AN ANNUAL TEACHING STRATEGY FOR YOUTH MINISTRY

It's so important to have a strategy for what you teach teenagers. Without a strategy, we run the risk of missing important ideas, teaching only the topics that personally interest us most, and ultimately failing to give teenagers a full and holistic view of God. So how do we do that? It comes down to **what we teach every week, every month, and every year.** And for teenagers, we also have to talk about **how to communicate biblical truth in a way that connects with a teenager's needs and questions.**

That's a lot to figure out, and a lot of strategy to envision!

But don't worry — we're going to share how we've structured all of this in Grow Students Curriculum. **But don't worry if you've never used Grow Students in your ministry before.** You can still steal our strategy! Take the ideas you find helpful, ignore the parts that don't quite fit your context, and combine them with the unique language, vision, and strategy of your church.

Now, let's talk about our teaching strategy! We'll start with the big picture and then get more specific as we go.

HOW TO TEACH EACH YEAR

When planning an annual teaching strategy, the most important thing you'll need to do is to **establish your scope and sequence** — a fancy term for what you'll teach (the scope) and when you'll teach it (the sequence).

If you were developing a teaching strategy for preschool or elementary-aged kids, you'd want to build your scope and sequence around telling Bible stories chronologically since **young kids learn best through concrete stories and easy-to-grasp timelines.** But teenagers are pretty different from young kids, so it's probably a good idea if your youth ministry teaching strategy is a little different from how your kids ministry teaches.

Since teenagers are already thinking much more abstractly than when they were little kids, here are a few things to remember as you build your scope and sequence …

- Instead of teaching mostly Bible stories, **you can teach more principles and ideas** than you can in children's ministry. But teaching Bible stories still matter! Don't abandon them!
- Instead of only focusing on principles and ideas, think about how you can teach **familiar Bible stories in new ways** that add more complexity and depth than they were capable of grasping when they were little.
- Instead of teaching the Bible chronologically, **combine passages from the Old and New Testaments, and even multiple books,** to show students how very different parts of Scripture come together to show us what God is like.
- Instead of teaching only one style of message, make sure your year of teaching **balances book studies, character studies, and topical studies.**

With that in mind, we recommend structuring your scope and sequence for teenagers around a few key subjects students want and need to hear about. **But just because your scope and sequence is structured topically doesn't mean every series needs to be topical!** You might do a study in Ephesians through the lens of friendship, or a series on David through the lens of identity, or a study on the Exodus through the lens of hurt and pain. Keep that in mind as you read through this list of subjects.

Oh, and if you're wondering where this list came from, it came from a whole bunch of youth pastors! When we were originally creating the Grow Students scope and sequence, we asked hundreds of youth pastors **what subjects they covered with their students every single year.** Then we built our scope and sequence based on

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those recommendations. Each year, we recommend choosing 12-13 subjects from this list that you'd like to explore with your students.

- **CHRISTMAS:** A teaching series on the Christmas story, to be taught in a new and fresh way each year. We teach this every December, of course!
- **DOUBT & QUESTIONS:** A teaching series on approaching tough faith questions. While this subject can be covered anytime, we like to schedule it for the spring or summer, after you've had time to build plenty of trust and relationships with your students.
- **EASTER:** A series on the Easter story and the events surrounding it. We schedule this for the weeks before, during, or after Easter Sunday, depending on your calendar and preferences.
- **EVANGELISM:** A series to help students hear, understand, and share the good news of Jesus. We like to schedule this in the summer because it aligns with the Grow Discipleship Strategy! Every summer, we focus on the spiritual habit of Sharing Your Story, so it's a great time for an evangelism series.
- **FAMILY:** A series on building healthy relationships and navigating conflict with our families. While this subject can be covered anytime, we like to schedule it for the spring, around the time some countries celebrate Mother's Day and Father's Day.
- **FRIENDSHIP:** A series on developing healthy friendships. We like to schedule this series toward the beginning of the school year to help students get off to a great start in their friendships with each other. (It's also a great time to talk about dating without committing an entire teaching series to it!)
- **HURT & PAIN:** A series on trusting God during times of crisis. This subject can be covered anytime, since there is likely always at least one student in your ministry dealing with something difficult at any given time.
- **IDENTITY:** A series on discovering who God created us to be. We like to schedule this in the winter because it aligns with the Grow Discipleship Strategy! Every winter, we focus on the spiritual habit of Using Your Gifts, so it's a great time to explore the gifts God gave us and how we can use those gifts to love God and others.
- **JESUS:** A series on the life, teachings, ministry, or miracles of Jesus. While you can teach a series on Jesus anytime, we often like to schedule it around Easter, since you'll already be focusing on Jesus' death and resurrection around that time.
- **JUSTICE:** A series on how God makes wrong things right, and how we can join in on that mission! This type of series could explore topics like addressing injustice in the world, dealing with injustice in our personal lives, or resolving conflict when we feel we've been wronged. This subject can be covered anytime, since there are always wrongs to be made right!
- **LEADERSHIP:** A series on responding to people in leadership or authority over us, or developing leadership skills ourselves, or examining who (or what) we allow to have leadership and authority in our lives. We like to schedule this in the fall because it aligns with the Grow Discipleship Strategy! Every fall, we focus on the spiritual habit of Spending Time with Others in godly community, so it's a great time to explore the ways we're leading, and being led, by others.
- **LOVING OTHERS:** A series on caring for or serving others. We like to schedule this in the winter because it aligns with the Grow Discipleship Strategy! Every winter, we focus on the spiritual habit of Using Your Gifts, so it's a great time to explore how we can use the gifts God gave us to love others better.
- **SPIRITUAL GROWTH:** A series on how we can grow closer to Jesus. Sometimes, we schedule a series that covers the four spiritual habits of the Grow Discipleship Strategy: spending time with God, spending time with others, using your gifts, and sharing your story. Other times, we focus on a specific aspect of spiritual growth, like reading the Bible, or prayer, or faith. We like to schedule this in the spring because it aligns with the Grow Discipleship Strategy! Every spring, we focus on the spiritual habit of Spending Time with God, so it's a great time to challenge students to get closer to Jesus.
- **WISDOM:** A series on making wise choices in general or in a specific area (like dating, social media, peer pressure, etc.). This subject can be covered anytime, since there are always reasons to talk to teenagers about growing in wisdom!

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If your teaching series are four weeks long, you won't have time to dedicate an entire series to each of these topics every year, but that's okay! Anything you can't fit into this year can be taught next year instead.

For more details on how to plan a year of ministry, including your teaching calendar, check out this article on planning a whole year of youth ministry. There's a video that will walk you through it!

A MONTHLY TEACHING STRATEGY

Now that we've talked about an annual teaching strategy, let's zoom in a bit more and look at each month. Rather than one-off lessons, **we suggest teaching teenagers in a new teaching series every month or so.** We like four-week series best for teenagers, but once in a while we like to switch things up for a special mini-series (two weeks) or a mega-series (six weeks). But no matter how long your series are, during each series, you can create a special multi-week-long experience to help teenagers better connect with and process the ideas and stories you're exploring.

Once you know what subjects and Scripture you'll be teaching, you can begin to look for the big-picture ideas and themes you plan to help teenagers see in those stories. With those identified, you'll be better prepared to come up ways to **tie everything together for the month,** like with …

- A memorable series name.
- Unique series graphics, music, and videos that follow a relevant theme.
- A special room or stage design.
- Series-specific activities, rhythms, structures, or patterns.
- A series-long challenge or activity.

For more ideas on how to **create monthly themes that make your teaching more effective,** check out this article on how to create a strategy for your Weekly Environments!

If you'd like to see how this looks in a year of Grow Students Curriculum, check out this sample of our Scope & Sequence!

If you're using Grow Students Curriculum, you know we've already developed this monthly teaching strategy for you. And if you're not using Grow Students, every year **we provide teaching content designed by real in-the-trenches pastors and volunteers in youth ministry** who understand how to teach teenagers effectively. And we give you everything you need to make it happen!

But before we wrap things up, let's talk about how to approach your teaching every single week. We've already talked about **your big-picture teaching strategy,** but **your weekly messages should be strategic too!** So let's talk about how.

A WEEKLY TEACHING STRATEGY

To teach students effectively, we know we can't just open the Bible and teach! We need **strategic and age-appropriate teaching methods** if we want teenagers to remember, personalize, and apply what we teach.

There are so many different ways to approach your teaching time for teenagers. There are countless models, structures, and formulas you can follow to teach the Bible in compelling and practical ways. But we like to think about teaching in terms of three questions the teenagers in your ministry are asking every time you or another adult stand up to teach them something:

- **WHAT?** What are we talking about?
- **SO WHAT?** Why does it matter to God and to us?
- **NOW WHAT?** What should we do about what we just learned?

(If you've ever used Grow Student Curriculum, those three questions might be familiar, because every week of our teaching is structured around these three questions.)

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Now, when some people hear the word "teaching," they automatically picture a class or a sermon. But when you're talking about teenagers, the truth is **young people never learn best just by listening to someone talk**. Instead, there are other, more effective, and engaging ways to help teenagers learn, like …

- **QUESTIONS AND POLLS** give them the chance to share their opinions and thoughts, which keeps them engaged and helps us better understand their perspectives.
- **PERSONAL STORIES** give them real-life examples of faith, doubt, and difficulties to learn from and remind them they're not alone.
- **IMAGES, VIDEOS, AND MUSIC** engage their eyes and ears, and help us recapture their attention when it wanders.
- **OBJECT LESSONS** give concrete experiences to help them understand or remember abstract ideas.
- **ACTIVITIES** get them moving and interacting in ways that will help them better remember what they learned, because they didn't just hear it — they experienced it.
- **MOMENTS OF REFLECTION** give them a chance to sit quietly, write, think, or pray, so they can better process what is being taught.
- **OPPORTUNITIES FOR RESPONSE** give them a chance to do something about what they've learned, like make a commitment or choose a next step.
- **DISCUSSION** gives them an opportunity to have conversations with their peers, and with us, about what they're learning — and it might just be the most important teaching method we just shared. For teenagers, the most effective discussion questions aren't meant to only review or summarize a lesson, but to help them **personalize and apply what they've learned.** Teenagers learn best by processing out loud, asking questions, giving pushback, sharing opinions, listening, debating, and being involved in the learning process. This can only happen in a discussion.

Okay, maybe this seems like a lot to think about, but **the most important thing you can do in youth ministry is to strategically teach teenagers about who Jesus is!** So make sure the strategy you're using to teach the students you lead is leading them in the right direction.

In case you missed it, check out this article about planning an entire year of ministry. It'll show you how this teaching strategy could look on your annual calendar, alongside an annual strategy for your:

- Discipleship
- Weekly Environments
- Events
- Volunteers
- Families

We've said this before, but we've got to say it again! These ideas we've talked about are nice … but **these *ideas* only become a *strategy* when you put them on your calendar and turn them into actions.**

When you have an annual plan to turn your ideas and goals into a strategy, you'll make a much bigger impact.

So whether you use Grow Curriculum or not, **we hope you'll** steal our strategy! We developed it over lots of years of ministry, with input from lots of church leaders and lots of trial and error. Take it, tweak it, and make it your own. We really hope it helps you be just a little more awesome at what you do this year!



For even more resources like this one, try a free trial of Grow Curriculum and Annual Strategy for your children's or youth ministry. It's everything you need for a more strategic year of discipleship, teaching, environments, events, volunteers, and families!

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