

Week Five

*The Secrets to Writing a Donor-Centric
Appeal Letter*



**Direct Mail
Fundraising
The Basics & More!**

Introduction	3
Right here, right now	3
Are you forgetting something?.....	4
Green Eggs and Ham.....	5
Your story	5
All about your donor	6
Your letter.....	7
Post Scriptum.....	7
Scribbles, and Post-Its and headlines oh my!.....	8
Length.....	8
Typography.....	8
Swipe files, your BFF	9
Final Words	10
Worksheets.....	11

Introduction

Forget almost everything that you've ever learned about writing.

Throw out your Strunk & White *Elements of Style*.

Ignore the admonishing voice of your high school English teacher “tsk tsking” in the back of your head.

Take a big black sharpie to your organization's statistics and forget all about your illusions of “professionalism.” What I'll be asking you to put on paper might even strike you as schmaltzy and sentimental.

You're about to embark upon the most exciting part of this journey...and it's best to start off with a clean slate.

What I'll be talking about in this week's lesson is **writing to raise money**, plain and simple. It's not academic, it's not journalism, and it's definitely not the business writing you're probably used to.

I didn't pull the techniques I'm about to share with you out of thin air. They're coming to you via years of hard-won experience, studying, testing and, most importantly, solid results.

They'll get results for you too.

Right here, right now

As Jeff Brooks notes in his book *The Fundraiser's Guide to Irresistible Communications*, if you've had CPR training, you know that, in the event of an emergency, one of the first things you'll do is to

point at a bystander and yell “YOU - call 9-1-1” There’s a reason why you’re not going to holler “Somebody call 9-1-1.” It’s highly possible that every observer will think that *someone else will make that call.*

Your call to action needs to be real and it needs to convey a sense of urgency.

Your donors are no doubt distracted. They’re sorting their mail over the trash can, thinking about what they can serve for dinner 30 minutes from now, and oh, did they remember to drop the check for the cable bill in the mail?

Your job is to make them pause and think to themselves, “*Yes, I can write a check right now to help.*”

This isn’t a sales letter. You don’t have just 100 widgets left before you run out or a premium offering. Creating a sense of urgency will take some thought.

Are you forgetting something?

My favorite question to ask a new acquaintance in the industry is, “How did you get involved in fundraising?” The answering stories are always so [fascinating, diverse and heartfelt](#), but they share one commonality. We all want to make a difference. I’ve found, too, though that we’re often sharing another commonality: the feeling that it’s somehow wrong to ask for money...to go “begging.”

Stop.

Slap yourself upside the head a few times and tell yourself that you’re proud, proud, **proud** to be a fundraiser. Quit being afraid to ask. Quit making namby-pamby asks. Ask with the assumption that you’re going to get. And remember: you’re not asking - you’re offering an opportunity to change the world.

As my friend, copywriter Jules Brown says: **You're in the Ask Business. Own it with pride. Ask like you mean it . . . and the donations will flow in.**

Green Eggs and Ham

What might seem to you and I to be the simplicity and rawness of Theodore Geisel's children's tales actually have their root in an interesting story. It seems that back in 1954, the director of the education division of the Houghton Mifflin publishing house learned that illiteracy rates were climbing. Children, he found, were not learning to read because their books were boring. He promptly put together a list of 348 words he believed were important for first-grade students to recognize and asked that Geisel to trim the list and write a book using 250 of them.

The resulting book, *The Cat in the Hat*, went on to become an international best seller and is still beloved today.

Yet Dr. Seuss was a perfectionist in the extreme. His "simple" children's books might sometimes take up to a year to write and it was not uncommon for him to throw out 95% of his material until he settled on a theme for his book.

Simplicity does require a paring down, a getting back to basics. It's so very tempting to want to explain how you do what you do, step by painful step to the reader.

Don't. Your readers are not interested in your seven different programs. They are interested in your impact.

Keep it simple.

Your story

Renowned copywriter Indra Sinha said it best:

Don't start by writing. Start by feeling.

Feel, and feel passionately, and

*the emotion you feel will come through
the spaces in between the words.’*

Remember how in *Week Two* we covered the fact that every single decision has its roots in emotion? Time and time again, it’s been proven that the brain’s wiring overwhelmingly relies on **emotion over intellect** in the decision-making process.

What will touch your donors’ and prospective donors’ hearts? You may roll your eyes at some of the television advertisements for the ASPCA or various children’s charities. But there’s a reason why you see them over and over and over again: they work.

Review your interviews and your organization’s stories. Is there a detail there, something that might have made your eyes well up with tears or made you laugh out loud? It might not even be central to your story, but it will be something that will make your donor read on.

I don’t have a story that compares with my friend Jules Brown:

*“When I was working on an appeal for a children’s home-based hospice service, I used a heart rending quote from a little girl called Una, who knew she was going to die, and who told her mother: **‘I want pink balloons at my funeral.’**”*

Have you conducted your interviews? What stories moved you?

All about your donor

Being donor-focused can seem confusing, can’t it? You’ve been told often enough that the word “you” is the most important word in your letter, so you keep a running tally of the word. That’s a helpful measure, to be sure, but it isn’t the half of it. Don’t mistake being donor-centric for tossing in a few “you’s” here and there, like this letter from my local library did:

Dear Friend of the Library: *(What? They don’t know my name? I’ve given every year for the past five years!)*

Have you been to the XXX Library lately? It continues to be a busy and wonderful place, whether you are taking out books or DVDs using the

computer, or just browsing. Perhaps you enjoy relaxing with a magazine in our Reading Room or participating in one of our successful programs:

- the XXX Poetry Contest for adults, teens and children,
- diverse programs for children including multi-cultural events, the Science in the Summer Program, and Story Hour
- adult education including one -on-one literacy tutoring, GED preparation, and English as a Second Language.

Have you met our new Head Librarian? Jane Doe came on board a year ago. Her creativity, knowledge, and experience as reference librarian have added immeasurably to our Library. We are very fortunate to have a stable and dedicated staff working with Jane and our patrons. Their warm, personal touch makes the XXX Library a place worth visiting again and again.

It's a nice start and they mean well, truly they do. But despite a few "you's" thrown in for good measure, this letter is still all about them, them, them.

Remember my mantra: when your focus is on your donor the money will follow.

The cheat sheet at the end of this manual, 20 Phrases to Make Your Donor Feel Like a Hero, will help to guide you.

Your letter

Let's cover some small but important details about the letter itself:

POST SCRIPTUM

Always, always, always include a P.S. As Tom Ahern notes, research tells us that the P.S. "*is one of the few elements in an appeal letter that you can almost guarantee most folks will read.*" Don't waste that opportunity.

SCRIBBLES, AND POST-ITS AND HEADLINES OH MY!

Call me a geek. As a direct mail junkie, I can't begin to tell you what an utter thrill it was a few weeks ago to find myself locked up in a room with hundreds of direct mail packages for a whole day as a judge in the *Fundraising Success Gold Awards*. The glory! I couldn't wait to dive in.

One of my favorites (and a finalist) was a high end upgrade package from an environmental organization. What stood out? It wasn't necessarily the copy or the full color report, it was the *personalized* Post-it® notes found stuffed throughout the report.

The beauty of using Post-it® notes in your appeal is that they mimic something known in the industry as a buck slip or a lift note. Simply put, they're those extra pieces of paper slipped into a direct mail package to lift response.

Don't be afraid to use graphic enhancements like bullets, underlining, boldfacing, photographs (depending on your printing capabilities), highlighting, or handwriting in the margins.

LENGTH

The first and last argument you're going to have will be about your letter's length. Sigh. Everyone wants to keep it to one-page, don't they? Your year-end appeal needs to be as long as necessary to make the case for giving.

Again, time after time after time the research points to longer copy. Who are you to argue with results?

TYPOGRAPHY

Researchers have found that a serif typeface like Times New Roman is more than FIVE TIMES easier for average readers to take in than a SANS serif type such as Helvetica or Arial. Imagine. Five times easier. When was the last time you read a book or a newspaper set in sans serif type? Ain't happening. Now you know why.

While you might think that an Ariel 12-point font is easier to read, why argue with science? Use 12 to 13-point Times New Roman. Make it easy on your donor.

And do indent your paragraphs. Indents actually help people read more quickly. They also let the reader know that this is a personal letter, rather than a business letter.

Swipe files, your BFF

“Help! Where do I start?”

If you're a regular reader, you know that I am a huge fan of the online fundraising resource SOFII. SOFII showcases exhibits from the best fundraisers in the businesses – people like Mal Warwick, Ken Burnett, Tom Ahern and Lisa Sargent.

In fact, SOFII is the nonprofit development person's best swipe file!

Ask many nonprofit fundraisers and they'll have no idea what a “swipe file” is.

Fortunately, I began my career in marketing and sales and any good marketer worth his or her salt has developed their very own swipe file that they are constantly adding to.

So should you!

According to web terminology definitions, a swipe file is “a collection of noteworthy examples of various items of interest that can be used by a writer or editor to promote creativity or to assist in developing copy for publication.”

You've probably developed your own “swipe files” without even realizing it. I'm talking about those flashes of brilliance when you managed to put onto paper exactly what you wanted to say. Those little gems that help you along, so that you aren't continuously reinventing the wheel.

Along with SOFII, There are any number of books I turn to for openers when designing an annual campaign.

Books like Mal Warwick's *How to Write Successful Fundraising Letters* feature appendixes like, "Ninety Ways to use the Word "You" in a Fundraising Letter," offering phrases like "You are among the first..." or "I don't know about you, but I..."

You know. Simple phrases that can jumpstart your brain when it's operating in feeble mode.

I also make a practice of collecting appeal letters that I receive from other organizations – and the thank you letters I receive following a gift. I'd like to say that I keep them for "swipe file" purposes, but, sad to say, more often than not I keep them as examples of what not to do.

If you haven't already made a conscious effort to create your own swipe files, there's no time like now to start. And the best way is by bookmarking www.sofii.org. Go ahead. Do it now. Once you see how valuable it is, make a donation.

Final Words

Do your shoulders seize up when you sit down to write? "*I'm no copywriter,*" you think. "*Everything I put down on paper sounds exactly like what she tells us NOT to do!*"

Stop.

Take a deep breath.

It might surprise you to know that even seasoned copywriters feel inadequate at times. I can't tell you how many times I've conducted my interviews, developed a story and a theme, know the direction I'm heading and then...*blocked*. Remember, though, what an outside writer doesn't have is your commitment and passion for your mission - *and that counts for a lot.*

Do whatever it takes to relax. I often listen to music when I write. Typically, you'll find me listening to classical music, occasionally R&B or Motown. I once based a campaign theme on Sly and the Family Stone's "Everybody is a Star." Turn off all distractions, like email or the telephone. Write and write and write and don't stop to edit. Sometimes inspirational quotes will start me moving in the right direction.

When I'm really blocked, I'll simply quit and either go for a run to clear my head or watch a silly sitcom on television or turn my attention to mundane tasks like filing.

First and foremost, remember: **you're writing to a friend.**

Worksheets

[Basic Appeal Letter Template](#)

[20 Phrases to Make Your Donor Feel Like a Hero](#)