Which letters did Paul write?: student handout

Module 12: The Pauline Corpus and Ancient Pseudepigraphy.

Name: _____ **Date:** _____ **Class:** _____

Central question: Thirteen New Testament letters name Paul as their writer. How do scholars decide whether a letter in Paul's name was written by Paul, and how widely is each answer held?

Read each document's source note first. Fill in the sorting chart and organizer with your partner. Each document quotes the letters (or an early writer) and then summarizes what scholars conclude, as ExtantBible presents it.

Document A: The seven letters nearly all scholars accept, and how Paul wrote

Source: The authorship sections of the book pages for the seven letters, citing Raymond Brown's An Introduction to the New Testament (1997); the paragraph on writing on /extant; Romans 16:22 and Galatians 6:11 on their chapter pages.

Primary source: two verses from Paul's letters (written in the 50s CE), in a public-domain translation (BSB, 2023); then a summary by ExtantBible (2026) of how scholars date and judge the seven letters, following Brown (1997).

Letter	Written (the date most scholars give)
1 Thessalonians	50 to 52 CE
Galatians	54 to 55 CE (a minority: 48 to 49)
Philippians	54 to 63 CE (debated: where Paul was in prison is uncertain)
Philemon	55 to 63 CE (debated, for the same reason)
1 Corinthians	56 to 57 CE
2 Corinthians	57 CE
Romans	57 to 58 CE

“I, Tertius, who wrote down this letter, greet you in the Lord.”

Romans 16:22, Berean Standard Bible (BSB, public domain, 2023).

“See what large letters I am using to write to you with my own hand!”

Galatians 6:11, Berean Standard Bible (BSB, public domain, 2023).

- Nearly all scholars agree that Paul wrote these seven ("Nearly all scholars agree"). Brown reports that none of them is seriously disputed. 1 Thessalonians is usually considered the earliest Christian writing that survives.

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- Many scholars think 2 Corinthians joins parts of two or more of Paul's letters. That is a question about how the letter was put together, not about who wrote it.
- Paul dictated his letters, sometimes adding a closing line in his own hand. One secretary, Tertius, names himself in Romans 16:22. Brown notes that we do not know how closely Paul's secretaries took down his words: he may have dictated some letters exactly and left more freedom in others, which makes style a weaker test of authorship.

On ExtantBible: Romans: authorship

Document B: 2 Thessalonians: a split decision

Source: The book page for 2 Thessalonians, citing Brown (1997) and a 1905 Oxford committee's study of the earliest Christian writers; the arguments as Brown sets them out, and Ehrman and Méndez (2024) on 3:17; the passages on their chapter pages.

Primary source: passages from 1 Thessalonians (written 50 to 52 CE) and 2 Thessalonians (date debated: 51 to 52 or 80 to 100 CE), in a public-domain translation (WEB, 2020); then a summary by ExtantBible (2026) of the arguments Brown (1997) and Ehrman and Méndez (2024) report.

"For you yourselves know well that the day of the Lord comes like a thief in the night."

1 Thessalonians 5:2, World English Bible (WEB, public domain, 2020).

"Now, brothers, concerning the coming of our Lord Jesus Christ and our gathering together to him, we ask you not to be quickly shaken in your mind or troubled, either by spirit or by word or by letter as if from us, saying that the day of Christ has already come. Let no one deceive you in any way. For it will not be unless the rebellion comes first, and the man of sin is revealed, the son of destruction."

2 Thessalonians 2:1-3, World English Bible (WEB, public domain, 2020).

"I, Paul, write this greeting with my own hand, which is the sign in every letter. This is how I write."

2 Thessalonians 3:17, World English Bible (WEB, public domain, 2020).

- Church tradition accepted the letter's claim that Paul wrote it. Polycarp probably used it (110 to 140 CE; the 1905 committee judged the use highly probable but not certain), and Marcion's collection included it (140 to 144 CE).
- The case for an imitator, as Brown reports it: the letter follows the shape of 1 Thessalonians closely, and about a third of it resembles the first letter; 1 Thessalonians says the day comes like a thief, without warning, while 2 Thessalonians says signs must come first; and the warning about letters "as if from us" and the mark "in every letter" fit a time when many letters of Paul were known. On this view a follower wrote it in 80 to 100 CE.
- The case for Paul: Brown notes that English-speaking scholars such as Bruce, Marshall and Morris have tended to defend writing by Paul; if Paul wrote it, Brown dates it soon after 1 Thessalonians, about 51 or 52 CE; on this reading Paul writes again to calm readers told that the day had already come (2:2). Brown notes that the signed greeting is very personal, and that writing so soon after would explain why the letter repeats less about Paul's visit.

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- The signed greeting is read differently by those who doubt Paul wrote it. Brown says that if the letter is pseudonymous and forgery is to be avoided, the writer is vouching for the message, not the handwriting; Ehrman and Méndez read it as an imitator assuring readers that this is not another letter forged in Paul's name (see 2:2).
- Brown judges scholars about evenly divided and says he cannot decide with certainty himself. The site labels both views "Scholars are split".

On ExtantBible: 2 Thessalonians: authorship

Document C: Colossians and Ephesians

Source: The book pages for Colossians and Ephesians, citing Brown (1997) and Carson, Moo and Morris (1992), who report Donald Guthrie's view; Brown's chapters on the two letters, and Ehrman and Méndez (2024) on Colossians; the passages on their chapter pages.

Primary source: a passage from each letter (written about 60 to 62 CE if Paul wrote them, 80 to 100 CE if followers did), in a public-domain translation (BSB, 2023); then a summary by ExtantBible (2026) of how scholars judge the two letters.

“Tychicus will tell you all the news about me. He is a beloved brother, a faithful minister, and a fellow servant in the Lord. I have sent him to you for this very purpose, that you may know about us, and that he may encourage your hearts.”

Colossians 4:7-8, Berean Standard Bible (BSB, public domain, 2023).

“Tychicus, the beloved brother and faithful servant in the Lord, will tell you everything, so that you also may know about me and what I am doing. I have sent him to you for this very purpose, that you may know about us, and that he may encourage your hearts.”

Ephesians 6:21-22, Berean Standard Bible (BSB, public domain, 2023).

- Colossians: its style (very long sentences that pile up words of the same meaning) and its developed picture of Christ lead a modest majority, about 60 percent of critical scholars by Brown's estimate, to see a follower of Paul ("Most scholars agree"), whom Brown places in the 80s (80 to 90 CE on its book page). Ehrman and Méndez agree: they find it hard to accept that Paul wrote it, since its author says believers have already been raised with Christ.
- Others accept Paul, writing from prison about 60 to 62 CE, sometimes with a secretary given freedom: the rest of the critical scholars, about 40 percent if Brown's estimate of the majority holds, among them Carson, Moo and Morris ("Some scholars hold"). Brown adds that counting unusual words settles little: Colossians has 87 words not found in the seven undisputed letters, but Philippians, which no one doubts, has 79.

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- Ephesians: between a third and a half of its verses parallel Colossians in order and content (Brown), its style differs again, and it describes the church as one universal body. About 70 to 80 percent of critical scholars, by Brown's estimate, see a later follower writing in 80 to 100 CE ("Most scholars agree"). A minority of 20 to 30 percent, among them Carson, Moo and Morris, hold that Paul wrote it in the early 60s ("Some scholars hold"); they report Donald Guthrie's reply that two minds could not have produced two such letters, so interdependent yet independent. If Paul wrote it, Brown notes, he could have drawn on his own earlier letters.
- For both letters, church tradition accepted Paul's authorship, from Irenaeus on ("Church tradition"). Polycarp probably used Ephesians (110 to 140 CE); for Colossians the earliest writers show only uncertain echoes.

On ExtantBible: Ephesians: authorship

Document D: The Pastoral letters and the early lists

Source: The book pages for 1 Timothy, 2 Timothy and Titus, citing Brown (1997) and Carson, Moo and Morris (1992), with Ehrman and Méndez (2024) on writing in another's name; the timeline entries for Marcion's canon and the Muratorian fragment; Papyrus 46 on /extant; Polycarp and Irenaeus in public-domain translations.

Primary sources: Polycarp's letter to the Philippians (110 to 140 CE, trans. Lightfoot, 1891) beside 1 Timothy (BSB, 2023), and Irenaeus, Against Heresies (180 to 185 CE, trans. 1885); then a summary by ExtantBible (2026) of how scholars judge the three letters and what the early lists show.

Evidence	Date	What it shows
Polycarp probably echoes 1 Timothy, without naming it	110 to 140 CE	1 Timothy existed and was read
Marcion's collection of ten letters of Paul	140 to 144 CE	Leaves out 1 and 2 Timothy and Titus
The Muratorian Fragment	170 to 200 CE (most scholars' dating)	The earliest list to include all three
Irenaeus quotes Titus as Paul's	180 to 185 CE	Church tradition names Paul
Papyrus 46 (Chester Beatty Papyrus II), a book of Paul's letters	About 200 or earlier	Its last leaves are lost, so it cannot show whether it held the three

“But the love of money is the beginning of all troubles. Knowing therefore that we brought nothing into the world neither can we carry anything out, let us arm ourselves with the armor of righteousness…”

Polycarp, To the Philippians 4.1, trans. J. B. Lightfoot, The Apostolic Fathers (1891).

“For we brought nothing into the world, so we cannot carry anything out of it. […] For the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil.”

1 Timothy 6:7 and 6:10, Berean Standard Bible (BSB, public domain, 2023).

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"...as Paul also says, "A man that is an heretic, after the first and second admonition, reject; knowing that he that is such is subverted, and sinneth, being condemned of himself.""

Irenaeus, Against Heresies 3.3.4 (quoting Titus 3:10-11), trans. Alexander Roberts and William Rambaut, The Ante-Nicene Fathers, vol. 1 (1885).

- About a quarter of the Pastorals' vocabulary is not found in Paul's other letters, the style differs, the church order is more developed, and Paul's travels in them cannot be fitted into his career up to his Roman imprisonment of 61 to 63. These reasons lead most critical scholars, 80 to 90 percent by Brown's estimate, to see a later author writing in 80 to 100 CE ("Most scholars agree"). Brown notes that 2 Timothy has the best claim of the three.
- A minority of 10 to 20 percent, among them Carson, Moo and Morris, hold that Paul wrote them about 62 to 67 CE ("Some scholars hold"). As Brown reports the replies: Paul would then have been released and had a "second career" in the mid-60s; a secretary may account for some of the style; new subjects such as church order call for new words; and Philippians 1:1 already mentions overseers.
- Marcion's collection left out the three letters; Brown notes Tertullian's later claim that Marcion knew them and rejected them, and judges that the outside evidence slightly favors writing before about 125. Most scholars date the Muratorian Fragment to 170 to 200 CE; a minority date it to 350 to 400.
- The works cited here differ on the intent of a writer in Paul's name. Brown says most picture a disciple of Paul's school writing what Paul would say, the suggestion of fraud having largely left the discussion. Ehrman and Méndez call such letters forgeries, common in antiquity but almost universally condemned, and say ancient readers would have called the false claim deceptive. Carson, Moo and Morris, who accept Paul, reply that the church rejected letters it knew to be in another's name: Tertullian reports that a presbyter in Asia who wrote the Acts of Paul "from love of Paul" was removed from his office.

On ExtantBible: 1 Timothy: authorship

Evidence organizer

	Question	Your notes and evidence (names and dates)
1.	Name the seven letters nearly all scholars accept as written by Paul, and the earliest of them.	
2.	What does Romans 16:22 show about how Paul wrote, and why does it matter for arguments from style?	

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	Question	Your notes and evidence (names and dates)
3.	Compare 1 Thessalonians 5:2 with 2 Thessalonians 2:1-3. How do they differ, and how does each side explain the difference?	
4.	How can 2 Thessalonians 3:17 be used by both sides?	
5.	Compare Colossians 4:7-8 with Ephesians 6:21-22. What do you notice, and what does Brown say most critical scholars conclude about Ephesians?	
6.	Why does Brown think the count of unusual words cannot settle who wrote Colossians?	
7.	Polycarp (110 to 140 CE) echoes 1 Timothy without naming it, Marcion (140 to 144 CE) left out the Pastoral letters, and the Muratorian Fragment (170 to 200 CE) includes them. What does each show, and what can it not show?	
8.	Brown, Carson, Moo and Morris, and Ehrman and Méndez describe writing a letter in another's name differently. Give each view in one sentence.	

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Your written answer

In one or two paragraphs, answer the central question. Cite at least three documents by letter, name at least two kinds of evidence (at least one from inside a letter), give the strongest point on the other side, and use the site's label words for how widely each answer is held.

Homework: Students who need more time finish the second paragraph (the strongest evidence on the other side, and how much weight it deserves) at home, using the handout and the organizer.

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Check your work: the single-point rubric

The middle column is the target. Note where the work falls short on the left and where it goes beyond on the right.

Concerns	Target	Going beyond
	Sourcing: Says for each letter discussed what kind of evidence is cited and who reports how widely the view is held (for example, Brown's estimates).	
	Weighing evidence: Tells evidence from inside a letter (style, vocabulary, ideas, dependence on another letter, fit with Paul's career) apart from outside evidence (quotations, lists) and explains how each bears on authorship.	
	Limits of the evidence: Explains at least one limit: a secretary may shape the wording, a count of unusual words means little without comparison, an early quotation shows only that a letter existed, or a list's silence or a lost page does not say why a letter is missing.	
	Descriptive, qualified language: Attributes judgments ("Brown estimates that most critical scholars", "Ehrman and Méndez call it forgery", "church tradition") and uses the site's label words, giving the minority view its own reasons and keeping historical claims apart from statements of belief.	

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