Format of Pauline Letters and Method of Reading

I. Introduction
   A. Address and greeting
   B. Thanksgiving section

II. Body
   A. Doctrine – teaching about God/Christ
   B. Ethics – morality, right and wrong behavior

III. Conclusion

This method of reading and interpretation can help a person to avoid some of the pitfalls of misinterpretation.

Summary of the Method:
1. Look carefully at thanksgiving section for clue to Paul’s concern (tips his hand)
   (http://www.africa.upenn.edu/Articles_Gen/Letter_Birmingham.html)
2. Look for connection between doctrine and ethics
3. Learn about historical context
4. Remember these are only letters, not complete treatises.
5. Remember you are reading someone’s mail – you have only half of the dialogue

Method:
1. Look carefully at thanksgiving section for clue to Paul’s concern (tips his hand) In 1 Cor. 1:5 Paul gives thanks for the speech and knowledge of the Corinthians in the thanksgiving section yet later in the later he criticizes their use of knowledge (see 8:1 “knowledge puffs up” and speech regarding speaking in tongues (see 1 Cor.14) ). The very things he gives thanks for
in the Thanksgiving section are the same things he later criticizes in that same letter. The Thanksgiving section often contains a clue as to what is Paul’s concern.

2. **Look for connection between doctrine and ethics in the body of the letter.** In 1 Cor.6:12+ Paul’s reasons against having sex with prostitutes by citing Christian doctrine. You are a temple of God; you are part of the body of Christ; live accordingly. Doctrine(teaching about God or Christ) generates Paul’s better ethical(about right and wrong behavior) reasoning.

3. **Learn about historical context.** Why does Paul say twice in 1 Cor. 7 that marriage is sinful?. Some were teaching marriage as sinful. What group would teach this. In Paul’s day there are a couple of candidates, e.g. Stoics and heterodox gnostics

4. **Remember these are only letters, not complete treatises.** When Paul speaks of marriage as a remedy for lust in 1 Cor.9, this is hardly a complete statement about marriage. Paul is not giving the complete teaching on marriage here; he is dealing with particular problems of particular people.

5. **Remember you are reading someone’s mail** – you have only half of the dialogue. When 1 Corinthians 6:13 speaks of food for the stomach, this appears odd in the context of a discussion of sex with prostitutes. What Paul appears to be doing is quoting the argument the Corinthians had used, namely sex is a natural biological activity devoid of moral consequence equivalent to ingesting food. Sometimes one needs to speculate about what people have written to Paul. Furthermore Paul is writing to the Corinthians of the first century, not to the Americans. While some of Pauline teaching may inform contemporary readers, not all of it applies, e.g. Paul’s teaching on slavery and women.

The above methodological steps I learned from Peter Ellis. *Seven Pauline Letters*(Liturgical Press, 1978) , and hope you can employ them as you interpret Pauline letters.