



## THE CARDINAL RULES OF FUNDRAISING LETTERS (AND HOW TO BREAK THEM)

By Mal Warwick

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### 1. Use “I” and “you” (but mostly “you”).

In fact, “you” should be the word you use most frequently in your fundraising letters. Your appeal is a letter from one individual to another individual. You aren't writing a press release, a position paper, or a brochure.

Studies on readability supply the fundamental reason the words “you” and “I” are important: they provide “human interest.” Stories, anecdotes, and common names (and capitalized words in general) have some of the same effect — but the most powerful way to engage the reader is by appealing directly to her: use the word “you.”

Use the *singular* “Dear Friend” — and the same, singular salutation appears even if the letter is addressed to a married couple. (Only one person at a time reads a letter!) Abolish the plural “you” from your vocabulary (as in “Dear Friends,” for example). Try to avoid the royal “we,” too; it smacks of condescension and will detract from the personal character of your appeal.

Use of the singular will require that you stick to a single letter signer. You'll cause yourself two problems by using more than one signer:

- (a) You won't be able to enliven your letter with the personal details and emotional asides that might come naturally in a letter from one person to another.
- (b) With multiple signers, you'll sacrifice “suspension of disbelief”: your reader's willingness to accept that your letter is actually a personal, one-to-one appeal.

Think about it: how am I to believe that two or three busy people who don't live together or work in the same office have collaborated in writing a fundraising letter to me? Which one of them typed the letter? (*Or was it really someone else?*) Did they both *actually* sign it? These are not questions you want your readers to be asking!

**When to break Rule Number 1:** You may write a letter in the first-person plural if — but only if

— there's a very special reason to do so. For example, if the letter is to be signed by a married couple, or your organization's two venerable cofounders, or a famous Republican and a famous Democrat. Even in such exceptional cases, however, I advise you to craft the letter *as though it were written by only one* of the two signers, in much the same manner as one of those annual family letters that arrive by the bushel every December. Something like this:

*Howard and I had a terrific time at the yak farm, but the same can't be said for the yaks. (You guessed it: the kids were up to their old tricks!)*

## **2. Appeal on the basis of benefits, not needs.**

Donors give money because they get something in return (if only good feelings). To tap their generosity, describe what they'll receive in return for their money — such benefits as lives saved, or human dignity gained, or larger causes served. And don't be shy about emphasizing *tangible* benefits. Donors may *tell* you they give money for nobler reasons, but premiums often make a difference. (Remember: most donors read your letters in the privacy of their own homes. They don't have to admit their own mixed motives to anyone — not even themselves.)

**When to break Rule Number 2:** If you're sending a genuine emergency appeal, you'd be a fool not to write about your organization's needs — and graphically so! But if it isn't a real emergency — and you're *really* in trouble if you habitually cry wolf — then write about benefits, not needs. In the long run, you'll raise a lot more money that way.

## **3. Ask for money, not for “support.”**

Almost always, the purpose of a fundraising letter is to ask for *financial* help. Be sure you do so — clearly, explicitly, and repeatedly. The “Ask” (pardon my jargon) shouldn't be an afterthought, tacked onto the end of a letter: it's your *reason* for writing. Repeat the Ask several times in the body of the letter as well as on the reply device. It may even be appropriate to *lead* your letter with the Ask.

**When to break Rule Number 3:** Many direct mail packages are structured not as appeals for funds but as invitations to join a membership organization. Others feature surveys or other donor involvement devices. In these cases, deemphasize the financial commitment, and highlight membership benefits — or stress the impact of completing the survey or mailing the postcard you've enclosed.

## **4. Write a package, not a letter.**

Your fundraising letter is the single most important element in the mailing package. No fundraising appeal is complete without a letter. But it's only one of several items which must fit smoothly together and work as a *whole*. At a minimum, your package will probably include an outer (or carrier) envelope, a reply envelope, and a reply device in addition to the letter. When you sit down to write,

think about how each of these components will help persuade donors to *send money now*. Make sure the same themes, symbols, colors, and typefaces are used on all elements, so the package is as memorable and accessible as possible. And be certain *every* element in the package relates directly to the Big Idea or Marketing Concept that gives the appeal its unity.

**When to break Rule Number 4:** Sometimes it pays to spend a little extra money on a package insert that *doesn't* directly relate to the Marketing Concept. For example, a premium offer might be presented on a “bucksip” — an insert specially designed to highlight the premium — but the offer might not appear anywhere else in the package (with the possible exception of the reply device). Often, in fact, a bucksip works best if it *doesn't* use the same color and design as other package elements. (That way, it stands out more clearly.)

## 5. Write in American English.

Use compact, powerful words and short, punchy sentences. Favor words that convey emotions over those that communicate thoughts. Avoid foreign phrases or big words. Minimize your use of adjectives and adverbs. Don't use abbreviations or acronyms; spell out names, even if their repetition looks a little silly to you. Repeat (and underline) key words and phrases.

**When to break Rule Number 5:** A letter that could have been written by a twelve-year-old might not look right bearing the signature of a college president or a U.S. senator, so follow this rule judiciously. (But don't make the mistake of confusing big words, complex sentences, and complicated thoughts with intelligent communication: the most literate fundraising letter needs to be clear and straightforward.)

## 6. Format your letter for easy reading.

Be conscious of the white space you're leaving around your copy; the eye needs rest. Indent every paragraph. Avoid paragraphs more than seven lines long, but vary the size of your paragraphs. Use bullets and indented paragraphs. In long letters, try subheads that are centered and underlined. Underline sparingly but consistently throughout your letter — enough to call attention to key words and phrases (especially those that highlight the benefits to the reader), but not so much as to distract the eye from your message.

**When to break Rule Number 6:** Don't mechanically follow this rule. Some special formats, such as telegrams or handwritten notes, have formatting rules of their own. Don't ignore them. Remember that you want the reader to believe — or at least to *act* as though she believes — that you've sent her a telegram, a handwritten note, or a personal letter.

## 7. Give your readers a reason to send money NOW.

Creating a sense of urgency is one of your biggest copywriting challenges. Try to find a genuine reason why gifts are needed right away: for example, a deadline for a matching grant or an

approaching election date. Or tie your fund request to a budgetary deadline so you can argue why “gifts are needed within the next 15 days.” There is *always* a reason to send a gift now. And the argument for the urgency of your appeal bears repeating — ideally, not just in the text of your letter, but also in a P.S. and on the reply device.

**When to break Rule Number 7:** Be very careful about fixed deadlines if you're mailing via bulk rate. (Instead of giving a date, use a phrase like “within the next two weeks.”) Don't overuse the same arguments for urgency, lest your credibility suffer. And try *not* to depend on deadlines based on actual dates in large-scale mailings to acquire new donors: the value of those letters will almost always be greater if you can continue to use the same letter over and over again.

## **8. Write as long a letter as you need to make the case for your offer.**

Not everyone will read every word you write, but some recipients will do so, no matter how long your letter. Others will scan your copy for the information that interests them the most. To be certain you push *their* hot buttons, use every strong argument you can devise for your readers to send you money now. And to spell out every argument may mean writing a *very* long letter; it may also mean repeating what you've written to the same donors many times in the past. But don't worry about boring your readers by restating your case: research repeatedly reveals that even the most active donors remember very little about the organizations they support.

**When to break Rule Number 8:** Not every organization — and not every appeal — calls for a long letter. A well-known organization with a readily identifiable purpose might be able to make its case with only a sentence or two. The American Red Cross, for example, or a prominent children's hospital; a few words might get the point across, in either case. Similarly, in writing to your proven donors, you can sometimes state the argument for a straightforward membership renewal or special appeal in few words. “It's time to renew your membership” is a good example.

### **Three more things to keep in mind**

If you heed the basics of strong and effective writing — and if you follow the eight rules I've just described — you won't go far wrong when you write your next fundraising appeal. But I suggest you also keep in mind the psychology of the position you've placed yourself in as the signer of your letter. You might want to consider the following as three additional rules of writing fundraising letters:

“You” — the signer — are an individual human being, with hopes, fears, convictions, and experiences. *Write about them.*

“You” are writing to one person — the addressee — who has hopes, fears, convictions, and experiences, too. Write about them, too.

Regardless of its mission, your organization addresses human needs on many levels, intangible as well as concrete, emotional as well as practical. Those are the things people care about

— not your budget or your "needs." *Write about the things people care about!*