

THESE MATERIALS WERE USED IN CONJUNCTION WITH

SEMINARS FOR  
EXCELLENCE IN  
**Nonprofit**  
MANAGEMENT

The Science and Secrets of  
Effective Communication

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# Love Thy Reader

A summary of key principles, tips and secrets that will help you write and design *really* effective nonprofit communications, including direct mail, brochures, newsletters, press materials, case statements, event promotions and Web sites.

Good communications are action-oriented. They're written and designed to make something happen: raise money, attract volunteers, change opinions, sell services, fill events....

Sticking to a focused "action objective" will pretty much determine whether your communications succeed or fail.

Donors are interested in how their money has changed the world.

Good communicators are pessimists.

There are four personality types, and you have to speak clearly to at least three of them.

## Important general principles

1. Why does an organization communicate? The reasons typically boil down to one thing: **getting people to take action!** (*Give money, write a letter, buy a ticket, volunteer, etc.*) Before you begin any communications piece, answer these two questions:
  - (1) Who specifically is the audience is for this communication? (Hint: your audience is NEVER "the general public.")
  - (2) What do you want that audience to do once they've read it? Then write a brief "action objective" and post it where you'll see it a few hundred times a day. An example: "This brochure will convince parents who are having problems with their kids [*the specific audience*] that one phone call [*the action you want them to do*] could change their lives."
2. Stand in awe of the most powerful force affecting human behavior: **inertia.**
3. The biggest communications secret of them all: people don't read ads, they don't read magazines, they don't read newsletters, they don't read brochures, they don't read direct mail...**they read what interests them.** So what interests people? Well, for one, donors are really, really interested in how much good their money has done. So, in your newsletter, are you talking about how your donors' money is making the world a better place?
4. **People are exposed to thousands of messages a day.** In self-defense, even sympathetic people ruthlessly filter out and ignore stuff you'd very much like them to hear.
5. You need to address **four distinct personality types:**
  - the expressive, who loves the new stuff and is easily bored
  - the analytical, who craves facts and more facts and has trouble deciding
  - the bottom-liner, who values brevity and makes quick decisions
  - the amiable, who values relationships above all and wants your organization to be a friend

Top Tip  


Amiables must hear "you," expressives must hear "new," bottom-liners want to know what to do, and analyticals need proof

The implications are important: if each of these personality types accounts for 25% of your audience, then failing to address any one of the four types could cost you a quarter of the available attention spans out there. Some kinds of communications — like case statements laden with statistics — can easily miss 75% of their audience (and ironically the 25% they do reach, the analyticals, are the 25% who have trouble deciding).

Top Tip  


You must have something for everyone, especially in the first few seconds of your message's encounter with a potential listener. Here are some tips:

- *Amiables* respond to heavy use of the word "you" and the promise of an ongoing relationship ("Stay in touch, hear?"). They like warmhearted pictures. They want to be part of your family.
- *Expressives* want to learn about the new, exciting things you're up to; they burn hot and cold, so keep it lively. They like bold statements, new directions, initiatives, bright ideas.
- *Analyticals* welcome all that documentation, lengthy testimonial, and statistical evidence that proves your point. Explain till you're blue in the face, and they'll ask for still more.
- *Bottom-liners* want you to tell them — short and sweet — what you do and what you want them to do. They like summaries and capsulizations, and they want to be told their task.

## Persuasive writing 101

People are interested in why you do what you do, and what kind of results you get. Very few people are interested, at least initially, in *how* you do what you do.

Readers are listening to radio  
WIIIFM: "What's in it for me?"

Write "Why do we do this?  
Because...." statements.

*Word-of-mouth example:*

For a charter school that uses music lessons to improve basic skills: "When she entered our 3rd grade, she couldn't spell 'cat.' At the end of the year, she could spell 'Tchaikovsky.'"

6. **Focus on benefits, not on features.** It's axiomatic for professional copywriters: features tell, benefits sell.

Features = WHAT you do. Benefits = WHY the feature matters.

It's easy to translate features into benefits. Ask yourself, "If I were the target audience [a donor, a client], why would I care about this feature? What would be in it for me?"

Here's a feature: "Our agency offers English as a Second Language (four levels) to newly arrived immigrants."

Why do I care?

Assume for a moment that you are trying to persuade a corporation to support this program. The same feature translated into a benefit might read: "Our English as a Second Language classes help new Americans become job-ready. We offer classes at four levels, so students can continuously improve their language — and workplace — skills." In this re-working, you've taken into account the audience, and you've made the reasonable assumption that training that creates a pool of well-trained employees will interest corporate donors.

7. **Include repeated calls to action.** You really *do* have to tell people what to do, as any pessimistic communicator knows.
8. **Be "word-of-mouth worthy."** Give people short, memorable (i.e., easy to pass along) examples and stories that illustrate your agency's work.

Top Tip  


# Crimes against communications

A high degree of "scannability" is vital for effective communications. Why? Because people browse before they read in depth. And most "readers" never really go beyond the browsing stage. And because easily scanned materials seem helpful and reader-friendly.

*What is easiest to read?*

"Serif" typefaces such as Times, Times New Roman, Palatino, and Garamond. This typeface is Garamond.

*What is 500% harder to read?*

"Sans serif" typefaces such as Helvetica and Arial. This typeface is Arial. If your action objective reads "we must find a way to reduce our readers' ease of comprehension by 500%," then by all means use Arial.

9. "Scannability" — it's not just a good idea, it's the law.

**Most of the time, people scan written material before they read it.** They browse. Their eyes zip around. They're looking for what interests them...fast. We are scanners first — readers *maybe*. (And it's a big maybe. The safest, best assumption is that no one except your doting mother will read your stuff in depth.)

Build for browsers. Do everything you can to take advantage of the reader's flitting eye:

- put the important stuff FIRST
- keep most paragraphs short (long paragraphs look dense and forbidding, and they really are exhausting to read; one-sentence paragraphs, on the other hand, are amazingly refreshing)
- use provocative subheads to break long stories into smaller (and less intimidating) units
- use lots of bullet lists
- never run a photo or graphic without a caption (the Associated Press recommends a two-sentence formula: the first sentence states what is in the photo; the second sentence explains the context)
- use pull-quotes that summarize key points
- use major graphics to direct the eye around the printed page (and get your hands on a copy of Colin Wheildon's superb book, *Type & Layout: How typography and design get your message across — or get in the way*)
- columns between 40 and 60 characters wide scan most quickly
- for long printed texts, single-space your lines: adding extra space between lines (a thing designers sometimes do to add light to a page) can create a "ladder" effect that interrupts smooth reading
- always indent paragraphs (including those in business letters; ignore your 10th-grade English teacher's admonitions)
- reversed type (**a WHITE letter on a BLACK background**) is much harder to read; Colin Wheildon's studies found that reversed type reduced ease of comprehension by 70% or more; use reversed type for secondary information, if at all
- not all type is created equal: your brain has been programmed since childhood to speed-read serif, "Roman-style" type, set in upper- and lowercase (the most common examples of a standard Roman typeface are the stalwarts, Times and Times New Roman). As a result of all this training, the brain finds TYPE SET IN ALL CAPS, LIKE THIS; or "sans serif" type like this (Arial) significantly harder to read. Sans serif type is 5 times harder to comprehend than serif type, researchers found. Use sans serif typefaces and ALL CAPS sparingly, as accents.
- are graphic designers worthless? Of course not. They add drama, clarity, beauty: all involvement devices that help draw readers in. But you will discover that most designers are unaware of even the most basic findings of readability science. You'll have to teach them the tricks of that trade.

Top Tip  


Top Tip  


Write at the 8th-grade level. It's not "writing down," it's writing that respects the reader's time. Write ASAP sentences: "As short as possible."

A national survey asked donors what kind of communication they preferred most. Their top choice? Newsletters.

What's at stake? Just 80% of your newsletter's effectiveness. Four of five readers will read *nothing but* your headlines, subheads, captions, pull quotes and leads.

*Wall Street Journal front-page headline and subhead (5/11/01):*

Chicago to Boeing: Come Smell the Flowers. Winter? What Winter?

A Snow Job Seemed to Work: Why, the Windy City Isn't Really Even All That Windy

### Headline checklist:

- ✓ Does it summarize the major point(s) of the story?
- ✓ Does it scream "new"?
- ✓ Is it long enough? (The Wall Street Journal's amazing front page headlines are 25-35 words long.)
- ✓ Is there a subhead? (Yes.)
- ✓ Have you told donors what you've accomplished with their money?
- ✓ Are you patting yourself on the back? ("Another successful year!") Don't. It can send the wrong message.

10. **Make it look easy.** First impressions count for a lot with readers. If your stuff looks easy, instead of a chore, more people will commit.
11. **Write at the 8th-grade level.** It's transparently easy to read. And it is *not* writing down, as people suspect. (Hey, if it's good enough for the Wall Street Journal....) You can write about anything — including theoretical physics — at the 8th-grade level. Why? Because grade level has almost nothing to do with vocabulary. Shorter sentences are the fastest way to lower grade level.

## Buffed-up newsletters

12. **Headlines rule.** Headlines matter — far more than you might imagine. Most reading takes place at the headline level. Most of the time (80% is a commonly accepted figure) people read *only* the headline, not the story.

Yes: four out of five readers will never read your articles.

A newsletter with great headlines and mediocre stories is far better than a newsletter with weak headlines and great stories. **Want to dramatically improve your next newsletter? Write better headlines and always include subheads.**

Top Tip  


The purpose of a headline is to capture, in as few words as possible, the essence of the article. But that's not all. A good headline:

- qualifies the reader (not every story interests every reader);
- serves as a quick reference for someone who might circle back;
- is involving: it excites and informs and connects;
- lets the reader know how this story differs from previous stories on similar topics, and piques the reader's interest anew

Real headlines work for a living, and their job is to explain the story clearly. Cute, vague, or lazy headlines leave readers cold. *Literally!!!* A good headline warms up readers, easing them into the story in small, incremental steps.

The *Wall Street Journal* uses the following sequence of steps to warm up readers: an "eyebrow" (a few words of teaser above the headline), the headline itself, a "deck" (subhead) beneath the headline, and an evocative lead sentence — these four items function *as one unit* to move the reader quickly from disinterest to high interest.

Think of headlines (and pull quotes, captions, the table of contents and other reader conveniences) as "decisionware," helping "browsers" decide whether they want to read more.

13. **Write the way news reporters write.** Use the so-called "inverted pyramid" story structure: conclusion first, explanation next, background or examples last. The story of the three little pigs, told in inverted pyramid style:

"A wooden home in Fayetteville was reduced to matchsticks last night when a long-standing feud between a wolf and family of bachelor pigs erupted into violence. Experts says feuds of this kind are 'predictable occurrences between natural enemies' and that the pigs should have built out of brick."

The inverted pyramid puts the important stuff first and guarantees that you'll waste none of your readers' precious attention.

*a program description*

## BEFORE

Counselors facilitate weekly educational and support groups for offenders that teach stages of child development, enhance parenting skills and also helps offenders maintain positive relationships with their children.

*the same program description*

## AFTER

*"My father was never there for me. Now I'm a father. And I want to be there for my kids."*

They're young. They're in prison. And they're fathers. They're not expected to be good parents. But they want to be. We help them get there. Families in Crisis provides counseling, case management and educational services to help young men blossom into loving and supportive fathers.

# Brochures that speak true

14. **How to write powerful program descriptions:** STOP writing about what you do and how you do it. INSTEAD, write about why the program matters and what your results have been.

Top Tip  


15. **A brochure checklist:**

- Who is the primary audience for this brochure? (If there are multiple audiences, rank them in importance.)
- What questions will this audience typically ask? (What do they really need to know? What kinds of information are they searching for? What objections will they have? Remember: they might be searching for soft things like "reassurance" as much as for hard facts.)
- What action or decision do you want your audience to take/make once they've read your brochure? Have you helped them take that action or make that decision? Does the brochure clearly explain what the next step is and lead the reader to it?
- Is the brochure about the reader rather than about the agency? Are there many more references to "you" (i.e., the reader) than to "us/we/our"? Have features been translated into benefits? Is testimonial used to build credibility?
- Does the cover speak directly to the target audience and offer a clear benefit?
- Is the brochure jargon-free?
- Are there well-produced photos of people? (Remember those amiables? People respond to people.)
- Is lengthy text broken down into easy-to-scan smaller chunks?

# Fund-raising direct mail reality check

Why test? Because otherwise you're really just guessing. Testing is essential to acquisition programs.

There are seven ways to trigger response in direct mail, according to the industry's top experts:

- fear
- anger
- greed
- guilt
- exclusivity
- salvation
- flattery

16. Are you testing and building knowledge? **Ever-more-profitable direct mail programs test something with every mailing.** Test what, you ask? Some common tests: a Johnson box; teaser copy on the outside envelope; different signers for the letter; enclosures such as a bookmark or schedule of events; a negative vs. a positive copy platform (all the things your gift prevents vs. all the things your gift makes possible); a four-page vs. a two-page letter; adding a lift letter with testimonials; machine-addressed vs. hand-addressed. The minimum useful cell size for testing is 3,500 names.

Top Tip  


17. **Respect the 60-30-10 rule.** 60% of the response to your mail will be due to the quality of your list, 30% will result from your offer, 10% will be thanks to copy/format.

18. Self-respecting direct-mail fund-raising efforts pay close attention to: (1) retention; (2) acquisition; (3) list hygiene [each year, **20-30% of the names on your mailing list** will move, die, divorce or be abducted by aliens], (4) testing, (5) upward mobility — i.e., moving people up the dollar ladder, and (6) frequency [if you're only mail-

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The importance of pronouns  
in fundraising letters:

powerful **You**  
necessary — I  
weak — We

ing once or twice a year, you're leaving a lot of money on the table].

19. **The direct mail time bomb:** ONE one thousand. TWO one thousand. THREE one thousand. If the reader has found nothing of interest in 3 seconds, BOOM!!!...your letter's dead. Especially with acquisition letters, get to the point IMMEDIATELY!
20. **The heart writes most of the checks.** Fund-raising direct mail is NOT a case statement nor an annual report. Your statistics are the *least* important thing in your letter. Aim first for the heart — the emotional triggers — *then* go for the head.
21. **The most powerful word in the English language is "You."** Walk into a crowded room and shout "You." Every head will turn. We are hard-wired to respond. Use this word as often as possible.
22. **Believe it or not, long letters virtually ALWAYS earn more money than short letters,** at least in acquisition campaigns. There are a couple of good reasons why. People rarely read an entire letter beginning to end; they skip around, looking for things that interest them. A four-page letter, therefore, can offer four times as many interesting things as a one-page letter. Furthermore, long letters have high perceived value. If you're such a great program, after all, how come your whole story fits on a single page?
23. **Try teaser copy on your solicitation envelope.** Bill Jayme, a pioneer and by any measure one of America's most successful direct mail copywriters, always maintained, "Your outer envelope is where your prospect decides to stop, look and listen."
24. **A great reply device will increase gifts.** Remember: the bottom-liners will go directly to the reply device. Make sure they get the full message there. Add drama. Make it exciting. Put in a face for the amiables. Show what their gift will buy. Always use "Yes!" and make it big: this is where the donor pledges his/her commitment.
25. **Using your newsletter as a fund-raising device...**  
According to recent research, donors prefer newsletters above any other kind of organizational communication. Why? To find out how much good their money is doing. Newsletters are also useful for recognition, education, and enlisting volunteers.  
Newsletters can also be effective fund-raising devices. Jeff Nickel, of the Domain Group, has tested newsletters with many different clients and recommends the following:
  - 11x17 format, folding to four 8.5x11 pages, sometimes with an extra sheet
  - two-color printing (full color speaks of waste to donors)
  - not on glossy paper (seems expensive)
  - NOT a self-mailer
  - mailed in a #10 envelope with teaser copy: "Your newsletter enclosed."
  - send newsletter-based solicitations exclusively to current donors
  - include a reply envelope and reply device
  - mail as often as possible
  - use the newsletter for "accomplishment reporting"

**Top Tip**  


Newsletters are often shoved under the PR department and underutilized as fund-raising devices. According to Jeff Nickel, only 11% of organizations send newsletters, despite the donors desire for

# Making nice with the media

Newspapers cover news. (Sounds obvious, right?) So send out a brief press release whenever you have something **NEW**: *new* volunteers, *new* partnerships, *new* services, *new* sources of funding. Good PR is a game of inches. Frequent little mentions in the paper pay off big time by sustaining your community visibility.

them.

26. You'll place more feature stories if you do three things:

(1) **Find and develop an interesting story angle.** Strange as it might seem, it is *not* an editor's or reporter's job to figure out what is interesting about your organization. It is *your* job to find and pitch a "suitable" story angle — one that is tailored to the interests of a specific periodical's readers.

(2) **Present your story angle clearly and concisely, in a letter or an e-mail.** Don't expect a warm welcome if you phone. Reporters complain long and hard about the amount of time they waste answering poorly conceived phoned-in story pitches.

(3) **Ease the reporter's way.** Once a reporter has expressed interest, do everything you can to supply additional information and arrange interviews.

Top Tip  


27. **The first place a reporter will go is to your Web site.** A recent national survey found that reporters no longer call first; instead, they log on, to see what you're about. Do you have a Web site? Will the reporter find what he/she needs there, things like correctly spelled names, service statistics, etc.? Better check.

28. **Send a photo with a short caption instead of (or in addition to) a press release.** Newspapers and magazines are visual media. And they are desperate for good photos. Take advantage of this need. Send an interesting photo, with a caption that promotes your organization. Good candidates for this kind of PR: upcoming events, hospitals that have added new equipment, attractions like zoos.

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# Checklist for the Winning Fundraising Letter

From *Dear Friend: Mastering the Art of Direct Mail Fund Raising*

By Kay Partney Lautman and Henry Goldstein

**(1 = poor and 4 = excellent)**

	1	2	3	4
1) <b>Lead:</b> Does it create immediate interest? Will the prospect begin reading? Give your highest rating for a strong theme and the use of story-telling, case histories, or news (such as of a crisis) to introduce the problem. <i>Hint:</i> A better lead can often be found in the body copy a few paragraphs down. If you find one, move it up and raise your rating as well.				
2) <b>Writing Style:</b> Is it easy to read, friendly, and personal? Base your rating on how well the words and ideas flow, use of emotion, and the use of good transitions between ideas. Look for the absence of jargon and of complicated, overly long sentences. And look for the use of down-to-earth words that no one will have to look up.				
3) <b>Focus:</b> Is the focus simple and clear? Or do you try to tell too much? Base your rating on whether the letter focuses on a specific problem, or a need, or a goal—on whether it focuses less on the needs of the cause and more on the needs of the people served by the cause.				
4) <b>Problem Solving:</b> Does it offer solutions and hope? Rate on the basis of whether it offers believable solutions to genuine problems—solutions that are time or money related. <i>Hint:</i> Referring to a track record in past situations adds credibility to your solution.				
5) <b>Reader Recognition:</b> Does it make the reader feel important if he or she sends you a donation? Also, is the letter written only to one person. Does it use the word “you” several times on every page?				
6) <b>Personal Benefits:</b> Are the personal benefits that come with a donation emphasized? Does the donor get a publication, discounts, or other services? If so, are they described effusively? If they lend themselves to pictures, are powerful illustrations used? If the benefits are exceptional, does the mailing package devote specific space (perhaps even a separate piece) to describing them?				
7) <b>The Request:</b> Have you actually, clearly asked for a contribution? Base your rating on a strong, straightforward request for a gift, without apology. Has the best case been made for why the money is needed? Is the need stated several times and in several ways before the final request?				
8) <b>Urgency:</b> Will the donor understand that he or she must move quickly—must get the gift back to you while it can still help. Is an immediate response urged? <i>Hint:</i> Offer a strong reason to give now—something like crisis, budget deficit, deadline, tremendous opportunity, whatever is true.				
9) <b>Suggested Gift:</b> Does the donor know exactly how much money you want? Have you eliminated any chance that the donor will wonder how much to send? Remember, you get what you ask for. <i>Hint:</i> Ask for \$3 more than the average gift you seek. Try using “odd” dollar figures (\$17.27 for example) for credibility.				
10) <b>The P.S.:</b> Is it as good as the lead? Would the letter be badly damaged if the P.S. were left off entirely? If it would not, rewrite the P.S. so that it cannot be left off. Remember, the P.S. and the lead are usually read, even if the body of the letter is not.				
11) <b>Length:</b> Is the letter long enough to create interest, to state the problem, to tell the story in its most interesting form, to arouse emotion, to offer hope and the opportunity to participate in something significant, to state your credentials, to ask for the gift, and to offer attractive personal benefits?				
12) <b>Format:</b> Does it look like a letter? Is it typewritten? Is there good use of white space? Are short paragraphs mixed with medium length paragraphs? If it’s a long letter, does it make good use of graphic devices like subtitles, underlines, indented copy blocks, and bulleted items to increase readability? Remember, if it can’t be read easily, it won’t be read at all.				
13) <b>Photos:</b> If photos or other pictures are used, are they interesting? Are they clear enough to understand? Do they tell a story? Are they at least 2½ x 3½” in size? If there are captions—and you should probably use them—are they lively and descriptive?				

*This checklist is based on Con Squires’ CopyRater™ from his newsletter  
“Techniques for Success in Direct Mail Fundraising.”*