

HOW TO WRITE A

DEVOTIONAL



THE DEFINITIVE GUIDE

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NEW YORK TIMES BESTSELLING NOVELIST & BIOGRAPHER

Of all the markets open to new nonfiction writers, the devotional market is by far the most welcoming.

To get the lowdown on this vast opportunity, I went to the leader in the field, my favorite writing teacher in the country, Dr. Dennis E. Hensley.

Doc is chairman of the Department of Professional Writing at Taylor University and a monthly columnist for *Christian Communicator* magazine.

He's also the author of 60 books, including numerous devotionals, such as *Surprises and Miracles of the Season: for Christmas and New Year's* (Beacon Hill Press), and *More Than Meets the Eye* and *Man to Man* (both Kregel Publishers).

He has been head scriptwriter for the daily radio devotional program "Fresh Perspectives" on WBCL radio since 2006.

In more than three decades, I've never hosted a writers conference without asking Doc Hensley to speak. No one motivates writers like Doc, and no one knows devotional writing like he does.

So fasten your seatbelt and get ready to break into nonfiction writing with all the goodies he has to offer in this comprehensive guide.

I asked Doc about all aspects of writing and marketing devotionals, starting with what makes this such a huge market, especially for beginners.

DEVOTIONAL BOOKS ARE RELEASED THEMATICALLY FOR:

- Teens
- Men
- Women
- Grandparents
- College students
- Veterans
- Teachers
- Athletes
- And just about any other people group you can think of

Devotionals are used by a wide variety of media, including large-circulation daily devotional guides, such as [The Quiet Hour](#), [The Upper Room](#), [The Secret Place](#), [The Word in Season](#), [Devozine](#), [Pathways to God](#), and [Wesleyan Church](#) (These links will take you to their submission guidelines.)

More than 25 devotional quarterlies each publish 365 new entries each year. Naturally, these need fresh material annually.

Publishers of vacation Bible school and Sunday school materials often include devotionals for teachers and students. Many independent and denominational magazines (such as [The War Cry](#) and [The Baptist Bulletin](#)) run devotionals in each of their issues.

Some publishing houses produce not only devotional books, but also devotional desk calendars and greeting cards.

Again, this market must be replenished annually. Publications can't just recycle devotionals they ran the previous year. They depend on freelance writers to provide hundreds upon hundreds of fresh, insightful new ones.

WHAT YOU SHOULD BRING TO THE TABLE

Writers of devotionals should have a pure heart (James 3:8-11). With humility, graciousness, and spiritual sensitivity, you can create something that can alter a reader's thinking and behavior.

You also need a focused mind (Ps. 1:1-3; 73:28). A succinct and powerful message must be distilled to 150-175 words. This demands clarity.

And you must have a burning desire (Jeremiah 20:9). Ask for God's guidance to say the right words to someone who may be reading a devotional published a year after you write it.

God is the Alpha, but He is also the Omega. He knows what hurts and needs people will have in the future, and He can use you to prepare materials today to help people during hard times tomorrow.

You won't get rich writing devotionals. In fact, you may have to write a half dozen to see more than \$100. That's why it's important to write them in batches to make it worth your while—not that you're doing it solely for the money.

You can revise and resell your print devotionals as radio devotionals for about the same rate of pay. And you can collect your devotionals and publish them as a book, receiving an advance and royalties.

But beyond payment, you may also enjoy the deep gratification of readers telling you your words changed a mind about an abortion, a suicide, or a divorce.

MEETING READERS WHERE THEY ARE

People turn to devotionals to meet deep needs. Some have lost friendships, been divorced, suffered from criticism, betrayal, or the death of a loved one. They need the balm of God's comfort.

Others seek intimacy with God. Their prayer lives are lax, their testimonies weak, and their church attendance sporadic. They need to find their way back to Jesus.

Some just want to grow spiritually or to discover a better way to share their faith. Your devotional may be their only connection to the Bible all day.

A harried mom may read one just before bed.

A busy teacher may read one during lunch.

An executive may read one during breakfast.

THE WRITING METHOD

When you settle on a passage of Scripture as your anchor text, read it in different translations. Pray and meditate over it until you're certain you thoroughly understand the verse in context.

Stay current by offering an illustration today's reader can relate to. Link modern challenges and questions to longstanding solutions from God's Word—and make the connections obvious and logical.

Doc Hensley's Devotional Format Summary

Hook: An excellent lead and a compelling anecdote will grab and hold (hook) the reader's attention.

Book: Point them to the wisdom of the Bible (book).

Look: Offer some unique way of seeing (look) how the Bible relates to his or her needs.

Took: Finally, provide takeaway (took) value.

Analyze your Scripture for what it says about God, about others, about you.

Does it:

- Make promises, like, "Train up a child in the way he should go, and when he is old he will not depart from it"?
- Issue commands, like, "You shall not steal"?
- Establish principles, like, "What people sow, that will they also reap"?
- Offer examples, like when Jesus said, "Follow Me"?

- Present prayers, like The Lord's Prayer?
- Provide encouragement, like, "Blessed are the meek, for they shall inherit the earth"?

Once you discover the true meaning and function of a passage, you'll know how to help your readers relate to it.

We're told that all Scripture is profitable, so explain how this passage will profit your reader. But remember, you're not writing a Bible lesson, a history lesson, or a lecture. Offer an anecdote that applies the passage to your reader.

How do you keep it current? Ask yourself:

- What issues are affecting families?
- How are attitudes changing?
- In what ways are values shifting?
- How is the workplace different?
- What national and global concerns make people anxious?

Read newspapers, blogs, and magazines. Listen to the news. Find a contemporary issue and draw a biblical parallel.

1. Runaway children? Look at the prodigal son.
2. Rebellious children? Cain and Abel.
3. Adultery and divorce? Hosea and Gomer.
4. Barren women? Sarah, Hannah, and Elizabeth.
5. Ministering to prisoners? Joseph, Peter, and Paul.

Any modern problem has a parallel story, lesson, judgment, or prediction in Scripture.

THE MAKINGS OF A GOOD DEVOTIONAL

Your reader is giving you a few minutes, and in exchange you must provide an engaging piece of writing that offers new insights. Be genuine and honest, not grandiose or admonishing.

Good devotional writing says, “Walk with me a few minutes. Examine something with me.”

Keep your style appropriate to your audience. Writing devotionals for teens is not the same as writing for seniors.

Although your anecdotes and illustrations should be drawn from your life, the lesson should always be drawn from Scripture.

Present God’s wisdom in a package your reader can relate to.

Stick with tangible images, things readers can see, touch, smell, hear, and taste.

Be specific, yet precise. Make each word count.

Use visual nouns, punchy verbs, short sentences, and the active voice.

FIVE BASIC PATTERNS

Learn these and you can begin using them immediately:

1. The Self-examination

Draw on personal experiences and use anecdotes to teach valuable lessons. Often such devotionals begin with:

“When I was in high school ...”

“When I was fishing alone one morning ...”

“During my first year at camp ...”

The recollection always has a moral or application that ties in with the selected Scripture.

2. An Outside Observer Reports

Here you’re telling what happened to someone else. Real names may be used with permission, or changed, as long as the story is true.

Often these devotionals begin with a phrase such as:

“When my great-grandmother first came to America ...”

“My best friend had just gotten his driver’s license ...”

“Most people are unaware that George Washington ...”

3. You Interact with Other People

Report on something you learned from a friend, coworker, or family member. Begin with a phrase such as:

“My son taught me a lesson one day when I was walking him to school ...”

“My friend could always make me laugh ...”

“One day my college history professor was explaining ...”

4. The Object Lesson

Use a tangible object to parallel an event or circumstance. Jesus often used this format, employing such things as a mustard seed, a Roman coin, a lamp and a bushel, or a tower as metaphors.

Object lesson devotionals quickly make readers see the parallel between the object and the lesson. “Trees killed by saltwater brought in by a tsunami will still stand upright and take up space, but they will bear no fruit. People who come to church each Sunday and occupy a pew but do nothing all week to share their faith are like these trees.”

5. The Double Meaning Phrase

Take a well-known line from advertising, history, a song, or a poem and convert it to a Christian message, as in “A day without Sonshine is a gloomy day.”

One devotional writer compared the rigid discipline of being a United States Marine to the discipline Christians should adhere to, calling the devotional, “Corps Values vs. Core Values.”

DEVELOPING A DEVOTIONAL JOURNAL

Because much of what we observe and say has potential to become material for a devotional, keep a journal for ideas, thoughts, and feelings. Begin today by answering:

- Did God use a specific verse of Scripture to change your life? How did it affect your outlook?
- Has God brought a person into your life to alter your direction? Like Philip with the Ethiopian eunuch, how did someone suddenly enter your life as a teacher, friend, mentor, or accountability partner?
- When did God make Himself known to you in a dramatic way? Did you receive an answer to prayer regarding a health issue, financial need, or spiritual awakening that proved He was working in your life? Record the details.
- Had God ever reprimanded and brought you back in line when you were spiritually wayward? Explain how you felt God's chastening and corrective hand.
- Did God use a deep hurt in your life to make you sensitive to others or to show you new ways to be effective to those you serve?

In answering these questions, you'll discover your life is a source of great lessons you can pass along.

BRAINSTORMING MORE DEVOTIONAL TOPICS

As you make entries in your devotional journal each day, try to recall:

- A sad or funny experience you've had in the past year
- Things you've learned while traveling
- Challenging relationships with people at work, home, or school
- Something you are an expert on
- An item in a newspaper or magazine that fascinated you
- An editorial or column you strongly disagreed with
- An unusual experience or new challenge you've recently faced
- An opinion based on years of experience
- Something startling or insightful you recently learned from TV or a book
- A new perspective you gained from a sermon
- Societal trends that concern you
- An event that restored your faith in mankind
- Something related to science, nature, weather, or time that stunned you
- A trip to a museum that awakened a new appreciation for nature
- A new job assignment that has stretched you
- A family picnic or class reunion that gave you a special perspective
- Letters or diaries you recently discovered
- A poem or song that keeps coming to mind
- Volunteer work that helped you see the suffering of others
- A friend's sickness or accident that alarmed you

AVOIDING BLIND SPOTS

Although certain publications use devotionals targeted to teens, working women, or seniors, most devotionals you will write will be read by a broad spectrum. So keep in mind:

- People live in many different financial and social conditions.
- The distinctive beliefs of many denominations and theological traditions are precious to people and must be respected.
- Some readers have limited education. So keep things simple but not condescending.
- People in other countries may not understand your slang and pop culture references.
- It is usually better not to write devotionals that stir controversy. So avoid topics such as infant baptism, female ordination, or speaking in tongues.

THE BASIC FORMAT

Before submitting a devotional, obtain a publication's writers guidelines and copies of the publication itself. Follow the guidelines *exactly*.

Your name, address, and phone number should appear on each page. But some publications also ask for your email address.

The basic format calls for a suggested passage of Scripture (usually 5 to 12 verses), a title, one printed-out specific verse from the suggested reading, and an anecdote or story that shows how that biblical lesson applies today.

The writer's byline usually appears at the end.

Some publications ask that you begin or end with a prayer or thought for the day.

Length varies, from as short as 75 words to as long as 225.

The guidelines will state the preferred method of submission.

Some editors like printouts mailed to the publication's office. Some like email submissions. Some accept either.

Most publications buy first rights, important because you can then re-use your devotionals in books.

SUMMARY

Writing devotionals is a good way to enter nonfiction writing, earn money, and make a positive impact on thousands of readers. Your experiences and those of others are rich sources for ideas.

How to Get Started

1. List 20 emotional hurts people are dealing with (loneliness, depression, guilt, shame, abandonment, grief, prejudice, etc.). Then list what aspects of spiritual growth could come out of each such experience (learning to pray more effectively, learning to bring the Good News to others, cultivating humility, etc.).
2. Start a devotional journal.
3. Try writing a one-page devotional and submit it to one of the devotional markets listed in *The Christian Writer's Market Guide*.

You're on your way!

Jerry Jenkins is the author of 21 *New York Times* bestsellers, including the popular *Left Behind* series. He's also written over 160 other books and is sought around the world for his expertise in writing and publishing. Jerry currently lives in Colorado with his wife Dianna.



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powerful resource?*

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