

The Art of Writing Devotions

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Years ago, I asked God to allow me to share His love and truth to the ends of the earth. I thought He answered that prayer when *The Upper Room* published my first devotion in 2012, but that was just the beginning of my exciting journey. In April 2016, the Lord blessed me with the privilege of serving as a contracted writer for *Our Daily Bread* (www.odb.org/subscriptions). As I continue honing my craft, the Lord is allowing me to equip and encourage writers to use their unique voices to share His love and truth through the written word. I'd like to share a few tips that help me write devotions God can use as He sees fit.

1. Know Your God and Scripture

To help others grow spiritually, we'll need to know and grow with God personally.

As we share God through devotional writing, it's vital to nurture our own ongoing love-relationship with Jesus through prayerful study and application of His Word. We'll never know everything about the Lord, but it's important to handle the Word of God responsibly. It's wise to connect with at least one accountability partner who is strong in biblical studies and teaching, commit to reading through the whole Bible at least once every other year or every three years, to become more familiar with Scripture. Reading daily devotions and participating in deeper study of Scripture throughout the year will help us grow spiritually and help us learn more about the craft of devotional writing. However, a daily devotional book cannot and should not take the place of savoring God's whole story—the Bible—a little bit every day, as we share God through our own writing.

2. Invite God into Your Process

Our words are nothing without God's power.

Devotional writers require close connection with God from conception of an idea to the completion of a project. It's wise to recruit at least one person who will commit to pray for us and for our readers as we write, and after we share our work. However, our personal Bible study and continual prayer will help us invite the Lord into every stage of our writing process. We have the privilege of asking God what illustrations He wants us to use, what words He wants us to write, what text He wants us to teach, and even how He wants to present His teaching. As we acknowledge God throughout the day, we will be able to hear Him more clearly when we invite Him into our writing and editing process.

3. Know Your Target and Secondary Audience

God gives us a voice and a message, as well as a heart for the readers He entrusts to us.

Whether we're writing devotions for our personal blogs, contributing as guest bloggers or in devotional compilations, submitting to devotional magazines, or writing a devotional book, it's important to identify and know the needs of our Target Audience, the main readers we want to reach. It's also wise to identify our secondary audience, other readers God may lead to our work. When we know our audience, we can tailor our messages, adjusting our tone, our language, our choices of illustrations, as well as the way we present the connection to the Bible teaching, so that we can do our best to meet their specific needs.

4. Know Your Guidelines

God uses different types of devotions to reach different audiences with different needs.

Even if we're writing devotions for our personal blogs, readers will expect consistency. It's important for us to commit to a format, a word count, and a schedule that works for us and fulfills our commitment to our readers.

Before submitting to devotional magazines, it's wise to study the magazine's brand and writer's guidelines to make sure our voice and our message are in alignment with the magazine's purpose and format. Format, word count, and interaction with Scripture can vary. However, as a general rule, we can split our devotions and our word count into three parts.

The first section can be devoted to our illustration. The second section can be connected with a solid transition statement that leads into the biblical teaching. The final section will require a good transition and possibly a reminder of the illustration used, as we offer a come-alongside application idea with a takeaway. Though these sections won't always be separated with equal word counts, the three-part-template will give us a good place to begin writing a balanced devotion.

5. Continue Developing Your Craft and Edit, Edit, Edit

God gives us passion, talent, and ideas, as well as the ability to hone our craft and editing skills.

Once we know our audience and are aware of the guidelines we'll be adhering to, it's time to solicit helpers. We can ask friends and family to pay for us as we write, but it's important that we prayerfully seek writers to offer honest feedback on our work. Finding the right critique groups, writing partners, or mentors will help us improve our craft as we write for the glory of God.

We can also ask for accountability to help us ensure we're not using verses out of context. Readers who have a strong biblical background can focus on checking our interpretation of the text within the context it was originally given. These readers will help us avoid taking verses out of context and using them as generic taglines, in an effort to support our opinion, our agenda, or the specific point we hope to present through our illustration. This helps the message feel natural, and the teaching will not feel forced.

If we're blessed with the opportunity to work with professional editors, it's important to remember we're on the same team. The editing process is a beautiful example of how God's people work together for His Kingdom purpose. We all have different strengths and weaknesses, so having strong writers supporting us with honest feedback and prayerful encouragement will ensure we offer the Lord our very best work.

6. Pursue God first, Not Publication

Devotions are an offering to God to be used as He sees fit, for His glory alone.

It's easy to be tempted to writing for the wrong reason—self. However, we can ask God to help us pursue Him first and write out of loving obedience to Him. When we ask Him for periodic heart-checks, He can purify our motives and increase our desire to make Him known. Whether we're paid for our published devotions or not, it's vital for us to worship God through our writing process, present our best offerings to Him, and pray for our readers. When loving, pleasing, and serving God is our first priority, we can experience satisfaction and contentment no matter how the Lord decides to use our offerings.

7. Work to Master the Basic Elements of Devotional Writing

Devotional formats and audiences vary, but the elements of strong devotions are consistent.

Strong devotions:

- A. Point to Christ, using Scripture in the context in which the original text was presented
- B. Contain an authentic, personal, life-applicable, and biblical message that encourages readers
- C. Focus on one idea, consistent from the title through the illustration, teaching, and takeaway
- D. Begin with a strong title and a true illustration that grab the reader's attention
- E. Contain a clear transition that connects the illustration to the biblical teaching
- F. Include active verbs and concise, purposed sentences that build to the takeaway
- G. Avoid preachiness and use a come-alongside tone and words (*we can*, not *you should* or *must*)

- H. Avoid religious jargon (cliché words or phrases used by people in church)
- I. Offer a universal message or meet a universal need with a biblical application and takeaway
- J. Use true, concrete illustrations, engaging the reader with sensory details
- K. Avoid absolute statements, generalizations, or stereotypes
- L. Interact with the Bible verses and do not use Scripture as an out-of-context support tagline
- M. Make every word count, eliminating passive voice and unnecessary filler words

8. Obediently Place Your Best Work in God's Hands, so He Can Use Your Words

God will use our small offerings if, and only if, we share the messages He's given us to write.

We have to learn the art of letting go. Once we've prayerfully written and polished our devotion, our goal is to share our work so God can use our words.

Every God-given voice is special, unique, and purposed for a specific God-ordained audience.

Every voice is needed, useful, and important. Every voice makes a difference in God's Kingdom.

We need God and each other as we courageously point our readers to Jesus with every word He places on our hearts, and continually work to master the art of writing devotions.

Thank you for taking time to visit my website. I thank God for your partnership in sharing the Gospel of Christ through the beautiful art of devotional writing.

In His service,
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