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Week 3: Writing, Editing and Design Oh My!

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Introduction

How are your stories going?

- Are you thinking of new ways to put a system in place to gather your most compelling stories on an ongoing basis?
- Have you started to look at your letter with a more critical eye? In other words, from your reader's perspective?
- Are you going over it again to see if it includes emotional triggers?
- Have you excised the jargon and buzz words?

Good!

This week we're going to be looking at the DESIGN of your piece:

Last week we looked at what you say and how you say it.

now we'll look at

HOW YOU DISPLAY IT.

Yes... this means how your letter *looks* (we'll get to the rest of your package next week). If you've written the best story in the world, but it's two or three giant paragraphs of unbroken text, even some of your most loyal donors will hesitate to read it.

It also means how your letter *reads*... the flow. We talked about this last week, but it's so important we'd like to talk about it some more. Your letter must be conversational. If you're using a lot of passive voice, or big words, or run-on sentences or stilted, non-conversational language, very few people will take the time to stick with it.

Don't hamstring yourself before you begin!

Remember, this course is about successful year-end appeals. So...

Let's look at:

- How to increase the impact of your appeal 10-fold
- How to analyze your writing to make your story even more powerful

- How to make your pictures tell a story
- How to craft super-effective calls to action

How to increase the impact of your appeal 10-fold

Two words: Design. Editing.

One way to kill two birds with one stone is to edit with a designer's eye. And you definitely don't need to have a design degree to be successful. How does it look – just at a glance? Is it pleasing to the eye? Does it look easy to dive into?

Have you ever had the problem where your leadership insisted on a one page letter, even if that meant squishing your text into 10 point font?

Or a nonprofit leader which a PhD or a law degree who insisted that “This is not how I talk; rewrite it!”

Appeal letter editing can be difficult. It's hard to edit your own writing, and of course asking your board to do it is asking for trouble. Most people haven't been trained to write or edit appeals.

Oy vey. When it comes to editing your appeal, you want to make sure you know the standards that direct mail marketing companies and successful nonprofits have used effectively for decades. Sure, you can get a bit creative. But... first learn the basics. Riffing comes afterwards.

There IS a layout format that will help people read your letter instead of tossing it instantly.

There IS a way to get people to engage with your photographs..

There IS a way to draw people in through your story, typeface, headlines, and the wording you use throughout the letter.

10 Ways to Increase Your Appeal Letter's Impact

[note that some of these points have been touched on in the previous weeks of this course, but they're super important and do bear repeating].

1. **Big Headline** no more than 2-3 sentences long. Don't overlook your headline! You need to draw people in right away, into your story. You can even be cheesy. Your headline could say, “It was a dark and stormy night” or “She raced from the window, just in time to see...” The headline could read like the beginning of a story.
2. **Story-focused from the start.** Too often nonprofit appeal letters bury the story (if they include one at all). Don't insert your story 2-3 paragraphs down. Let people get right into the story in the very first paragraph. You want to insert your mission statement at the start? Forget it. Let people know what you do AFTER they read the story. They'll remember the story more than anything you write in your mission

statement paragraph. Let your readers see, hear, feel and touch your mission. Make your mission REAL with your story.

3. **Short paragraphs.** Your paragraphs should not be much more than 4-5 sentences, if that. You've got to make your letter look like an easy read. People do not want to dive into something that reads like an academic journal. They want to escape. They want you to share with them the urgent problem that you need their help with. That means talking in the appeal letter like you'd talk with a friend. Short sentences, short paragraphs. Pausing for breath. Let your story breathe.
4. **Indentation.** This means indenting two or three spaces in every paragraph. It will make your letter look like more of an easy read.
5. **Subheaders.** These can be your ask. These can also be your questions to your reader, asking them to imagine themselves in your protagonist's shoes. The reader should be able to understand the entire gist of your appeal, just from reading the subheaders (because these may be all they read!). Your letter is really a series of letters within a letter.
6. **Underlining and boldface.** These serve the same function as your subheaders. They break the text up and draw your reader's eye to the important points in your letter. Again, the reader should be able to understand the entire gist of your appeal from just the underlined and/or boldfaced parts. Another letter within a letter.
7. **Put a face on it.** One great photo, placed in the upper right of your letter, is better than just about anything else in conveying the emotion you need to convey to draw your reader in. Choose a photo that tells a story. One that depicts, instantly, who you've helped (or want to help). Headshots are best. Not stock photos that look posed, but real-looking photos that convey and/or evoke emotion. A wide-eyed, innocent child. A senior receiving a hot meal. An abandoned puppy. A teen standing by a polluted river. A smiling graduate. Put a face on what you do (more on this below).
8. **Handwritten captions.** If people see a font that looks different, especially underneath your picture, they may be interested in reading further.
9. **Fonts.** What's easy on the eyes is different online than offline. Offline writing needs a serif font. Online writing calls for sans-serif (more on this below).
10. **Don't try to get it all onto one page.** Getting it on one page will most likely mean you are using 10-11 point font, and that your writing is squished into an unreadable block, and your story is lost.

Read on to get more tips about the design of your appeal.

What Is the most effective typography and graphic design for your appeal letter?

According to Dan Kennedy*, these are the devices he uses most often to make a long (appeal) letter look like an easier or faster read:

1. Bullets ■ ■ ■ ■
2. Numbering 1,2,3 and so on
3. Underlining
4. **Boldfacing**
5. *Varied Type*
6. Simulated Handwriting- in the margins, in the P.S.
7. Boxes
8. Lines made of asterisks *****
9. **Yellow overprint**
10. Screens
11. Photographs with type running around themselves
12. **Subheads...** lots and lots of subheads!

The eye tends to move at incredible speed until something stops it and grabs the reader's attention.

- You must provide many 'stoppers' throughout the letter.
- Donor names and Pictures almost always stop the eye – in a good way.
- Be sure and put one compelling eye grabber on each page.

Layout reminders:

- Use large typefaces (the recommended font has increased to 14 points due to the graying of our population).
- Keep your lines and paragraphs short.
- Make everything easy to read; indent the first line of every paragraph.

* Kennedy, Dan. The Ultimate Sales Letter. Pg 130

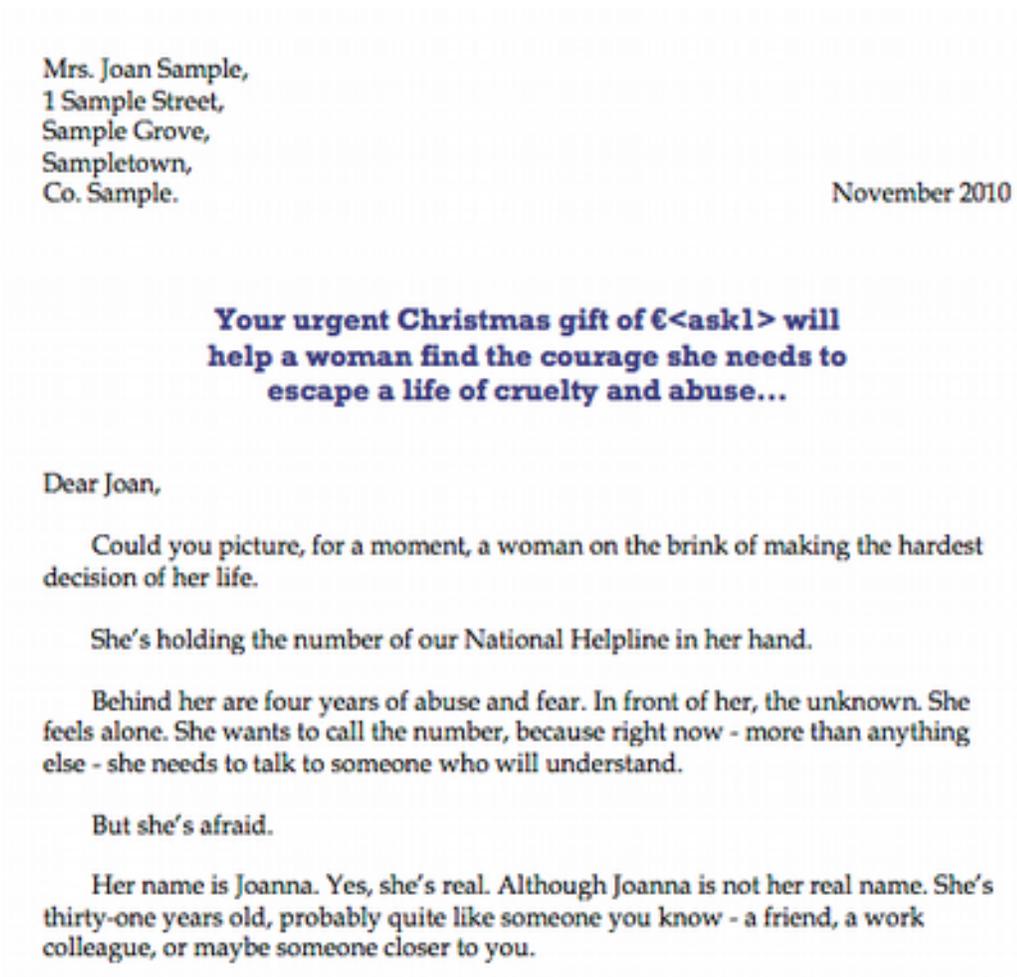
- Use dashes instead of commas.
- Keep things breathable; incorporate white space.

Use fonts the eye finds most readable. Hint: The most trusted newspaper fonts used by top 100 newspapers are Poynter, Franklin Gothic, Helvetica, Utopia, Times New Roman, Nimrod, Centur Old Style.

Offline Typography Must-do:

- Serif font (more suggestions are Garamond, Palatino); not a sans serif.
- Headlines in Initial Caps
- Header no more than 3-4 lines.

Here's an example from the Dear Joan blog by Jules Brown.



Hire a photographer. Good pictures of your cause are worth real money. If you can't do this, at least invest in a quality stock photo. Remember, head shots work the best. But look for ones that convey real emotion.

One little word that makes a HUGE difference for your appeal

That word is YOU.

You can prevent the unhappy ending. Yes, “you!” Your letter should be written to compel your reader; not to talk about how great your organization is. “We,” “I” and “Our” have no place in your fundraising appeal.

Why? This is personal. Your donor is the hero. She can do something, personally, about the problem. Mazarine can send a kid to college. Claire can prevent a child from sleeping on the streets. Call your donor by name (no “Dear Friend”) and show them how they – not you/your organization -- can save the day.

[BTW: Don’t overdo the use of the reader’s name. That can seem the opposite of personal, and can backfire. Did you ever get a letter or phone call where the telemarketer kept saying your name over and over again? Didn’t it feel manipulative? If it seems phony it’s not going to work].

Make your appeal reader-centric.

Never forget that your job is to invite the reader to join you in something amazing... essential... critical... inspiring. Don’t make it about you. Make it about *their* experience.

Read your letter. Cross out all the ego-centric stuff and rewrite. As veteran communicator [Tom Ahern](#) says: “*And remember: "you" is glue. Every time you use it (especially in headlines) the reader pays slightly more attention...involuntarily. Readers can't help it! They're hard-wired to respond to "you"! It's the best cheap trick I know.*”

People listen for the word YOU in a sentence, so see when the conversation will come back around to them.

Stuff in the good “you” word wherever you can.

Appeal Letter Edit Examples

What happens when you insert the word YOU into an appeal letter that didn’t have it before?

Here’s what that looks like.

The founder of [H.O.P.E. Inc, Kenita Pierce-Lewis](#), asked Mazarine to have a look at her appeal letter, to see what she could do with it.

Below you'll see her first draft of the appeal letter.

October 18, 2012

<fname><lname>
<add>
<secin>
<city> <st> <zip>



HAVE YOU EVER WONDERED HOW YOU COULD HELP BREAK CYCLES OF POVERTY IN YOUR COMMUNITY?

Dear <sal>.

Imagine working two jobs, going to school full-time, and coming home to an eviction notice the same week **yo**ur child is scheduled to have brain surgery. That is exactly what single mother Yvette faced last month. The medical bills were piling up, with no family nearby, and no other financial options, she turned to H.O.P.E. Inc. for help.

"I came across H.O.P.E. when I needed them the most, my daughter was about to have brain surgery and my rent was due right along with my car note." - Yvette Pierce-Conner



We receive many different stories every day from hard working single parents like Yvette, going to school and striving to make ends meet. The fact of the matter is, today's typical college undergraduate students are no longer 18-year-old recent high-school graduates who enroll full-time and have limited work and family obligations. **More than one in eight students are single parents and more than a third are over the age of 25.** Did you know that out of 1.2 million single parent families in the State of Georgia, 48% are low income?

Because you gave <amt> on <Date>, we know that you believe in the power of education and the impact it can have on a single parent family. But do you realize just how much your donation affects their future and the future of their children? Consider this, the median wealth of single parent's increases by **\$35,000** when they complete a college degree program.

YOUR GIFT MAKES A HUGE DIFFERENCE IN THE LIVES OF THESE FAMILIES!

Just ask Maria Barnett, who found herself a single parent after years of marriage. Having to adjust to the financial trials of being a single parent, working, and in school she found herself living on her friends couch hopeless with nowhere to turn. She wrote, **"I do not foresee a light at the end of the tunnel and am hoping that through your program I can get some sort of relief."**

According to a **Women Employed** publication, "Single Mothers and College Success: Creating Paths Out of Poverty," single mothers face especially daunting challenges in their efforts to obtain a degree. Compared to married parents, single parents are more likely to have low-incomes, have greater challenges paying tuition and arranging child care. For many of these single parents, completing a degree can take anywhere from six to 15 years.

Our President & Founder, **Kenita Pierce-Lewis**, founded H.O.P.E. Inc. based on the experience and struggles she suffered as a single parent laboring to finish her Bachelor's degree over the course of ten years due to lack of resources and income. There are programs out there that serve single

Draft 1 of the letter, page 1

It's heavy on the WE.

Notice that it is in a sans-serif 10 point font and that there are large, unbroken blocks of text.

Notice the stock photograph that's not a close-up, so it's hard to read the emotion.

Notice there are statistics mixed in with the story, there are two stories, and that the letter tells the story of the founder in the third person.

Now look at this edited version. What has been done to improve the letter from a readability standpoint?

<Date>

<fname><lname>
<add>
<cc>
<city><st><zip>



Have you ever been caught in an impossible situation, where it seemed like there was no escape?

Dear <sal>,

Imagine you're working two jobs, with children to feed, as a single parent. Sometimes you have to choose between food and rent. Sometimes you can't even afford a doctor's visit for your child.

But you have dreams of a better life. You want to get a college degree, and learn, and earn more money someday. So you're also going to college full-time.

You work 8 hours at a job, 4 hours at school, and then you need to come home and be a mom too. You love your children and pray they will forgive you for having to be gone so much.



But now imagine this. You get to your front door after a long, long day, and you see the yellow envelope.

The eviction notice. This is the week your child is scheduled to have brain surgery. You're at the end of your rope. Where do you turn?

Yvette (*pictured right*) faced this exact situation last month. The medical bills were piling up and she was about to be out on the street. With no family nearby, and no other financial options, she turned to H.O.P.E. Inc. for help.

"I came across H.O.P.E. when I needed them most. My daughter was about to have brain surgery and my rent was due right along with my car note." - Yvette

Because you gave <amt> on <Date>, we know that you believe in the power of education and the impact it can have on single parents.

▶▶▶ H.O.P.E., Inc | Duluth, GA | 30096 ▶▶▶

HOPE Inc. Letter with Mazarine's edits, Version 2

Here's what Mazarine did to edit the letter.

- 1. Enhanced readability:** she changed the blocks of text by indenting and spacing every few sentences.
- 2. Picture:** She took out the stock photograph and kept the picture of the real person. And it's a nice, emotional headshot that shows the love between mother and baby. You already want to protect them.

3. **Provided stoppers like the word YOU, increasing scannability;** spaced the letter so that there were bigger spaces between the paragraphs and the header text.
4. **Changed the font** to a serif font, and made the font 13 point.
5. **Took out the grant-writing speak**, where sentences like “*single mothers face especially daunting challenges in their efforts to obtain a degree. Compared to married parents, single parents are more likely to have low incomes, have greater challenges paying tuition and arranging childcare.*” are common. she did this because nobody talks like this. Taking a page from David Ogilvy, who said, “Write like you talk.”
6. **Rewrote and paced the story more slowly, building up the tension**, focusing lovingly on the details, helping the reader get into the shoes of the person in need.
7. **Focused on just one story**, problem to solution.

REMEMBER: People tend to care more if there is *one* story, one person they can identify and visualize, one person’s problem they can feel confident in solving. Statistics can help if they’re really shocking, but generally they depress response. Why? Because people make the decision to give with their hearts, not their heads. The problem needs to seem solvable, and that happens best when you share one authentic story; not data about faceless thousands.

Direct mail guru Tom Ahern tells it like it is when he says:

Emotion leads to action. But logic leads to conclusions. So wear your heart on your sleeve.

Here's another appeal letter edit (by Mazarine) from one Meals on Wheels nonprofit.

Draft 1

Dear Friend of <our nonprofit>,

Aging is inevitable. We all think about it from time to time – when to retire, maybe moving to a warmer climate or downsizing to a condo, spending more time with grandchildren, enjoying a favorite hobby or pursuing new interests. What we don't always think about are the difficulties that can come with aging, the "other" side of aging. What happens when you are no longer able to drive, when jobs around the house become more difficult, when the ordinary tasks of daily living are just a little bit harder? Most seniors in these situations still want to remain independent and living in their own homes. With some help, they can.

For some seniors, receiving Meals-on-Wheels, transportation to their neighborhood senior center or a weekly grocery trip may be all the help they need to maintain their independence. Others find themselves in situations where they need more help and additional services. Often times that assistance comes from the social workers here at <our nonprofit>.

Many of our clients have financial issues that require intervention and on-going monitoring and management. Louise is one of those seniors. She lives alone in her own home. Her children live out of town. Her income is enough to cover her monthly expenses. But as she has aged, there were times when she would forget to pay her bills. She also began to hire people to do things around her house and was being over charged for the work they did. There were days she went to the bank several times to withdraw money. It wasn't long before she began having financial problems. Her checking account was overdrawn, and her property taxes were delinquent. The day she received a disconnect notice from the utility company, she panicked and asked her bank manager for help. He referred her to <our nonprofit>. Through our Representative Payee program, we have been able to help Louise. With a financial power of attorney, we are managing her finances. Her bills are being paid on time, she receives a small amount of spending money each month and money is even being added to her savings account. Her <our nonprofit> case manager is in regular contact with her adult children. Louise is doing well. With our help, she can remain independent and in her own home.

Clients like Louise are sometimes in extremely dire circumstances when they find their way to <our nonprofit>. They may have received an eviction notice or have had their utilities shut off for non-payment. The reasons vary: bills and expenses may exceed their income; overspending on unnecessary items; forgetting to pay bills; or writing the checks and then not mailing them. Late fees and overdraft charges exacerbate the problem. Unfortunately, for some of our clients, their financial problems are the result of financial exploitation by a relative, friend or someone they befriended who is now taking advantage of them. We have clients who have been exploited out of thousands of dollars. We take the steps necessary to end the exploitation. Many of these seniors have no family support, or have no contact with their family. They are in a state of crisis. This is when <our nonprofit> steps in to help.

The first thing we do is stabilize the situation. We work with landlords, utility companies and other creditors to arrange payment plans. We obtain legal power of attorney and begin the process of managing their finances. We will prepare a budget, eliminate or reduce expenses, manage their income, pay their bills on time and see that their needs are being met. Our staff will even shop for clients who cannot shop for themselves. Beyond that, we will ascertain what other services they need to help them stay in their homes. It might be services <our nonprofit> can provide, such as Meals-on-Wheels or transportation. Or, they may need help with homemaking or personal care. Some have mental health, substance abuse or legal issues. <our nonprofit> refers these clients to the agencies and organizations that can provide the appropriate help. Our social workers will also serve as a liaison for the client's family. Our goal is to keep our clients financially stable and independent for as long as possible.

What most seniors fear most is not being able to remain in their homes and being moved into a nursing home. Studies have shown that seniors do better, physically and emotionally, when they can stay at home. Often times, it may be help in just one area such as our Representative Payee financial management that makes staying at home possible. These services, much less expensive than institutional care, give the senior peace of mind of knowing they will not have to leave their home. They know they are not alone; help from is just a phone call away.

I am asking you to join with us in providing these vital services.

The reimbursement <our nonprofit> receives from our funding agencies does not cover the entire cost of our services.

Foundation grants and donations from those who support our mission make it possible for us to help the 2000 senior clients we serve each year. They depend on us. Many of these seniors live alone, with no family to help them. If it were not for <our nonprofit>, most of them would have no where to turn for help. Your contribution will make a difference in the life of a senior.

First of all, what's wrong with this appeal letter?

[Note: When Claire read it her first take was: "*I don't want to read this. Looks like too much work.*"] Let's analyze why.

- 1. Passive voice, awkwardly phrased.** "*Foundation grants and donations from those who support our mission make it possible for us to help the 2000 senior clients we serve each year.*" Nobody talks like this.
- 2. No stoppers to grab attention.** Using the word WE instead of the word YOU. No headlines. No pictures.
- 3. GIANT unbroken paragraphs.** Your eye starts skipping over them in self defense.
- 4. Reads like a grant application.** Dry, dull. "*For some seniors, receiving Meals-on-Wheels, transportation to their neighborhood senior center or a weekly grocery trip may be all the help they need to maintain their independence. Others find themselves in*

situations where they need more help and additional services.” Again, nobody talks like this.

5. Completely impersonal. Doesn't share the story and picture of one senior who needs help in a compelling way. We hear about "Louise" but she seems to be a cardboard cut-out. Then the letter speaks of seniors generally, in the abstract. Abstracting the problem doesn't help you get money for your cause. Personalizing it does.

So how do we fix all of these problems?

Draft 2 of their letter, after Mazarine's preliminary round of edits:

<Date>

First name, last name

Address

City, State Zip

Do you ever think about what you'll do when you get older?

Dear <firstname>,

Do you ever dream about retiring, maybe moving to a warmer climate or downsizing to a condo, spending more time with grandchildren, enjoying a favorite hobby or pursuing new interests?

But what about the "other" side of aging?

What happens when you are no longer able to drive, when jobs around the house become more difficult, when the ordinary tasks of daily living are just a little bit harder?

Most older people still want to remain independent and living in their own homes. With your help, they can.

With your generous donation of \$50 today, the 2,000 seniors we serve can continue receiving Meals-on-Wheels, transportation to their neighborhood senior center or a weekly grocery trip to maintain their independence.



But we don't just stop there. We help seniors with so much more. Let me tell you about Louise. Louise lives alone in her own home. Her children live out of town. Her income is enough to cover her monthly expenses.

- But sometimes she forgets to pay her bills.
- She also hired people to do things around her house and they over-charged her.
- Sometimes she went to the bank several times a day to withdraw money.

It wasn't long before she began having financial problems. Her checking account was overdrawn, and her property taxes were delinquent. The day she received a disconnect notice from the utility company, she panicked and asked her bank manager for help. He referred her to us.

Thanks to your generous support in the last year, we have been able to help Louise. Her bills are being paid on time, she receives a small amount of spending money each month and money is even being added to her savings account. Louise is doing well. With your help, she can remain independent and in her own home.

<Firstname>, won't you help us ensure that our 2,000 other seniors can continue to live independently and age with dignity? Please give today.

Thanks to your support, we can do even more for seniors. But we need your help. Our grants cannot cover the expenses that we incur, and there are THOUSANDS of people like Louise who desperately need our services. Could you please give <double the amt they gave last year \$50> today to help us continue to help seniors?

What most seniors fear most is not being able to remain in their homes and being moved into a nursing home. Studies have shown (*WHAT STUDIES? Citation needed*) that seniors do better, physically and emotionally, when they can stay at home.

Please donate \$50 today and help us continue providing these vital services. The reimbursement <our nonprofit> receives from our funding agencies does not cover the our costs, and our 2,000 seniors need us, desperately, to help keep them aging with dignity. And someday, our services may be important to you.

What if <our nonprofit> didn't help? Our 2,000 senior clients would not get food, health checks or simple financial checkups to ensure they are not

getting taken advantage of. Many of these seniors live alone, with no family to help them.

If it were not for your generous donation to <our nonprofit> today, most of them would have nowhere to turn for help. Please, use the enclosed envelope and give <double the donation they gave last year.>

Sincerely,

Name of Executive Director

(Write your PS here, and restate the point of the letter. Yellow highlighter.)

Do you see how Mazarine rewrote this letter?

Big compelling picture

Short paragraphs

More asks throughout the letter

More compelling copy

Tells the story like we're sitting in a coffee shop together.

Put in headers and personalization to break up the text.

Make sure you've got that PS!

How to craft a killer opening line

You have about two seconds to draw the reader in. Two seconds!

Some of the best ways to capture attention are to begin with one of the following:

- Start with the word “you.”
- Ask a provocative question.
- Begin with a gripping, brief narrative anecdote.
- State a seeming contradiction or paradox.
- Open with a gripping, relevant quote.
- Maybe even tell a joke (but then, probably, go on to explain why it’s not really that funny to your protagonist).

What you’re trying to achieve with your opener is:

- Arouse curiosity – enough so the reader wants to learn more.
- Establish rapport – this is why using “you” can be so powerful.
- Tie your opening to your reason for writing as quickly as possible.

DON’T

Here are some lines that *won’t* work (in appeal letters recently sent to me):

*“A long-time friend recently ask me why should I give to [name of charity?]” This is not ideal, as it’s about the author; not the reader. Plus it puts the reader on the defensive: Yeah, why *should* I?*

“At this busy time of year, we want to thank you for your support of (charity name), a United Way Agency. “

Wow! First you remind the reader they’re too time-strapped to read this, then you remind them that you get support from United Way – so maybe you don’t really need their support as much as another charity who doesn’t. And while thanking previous donors is good, it’s not the first thing. That makes them think this letter may just be something to file with their tax receipts. Your purpose in writing the letter must be crystal clear and compelling – right from the get-go.

“Starting a business. Moving to a new city. Entering (or re-entering) a new field.” Suffice it to say this litany of things that happen to folks went on for seven lines. It might be useful in the body of the appeal, but a much better beginning would be something like “With this letter you can help someone start a business and feed their family.”

“February 12, Abraham Lincoln’s birthday, marks the end of Anti Human Trafficking Awareness Month in California, a month chock-full of symposiums, meetings, movies, and discussions on the issue of modern day slavery—human trafficking.”

No one talks like this. It's a bit like a lecture. A better beginning would be something like this: "*You can help someone break free from modern day slavery.*"

DO

Here are some lines that *will* work:

From direct mail writing guru Tom Ahern:

"Let me ask you a personal question: Do you believe in miracles?"
Begins by putting the reader into the equation with "do you believe?"

"This is my baby sister after she fell down the stairs. My Mom says she falls down the stairs a lot."

Creates a compelling visual picture of a world of hurt; emotionally triggers the reader to want to change this picture.

"I'm writing you in advance -- parent to parent -- to explain why I think it's important that you say "Yes" when that phone call comes."

Clear it comes from a peer. If you remember from Week Two, one of the psychological triggers of giving is "social proof." If you believe your peers will approve of you if you give, you'll be more likely to do so. It's a built-in decision-making shortcut.

From Alan Sharpe:

"What do you suppose is the easiest way to reduce homelessness in our city by 30%?"

Provocative question that ties right to the purpose of your cause. I want to know the answer.

"How many groceries can you carry home on your head?"

Create a visual picture, and makes me wonder what's next.

"Can you imagine a hospital without nurses?"

Puts the reader right into the picture... "can you imagine?" gets the reader to think/visualize. And it's already clear what this may be about.

SOFIL.org:

"I am writing this fundraising letter to you from the HOSPITAL FOR SICK CHILDREN in the centre of London - in fact within a mile radius of St. Paul's Cathedral. It continues:

We have also during some of the most savage raids on London stood, a citadel of healing, ringed round by a living furnace of fire."

This letter was written in 1945! It allows the reader to imagine the devastation people must have felt when their magnificent hospital was badly bombed. The reader is drawn in to reading the story and the need.

“Could you picture, for a moment, a woman on the brink of making the hardest decision of her life?”

Again, “could you picture” asks the reader to visualize something terrible – a wrong they can potentially right. [This was written for Women’s Aid in the UK]

Now you're talking - how to write to engage hearts and minds

A letter is a conversation on paper. A conversation. Not a term paper.

You want a talkable message. Talkable means:

- **Simple** enough that the reader can put it down; then turn around and tell a friend what it was about. It doesn't require a bunch of statistics, historical background or technical understanding;
- **Interesting** enough that the reader will remember it; often because it centers on a story and/or an unforgettable visual, both of which stick to our brains better than dry facts, and
- **Compelling** enough (curious, surprising, shocking, funny, or otherwise worthy of taking note of) that the reader will actually be impelled to share your message. They'll talk it; then walk it (by giving; then hopefully sharing with their friends)!

Here are some things that are required of you when you have a conversation:

Be personal. This begins with calling people by their correct name. Don't use Charles if the donor goes by Chuck. Don't automate such much that you end up with something nutty like "Dear Mrs. Charles (Chuck) Lucy Brown." If you can hand address the envelope, or add a personal note to the letter, do so. And, in the 21st century, *err on the side of the informal.*

Be attentive. That's another way of saying you need to *pay attention* to how this donor is connected to you. If the donor gave previously, thank them. Let them know *you know* they're already a supporter. Tell them what you did with their last gift. If they volunteer... if they have a student in the school... if they're a former patient... if they attended an event... acknowledge as many of their past associations with you as you can.

Be relevant and meaningful. Talk to the reader like you would talk to a friend, or even a compatible stranger. If you were stuck at an airport due to a storm, you might strike up a meaningful conversation with folks you'd never met before about your common predicament. Assume a common predicament; one that your reader understands. Your tone should *convey a sense of being in this together and sharing similar values.*

Be chatty. Write like you talk, and like your readers talk. The only way you can really tell if your letter is conversational is to read it out loud. If there are places where you stumble over the words, your reader will too. So fix those places. Then read it again. Still stumbling a bit?

Go back to middle school. Go back to a time before you learned 'proper grammar.' Every place you're tempted to put in a contraction, do so. If you want to begin a sentence with

“and” or “but” go right ahead. If you want to have a one-word sentence, that’s just fine. If your spell check tells you you’ve got a sentence fragment you should ‘consider revising,’ ignore it.

Avoid the temptation to fall back on the defense that you “don’t want to dumb things down.” Simple writing is not dumb writing. In fact, it is arguable that it’s more clear and coherent, more difficult to achieve, and therefore requiring of greater intelligence. If you need to feel super-smart about simplifying your writing, tell yourself that’s what you’re doing.

Simplify. There’s something called the Flesh-Kincaid score (there’s [a built-in tool](#) in Microsoft Word) and it will tell you if your writing is above a 7th-grade level. You don’t want it to be. Jeff Brooks, in [The Fundraiser’s Guide to Irresistible Communications](#), suggests you’re better off in the 4th - 6th grade range. This generally means short sentences. And short words. Run Jane run.

ACTIONABLE TIP: Ask a middle-schooler to read your letter. If they can understand what you’re talking about and why you’re asking for a gift, you’re good to go. If not... back to the drawing board.

How to analyze your writing to make your story even more powerful

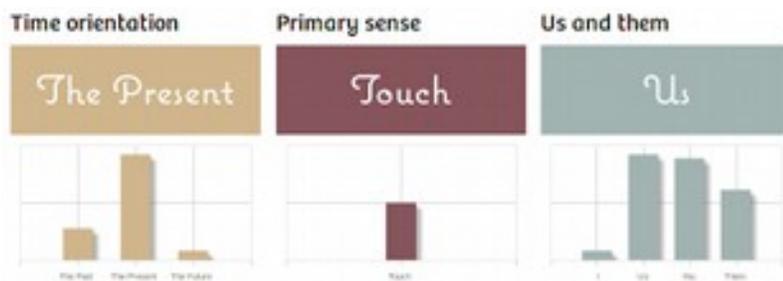
Would you like a tool that helps you analyze your writing to see if it's simple enough, if you're focusing on your donor enough, if you're showing the need concisely and clearly?

Such a tool exists! It's called 750words. 750Words.com is a free website originally created to help people keep track of their daily writing (we'll explain more how you can use it, below). It wasn't designed for use by fundraisers *per se*, but for folks who wanted to improve their writing.

After writing privately for over a year on 750words.com, it occurred to Mazarine that she could use the graphing and charting aspects of this website to help people improve their appeal letters, to show them what they were focusing on.

Remember the appeal letter for [H.O.P.E. Inc](#) that we evaluated above?

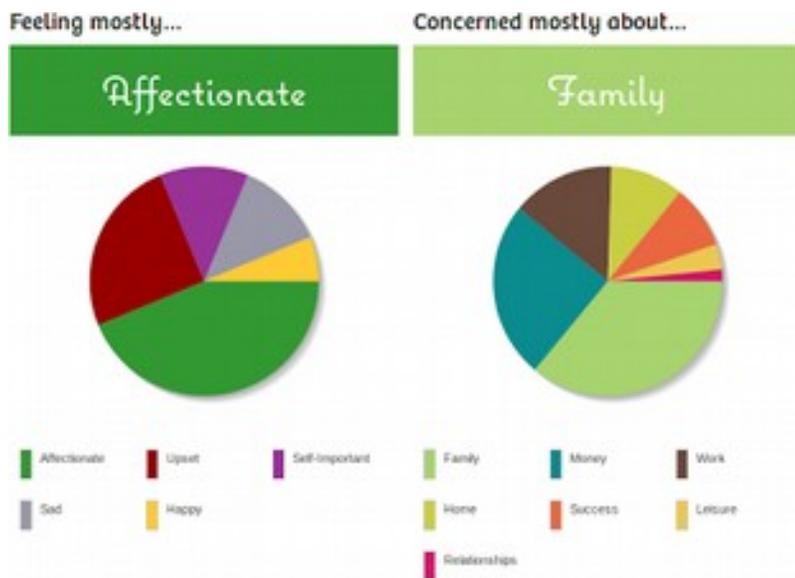
Mazarine put their entire letter through 750words and here is the result of the analysis:



As you can see, they were mostly focused on the present.

Another thing that comes out of this analysis is that there is just one primary sense (out of a possible five) in the whole letter. If you want to help your readers really BE there -- and *feel* what the main characters in your story are feeling -- you are best served by having more than one sense represented.

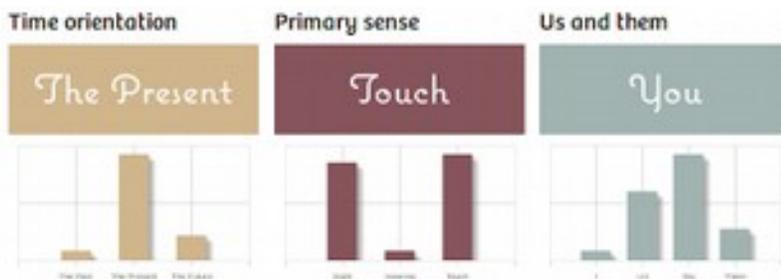
The original letter is also mostly focused on US with YOU following a close second. In donor-centered fundraising, as we've already discussed, you want to make the word YOU as frequent as possible; with very little "us" because after their first name and pictures, that is what will provide grab your reader's attention.



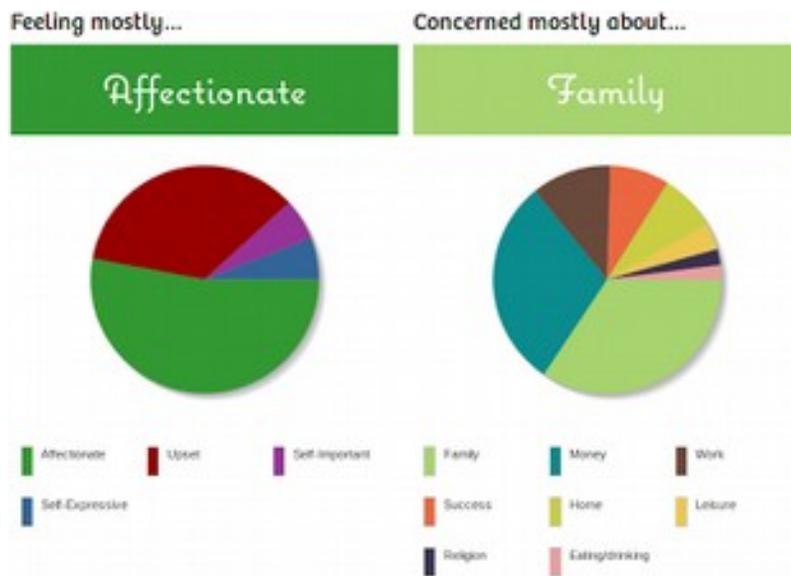
You can see from this second graph that HOPE Inc focused most on affection, then on being upset, then self importance. So it doesn't have as much urgency as it could. People tend to give to causes that are filling a desperate need. Even if you don't want to share the sad stories about your cause, it's important to make it clear that folks will not be helped unless your donor gives. It takes a lot to overcome donor inertia, and placing an emphasis on urgency will help them pick up the remit envelope and send you a donation.

Now that we've analyzed the first draft of the letter, let's evaluate Mazarine's edited draft (go back to page 10 to see this).

Is this version any better at being donor-centered or telling an urgent story than the first letter? Let's look at this edited letter through the eyes of 750words.



As you can see, it's still focused on the present. But the senses now include Touch, Sight, and Hearing. This makes for a more engaging story. And is it donor centric? Well, the dominant pronoun is now YOU. So, yes.



Looking at this chart on the left, you can see the urgency has grown., shown by the red section under “Feeling Mostly.” So perhaps this letter will make people feel the need to give a bit more.

Now... **Let's analyze a completely different type of fundraising appeal that had a 500% return.**

Should we give up?

The pictures on this page are upsetting.

Normally, we wouldn't publish them. Our advertisements purposely stay away from violent and horrific pictures.

When we published the murders of street archers by Brazilian and Guatemalan police, we spared you the sight of children with their tongues ripped out and eyes burned from their sockets.

When we wrote about Iraq's use of chemical weapons against Kurdish civilians, we deliberately did not use the photographs that made our volunteers cry.

We at Amnesty have no choice but to look at these pictures. And hear the stories that go with them.

The story of Agostinho Neto.

The African doctor's waiting room was full of people when the Portuguese secret police arrived.

about people who were in prison for their political or religious beliefs.

They wrote letters of support and comfort to prisoners, and of protest to their jailers.

Out of this early work grew the Amnesty reports, the letter-writing groups and the urgent action network, which can muster thousands of protest telegrams within hours of a prisoner's arrest.

For three decades Amnesty has campaigned against the terrible things to which the pictures below bear witness.

We've tried to show that turning a blind eye to a government's human rights crimes is both immoral and foolish. (It took the Gulf War to demonstrate this - but we'd been issuing warnings about Saddam Hussein every year since 1980.)

During the last thirty years, we have examined the human rights

A million failures.

Among the files we doled was that of Agostinho Neto, the Angolan doctor who was one of Amnesty's first 'prisoners of conscience.'

In 1975, when Angola won its independence from Portugal, Dr Neto became his country's first president.

Sadly, during his Presidency, his government was accused of imprisoning without trial, torturing and unlawfully killing many of its political opponents. How could such things happen under the rule of someone who had himself suffered so much?

Were we naive to imagine we could make a difference? In the last thirty years, things have not got better, but worse.

In 1961 we believed, didn't we, that the world would never tolerate another genocide? Since then we've had Suharto, Pol Pot, Idi Amin and Saddam Hussein.

We've had Empress Bokassa who stacked his fridge with human heads. For every prisoner freed, thousands are still in prison. For every

answer. While you make up your mind, here's a poem by Agostinho Neto.

Not that someone grows his fingers rigid with blood oozing from a hole broken by the galvanometer

He is thinking of victory and no sleep comes to his prison days or dreams at all his solitude

There are moments when the world is turned up in the narrow chamber

Oh! Who will sleep when he hears his best friend go mad there in the next cell his spirit is killed by madness?

We and famine are still, in 1991, devastating the Horn of Africa where, in the past two decades, millions of people have become refugees or have died because of repressive regimes with scant regard for human rights.

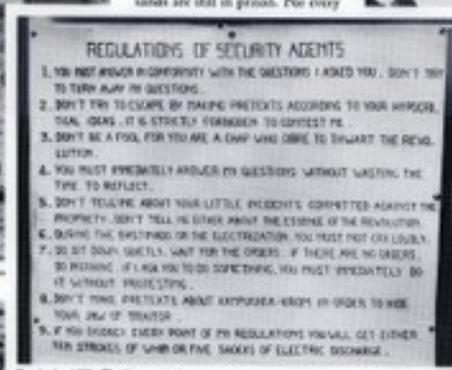
So long as such regimes are allowed to rule unchallenged, there will be poverty and disease and famine and war.

Only one power can stop it. Only one power is strong enough to say to the world's governments 'I will no longer allow this to happen.'



Philippines, 1988. Five Marines Giffon, seized and hauled back for no apparent reason by government troops while working his field.

They dragged him out of his surgery, past his terrified patients. Ignoring the screams of his wife, they began methodically to drag



Caribbean, 1970s. The 'beats rules' at a prison camp where many died.



Chile 1988. The United Nations Declaration of Human Rights lists the due process rights.



Peru 1985. A woman holds up a picture of her 'disappeared' husband, in the cruel hope that he is still alive.

The writing of Indra Sinha made Amnesty International millions of pounds when it came out in the early 1990s in a London newspaper.

If you'd like to read all of his successful campaign writing for Amnesty, please visit this page on Sofii.org. What is his writing like? Well, it's urgent. It's moody. It's the opposite of sweetness and light. It wouldn't work for every cause, but it does work - in spades - for the audience to whom he is writing. One of his fundraising articles called "Should we give up?" concludes:

"Western Governments did not lift a finger to save the Kurdish people from slaughter until that power forced them to intervene.

That power is public opinion.

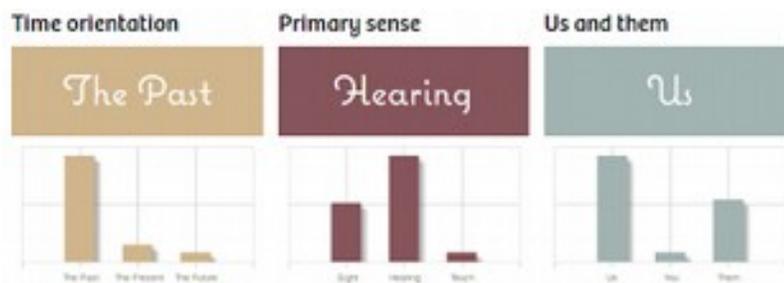
Pressure of opinion a hundred years ago brought about the emancipation of the slaves.

It is now for man to insist upon the same freedom for his mind as he has won for his body.

Think twice before saying to us, No, don't give up. You cannot ask us to continue, yet do nothing yourself to help.

The strongest voice on earth belongs to you. Use it. Join us."

Sinha wrote some of the most successful fundraising ads and letters that the world has ever seen. He made the need poignant, and urgent. He is a master of effective writing. How does HIS writing look in 750words? Here's how "Should We Give Up?" came out.

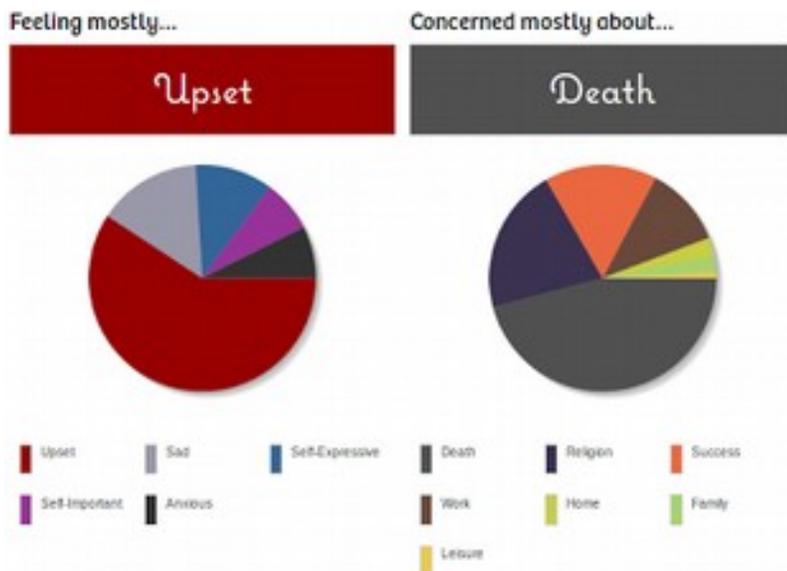


The time orientation is focused on the past. The reason that's okay here is that he talks about the 30 year history of Amnesty International and, astonishingly, talks about a success that turned into a failure. Someone they released from prison turned around to become a dictator (sort of a "we're doomed to repeat history if we don't learn from it" tactic).

He uses three senses, with hearing as the dominant sense, sight close behind it, followed by touch. He tries to make you really feel what it's like to be there.

He focuses on Us; then on Them and, finally, he barely uses YOU at all. It's so fascinating! He tries to include the reader as one of Us. And, because he's a master, it works!

He also breaks the rules and includes many disturbing pictures in each of the ads, pictures of people being kicked on the ground, people with their heads chopped off, and really gruesome stuff. That ALSO works. He spoke directly to the feeling of helplessness that people have upon seeing that sort of crime in the newspaper, and then he says, "But you CAN do something, you DON'T have to feel hopeless."



What were the dominant feelings in this piece?

According to the chart above, the most dominant feeling was being Upset, followed by Sad, then Self expressive, then Anxious. All of these urgent feelings came out of his piece, which created a sense of pressing urgency in the potential donors reading his words.

What is he concerned mostly about? According to the chart on the right, he's focused on Death, followed by religion, then success, then work. Again, you can see how by focusing mostly on death, which everyone is afraid of, he again creates a sense of urgency, of “now or never” in his readers.

What's this all mean? Not to confuse you, but... there is, again, more than one way to skin a cat. While we've discussed many 'best practices' there simply is no *one* right way to write an appeal letter. However...it's really helpful to be aware of what you're doing! Running your appeal through a tool like 750words can help you assess whether you've hit the mark you set out to hit. Check your pronouns, your urgency, the senses you're invoking. Plug in other successful appeal letters from a cause related to yours (check out some stuff on Sofii.org, for example, or just use some you've collected from your own mailbox) and see how they compare.

NOW it's your turn.

...

This is a truncated version of Week one of this course. If you'd like to learn more about how to actually set up a monthly giving campaign and make it successful, check out the rest of the [Your Ultimate Guide to Successful Year End Appeals](#) e-course.

OR Check out [Fundraising Mastermind Elite](#), where you can get this course, (normally \$197) plus 10+ more courses and 60+ webinar recordings, for one low yearly price.