

- REALITY BITES OVERVIEW -

Key Concepts

Two key concepts from *Reality Bites* are the concept of *worldview*, and a concept represented by the course name itself. A *worldview*, we teach, is something that everyone has, and it is simply a person's own *view* of the *world*. People do have lots of differing beliefs. Should what we believe be based on our own personal preference? Or should a belief be a conviction about the way something is in reality? What happens when we "come up against" reality? Do our beliefs have the power to *alter* it, so that we may carry on, unperturbed? Of course not. If someone strongly believed that the best thing for their diabetes was a bowl of their favourite ice-cream, they would soon have to face the very real affects of lacking insulin. Something happens when our *view* conflicts with the real *world* – reality *bites* back. In fact, if a person goes through life experiencing unexpected consequences and confusion at every turn, their worldview is breaking down experientially, because it's false. For a belief to be really true, it must correspond with reality. Faith is not wishful thinking. Christianity isn't some abstract, "spiritual" theory. It's down to earth, and relevant to everyday life. It's not true because it's found to be practical, successful or even superior; rather, those things emerge as indicators because it is already true. These two concepts set the overall tone of the course, and it's useful to revisit them from time to time with the students. They also serve as primary memory hooks, for them to be able to recall our studies together for years to come.



Structure and Strategy

The first year of *Reality Bites* consists of ten foundational units: WORLDVIEW, TRUTH, ORIGINS, UNIVERSE, CREATION, IDENTITY, MORALITY, DESTINY, EVIDENCE and GOSPEL. Within this structure we employ a cyclical "onion skin" model for each unit. The *onion skin strategy* maps each of a given unit's four lessons to four key perspectives.



- LESSON 1 - *Point of Relevance*
- LESSON 2 - *Secular Rationalisation*
- LESSON 3 - *Pluralist Alternatives*
- LESSON 4 - *Christian Understanding*

By following this sensitive procedure we arrive at a "properly planted" understanding that is genuinely believed by a person for all the right reasons. Importantly, the Christian perspective becomes the *conclusion* of an investigation. It is also much harder to deny, after having exposed some weakness in the alternatives. By beginning the investigation with a *Point of Relevance* (the outer layer), we address the most immediate concern for most people: "What's this got to do with me?" or "Why should I even care?!" For many teenagers, much of what an adult might have to say, especially on pie-in-the-sky topics like religion, is automatically boring and irrelevant – until proven otherwise! This is a potential barrier that is immediately addressed by our method, each time we encounter a new topic. The accumulating effect is the sense that Christianity as a whole is interesting and relevant to everyday life.

The second lesson or layer, *Secular Rationalisation*, engages the predominant views from academia and the secular media. This is important, because they collectively represent the default view taken seriously by society. Often, these views will erroneously be presented as the unbiased, educated alternatives to "irrational" (religiously, morally or emotionally motivated) views. Instead they turn out to be ideologically driven themselves: that is, by the secular philosophy of *naturalism*. Examples of these types of views are the theory of evolution, and pragmatic approaches to biological advances (such as cloning). They inevitably become an attempt to formulate a rational denial of something true and meaningful, and it is well worth spending time understanding why their explanations fail.

The third lesson, *Pluralist Alternatives*, follows with a survey of alternative views, often from major world religions. For example we might ask, "On the subject of human destiny, what does Buddhism claim?" which would uncover the Buddhist belief that we are evolving towards the goal of non-existence, via a process of reincarnation and progressive enlightenment. Our purpose in discussing such views is not to consider them as viable options for ourselves, but to treat them as claims that must be put to the test. When we do, we inevitably find that they are illogical and/or inadequate explanations when compared to the Christian understanding.

Lesson four, the inner layer of our onion, presents comprehensively what will only have been touched upon in the three preceding lessons: a biblical, Christ-centered view. The *Christian Understanding* should thus come as a satisfying resolution to a personal (by this point) quest – a claim about the truth whose superiority has been demonstrated. The four-layer model proves very useful with a majority of subjects, but for a few select units (such as the final unit, *GOSPEL*) we change tack so that we can utilise all four lessons to present different facets of a topic.

Virtually every lesson of the course includes a related game or other activity, in order to mix things up and have a bit of fun. As well, we always watch a carefully selected scene from a popular movie. The use of movie clips in *Reality Bites* provides an entertaining way to engage a topic. Students even occasionally script and star in their very own movie production! They discover that movies are seldom value-neutral. In other words, writers and producers often inject elements of their own worldview into the movies they make. Being aware of this extra dimension can actually make watching movies more interesting, and it's also important so that we aren't unduly influenced by them. Training our students to look out for the message behind the medium helps them to become more discerning.

A Biblical Foundation

Reality Bites isn't a traditional Christian youth study, which often involves straightforward bible study and prayer, as well as advice on how to make decisions in life. We do have those things, but we also consider various issues and study how other views about them are inadequate and/or false. Regardless of structure, strategy, method or even tradition, what is really important is that what we do is biblically insightful and commendable. Part of the biblical basis we find for our approach, is in the parable of the *Sower and the Seeds* (Mark 4:3-20). There the gospel comes to different audiences, having different receptivities to it, and also varying degrees of retention. The perils mentioned correspond to influences from the normal teenage experience: *persecution* (peer pressure, ridicule of Christian beliefs), *deceitfulness of wealth* (consumerism, brand names, "bling") and *desires for other things* (popularity, premarital sex, drugs, freedom from accountability, etc.). All of these "weeds" are worldly standards that arise from systems of thought contrary to Christianity. According to the Lord Jesus, they have the power to thwart Christian faith and distract from the message. Is there any justification for the task of countering these influences? Should we only scatter seed, or should we also plough, weed and prune?

Consider our context. We no longer live in the age of Christendom, where Christian principles were generally known and upheld by society. There has been a great equalizing of viewpoints, such that every belief should be considered equally valid, and no viewpoint should elevate itself above others by claiming exclusive truth. The notion of "God" used to be understood even by atheists, but today it is ambiguous. Similarly, the notion of a single path to God is considered naive, if not bigoted. This changing playing field seriously undermines perceptions of Jesus himself, who is the *only* Way to the one true God. The concepts and context necessary for understanding the Christian message are being systematically eroded by *postmodern* thought structures. These influences condition our youth with unprecedented efficiency, primarily through the media and popular culture. The soil of their hearts and minds is laid fallow, no longer cultivated by a society with Judeo-Christian underpinnings. When the gospel message comes to them, it is "foolishness" to their mindset, which is now far more akin to that of first century Greeks than of Jews (I Cor 1:23). Many of our young people have sincere questions, nagging doubts and areas of confusion. If they don't now, then they almost certainly will within a few short years. How long will we continue to see the seeds take root while they are still living at home—only to wither and die within their first year at university, where false ideologies permeate the cafeteria and the classroom?

Scripture is explicit about what to do: we are to "see to it" that we aren't taken in by these "deceitful philosophies," which are basic to non-Christian worldviews (Col 2:8). As Christian leaders we are to "demolish arguments" and "take captive every thought" that runs contrary to knowledge of God's truth (II Cor 10:5). This is not done for the sake of triumph, but because the message itself is so precious. We note Paul's strategy when he brought the message to Greeks who were without the necessary context for understanding it (Acts 17:16-34): it was to compare and contrast, relating foundational concepts (such as *creation*, v26) in familiar terms. Within this model the Christian message is still being asserted (with sensitivity, cf. I Pet 3:15), in a way that makes clear its superiority and reasonableness. Amidst an endless pantheon of imposters, the one true God used Paul to articulate His exclusive claims in terms the Greeks could apprehend. When our young people today are being bombarded by "deceitful philosophies," it is up to us to respond with a re-statement of gospel truths in a manner like Paul's: to compare, contrast and demolish.

"For communication to be effective, especially in matters as life-defining as the gospel message, *truth* and *relevance* are the two indispensable wings on which it is borne. When these twin characteristics are combined, the message soars to its supreme height because it is *deeply earthed in reality*." – Ravi Zacharias, *Is Your Church Ready?*