- Literacy was a specialized skill possessed by a small minority (little cultural impact)
- Writing was a surrogate for verbal communication
- Reading occurred in an aural plane in and in collective social space
- Analysis was not easy for listeners
- Cognition was external, collective, oral in rhetorical form, and generally concrete

Literacy and orality

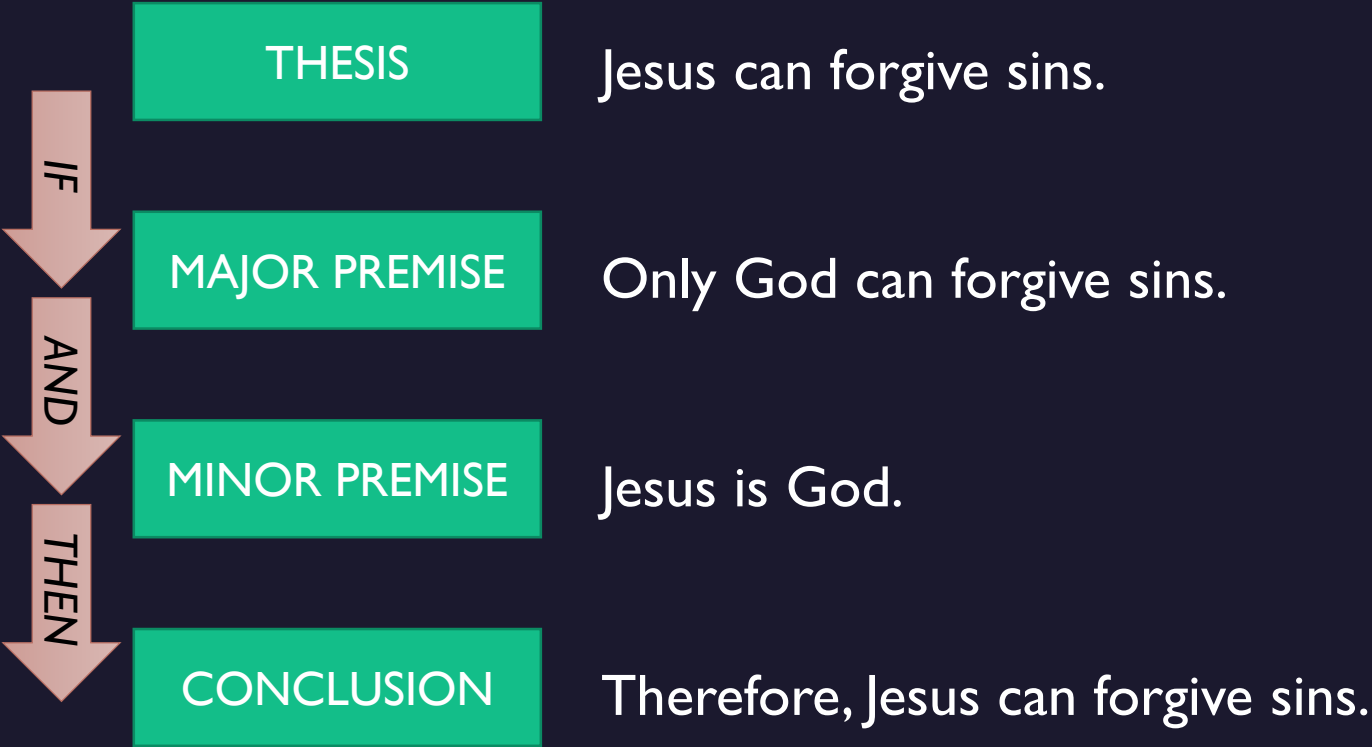
Since the printing press:

- Literacy is an elementary skill possessed by the majority (broad cultural impact)
- Writing in print is a primary form of communication
- Reading occurs on a visual plane in a silent, private social space
- Analysis (editing & examination) is easy for writers and readers
- Cognition is internal and individual; frequently abstract and logical in its rhetorical form



A concluding illustration

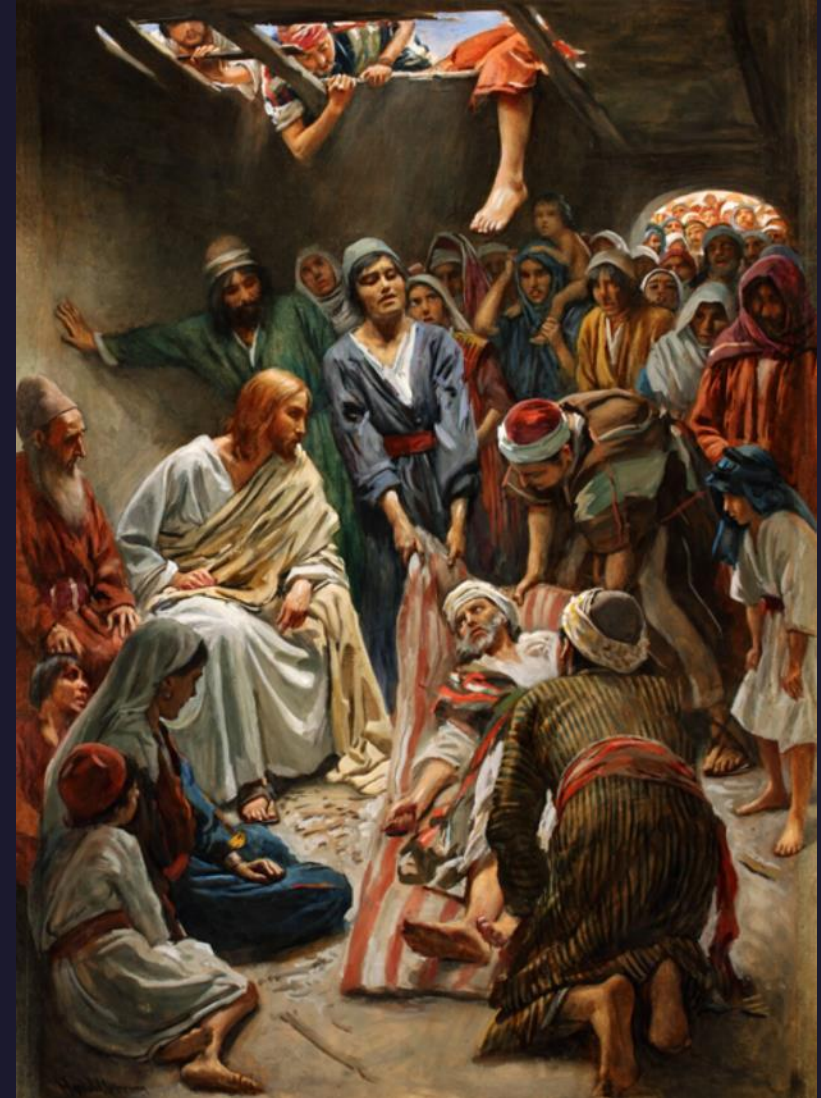
A seminary student is given an assignment to prove that Jesus has the authority to forgive sins



A concluding illustration

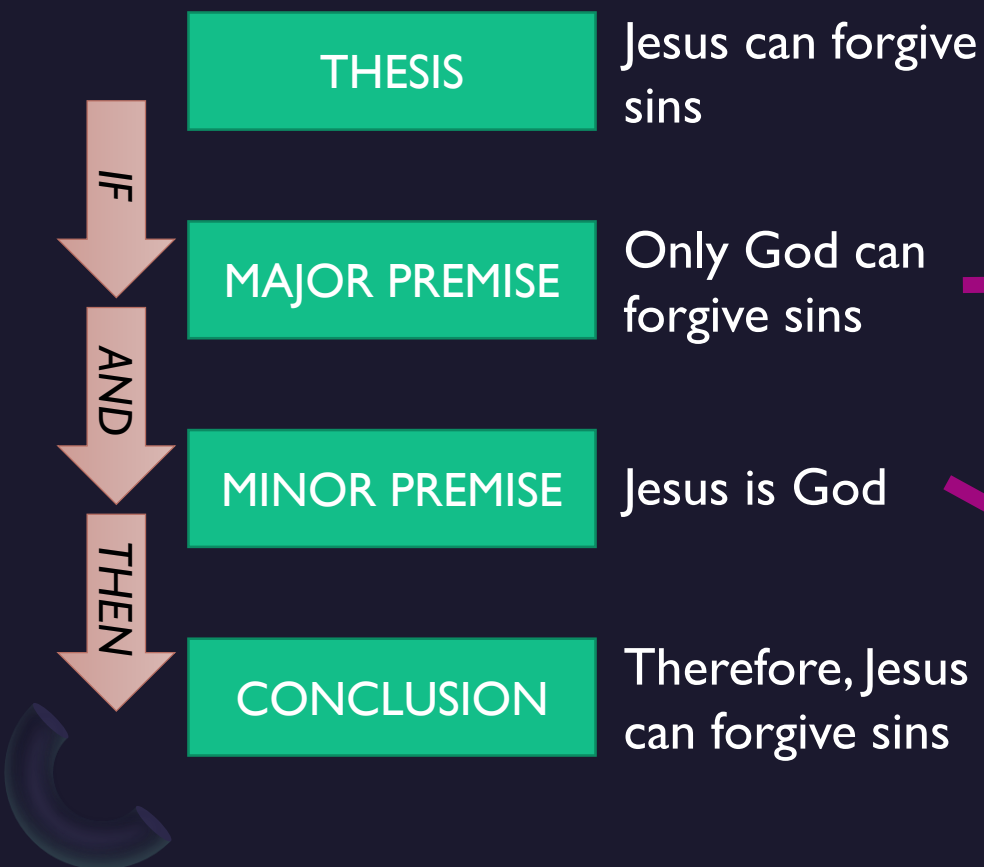
How did Mark show that Jesus has authority to forgive sins (Mark 2:1–12)?

- A concrete scenario presented inductively (narrative)
- Meaning is dependent on multiple layers of context
- Its reasoning is worked out through the speech of the characters in a collective setting (PCR)
- No abstraction, analysis, or logical proofs—its point is proven by the miracle at the conclusion of the story
- Presented orally and collectively (public reading)

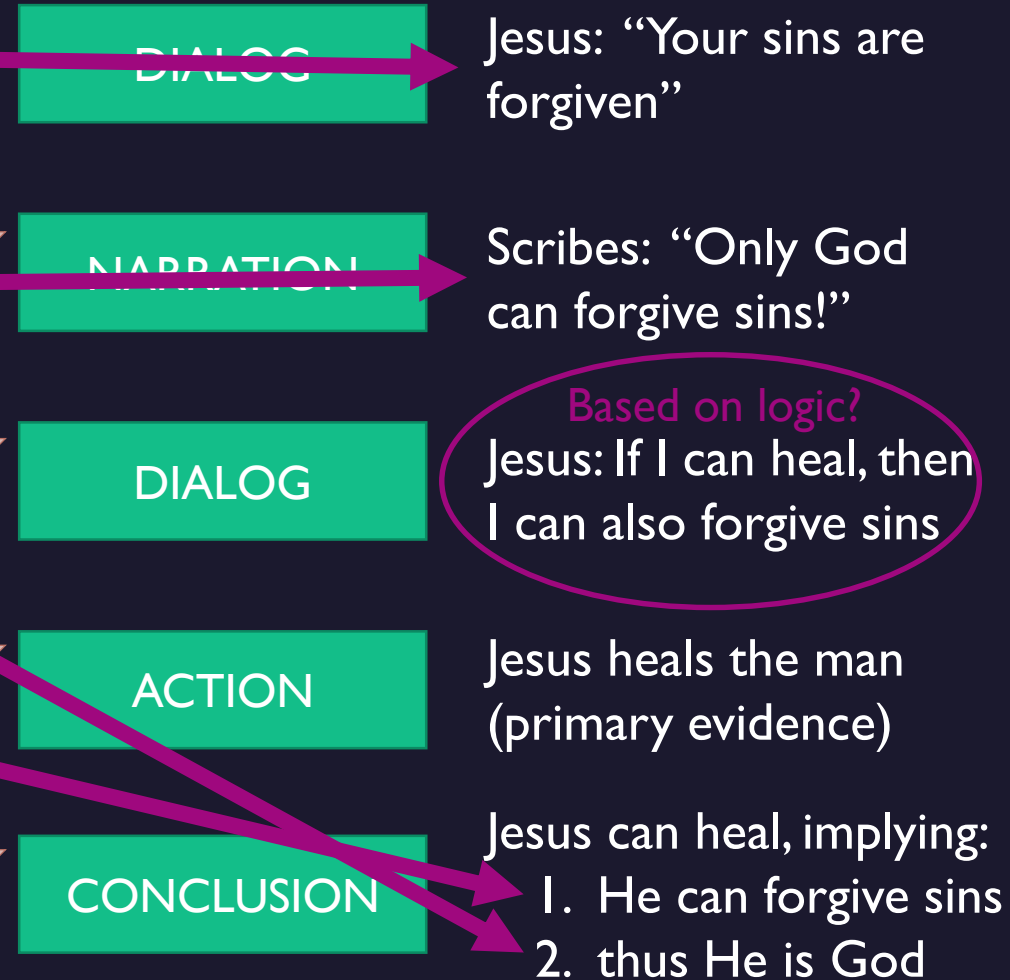


A concluding illustration

The seminary student's argument



Mark's argument



Implications for theological education

Evangelism & Discipleship

- Are we reshaping future pastors from collectivist communities into individualists through the critical method, rational processes, and our communication style?
 - How will this affect their preaching and leadership in their churches at home?
 - How will this affect the ability of the church to reach others in the culture?
- Are we shortcutting evangelism and discipleship by teaching abstract propositional truth but not engaging students in the concrete through mentoring relationships or apprenticeship?
 - Teaching propositional, abstract *knowledge* but not concrete, practical *know how*
 - How will this affect their leadership in their churches in the areas of shepherding and discipling?

Implications for theological education

Hermeneutics & Homiletics

- Are students taught to see what is relevant in the Bible from an American perspective? What about the perspectives of the Bible's ancient Mediterranean writers and people from their own cultures?
- Should we teach students only to focus on the explicit statements in the Bible (LCC) while overlooking what the biblical writers meant to imply by them (HCC)?
- Should interpretive methods emphasize dissecting, objectifying, and characterizing the words in the Bible or relate passages in the Bible to their contexts, to each other, and to the whole message?
- Should our pedagogy provide abstract methodologies or model concrete practices?
- Should we teach students to preach abstract "principles" derived from the text or to preach the whole text including its context, concrete details, and cultural aspects?
- Should we change their implicit epistemology from external and concrete to internal and rational?
- Are we teaching proper contextualization in hermeneutics and homiletics?