For as long as I have been involved in any type of small group study where a Bible is either needed or preferred, it never fails that there’s another person with a Bible that says something slightly different from mine. While that can be confusing, it’s not half as confusing as walking through the Bible aisle of a Christian bookstore. All of the translations and all of the acronyms bleed together: KJV, NIV, NASB, ESV . . . CIA, FBI, CNN, ESPN. So let me clear up some of the confusion and explain why we have so many translations and what’s different about them.

We wouldn’t need Bible translations if we knew how to read ancient Hebrew, Greek, and Aramaic. But most of us don’t, and so we leave it to the ones who enjoy doing that type of thing to translate it for us. What makes the process tricky is easily demonstrated by the verse “Adam lay with his wife Eve” (Genesis 4:1). I’ll assume you know what’s being said here. The translator also knows what’s being said here, but what English word should she use to say it? If she translates it word for word, using “lay with,” then you could misunderstand. Were they taking a nap together? If she uses an English equivalent like “had sex with,” then your grandmother could have a heart attack. That should give you a broad picture of the tensions and issues involved in translations as well as introduce you to the three major types of translations.

FORMAL EQUIVALENCE

Bibles that have what’s called a “formal equivalence,” or literal translation, will take the ancient Hebrew and Greek texts and translate them as closely as possible to the original words and sentence structure. This type of translation will keep the original and historical meanings intact while still allowing us to understand it in English. It is an essentially word-for-word translation, giving the best possible reading of how the original audience would have read it. To catch the only downside of this type of translation, think of the Spanish phrase mesa verde. If you translate it literally, it would say “table green,” as opposed to the “green table.” Maintaining the original word order can actually make reading it in English somewhat challenging.

Some translations that hold to a literal, word-for-word translation are the New American Standard (NASB) and the English Standard Version (ESV). Literal translations are helpful in keeping us connected to the history, nuance, and wording of the original text. However, in attempting to provide verbal accuracy, meaning can be obscured. An “ephah” of flour is meaningless to most of us, while a “pound” of flour is not. And this brings us to the next type of translation.

DYNAMIC EQUIVALENCE

Rather than requiring you to turn to the tables of weights and measures at the back of your Bible to figure out what an ephah is, a dynamic equivalent translation takes the next step and figures it out for you. The translators ask, “Okay, what would this be like today in as close as possible to the original words? How would we say it?”
In dynamic equivalency, idioms, words, and grammatical structure are all translated into our own equivalent, everyday usage of the same words, idioms, and grammar. This is sometimes called a thought-for-thought reading, as opposed to a literal word-for-word reading. This kind of translation can help increase the ease of reading or the flow of Scripture, matching it to the way we read today. Bible translations that use this method include the New International Version (NIV), Today’s NIV, or TNIV, and the New American Bible (NAB).

For the average Christian, using a Bible like the NIV as a primary source of reading is often the most helpful. You just need to decide if you are an average Christian and choose accordingly. I’m pretty average.

PARAPHRASE

A paraphrase, or free translation, adds modern slang to Holy Writ. And taking the liberty to put God’s Word into our own vernacular can be fun and helpful, so long as you take the time to study the text, understand its intended nuance and meaning, and then say it straight. That’s what authors writing a free translation have done. They have taken the original language, translated it into a native language, such as English, and then added their own style to it in an attempt to bring out shades of meaning hidden by cultural distance.

For example, Eugene Peterson, who wrote The Message, takes the account of Jesus’ birth and writes it like this:

_The birth of Jesus took place like this. His mother, Mary, was engaged to be married to Joseph. Before they came to the marriage bed, Joseph discovered she was pregnant. (It was by the Holy Spirit but he didn’t know that.) Joseph, chagrined, but noble, determined to take care of things quietly so Mary would not be disgraced._ (Matthew 1:18-19)

If you’ve been to any Christmas Eve service, anywhere, you might not recall ever hearing this version read by the play narrator. But as you can see, a paraphrase can bring greater insight into the attitude or tone of a passage.

Another helpful free translation you may come across is the NLT, or New Living Translation.

Each type of translation has both an up side and a down side. The down side of the free translation is a little steeper than the others because to paraphrase you have to make some interpretive leaps and assumptions, and a translator risks saying or adding something that’s not in the original text.

I think through this survey you can see that it’s helpful to have a few different translations lying around to refer to, since each amplifies a different nuance of meaning. No matter what translation you use, I’d highly recommend to you the book *How to Read the Bible for All Its Worth* by Gordon Fee and Douglas Stuart (Zondervan), which is filled with more insight on this issue and a number of other interpretive topics.