

Beware TMI

By Teresa Cook

I sat at my computer and stared at the posting, mesmerized by its content. A young woman described in graphic terminology the sexual molestation she had suffered as a child at her father's hands. My heart ached for her, but it was much more than I wanted—or needed—to know. This woman longed to help others by writing about her ordeal, but she made one fatal mistake. She furnished TMI—Too Much Information.

Recognize the Danger of TMI

God sometimes calls us to tackle tough topics in our writing such as domestic violence, sexual abuse, or rape. Often we write from personal experience burned into our minds in vivid imagery. While our goal is not to shock or offend, we can go too far in describing events.

Including TMI in our writing may have two effects on our readers we do not intend:

- *Give them reason not to read*

I felt very uncomfortable reading the young woman's post about her sexual abuse even though I'd not endured the things she had. We never know how many of our readers have faced situations similar to what we describe and the emotions our stories may evoke.

Pornography addiction is one of the tough topics I write about. When I submitted a book chapter on the subject to my online critique group, I had no idea pornography had impacted any of the other members. Even though I didn't include lurid descriptions, one critiquer emailed back and said the piece was hard for her to read because of the effect her father's pornography addiction had on her own life.

While we can't tiptoe around these subjects and pretend they don't exist, we must be sensitive in presenting our stories. If we make readers too uncomfortable, they'll tune us out or stop reading altogether, and we'll lose the opportunity to minister to them.

- *Give them the wrong reason to read*

By including too much information, we can sensationalize a topic and make our readers hunger for more—whether it's sexual content, violence, or scandal. These shocking tidbits function like the gossip described in Proverbs, “The words of a gossip are like choice morsels; they go down to a man's inmost parts” (Proverbs 18:8 NIV).

Unfortunately, I think we all have a little of this appetite for the sensational. After all, I could have stopped reading the writer's story of her childhood molestation, but I didn't. So we must be careful not to feed an unwholesome hunger for the scandalous in our writing.

Avoid TMI

Use this acrostic to help you avoid providing TMI:

- *Take time to journal*

If you're writing about a sensitive issue you've personally experienced, bottled-up words and feelings often cause you to add more details than you would otherwise. Journaling allows you to spill all those emotions onto a page where they won't distress anyone else. Then you can step back and look at them more objectively before writing for the public.

Journaling also achieves a healing effect. This may be God's plan for your writing in the first place. I don't believe God intends every writer to use every bad experience in his life to minister to others. I do believe, however, that God calls each of us to find healing in Him. We can't effectively help someone else until we've been restored to health ourselves. So find healing. Then if God calls you to use that experience, write.

- *Minimize details*

Tell readers just enough of your story that they can identify with your experiences. Those who have undergone the same trials will supply the fine points from their own circumstances. Those who haven't can use their imaginations to fill in the gaps.

In her devotional book for moms, *Help! My Husband Has Sexually Abused Our*

Daughter, author Debra Butterfield begins with the story of her 12-year-old daughter's suicide attempt. This opening establishes the gravity of their situation immediately. When the girl reveals that her stepfather has sexually abused her since she was three, details become unnecessary. Debra does a good job of conveying the devastating reality of incest without crossing the line into sensationalism.

- *It's not about you*

Journaling benefits you. Published writing should benefit your reader. Paul warned the Ephesians not to “let any unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful for building others up according to their needs, that it may benefit those who listen” (Ephesians 4:29 NIV). As Christian communicators, we strive toward this goal.

Put your audience first, and write what your reader needs to hear—not what you need to write. To accomplish this, some writers tape a representative picture of their intended audience onto their computer monitors. This keeps their readers uppermost in mind.

Draw the Line

Only by tackling difficult real-life issues can we offer readers the real-life solutions they need, but we must show discretion and sensitivity. If we keep these tips in mind, we'll benefit others without burdening them with TMI.

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