

Writing for Donors: A Primer in Language and Style

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Over the past several months, I have met several people (planned giving donors to several different charities) who have asked me the same question: “why in the world do people who raise money for a living not know how to write?” Many go on to say, “how do they expect me to trust them with my money when they do not even know – or follow – the rules for basic grammar?” Then, at a large conference I was attending, I copied down the following PowerPoint slide the speaker referred to during his keynote address:

How to Touch a Donor

Firstly, Touch them a lot

Secondly, Make sure your case is impactful

Thirdly, Help each one find their passion

Finally, (and hopefully), you will really make a difference!!!!

After the conference, I called upon the most brilliant language person I know (who happens to be a lawyer) to ask: is this true? Does no one know how to communicate with a donor? She agreed with me, and we decided that what the planned giving field needed was an old-fashioned primer. Surely development officers do not want to lose donors—especially those older (richer) donors who were trained in old-school grammar.

Here, then, is our advice about how not to offend donors in your letters, brochures, reports, website, and email blasts.

Basic Writing Rules

Know your audience. A letter to an 85-year old planned giving donor should look and sound different from an e-mail blast to the 40-somethings on your donor list. Whereas 40-somethings might forgive your exclamation points and contractions, the 85-year old may well be offended by informality.

Know what you want to say. If you cannot explain a program in 30 seconds – and in plain English – then you cannot write about it effectively.

Use simple words and constructions wherever possible. We do not mean simplistic; there is nothing wrong with a compound sentence (say, two related thoughts separated by a semicolon).

What to Avoid

1. **Passive Voice**
Avoid passive voice, unless you are intentionally attempting to disclaim responsibility. “It was decided that” works only if you are one of three criminal defendants trying to avoid admitting that, yes, it really was all your idea.
2. **Too many words**
Avoid using three words when one will do. Note: following the “passive voice” rule will help with this rule. “I hope” is a lot more succinct than “it is to be hoped that.”
3. **Words that try too hard** (*see* “impactful,” above). They do not make you sound knowledgeable about planned giving. Rather, you can come across as a 4-year-old playing dress-up in Mommy’s closet.
4. **Jargon**
You do not persuade people by overwhelming them with acronyms. “It was found that your CRAT and CRUT illustrations appear to focus on your GST problem but the income will be taxed according to the 4-tier system” does not make you sound smart; it makes you sound like a consultant.
5. **Bromides** (“at the end of the day,” “find your passion,” “level playing field”).
On the other hand, you also do not persuade prospects by peppering them with phrases used by mid-level sportscasters.

Usage Rules

Pronouns are our friends: One donor is not “they” (we do not “help each donor find their passion”). Singular donors require a singular pronoun.

“Impact”: not a verb, unless you’re talking about meteorites

- Corollary: “impactful” is not a real word. I don’t care if you find it in the dictionary.

Use Affect/Effect correctly: “Effect” is a verb only if you mean “to bring about” (to effect change); when used (properly) in place of “impact,” you mean “affect” (“new tax laws may affect end of year fundraising”).

Use “That” vs. “which” correctly: simple rule: use “which” only in phrases that can be set off by two commas, *i.e.*, “put in pg sentences here). Unless you’re British. Or illiterate.

Use “Hopefully” sparingly and correctly: Hopefully is an adverb that means “in a hopeful manner,” not “I hope”: “she walked hopefully to sign her bequest intention,” vs. “hopefully, she will die soon.” We do not care if you find it in the dictionary; the fact that the former bastions of proper usage have caved to 1980s-era illiteracy does not make it right. What’s next, “awesome, dude!” replacing “affirmed”? Or “no problem” replacing “you are welcome”?

Use correct diction:

- You “wreck” your brains. You do not “rack” them (unless you live in 15th Century Spain).
- You “tore” the line. You do not “tow” it (unless you are operating a boat).
- You “wreak” havoc. You do not “reek” havoc (unless you really, really smell, I guess).
- You put someone through the “wringer,” not the “ringer” (unless you are speaking of a very large, strange bell).

Spell Correctly:

- “Alright” is not a word. You may use it only when three requirements are met:
 - a. You are 14 years old;
 - b. Your mother is nagging you; and
 - c. It is immediately followed by “already.”
- “Alot”: Ditto. Unless you add another L and use it to mean “apportion”

Use Abbreviations as they were intended: “I.e.” vs. “e.g.”: Both signal that an example is coming. Use “i.e.” in place of “in other words,” or, as some may remember from ninth grade Latin, “id est—that is” (*i.e.*, where you are using an example to illustrate the thought in a different way); use *e.g.* when you are providing a list – “I love trusts (*e.g.*, lead, flip, NIMCRUTs).”

Follow the Rules for Punctuation

- Periods and commas belong inside the quotation mark, unless you’re British. Semicolon, colon, question mark, or exclamation point go outside, unless part of the quote. A series of items requires a comma before the “and” (“oranges, apples, and lemons”). I don’t care that the *New York Times* and *Washington Post* have chosen to drop the final comma. They are wrong.
- Apostrophes may be used in two instances:
 - A possessive for a noun (but not a pronoun): “The chair is Mary’s” (but not “the chair is her’s”).
 - A contraction (“It’s time for dinner) – **never** to be used in formal writing or in any communication with donors over 75. Yes, people of a certain age were taught that contractions are a sign of disrespect. Like wearing a cap indoors. In a restaurant.
 - “It’s” means only “it is.” The possessive is “its.”
 - Never put an apostrophe in a plural (“memo’s”), unless you are trying to look illiterate.
- Colons: in a sentence, you should use a colon to introduce a list *only* when the introduction qualifies as a complete sentence.

- Semi-colons properly separate two thoughts that would each themselves qualify as a complete sentence; you may not use a semicolon if one thought is missing a subject or a verb.
- Exclamation points: Resist. Always.

You may rail against us all you want –language evolves, get over it; only over-starched matrons of a certain age care about these things. That may, perhaps, be true. But then again, you are the one asking that over-starched matron to like you/trust you/give you money. How well is that going to go if you leave her wondering whether you are truly ignorant, or just too lazy to bother?

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