

# The Principles of Interpretation

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# Axiom

- A self-evident or universally recognized truth.
- An established rule, principle, or law.
- A self-evident principle or one that is accepted as true without proof as the basis for argument; a postulate.

From the *American Heritage Dictionary*, online edition.

# Examples of Axioms

- Mathematics
- Declaration of Independence
- Interpreting human language (not just the Bible)

# Value of Axioms

- Over-arching viewpoint
- Guide
- Clarify
- To be used

# 15 Axioms of Interpretation

- From *Principles of Interpretation*
- Number and arrangement can vary
- Essential principles remain

# AXIOM 1:

The true object of speech is the  
impartation of thought.

## **AXIOM 2:**

The true object of interpretation is  
to apprehend the exact thought of  
the author.

## **AXIOM 3:**

**Language is a reliable medium of  
communication.**



**AXIOM 4:**  
Usage determines the meaning of  
words.

## AXIOM 5:

Two writers do not independently  
express thought alike.

**AXIOM 6:**  
Every writer is influenced by his  
environment.

## **AXIOM 7:**

**An author's purpose determines the character of his production.**

## **AXIOM 8:**

**Any writing is liable to modification in copying, translating, and the gradual change of a living language.**

## AXIOM 9:

By one expression one thought is conveyed, and only one.

## **AXIOM 10:**

**The function of a word depends on its association with other words.**

## **AXIOM 11:**

**A correct definition of a word substituted for the word itself will not modify the meaning of the text.**



## **AXIOM 12:**

One of two contradictory statements must be false, unless corresponding terms have different meanings or applications.

## **AXIOM 13:**

**Truth must accord with truth; and statements of truth apparently discrepant can be harmonized if the facts are known.**

## **AXIOM 14:**

**An assertion of truth necessarily  
excludes that to which it is  
essentially opposed, and no more.**

## **AXIOM 15:**

Every communication of thought,  
human and divine, given in the  
language of men, is subject to the  
ordinary rules of interpretation.

# Preliminary Rules

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Rule 1:  
Interpret communications of all  
kinds by the same general  
principles. p. 35

Rule 2:  
Before interpreting a passage,  
investigate its genuineness.  
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## Rule 3:

A correct text of a passage must be obtained before it is interpreted.

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## Rule 4:

If a translation be used, it must be an exact equivalent of the original, or the difference must be noted by the interpreter.

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## Rule 5:

Before interpreting a passage,  
determine whether it is literal or  
figurative.

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# The General Sense

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## Rule 8:

Let an author's own explanation of his meaning take precedence over any other interpretation.

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## Rule 9:

The interpretation of a passage  
must accord with the writer's  
purpose.  
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Rule 11:  
Interpret so as to make the sense  
clear.  
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## Rule 13:

An interpretation should conform to known laws, customs, opinions, history, country, biology, circumstances and character of the author at the time.

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# Words & Expressions

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Rule 16:  
An expression must be interpreted  
to suit the context.  
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## Rule 17:

In interpreting, the etymological meaning of a word must give place to the current established usage.

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## Rule 22:

Carefully note distinctions in synonyms, and, if consistent, give an author credit for using the term most suited to his meaning.

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# Parallel Passages

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## Rule 27:

In harmonizing parallels, allow for  
a different conception and  
expression of thought by different  
authors.

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## Rule 30:

If possible, interpret a quotation as parallel and consistent with the original; but always in harmony with its own setting.

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# Figurative Language

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## Rule 31:

The literal or most usual meaning of a word (or passage), if consistent, should be preferred to a figurative or less usual signification.

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## Rule 33:

In figures of similitude or analogy,  
very few points of comparison  
must be expected.

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## Rule 36:

In the interpretation of figures based on similitude, follow carefully the indications given by the author.

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