

# How To Improve Your Fundraising Letter In 10 Simple Steps

Creating a powerful and emotive fundraising letter isn't easy. But thankfully there is a wealth of Copywriting know-how available to those who want to improve their persuasive writing skills.

This straightforward guide reveals ten of the most frequently used, tried-and-tested copywriting techniques.

If you ever find yourself writing or critiquing a fundraising letter, consider these ten simple rules. Yes, you can break the rules - but shouldn't you know what they are first before you do?

Let's start with the most important element first. The headline.

## 1. Give priority to the headline.

The power of the headline should never be underestimated. Think carefully about what would interest your reader and how you can draw them into your first paragraph. Here are some questions you can think about when coming up with your headline:

- What is my audience interested in?
- Does my headline give them a reason to donate?
- Does my headline grab attention?
- Have I tried to speak directly and specifically to my audience?
- Does the headline make the reader want to read more?
- Is the headline easy to read?

Here are three alternative ideas for writing headlines:

1. Make the headline a complete and meaningful message.
2. Turn the headline into a "newsworthy" item
3. Teach the reader something new

And here are **five headline pitfalls** you may want to avoid:

1. Avoid being cute, clever and titillating, but irrelevant.
2. Be wary of misunderstandings, in-house jargon, double meanings, technical terms, colloquial, acronyms and abbreviations.
3. Don't be overly concerned about being original. Start with the "tried

- and tested” before trying new ideas that may not work.
4. Avoid being clever for the sake of being clever.
  5. Don't fit a headline around a visual that has nothing to do with what you're fundraising for. Get the headline first then make the visual fit.

## **2. Make the first paragraph fantastic.**

Too often, the first sentence and first paragraphs in fundraising letters are badly designed. What a waste! Here are a couple of examples of bad first sentences:

*“Worldwide Earth Fund has over 211 aid workers, living and operating in over 64 countries around the world. We enable developing countries to reach their full potential, through agriculture, social care and Information Technology.”*

This is a self-indulgent introduction. The first sentence is focused on the organisation the writer is promoting. The problem is that most people don't give two hoots about how big your organisation is - nor do they care for mission statements. It's *who* your charity serves that really matters. People don't relate to numbers or corporate-speak. People relate to people.

Another example of bad introductions:

*“I'm writing to you today about the impact of large-scale industrial waste and the long term detrimental effects that these by-products have both on our local community and on the wider environment.”*

This kind of sentence suffers in two ways. Firstly, it's aiming at the reader's intellect rather than their emotion. As a writer of any kind of response-driven letter, you should strongly think about the reader's emotional reaction to your words. Time and time again you'll get a better response with emotive copy rather than intellectual.

And secondly, the sentence rambles on for far too long and uses too many uncommon and lengthy words. Most of the time it's better to write in a simple conversational style.

## **3. Keep sentences short and leave plenty of white space.**

Most people feel overwhelmed by big chunks of text on a page. The average person prefers white space and short sentences. So watch out for long, rambling sentences and a cramped layout in your letter.

First impressions count with fundraising letters, so make the white space work for you. Remember: use nice big borders, nice paragraph returns,

and “easy-to-read” sentences.

#### **4. Use quotations where possible.**

People like quotes. Not necessarily long quotes, but just enough speech to add colour. Quotations will help keep your letter personal and human. You could even consider using quotation marks in your headline.

#### **5. Make the copy "you" focused.**

This is an easy test to see if your copy is reader-focused. Go through your draft-letter line-by-line and see how many times you’ve said “I”, “me”, “my”, “we”, or “our”. Then see if you can turn these words around into “You”, and “Your” sentences.

Here’s a simple example: “We want to provide aid to people suffering in Basingstoke.”

This sentence could become more reader-focused by changing it to “You can help us provide aid to the people suffering in Basingstoke.” Or as a question: “Will you help provide aid to people suffering in Basingstoke?”

#### **6. Include testimonials.**

Why not use more testimonials in your copy? It’s such a simple and effective way to improve your credibility. Just make sure you get full permission before you print the quotes.

#### **7. Be specific rather than vague.**

Being more specific adds to your writing credibility. Writing in vague terms usually happens because the writer doesn’t know much about the subject they’re talking about. Readers quickly pick up on this and may become cynical towards the advert.

For example.

*“The Worldwide Earth Fund helps feed starving children in Sudan.”*

This could be changed into:

*“Last year John, Esther, Moses and 600 other hungry children in Sudan were all fed by the Worldwide Earth Fund.”*

#### **8. Emphasise key words.**

It’s great to emphasise words. **Bold**, underlining, *italics* and CAPITALS; all of them can aid the role of communication. But do use these

techniques carefully.

For example, compare these two paragraphs:

*Are you tired of noisy neighbours and loud late-night traffic? Are you longing for a good nights rest? Then why not try Silentnight's comfy earmuffs? Independent tests have proven Silentnight earmuffs can reduce noise levels by up to 87%.*

Emphasising entire sentences can help people who skim-read find the important sentences quickly. But on a negative side, this style of emphasis may put people off your letter because it reminds them of “sales letters” or “junk mail”.

How about this version of the same paragraph?

*Are you tired of noisy neighbours and **LOUD** late-night traffic? Are you longing for a good nights rest? Then why not try Silentnight's comfy earmuffs? Scientists have proven Silentnight earmuffs can reduce noise levels by up to 87%.*

Did you read this paragraph differently?

By picking out the words we naturally stress in conversation, it can make the text appear more interesting to read. When used properly and in the right context, this style can make your writing appear more personal and lively.

## **9. Re-write your work as many times as you can.**

No-one writes perfectly the first time around. 99.9% of people will see things they can improve when they re-read their own copy, especially after taking a break. So re-write your own material again, and again, and again.

## **10. Get someone else to read and comment on your copy.**

Getting help from others will help you on at least two accounts: proof-reading and misunderstandings. Spilling errors are always an embarrassment. And something which makes perfect sense to you may be interpreted differently by someone else. So always take the time to get your copy double-checked.

But one final word of warning: don't be surprised when others suggest changes that you don't agree with! Take criticism kindly but remember you don't have to change everything you're told to, especially if there is no logical reason behind the alteration.

As H.G. Wells once famously said; "No passion in the world is equal to the passion to alter someone else's draft."

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