

TIPS FOR WRITING LIFE-CHANGING DEVOTIONALS

Here are some tips for writing great devotionals, either for *Light from the Word* or for your own church newsletter.

Devotional Do's

1. *Stick to the Assignment.* Nearly all devotionals are written by assignment, and the format cannot be varied. *Always* submit the right number of words in the format requested by the publisher. Editors are sticklers about this because (a) the published format and design is set and cannot be varied, and (b) readers expect consistency.

2. *Start with a Strong Lead.* This is especially important in a short format like a devotional (ours are 220–230 words). Grab the reader early and never let go.

3. *Use a Three-Part Structure.* It's real simple: Life-Scripture-Challenge. Start with a brief sketch of a common spiritual problem. This is where first person writing can be highly effective if done well. What's the question, problem, foible, or experience that we all face? Then state the biblical truth that bears on the point. You've got three or four sentences to make your case, so be concise and avoid repetition. Finally, challenge the reader to apply that truth to life. How will my life change if I take this learning to heart?

4. *Use First Person Carefully.* It's OK to use a first-person illustration, especially if it is unique or truly funny. But beware of making yourself the star of the devotional. People don't read to find out about you; they're looking for God.

5. *Challenge People.* People don't read a devotional because they want to be shallow Christians with their spiritual life stuck at zero. Devotional readers want to reflect on their relationship with God and to be caused to grow. Show your readers something important about God, themselves, or the world.

6. *Close with a Bang.* The last sentence of your devotional should be your best writing. Seal home the truth with a memorable sentence so that readers always want to read through to the end.

7. *Tighten Your Writing.* Revise, revise, revise. You have only 225 words to work with. Make every single letter pull its weight. Flowery words, cutesy images, and vague expressions will have to go. Let your voice be strong and clear.

Devotional Don'ts

1. *Don't Use Trite Personal Stories.* For example, don't talk about cute things that your children have said (everybody's kids are precious), mundane answers to prayer (does God do anything besides help people find parking spots?), or common personal traits (nearly everyone is afraid of heights). Say something original—that's what the reader is paying for.

2. *Don't Criticize Others.* Do not use the devotional to complain about "some people," "so-called Christians," or "many in our world today." Nobody reads devotionals to discover that sin is a problem; they're looking for the solution. Aim to inspire your reader to holy living rather than criticizing the shortcomings of others.

3. *Don't Use Urban Legends or Trite Sayings.* If you begin with "The story is often told" or "It has often been said," choose a different illustration or quotation. These are marks of lazy writing.

4. *Don't Rely on Jargon.* If you're tempted to add the words *blessing, by faith, in Christ, from above,* or other Christian code words, ask yourself why. Find a way to express these valuable ideas in other words.

5. *Don't Rehash the Scripture Verses.* Assume that your readers have read the verse you placed before them. Don't retell it in your devotional; simply comment upon it.

The worst devotionals are trite, sloppy, unoriginal sentimentality lathered up with religious jargon or else shallow, vindictive rants about the writer's pet peeve.

The best devotionals are tightly written, poignant, appropriately self-revealing essays on spirituality that cause the reader to see truth in a fresh way. They are always inspiring, and often convicting.

Never take a contract assignment for granted. Your words will be taken to heart by thousands of people. Choose them well.