

Pointers for Writing Devotionals that Touch—and Challenge—Your Readers' Hearts

By Carolyn Rathbun Sutton, editor of women's daily devotional book series, 2015-2022

The following simple, but critical, aspects of devotional writing are addressed briefly below:

1. Topic selection
 2. Tone of your devotional
 3. Title selection
 4. Transition techniques (from an anecdote to the spiritual teaching)
 5. Ending techniques that make for a strong reader take-away
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1. Topic selection

- Read the General Conference Women's Ministries (GCWM) devotional book guidelines for writers.
- Within these parameters, prayerfully decide on a topic that focuses on elements that contribute to the whole person.
- The devotional should build on a specific area of need in a woman's life or an ongoing interest (e. g. health, children, one's devotional experience, outreach, relationships, the power of prayer).

2. Tone of your devotional

- Be real. Be authentic.
- Be one with the reader. Example: Occasionally we need . . .
- Avoid condescension (e. g. suggesting that the author is superior in lifestyle, Bible knowledge, morals).
- Avoid patronization (e. g. the author "talks down" to readers of perceived inferior understanding).
- Avoid judgementalism (e.g. the author scolds, lectures, or "preaches" to the reader).

3. Title selection

- Don't reveal your main point or punchline in the title. This quickly dampens curiosity in the reader's mind and takes away her motivation for reading your devotional through to the end—because you've already revealed the ending.
- The title is not a sermon. Use your title as a hook to reel in the reader.
- Keep the title "punchy." Let it jump out at the reader.
- Craft your title to hold a "promise." Pique the reader's curiosity. A devotional entitled "Holiday Hold-up" or "The Three Keys to Prayer" will snag a reader's attention much more quickly than one entitled "Truly Our God Answers Prayer in Everyday Life."

4. Transition techniques (from an anecdote to the spiritual teaching)

Here are nine transition techniques, with examples, to get the reader from your opening anecdote/story to the spiritual teaching contained in your devotional.

Association

- This incident led me to think about . . .

Chronology

- Years ago, . . .
- Some time back . . .
- Five centuries ago . . .

Comparison

- What is true in Olympic competition is also true in the spiritual life . . .
- In many ways, our spiritual walk is like a hike toward a mountain destination . . .
- In a sport or in everyday life, it's important to . . .

Contrast

- This may be true about baking a cake, but when it comes to our walk with God . . .
- Unlike helpless birds in a nest, we can have the strength to . . .
- Judas sold his soul for 30 pieces of silver. On the other hand, Peter . . .

Everyday example

- Too often people, after one or two failures, are tempted to give up trying.
- Sometimes, midst trials and temptations, we forget how much God wants to be involved in our lives—daily. [Editor's note: But after a generalization such as this, be sure to focus on a specific thought, example, or word picture to which your readers can relate in daily life.]

Logical progression of thought

- This incident/text/tale reminds me of a woman/story/incident in the Bible that. . .

Question about everyday life

- Wouldn't it be wonderful if people were always thoughtful and kind? But they aren't, are they! So what will your response be—and mine—to discourteous treatment?

Question based on preceding anecdote/Bible teaching

- So what does it look like, in this day and age, to overcome evil with good? To heap coals of fire on an enemy's head?
- Joseph's faith in God didn't depend on his quick release from prison. Rather . . .

Recollection:

- As I recall that long-ago day, . . .

5. Ending techniques that make for a strong reader take-away

Your closing paragraph, ending sentence, and wrap-up thought all reinforce the spiritual lesson in your devotional and also focus on the reader's practical application in her life.

Since your closing thought can make or break the impact of your devotional, spend time rereading what you have written. Check everything for biblical accuracy, for logic, and for a smooth, progressive flow of all your ideas. Then craft a closing thought that reinforces the main idea and theme text.

Let your final thought appeal both to the reader's heart (touching her emotions) and to her higher desires (challenging her to take some type of positive action that day).

Important reminder: No matter what method you use to provide a strong clincher to your devotional, make sure it points (obviously, as in these next examples) to Jesus and the reader's relationship with Him (or more subtly, as in the examples beyond).

Point to Jesus

- Life experiences can't give us all the answers to life's problems, but Jesus can.
- Physicians may not be able to treat all our diseases, but Jesus can.
- I may not be able to "feel" forgiveness for someone, but, at my invitation and through my heart, Jesus can.
- This world cannot give me peace, but Jesus can.

Admission of limitations

- We must admit that we don't have all the answers. However, God does. So, . . .

Admonition/warning (kindly phrased)

- Let's be careful to let our words build up the Body of Christ, rather than tear it down.
- What we need is . . .
- Don't let an unforgiving spirit or a spirit of bitterness keep you from experiencing God's fullness of joy and His pleasures forevermore. [This also reinforces the theme text.]

Affirmation from Scripture

- God has begun a good work in us, so . . .

Acknowledge lack of closure as part of life on this earth

- This week we may be subjected to gossip, criticism, or falsehood. Yet if we are hidden in Christ, what God speaks about us will be true, faithful, and eternal. And it is *His* opinion of us that truly matters.

Amplification of a Bible text (similar to, but not the same as, the devotional's theme text)

- David wrote, "Seven times a day I praise you for your righteous laws" (Ps. 119:164, NIV). That's how God wants us to praise Him—continually.

Biblical example of Christ-centered living

- Mary chose to show her love to Christ in the presence of others. We can do the same by/when/while . . .

Blessing from a Bible text (or paraphrase of one)

- May He who began a good work continue it to completion until Jesus comes to take us all home (based on Phil. 1:6).

Call to deeper faith (made personal and practical)

- What we need is . . .
- God can . . . so that we will be able to . . .

Call to introspection

- How long has it been since you . . .?
- When was the last time that you . . .?
- Think about . . .

Challenge to practice one's theology in everyday life

- This Bible promise can also be our prayer. . .

- As Jesus said to the paralytic, He says to us right now: “Pick up your mat and walk.” How will obeying this command look like in your life today?

Contrast

- Even more necessary than our daily bread—from the supermarket—is the daily bread we need from God, His Word of life. The divine bread that will nourish us at every level, strengthening us to make it through our day on His behalf.

Empowerment

- God doesn’t force the will. It is we who can choose whether or not to trust His promises and then to act on them.

Encouragement

- Because of God’s grace, we can. . .
- Your mission now, despite failures in the past, is to . . .
- “Having faith in your abilities is just as important as faith in God because He made you. He gave you those abilities, and He doesn’t make mistakes. If you try, you might fail, but never fail to try.” (from Andrew Holmes, *God Moments for Men*, “Failure,” Christian Art Gifts, p. 91).

How to

- Forgiving is easier when . . .
- Ask God to help you . . .

Humor

- “There is no perfect mate. (I’m including you, by the way. And me!) . . . Live to bless and honor your [spouse]. Regardless.” (from Andrew Holmes, *God Moments for Men*, “Stay Committed,” Christian Art Gifts, p. 79).

Identify with the reader’s feelings before offering comfort

- Sometimes it feels as if God has “stepped away from the phone for a few minutes” as I heard on someone’s voicemail message when the person I was calling didn’t pick up the phone. I’m sure you have felt that way too when. . .

Identify with the reader’s failures (through your own—thus avoiding judgementalism) before offering encouragement

- “The head shaken in reproach is a common response to public sin. More helpful is the head that nods, ‘Yes, I am capable of that,’ then bows in prayer for the one who has fallen and the one who thinks he stands” (*Daily Bread*, January 19).

Invitation to a fresh start with God

- If you’ve slipped away from God as you’ve tried to balance a plate full of responsibilities, why not take a moment now to reconnect with Him. He’s just been waiting for you to say something.

Question

- How will you respond?
- We know Gideon chose to trust in God's word. What will you choose?

Showing the outcomes between contrasting choices

- As with the choice made in this story—as well as the biblical principles that clearly support it—choosing God's way over personal inclination will always bring peace both now and eternally.

Specific personal application

- If you are feeling overstressed right now, take steps to . . . , at the same time asking God for . . .

Suggestions (not commands) for readers

- If we will just slow down and give God a minute . . .
- Remember that . . .
- Why not spend more time . . .
- We can pray that/for . . .

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