



Improve Your Writing to Raise More Funds

Fundraising is all about communication. Here's how to write what people will read.

BY LAVERNE A. SCHMIDT, CFRE

Writing gives you and your organization credibility. Often a nonprofit organization is represented only by what donors and community members receive at home. What they receive needs to be clear and concise. Make your copy the piece they will *want* to read. What they read and how it's written will make a lasting and important impression.

Acknowledgments, appeals, newsletters, case statements, even e-mails—they're critical to fundraising success. And they're all about writing.

The ability to write so that people will want to read your copy can be learned as well as improved. Here are eight simple techniques to becoming a better writer.

1. Find a Mentor

Early in my career as a fundraiser, I reported to a hospital executive with high expectations. Unfortunately, my writing didn't hit the mark with what he was looking for, and I wasn't sure how to improve. Then I got the idea of sending him samples of letters from other organizations. He was kind enough to critique them from his point of view. He established a standard for me and, as I look back, it was then that my interest in writing began.

Keeping in mind that education is a lifelong process, I'm still learning from my mentor today. Whenever one of his letters crosses my desk, I save it as a reference, noting how he uses words to connect with the reader. For example, how does he phrase his response to a patient complaint? How does he make his point while conveying empathy with the patient's concern? You feel good after you read one of his letters, and that's exactly how you want your donors to feel.

2. Develop a Thick Skin

It's not easy to accept criticism. After all, you graduated from college, turned in a lot of papers, and now you're being told your copy isn't acceptable. You worked hard on it, only to hear those familiar words, "Take another shot at it. Rework it a bit." It's not the easiest thing to face, but it's part of the learning process.

In my former job at St. Luke's Medical Center, I worked with a fundraising consultant who gave me feedback on my writing. Sometimes after he reviewed my

work there was so much red ink on the paper, it was hard to find the copy. That may be an exaggeration but not much of one. Frankly, it was embarrassing.

I realized, however, that the lessons I was learning were worth suffering some chagrin. I persevered and, over time, began to see a pattern emerging. There were less and less red markings. Hallelujah! My writing had begun to improve! That thick skin rescued me many times from giving up.

3. Be Blessed with a Good Copywriter

You can learn a great deal by developing a good relationship with a copywriter. Pay attention to the subtle changes your copywriter makes to your work. Can you see how your copy was edited to add a phrase here and there to make it read better, to add more interest?

4. Read, Read, and Read

If you often find yourself picking up books by the same author, stop. Mix your reading choices. If you enjoy mysteries, read an occasional biography or self-improvement book. And, by all means, don't always read books on fundraising! While we all need to keep current with the profession, it's important to vary your reading to stimulate creative thinking.

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For a good book on creativity, try *Thinkertoys* by Michael Michalko.

Reading a variety of books and magazines is a good way to develop your writing style. Look for phrasing, sentence structure, vocabulary, dialogue, and transitions. These are the subtleties of fluid writing.

Pay attention to grammar, too. If your copy's hard to read because of poor grammar, it will confuse the reader. A down-to-earth, easy-to-read book that will help bring your grammar up to par is *Woe Is I* by Patricia T. O'Conner.

5. Don't Toss Those Annual Reports

A lot of money and expertise went into creating those corporate reports. You'll find the letter from the chief executive officer at the beginning of the annual report helpful in developing copy. Not only are these letters always well written,

but there are many phrases you can tailor to your work.

Look over appeals you receive at home. What do you like about them? Highlight what you like and save it. Start a folder called "Writing Ideas" and toss in material that will be helpful when you've hit a roadblock.

6. Attend Writing Workshops

Your local college is likely the best source for a workshop on writing. Most of the instructors are authors themselves. You'll receive inspiring guidance and learn writing exercises to spark ideas. If you can't find time to attend a workshop, consider distance-learning courses taught over the Internet or via audiotape.

7. Go Outside Your Circle

Just as your reading shouldn't focus on one subject, neither should you limit

yourself to attending only fundraising programs. Take a sales course and get fired up. Look to see if your community has a professional communications organization, and attend a program of interest. Such a group is a good place to meet people who can recommend the best writing workshops and connect you with a mentor.

8. Pay Attention to the Direct-Mail Gurus

Respected direct-mail experts such as Jerry Huntsinger, Mal Warwick, and Stephen Hitchcock have been in the business a long time and have written an unbelievable amount of copy. Over the years they've learned what copy works and what doesn't. Pay attention to what they have to say.

Any direct-mail expert will tell you that when you create an appeal to donors, you should imagine you're writing to your mother. Your copy should read as though you were in a face-to-face conversation with her. Most of the writing done in a fundraising office should follow that same conversational style. Just as you ask for a gift in a warm, personal manner, so should your copy be written. ■

Resources

Buck, Joseph, "Writer's Block: Is There a Cure?," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 4, No. 3.

Lauer, Larry, "How Do Effective Nonprofit Leaders Communicate?" *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 13, No. 1.

Muehrcke, Jill, ed., *Public Relations & Communications, Leadership Series*.

Muehrcke, Jill, "Reach Out and Train Someone: The Many Faces of Distance Learning," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 20, No. 2.

Recer, Dan, "Let's Get Planned Giving Out of the Fog," *Nonprofit World*, Vol. 9, No. 5.

These resources are available from the Society's Resource Center, www.snpo.org.

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Nonprofit World • Volume 21, Number 6 November/December 2003
Published by the Society for Nonprofit Organizations
5820 Canton Center Road, Suite 165, Canton, Michigan 48187
734-451-3582 • www.snpo.org

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