

# Tell Your Story!



## Turning Life Experiences Into Devotionals

Prepared by  
Carolyn Rathbun Sutton

For the  
Anna Knight Center for Women's  
Leadership and Museum

Oakwood University  
Huntsville, Alabama  
April 13, 2021

You can download a  
“Tell Your Story”  
tutorial packet from

[WLC@oakwood.edu](mailto:WLC@oakwood.edu)



**Tell Your Story!**  
**(Turning Life Experiences Into Devotionals)**

Tutorial Packet

By

Carolyn Rathbun Sutton

The Anna Knight Women’s Leadership Center and Museum

Oakwood University

Huntsville, Alabama

# Tell Your Story!



- “For we are God’s masterpiece. He has created us anew in Christ Jesus, so we can do the good things he planned for us long ago.”
- (Ephesians 2:10, NLT)



## Our Commission: Jesus Himself has asked us to tell our stories.

- “The man who had been freed from the demons begged to go with him.
- But Jesus sent him home, saying, ‘No, go back to your family, and *tell them everything God has done for you.*’”

• (Luke 8:38, 39, NLT, italics supplied)



One simple experience from your life can become a devotional that will touch the hearts of many.



- When we tell our stories, we are sharing with others how God has been at work in our lives.



Go for the heart . . .

- “The desire to reach for the stars is ambitious. The desire to reach hearts is wise.”

—Maya Angelou

- The reason we craft Christian devotionals from our personal stories is to reach hearts . . . for Jesus.



You might be  
thinking . . .

*Who would want to  
read my story?*

*What do I have to  
offer that would be of  
any help to a reader?*



What the book editor said . . .

- “We are always looking for fresh, new material!”





The book editor continued . . .

- “For those who do not know you, *your* story is fresh, new material.”



The book editor added . . .

- “When written under the influence and guidance of the Holy Spirit, *your* story can change lives for eternity.”



The book editor emphasized . . .

- “No one—better than *you*—can tell *your* story as authentically, passionately, and with as much clarity as you can. For only you have walked in your shoes.”



The book editor challenged . . .

- “Every person in this room has fresh, new material to offer to the world—from *your* life experience.”





The book editor concluded . . .

- “Not only will many people *read* what you have to say, they also *need* what you have to say! So, tell your story!”

You may be wondering,  
“But where do I start?”



Why not start by keeping and using a prayer journal during your personal time with God?

You can journal . . .

- Prayers requests
- Intercessory prayers
- Meaningful Bible texts
- God's responses to your praises and pleas
- How the Holy Spirit has directed and corrected
- Memories of God at work in your life



# Benefits of Journaling

- Deeper glimpses of how God has worked—and continues to work—in our lives
- Clarification of our thoughts and feelings \*
- Greater self-knowledge and problem resolution\*\*
- Reduced stress, improved immune and memory function, improved mood, and better “emotional stability”\*\*\*

Journaling, in particular, helps fight depression, asthma, AIDS, and the healing of some wounds\*\*\*\*

\*Elizabeth Scott, [stress.about.com/od/generaltechniques/p/profilejournal.htm](http://stress.about.com/od/generaltechniques/p/profilejournal.htm). Accessed June 2006. Italics supplied. Accessed April 7, 2021]

\*\**Ibid.*

\*\*\*(Kasee Bailey. “5 Powerful Health Benefits of Journaling” ([5 Powerful Health Benefits of Journaling \(intermountainhealthcare.org\)](http://5PowerfulHealthBenefitsOfJournaling.intermountainhealthcare.org), July 31, 2018. Accessed April 7, 2021.

\*\*\*\*Rachel Grate. “Science Shows Something Surprising About People Who Still Journal.” [Science shows something surprising about people who still journal \(mic.com\)](http://ScienceShowsSomethingSurprisingAboutPeopleWhoStillJournal.mic.com) February 17, 2005. Accessed April 7, 2021.



- A [study](#) from 2013 found that 76% of adults who spent 20 minutes writing about their thoughts and feelings for three consecutive days two weeks before a medically necessary biopsy were fully healed 11 days later. Meanwhile, 58% of the control group had not recovered.

—Rachel Gates



# Let's Get Started!



- Let's get started on your story—your first submission to the new collegiate women's devotional book.
- When we end our time together today, you will have the basic information you need to start working toward the completion of your first devotional.
- Get ready to take a few notes.

# First, What Is a Devotional?

A devotional is a concise piece of writing (250-425 words, depending on the publisher's guideline), which usually includes the following three components:

- A theme text
- A personal experience
- A spiritual takeaway/lesson (sometimes a prayer)

A Christian devotional always points readers to God and the unfailing promises found in His Word.



# A Devotional Meets Readers Where They Are (the Power of a Devotional)



“When feasting upon God’s word,

because of the precious light you  
gather,

present it to others that they may  
feast. . . .

(Ellen G. White, *Counsels to Writers  
and Editors*, 87.1)

*Where Does  
“Meeting  
People Where  
They Are”  
Begin?*

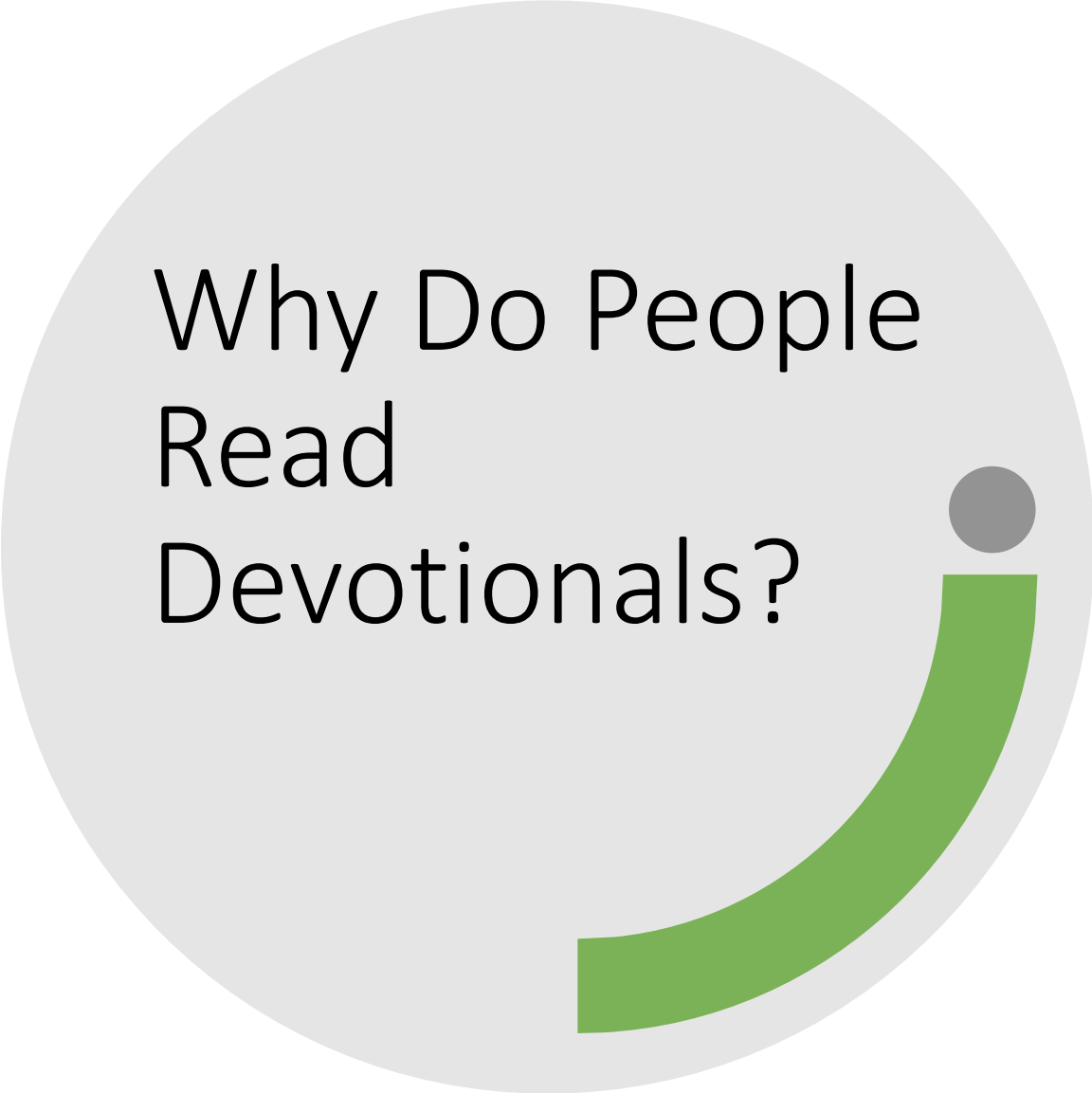


*The quote  
continues . . .*

“Let your communications [what you share] be free and heartfelt [authentic and humble].

You can best *meet the people where they are* . . . .  
right here in this sorrowing, sinful, corrupt world,  
battling with the stern realities of life.”

(Ellen G. White, *Counsels to Writers and Editors*, 87.1,  
italics and amplification supplied)



Why Do People  
Read  
Devotionals?

And What Do They  
Hope to Find in Yours?

# People read devotionals to find . . .

- Answers to life's dilemmas
- Comfort or encouragement
- Guidance in life's decisions
- Ways to cope with . . .
  - a break-up or loss of a loved one
  - childhood trauma
  - chronic illness
  - depression
  - addictions
  - betrayal
  - criticism



A Reader Benefits From a  
Devotional When You  
Offer Her . . .



## 1. SPIRITUAL SUPPORT

When you share that God has been at work in *your* life, the reader may very well be impressed that He can work in her life too.

“People want to hear about faith-related incidents that the writer has learned from.”

—Marcia Mitchell



A Reader Benefits From  
Your Devotional When  
You Offer Her . . .



## 2. EMOTIONAL SUPPORT:

“I’ve learned that people will forget what you said, people will forget what you did, but people will never forget how you made them feel.”

—Maya Angelou

This is how it happens:



## 2. EMOTIONAL SUPPORT (cont.)

When a reader relates to your story, she will be impressed that at least one other person (you, the writer) understands what she's going through. She no longer feels so alone with her challenges.

And since you share that you can cope with life *because* of your own relationship with God, you are encouraging her to deepen *her* relationship with Him too.

A Reader Benefits From a  
Devotional When You  
Offer Her . . .



### 3. INCENTIVE TO MAKE A POSITIVE CHANGE

A writer can “create something that  
can alter a reader’s thinking and behavior.”

—Jerry Jenkins

When your story points the reader to  
Jesus, your words can move her from a  
discouraged outlook to a hopeful mindset,  
leading her from darkness to light.

**Recap:** Three benefits readers need from your devotional



1. Spiritual support

2. Emotional support

3. Incentive to make a positive change (in her thinking or behavior)

# Devotional: A Time Capsule

- Someone once described a devotional as a “time capsule” which continues to release hope and strength to the reader whenever the [she] recalls it.







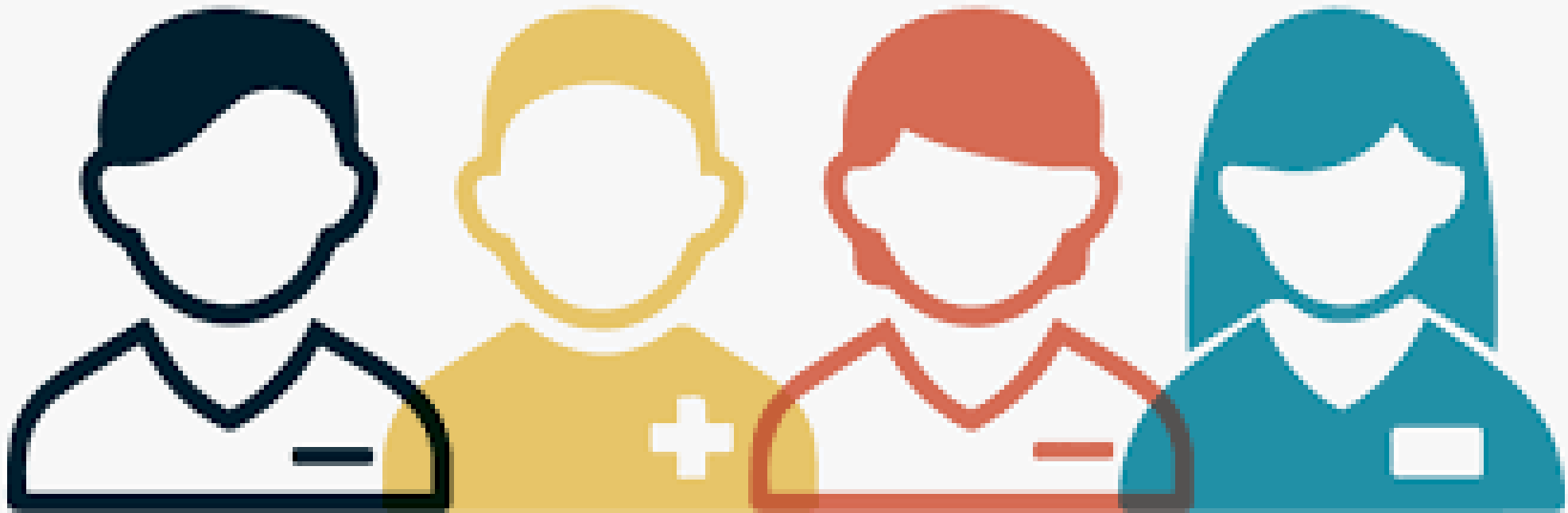
# The “Birthing” of a Devotional

- A devotional concept is most successfully birthed during one’s personal worship experience.
- “Jesus’ example shows us that the place to begin all our writing is on our knees. It is essential that we seek the ‘mind of Christ’ (1 Corinthians 2:16) if we hope to bring his answer to our hurting world. If we’re too busy to pray, we’re too busy.”
- —Marlene Bagnall

# The Birthing Team

(Ephesians 6:17b-18)

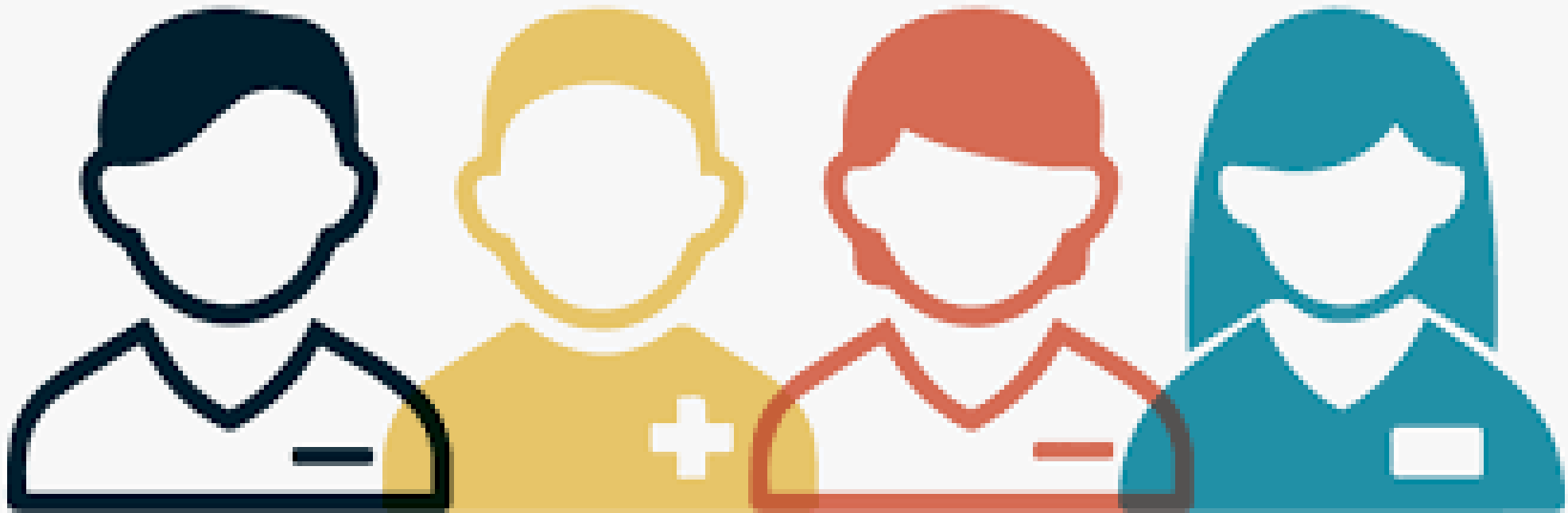
- Prayer
- Bible study
- Inspiration of the Holy Spirit
- Watchfulness in your everyday life



# The Birthing Team

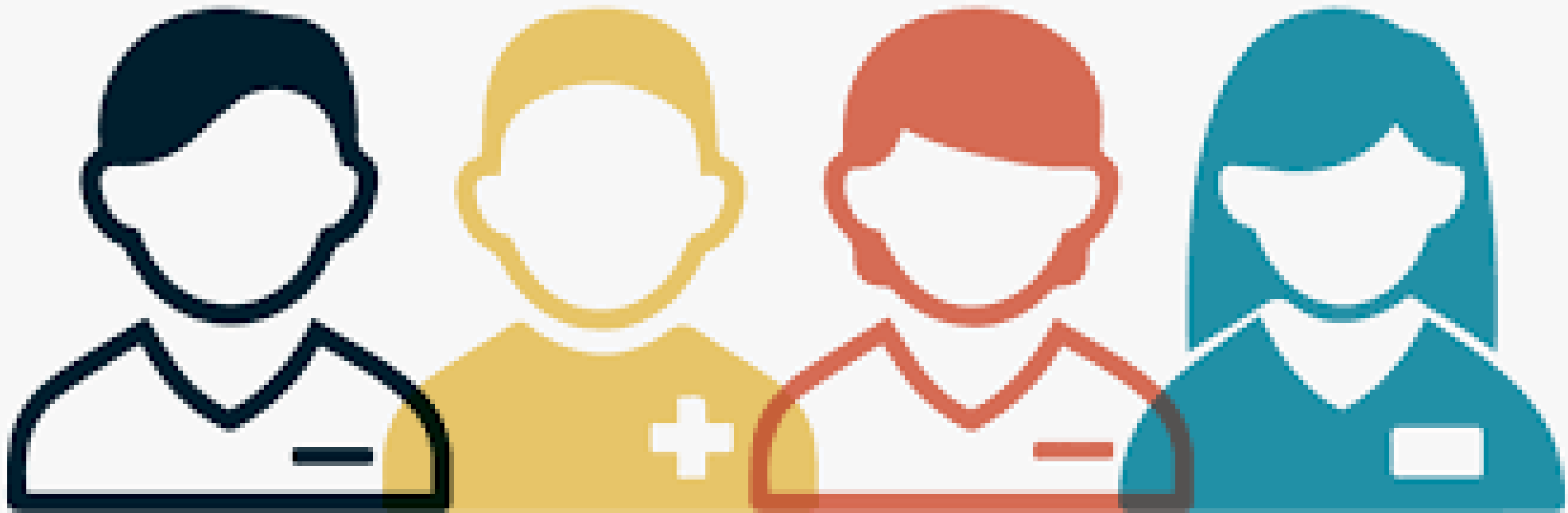
(Ephesians 6:17b-18, NIV)

“And take . . . the [1] word of God;  
with . . . [2] prayer . . . in the  
[3] Spirit, being [4] watchful.”



When you are “in devotion” with God, He brings His insight into your thoughts regarding your life experiences. Devotionals begin to “form” in this rich environment.

- Prayer
- Bible study
- Inspiration of Holy Spirit
- Watchfulness in your everyday life.



# And Keep That Prayer Journal Handy . . .

- “When God tells you something, write it down!”

—Ginny Allen

(Author, *God’s Love Song*)







# But remember . . .

- “Although your anecdotes and illustrations should be drawn from your life, the lesson [the reader takeaway] should always be drawn from Scripture.”

—Jerry Jenkins



So, let's get started  
on your devotional!

# Five Steps That Will Turn Your Story Into a Devotional

- I. Choosing (and then narrowing) your topic
- II. Focusing your story toward God
- III. Getting your reader's attention—as Jesus did
- IV. Crafting your takeaway
- V. Writing and editing your first draft





# Step 1: Choosing Your Topic

With Related Bible Text  
and Working Title

# Step 1-A: Choosing a Devotional Topic

- Over time, you may want to develop an “Idea Bank” in your prayer journal, on your computer, or simply on a handwritten list. On it you can list life memories, experiences, and adventures.
- For now, note up to three ideas as possible devotional topics from your life or the memory-trigger suggestions on the next two slides





# Topic Ideas . . .



- A favorite Bible passage
- A traumatic experience
- Something your grandmother taught you
- A childhood recollection
- An answered prayer
- An unanswered prayer
- A Bible promise fulfilled
- What a best-friend relationship taught you
- Your most unforgettable person

# More Topic Ideas . . .



- A pet- or animal-related experience
- An experience related to worship
- How you learned a new skill
- A major achievement or great joy
- A time of sadness or hurt
- Coping with a time of loneliness or a loss
- How nature taught you a lesson
- Other\_\_\_\_\_

# Step 1-B: Narrowing Your Topic Selection



On the lines below (or on your computer or notepad), list three topics *regarding personal challenges* that you have encountered.

Topic Idea 1: \_\_\_\_\_[Example: auto accident]

Topic Idea 2: \_\_\_\_\_[Example: cancer diagnosis]

Topic Idea 3: \_\_\_\_\_[Example: collegiate time crunch]

# Step 1-C: Choosing Topic-Related Title, and Text



1. From your three topic choices, choose just one for your first devotional:

\_\_\_\_\_ [collegiate time crunch]

2. Think of at least one possible title for your devotional (you can always change it later).  
Keep it short and punchy: [“Not Enough Time!” “Time Crunch!” “Timely Decision”]

3. Choose a complementary Bible text (or theme whose Bible reference you can find later: love, grace, forgiveness, protection, reconciliation, witnessing) that will support your story and lead to your reader takeaway: \_\_\_\_\_ [Matthew 6:33]

# Informal outline for “Not Enough Time”

BIBLE TEXT: Matthew 6:33—“But seek first the kingdom of God and His righteousness, and all these things shall be added to you” (NKJV).

STORY: I did not have time for both daily devotions and required reading for my master’s degree oral exam. God spoke to me through Matthew 6:33. So, I put time with Him first, trusting Him and doing my best with the time left. At the oral exam, the professors asked questions only on what I had had time to study—after time with God.

TAKEAWAY: God has promised He will be faithful to meet our needs when we put Him first. Where do you need to put Jesus first in your life today?





# Step 2: Focusing Your Story Toward God

[The Most Critical Part of Your Planning]

# Step 2: Focusing Your Story on God



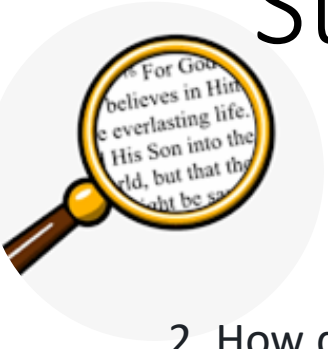
Step 2 is where you meet the readers where they *are* by sharing where you *were* before and as God helped you/spoke through His Word to you. The segue (bridge or transition) from your story to the spiritual application (lesson/takeaway) will introduce the element of hope.

The information you supply in answering at least TWO of the next three questions will show readers exactly *how* God worked in your life, offering them hope that He will work in their lives too.

1. How did God help me go forward with my life when, after I prayed, He didn't immediately provide what I'd asked?

\_\_\_\_\_ (N/A) \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

# Step 2: Focusing Your Story on God (cont.)



*(This question is the most important one that your devotional will answer for the reader.)*

2. How did God communicate with me *while* I was reading a Bible text/passage (when I was “in devotion”)?  
(Remember the “birthing” team: prayer, Bible reading, the Holy Spirit, the unfolding of life events.)

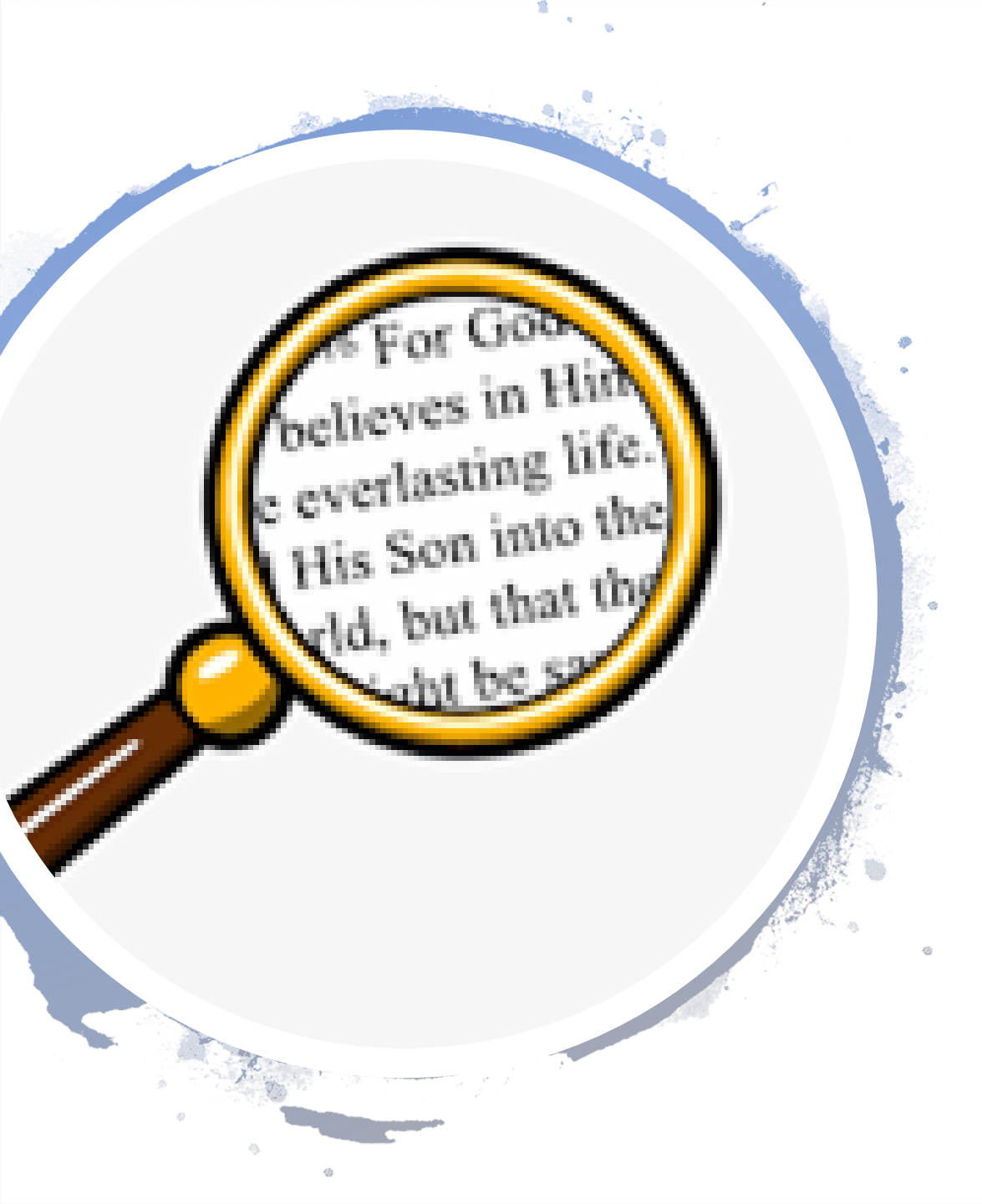
---

[Example: When I went to God in prayer because my time crunch might cost me my advanced degree, I asked the Spirit to guide me in Bible study. The Holy Spirit “stopped” me at Matthew 6:33. “Put Me first, and I will handle the outcome.”]

3. How did God help me cope with my challenge on a *daily* basis? \_\_\_\_\_

---

[Example: He reminded me that my daily choice was to keep my mind on Him and His power. Because He was in a personal relationship with me, I could trust His promises.]



The answers to these questions will provide your readers with . . .

1. Spiritual support
2. Emotional support
3. Incentive to make a positive change (in thinking and/or behavior)



# Step 3: Getting the Reader's Attention

Like Jesus Did

## Step 3: Getting the Reader's Attention— Like Jesus Did

- You want the reader to stay with you until the end of your devotional. So . . .
  - Pique the readers' interest.
  - Delay the resolution (so readers will keep reading).
  - Finally, reward them by revealing a satisfying/edifying takeaway.

Question: But how will you grab your readers' attention in your first sentence?

Answer: Do what Jesus did. He is our example in all things and often followed the pattern above when telling his parables (verbal devotionals). Notice the variety, creativity, effectiveness, and energy in His opening lines!

Jesus used attention-getting strategies 2,000 years ago that are taught by contemporary writing coaches today. He did this by . . .

- Posing a question: “But what do you think about this? A man with two sons told the older boy, ‘Son, go out and work. . .’” (Matthew 21:28, NLT).
- Using humor or irony: “Would anyone light a lamp and then put it under a basket or under a bed? Of course not!” (Mark 4:21, NLT).
- Setting up a crisis/problem: “A Jewish man was traveling . . . and he was attacked by bandits” (Luke 10:30, NLT).
- Describing a location/situation that appeals to one of the five senses: “A man planted a vineyard.” (Mark 12:1, NLT)



## To get people's attention for His stories, Jesus also . . .

- Used simile and metaphor: "The Kingdom of Heaven is like a mustard seed. . ." (Matthew 13:31, NLT).
- Jumped right into a story: "Listen! A farmer went out to plant some seeds" (Matthew 13:3, NLT).
- Focused on an emotion: "A man planted a fig tree in his garden and came again and again to see if there was any fruit on it, but he was always disappointed" (Luke 13:6, NLT).
- Proposed a relatable dilemma: "Suppose a woman has ten silver coins and loses one" (Luke 15:8, NLT).

# Now it's your turn . . .

- Compose an opening line for your devotional. (The following two techniques are also options.)
- A snatch of dialogue
- A flashback to an earlier time

- ---

---

---


---





# Step 4: Crafting Your Takeaway

What the Reader Can Apply to Her Life  
From Your Story



What seek ye first  
gdom of God and  
ghteousness, and a  
hese things shall b  
added unto you."

- Matthew 6:33

# What You Want to Leave With the Reader

Based on your story, text, and title, what would be an appropriate takeaway for your reader?

---

---

---

---

[Example: God faithfully fulfilled His promise to meet my educational needs when I put Him first.]

Then involve the reader: Where do you need to put Jesus first in your life today?

# A Few Ways to Word Your Takeaways

- **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.

- **Offer encouragement**

- Today, because of God's grace, we can . . . .
- Your mission now, despite failures in the past, is to . . . .

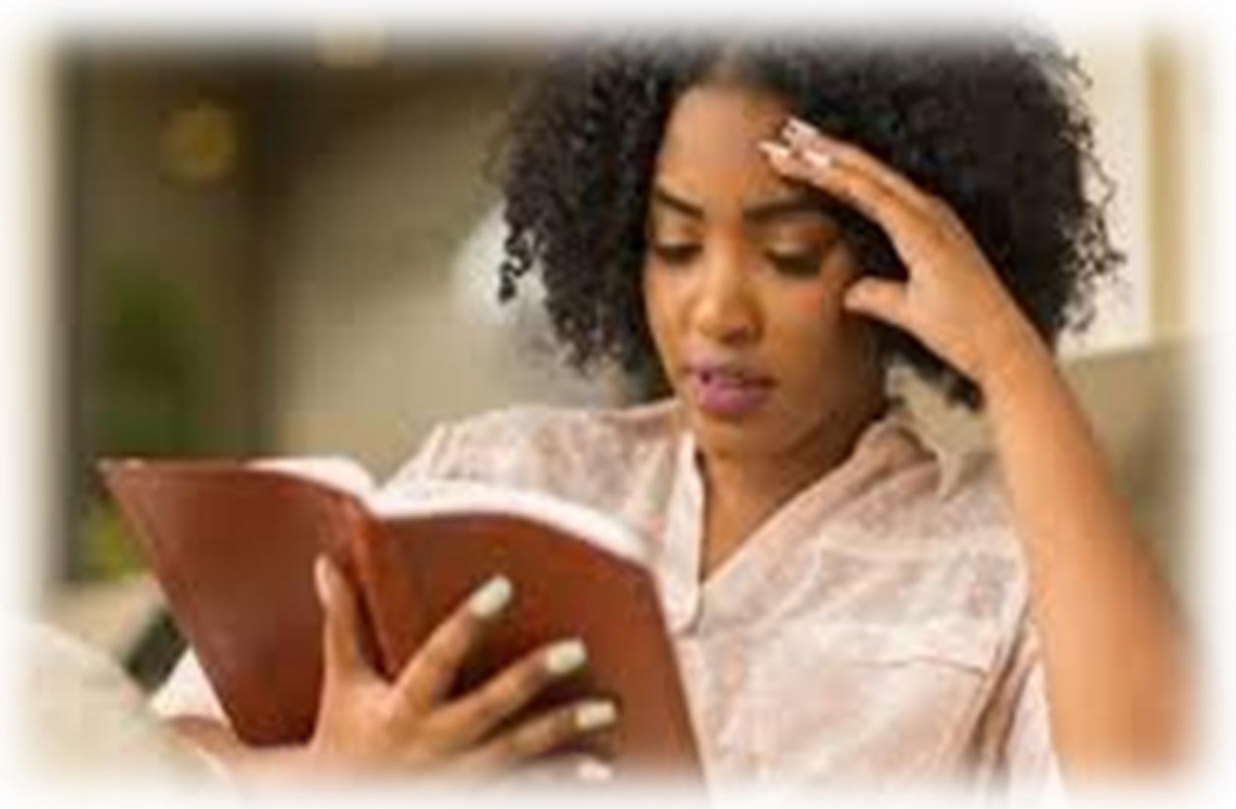
# More Ways to Begin Your Takeaway

- **Ask a question**
  - We know Gideon chose to trust in God's word. What will you choose?
- **Showing the outcomes between contrasting choices**
  - We can rest assured that 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 . . . .



# And One More Takeaway Idea . . .

- **You can give gentle suggestions (not commands) to your readers . . .**
  - If we will just slow down and give God a minute . . . .
  - Remember that . . . .
  - Why not spend more time . . . .
  - We can pray that/for . . .







# Step 5: Drafting Your Devotional (and Polishing It)



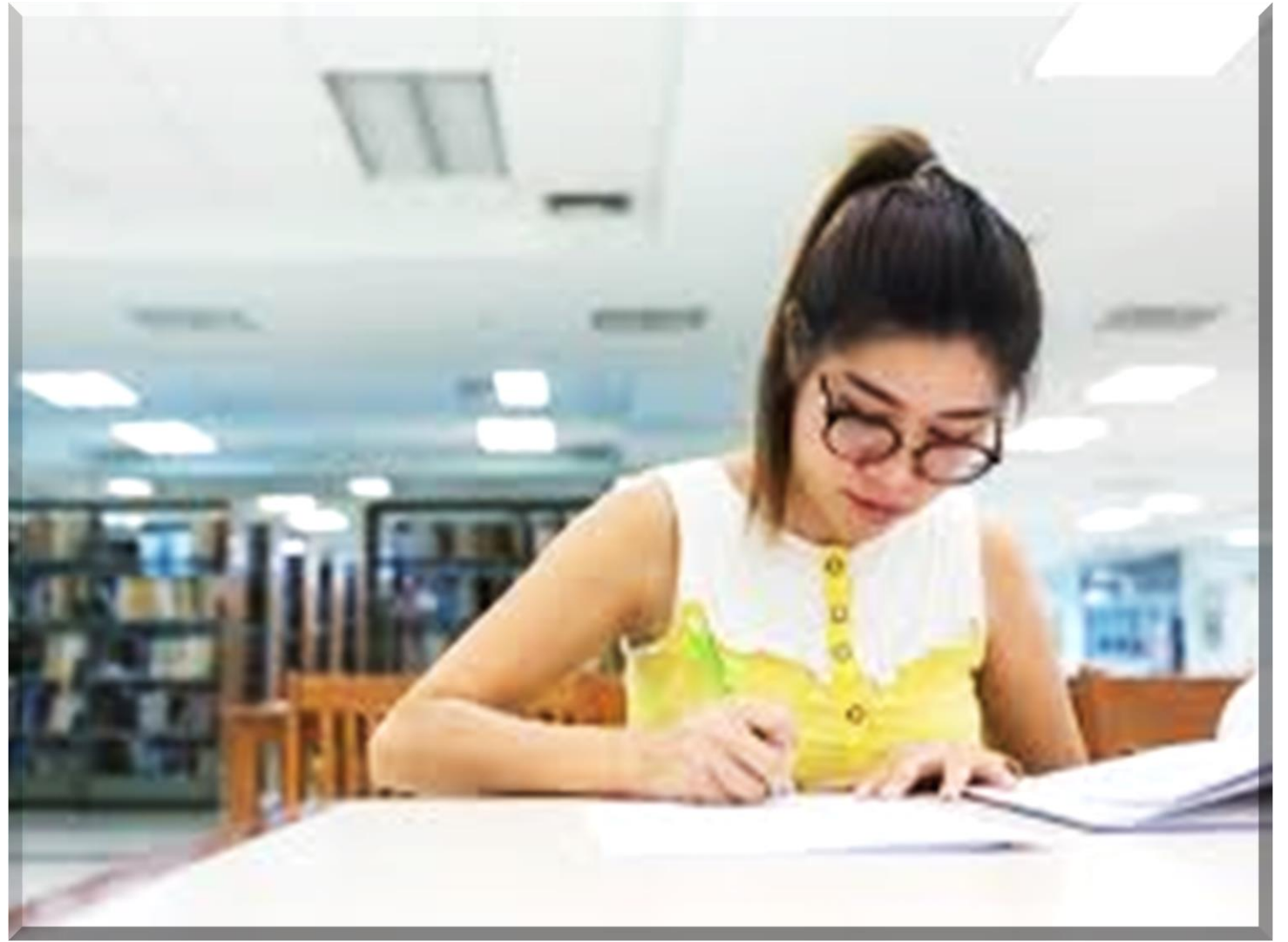
# Drafting Your Devotional

- From your personal notes and “in-devotion” insights, you will be ready to write the first draft of your devotional. Write until you have said everything you want to.
- Later, edit down the devotional, making sure you are within the word count limit as stipulated on the writer’s guidelines.
- Check that you have a clear, concise takeaway for your reader that logically reflects your Bible text and story.

# What to Weed Out of Your Draft

---

- Unnecessary details or repetition
- Information that is too personal
- Unclear pronouns: “Nick and Jon went to college. He majored in drama.” (Who?)
- Actual names of people unless you have their permission
- Copyrighted material (including song lyrics and poetry) that you don’t have written permission to use
- A judgmental tone or attitude





## Devotional Writing Resources

- [The Internet: Google](#) “How to write a devotional”
- [WLC@oakwood.edu](#)
- “Tell Your Story!” tutorial packet
- writer’s guidelines

[women@gc.Adventist.org](#)

- “Pointers for Writing Devotionals” (This resource will help you polish your openings, segues, and takeaways)



# Thank you for telling your story!



- Jesus knows the needs of your readers a year from now, so He is already at work in you, equipping *you* to reach *their* hearts—for *Him*.
- We hope to “see” you soon in a devotional book.
- Remember, God will bless your efforts when you tell your story because . . . Jesus has asked us to do.

End of Presentation

“Tell Your Story!”