The Four Canonical Gospels

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>GOSPEL acc. to...</th>
<th>MARK</th>
<th>MATTHEW</th>
<th>LUKE</th>
<th>JOHN</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>TO WHOM? implied audience?</td>
<td>mostly Gentiles, fairly new in their faith, and facing persecutions</td>
<td>better educated Jews who believe in Jesus, but argue over the Law</td>
<td>wealthier Gentile Christians in an urban setting, becoming complacent</td>
<td>very mixed: mostly Jews, some Gentiles, Samaritans, etc.</td>
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<tr>
<td>WHERE? written from and/or to?</td>
<td>probably Rome; possibly Decapolis, Syria or Alexandria?</td>
<td>possibly Galilee; probably in or near Antioch in Syria</td>
<td>probably Greece; possibly Syria/Antioch (Pauline missions)</td>
<td>originally Galilee or Syria; traditionally Ephesus (Asia Minor)</td>
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<tr>
<td>WHEN? approximate date?</td>
<td>first written &quot;Gospel&quot;; very late 60's or early 70's (Jewish War 66-70)</td>
<td>late 70's or 80's (w/ older sources, incl. one written by Matthew?)</td>
<td>mid to late 80's (incl. &quot;many&quot; earlier written sources)</td>
<td>main edition 90's (early edition 50's? epilogue after 100?)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WHAT? subtype of &quot;Gospel&quot; genre?</td>
<td>narrated &quot;good news&quot; (1:1) about Jesus, esp. his actions &amp; his death</td>
<td>book of &quot;heritage&quot; of Jesus (1:1) &amp; much of his &quot;teaching&quot; (28:20)</td>
<td>an &quot;orderly account&quot; for attaining &quot;secure knowledge&quot; (1:1-4)</td>
<td>much &quot;testimony&quot; and &quot;signs&quot; for believers (20:30-31; 21:24-25)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>WHY? community circumstances &amp; author's purpose?</td>
<td>to encourage a group undergoing difficult trials and persecutions</td>
<td>to teach a community with internal divisions and external enemies</td>
<td>to challenge believers to put their faith into practice more fully</td>
<td>to strengthen a group ostracized by other Jews for their faith</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

From: Fr Felix just SJ: [http://catholic-resources.org/Bible/Four_Gospel_Chart.htm](http://catholic-resources.org/Bible/Four_Gospel_Chart.htm)

These four canonical gospels were not the only gospels written, nor were they necessarily the earliest gospels written. (See criteria for canonicity below).
Notes on the New Testament

From Fr Felix Just SJ:  http://catholic-resources.org/Bible/NT_Canon.htm#Stages

The Canonical Arrangement of the NT

1. The 27 books of the New Testament are **NOT** listed in chronological order (the order in which they were written historically); several other principles were operative.

2. The overall order begins with the life of Jesus (four Gospels), then deals with the beginnings and expansion of the Church (Acts), then addresses particular issues and problems in early Christianity (Letters, Epistles), and finally focuses on the Eschaton or "End Times" (as described symbolically in the Book of Revelation).

3. The four Gospels are listed in what was traditionally regarded as their chronological order (i.e., Matthew was thought to be the oldest Gospel); most scholars today, however, believe that Mark was the first written Gospel (or at least the oldest of the four canonical Gospels in their full versions, as we know them today).

4. The Acts of the Apostles was originally the second volume of Luke's two-volume work; but when the four Gospels were grouped together, Acts was placed after John.

5. The Pauline Letters (written by, or at least attributed to Paul) are divided into two sub-groups: those written to communities and those addressed to individuals; within each sub-group, the letters are arranged not in chronological order, but rather in decreasing order of length (more or less, although Galatians is slightly shorter than Ephesians).

6. The anonymous "Letter to the Hebrews" comes immediately after the Pauline letters because people used to think it too was written by Paul; it may have been written by one of his followers, but was almost certainly not written by Paul himself.

7. The Catholic or General Epistles are also listed in decreasing order of length, although letters attributed to the same apostle are grouped together.

8. The Book of Revelation (singular! not "Revelations"!) closes out the NT canon, since it concludes with a description of the end of time (New Heavens, New Earth, New Jerusalem, etc.).

While the canon of 27 books was generally accepted in Western Christianity by the end of the 4th century, variations in lists occurred up until at least the 7th century and in some Eastern traditions remain until today.

In the West, the Reformation caused some re-think of the canon, but eventually reformers and Catholics alike accepted the 27 books in the canon, though not all were considered of equal importance.
Ten Stages of NT Formation and Transmission (with considerable chronological overlap, continuing down to today):

Some scholars (including the Pontifical Biblical Commission) propose only 3 stages (Historical Events, Oral Tradition, Written Texts), others 5 stages (Historical Events, Oral Tradition, Written Tradition, Editing, Canonization); the following schema more comprehensively lists 10 stages, many of which overlap:

1. **The Historical Jesus** - words are spoken and deeds are performed by Jesus himself during his lifetime on earth.
2. **Oral Tradition** - traditions and beliefs about Jesus are developed and passed on by early Christian communities.
3. **Written Sources** - some of the miracles and/or sayings of Jesus are compiled and recorded in early written documents.
4. **Written Texts** - individual letters, full Gospels, etc., are written with particular messages for particular situations.
5. **Distribution** - some writings are copied and shared with other Christian communities throughout the Mediterranean.
6. **Collection** - certain Christians begin collecting the letters of Paul and gathering together several different Gospels.
7. **Canonization** - four Gospels, several collections of letters, and a few other texts are accepted as authoritative scriptures.
8. **Translation** - biblical texts are translated into ever more ancient and modern languages: Latin, Syriac, Coptic, Armenian, etc.
9. **Interpretation** - the meaning of the scriptures is investigated on various levels: literal, spiritual, historical, social, etc.
10. **Application** - communities and individuals use the NT for practical purposes: liturgical, moral, sacramental, theological, etc.

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Four Criteria for Canonicity *(why certain books were eventually accepted into the NT Canon, while others were rejected):*

1. **Apostolic Origin** - attributed to and/or based on the preaching/teaching of the first-generation apostles (or their closest companions).
2. **Universal Acceptance** - acknowledged by all major Christian communities in the Mediterranean world (by the end of the fourth century).
3. **Liturgical Use** - read publicly along with the OT when early Christians gathered for the Lord's Supper (their weekly worship services).
4. **Consistent Message** - containing theological ideas compatible with other accepted Christian writings (incl. the divinity and humanity Jesus).

Four-Fold Role of the Evangelists as Authors *(what they contributed, even if “God is the Author” of all scripture):*

Compare this list with the principles mentioned in the Pontifical Biblical Commission's 1964 *Instruction on the Historical Truth of the Gospels*, par. IX.

1. **Selectors** - from among the many things Jesus said and did, they chose which stories they wanted to include and which to omit.
2. **Arrangers** - they organized the materials in a particular sequence, not necessarily chronologically but often in thematic blocks.
3. **Shapers** - they adapted and edited the individual stories from their sources so as to emphasize the themes they wanted to stress.
4. **Proclaimers** - they were not objective historians, but preached the "good news" about Jesus in ways appropriate to their audiences.

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**Gospel Source Theories**

![Gospel Source Diagram]

Dotted lines represent hypothetical documents or questionable relationships.