Amazing Appeal Letters That Are... Appealing!

Presenter: Dalya F. Massachi

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JUNK MAIL?

- Our challenge!

- I often stash the ones that I find most compelling and review them at my convenience (as a donor, as an evolving fundraiser). I appreciate that “junk”!

- What do YOU do?
2 BIG ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

1. Writing can be hard (we all get writer’s block). But practice and feedback are keys!

2. There’s a lot of expertise in the room; let’s use it to help each other.
OUTLINE

I. Let’s frame the discussion
II. What’s your gut reaction?
III. 2P2R Planning: 4 easy steps
IV. A brief before/after exercise
## MY BACKGROUND

As a nonprofit writer and editor for nearly 20 years, I’ve authored a host of proposals, articles, and online content…

including a column on OpportunityKnocks

…and contributed to/edited several books. My own award-winning book is pictured here.

From 2000-2004, I was the Founding Director of BAIDO.
NOW IT’S YOUR TURN!
“The letter we all love to receive is one that carries so much of the writer's personality that she seems to be sitting beside us, looking at us directly and talking just as she really would.”

— Emily Post, American author
WRITING WORKOUT

What’s your gut reaction?

STEP 1: Partner up with someone you have not met yet. Choose one person to take notes.

STEP 2: Share a sample envelope to review. Jot down what you think is most effective. Why? It’s o.k. to disagree!

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THE 2P2R PLANNING SYSTEM

1. Understand your Purposes

2. Define your Priority info

3. Know your Readers

4. Refine your messages

“Good writing does not come from fancy word processors or expensive typewriters or special pencils or hand-crafted quill pens. Good writing comes from good thinking.”

– Ann Loring

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UNDERSTAND YOUR SPECIFIC WRITING PURPOSES

- **Inspire** your readers to act
- Encourage the view of your org as a solid **investment** that will get **results** they can be proud of (they contributed!)
- Show your **pressing** issue in a compelling way; why are **you** the org to address it?
- Instill **trust** in your ability to get the job done
- Stand out from the crowd
DIFFERENT PURPOSES FOR DIFFERENT FOLKS

Examples:

- Introduce your org to a new potential donor
- Acknowledge a long-standing donor’s generosity, request a renewal/increased gift
- Request a special gift on a project of special concern to the donor
DEFINE YOUR PRIORITY INFO

"INSTEAD OF LEARNING TO ORGANIZE MY PRIORITIES I'VE BECOME COMFORTABLE WITH PANIC."

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“Your fundraising [appeal] letters will be successful only if they reflect what's unique about your organization and uniquely attractive to your donors.”

—Mal Warwick
YOUR UNIQUENESS

- Outstanding credentials or experience
- Extensive collaborations
- Unusual point of view or approach
ASK YOURSELF:

1) What is the unique value your organization or project adds to your community?

2) What makes your org a good investment NOW?
LET’S MAKE A DEAL!

They want to know: “What’s in it for ME and US?”

- **So what?** HOW does your org help solve our problem?
- What is the opportunity to help make a difference in own community as part of a winning team?
EXAMPLE: SLOW FOOD USA

Slow Food USA reconnects Americans with the people, traditions, plants, animals, fertile soils, and waters that produce our food. We seek to inspire a transformation in food policy, production practices, and market forces.

So what?

…so that together, we can ensure equity, sustainability and pleasure in the food we eat.
EXAMPLE:

Gardening is directly reflective of work put in by what comes out. A healthier garden fosters fertile ground, which is conducive to educating youth with seeds of self-worth. As the youth care for and learn from the garden, they too grow and will one day blossom.

(Oakland Food Coalition)
WHERE THE MONEY GOES

How far will you stretch each gift (esp. in these tough times)?

$XX will:

▪ Acquire a new resource for a community in need
▪ Plant an acre of urban garden
▪ Educate decision-makers about a pressing topic
▪ Provide materials for a neighborhood cleanup
HOW CREDIBLE ARE YOU?

- Who’s already on board? (endorsements)
- Mentions in the press
- Excellence ratings: CharityNavigator, BBB, greatnonprofits
- Transparent about everything (e.g., get more details on website)
CONNECT PERSON-TO-PERSON

- Be reader-centered
- Think and write in terms of “you” (the reader), “I” (your friend)
- Briefly communicate shared values, needs, interests
- Use their language, intimate voice
EXAMPLE: IMAGINE…

“If you could write a letter to your great-grandchildren, how would you begin?

You might tell them about the “Occupy” movement sweeping the planet: how the 99% got sick and tired of multi-billionaires making mega-profits and speculating with our food…while half the world went hungry.

It might be a difficult letter to write…because it’s hard to imagine a world without poverty and hunger.

For just a moment, I’d like you to let that future world “occupy” your imagination. Can you see it? That’s the world we’re fighting for. No poverty. No hunger. No excuses!

(Food First)
IDEAL TONE

Conversational/informal/warm:

- Can include sentence fragments
- Can begin with a conjunction (and, but, so) or end (“Where did it come from?”)
- Contractions are good
- As if you are talking to ONE friend at a time
- Easy to understand (clear instead of clever)
Ask yourself: What makes YOU most passionate and inspired about your work?

Let it shine through:

- Transcribe what you would say to a respected friend
- Act the host giving a tour of the best parts of your “home”
- But don‘t dwell on details they don‘t want to know
AVOID JARGON AND UNEXPLAINED ACRONYMS

- Would your readers use the term themselves?
- Does the term mean the same thing to them as it does to you?
- If you must use technical terms or acronyms, explain them the first time.
SENSE OF URGENCY

- Did something happen in the news that you need to address right away?

- Are you seeing a trend that will only get worse if not dealt with now?

- Can you use a deadline to spur action now? (before the winter comes/a challenge grant)
KNOW YOUR READERS

- New or existing donor?
- What is her relationship to your org?
- What do you know about his hopes, goals, motivations and interests?
- What does your reader already know about you?
- What dollar amounts are appropriate to ask for?

Group your readers accordingly.
WHAT’S ON THEIR MINDS RIGHT NOW?

EX: Appeal letter from the Union of Concerned Scientists

Envelope teaser: “There are too many environmental groups. Why don’t you folks work together?”

- Collaboration is a “guiding principle”
- Strengthen the entire Enviro. Movement
WHAT’S ON THEIR MINDS RIGHT NOW?

EX: Pesticide Action Network

Envelope teaser:
“Do you want pesticides in your body? Better speak up now!”

“Did anyone ask you if you wanted pesticides in your body? Well, they’re here! Deep inside your body there’s evidence of direct exposure to some of the most toxic chemicals known…”
LIKELY QUESTIONS

- Is your work related to my life/how I feel?
- How have you benefited my community?
- Do I agree that your activities will accomplish your mission?
- Do I already have a relationship with this org?
- Exactly how will my money be spent?
- Who else is already behind this?
- Can I give in installments?
STRETCH BREAK: 3 MINUTES!
REFINE YOUR MESSAGES

Match your READERS’ interests with your writing PRIORITIES

STEP 1: Get in your reader’s “zone”

Ask yourself: What would make your reader want to read or skim those letters?
1 COMPELLING STATISTIC

- Must be hard to believe
- Make it easy to understand (without too much background)
- It has to show the context or importance of your work (how it relates to your reader’s life or surroundings)
CREATE A JUICY HEADLINE

Called a “Johnson box” (after the copywriter who designed it)

Brief 1-3 sentences above the salutation that tells the story in a nutshell: your offer, the most important benefit, biggest news

EX. from Feeding America:

In the greatest food-producing nation on earth, more than 17 million children face hunger. YOU CAN HELP! Every $1 can help provide 7 meals for hungry kids.
PERSONALIZE YOUR SALUTATION

- Use actual name if you can

- OR get more specific than “Dear friend”:
  
  “Dear environmental activist”
  “Dear organic foodie”
  “Dear political junkie”
"WITH YOU EVERYTHING STARTS WITH A HUMOROUS ANECDOTE."

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SOME IDEAS

- Relate bold, unexpected, striking, or controversial statement/anecdote—perhaps rebuts conventional wisdom
- Focus on the story of one representative person
- Briefly paint a stunning or humorous word picture
- Provide hints of a mystery unfolding
- Summarize: who, what, when, where, why, how
SHARE STORIES

Capture the essence of your work with short scenes and quotes from people similar to your target readers or people they care about.

How have they/the community benefited: results and importance
FOCUS ON CHARACTERS

Ask yourself:
How can you help readers feel the urgency, exhilaration, relief, inspiration, surprise, humor, poignancy, suspense, or other aspects of your characters’ experiences?

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One of Margie Donovan’s favorite things is going to live theater. An arts center recently opened near her home in Folsom, CA, but Margie has yet to go enjoy a show. That’s because Margie is blind and funding cuts for public transportation mean Folsom now has just one bus route for the entire city – and it doesn’t run at all on weekends!

“Weekends are supposed to be when fun things happen,” says Margie. “But without good public transportation, people with disabilities are housebound.”

… the idea of someone being imprisoned in their home because of inadequate public transportation… it’s not right. Plus, there are so many more reasons we need good public transit…

(Transform)
Even left-brained people need an emotional understanding.

Your reader will remember how you make her/him feel more than anything else.
POSITIVE HUMAN EMOTIONS

Appreciation
Belonging
Compassion
Dignity
Empowerment
Encouragement
Excitement
Inspiration
Joy
Love
Safety

Example
You want your children to be safe and healthy. You always use sunscreen and they never leave home without warm clothes on. You use seat belts.

But what about the pesticides sprayed near the school playground your children use every day? Let Parents for Playgrounds tell you about what we have found...
"TURNS OUT THE PHILANTHROPY GENE IS IN BETWEEN THE RISK-TAKING AND THE HAPPINESS GENES."
USE QUOTES WELL

Capture the essence with short quotes

Ask: “How did you benefit from the experience? What changes did you see happen? And why is that important to you?”

Is there a juicy piece of dialogue that illustrates the scene?
DON’T START OUT WITH A FOCUS ON “WE” (the org)

EXAMPLE

Original: We want to bring native plants back to the community. But we need your help!

Suggested revision: Native plants bring many benefits to our community and help avoid eco-trouble down the line. With just a few simple steps, you can help improve our neighborhood’s environment!
SHOW, DON’T JUST TELL

- **Ask yourself:** How would you illustrate the concept in a photo or video?
- Convey 1-2 striking details
- Show HOW your solution benefits folks
- Use word pictures:
  - **NOT** “affordable housing and good nutrition”
  - **BUT** “roof and 3 healthy meals a day”
MAKE IT PLEASING TO THE EYE

Use:

- White space/chunks
- Subheads that tell the story
- Legible font
- Color
- Bullets
ASK FOR THE MONEY!

Trap: “Just laying out all the facts should be enough to make the request obvious!”

EX:
We need your help to continue our work.

We rely on individual donations for almost half of our operating budget. For every dollar received, we deliver four dollars in value because of our network of on-the-ground volunteers and pro bono researchers.
ACTIVATE WITH YOUR ENDING

*Ask yourself:* “If your readers were to take away just one idea or feeling, it would be ________.”

- Re-read your opening & closing. Do they work together?

- Your “call to action”:
  - Simple details they need to know
  - Limited-time offer or deadline
  - Reminder of the benefits they will enjoy NOW
INCLUDE A P.S.

- Studies: P.S. is 1 of 2 most commonly read pieces (other one: Johnson Box)

- Repeat your strongest points here:
  - Specifics of what you are asking for
  - What it will mean to your community
  - Reminder of the urgency
  - Any special offer/matching gift deadline

- Unusual example from The Carter Center:
  “PS: If anytime you’re not satisfied with the Carter Center results, I’ll refund your donation.”
TOP PERSON SIGNS

• Add: handwritten note to friends/coworkers

• Include something personal about the signer

• Idea: Join me as we fulfill our mission; I take personal responsibility for ensuring that $ will be well-used.

Example:
“As always, if you have any questions or suggestions for how we can become an even better community resource, please feel free to contact me directly.”
LET IDEAS GERMINATE

- Wait at least 24 hours before starting to revise.
- Try keeping a notepad & pen on your nightstand. This invites creative ideas to visit you.
CULTIVATE CONCISENESS: LESS IS MORE

“I didn't have time to write a short letter, so I wrote a long one instead.” —Mark Twain

- avg. 2 pages/1-2 screens
- Sentences: 14-20 words max.
- No freeloading words
- KISSS: Keep It Short, Simple, Skimmable
- Appeal letter ≠ grant proposal or essay
COMPLEMENT WITH GRAPHICS

- Not just a cherry on top: integrated

**EX** from Plenty International:

“The enclosed photos convey the essence of our projects more clearly and directly than anything we could say. As you look at them, remember: None of this would be happening without your support.”

- Captions (“micro-copy”): summarize, ID left to right, double-check, present tense vivid verbs

- Photos: people benefiting from your mission
PROOFREAD!

- Check your document for grammar, punctuation, spelling, and other slip-ups.

- Always read your piece out loud (even if it’s only to yourself). Most people hear words as they read them, so your words should roll off the tongue.

"I'm really not much of a proof reader but I did catch most of your b.s."
DON’T FORGET OTHER PIECES

Reinforce the message of your letter with:

1. **Response card**: Yes! (to signer or community); reminder of impact $ will have; different $ amounts (including “other”); return address

2. **Return envelope**: Stamp/ask for a stamp to save $


4. **Outer envelope**: Teaser w/question answered in the letter; highlight special offer
WRITING WORKOUT

Step 1: Choose one of the 3 text samples to work on.

Step 2: Take a stab at redrafting the text to be part of a donor appeal letter.
WRAP-UP QUESTION

What is the most valuable thing you are taking away from today? And how will you use that info?
MANY OTHER WAYS TO IMPROVE YOUR RESULTS:

- Workshops/webinars

- Writing coaching (indiv. & group)

- Editing services (proposals, books, etc.)

- Free newsletter
✓ FREE feedback session by conference call

✓ 1st and 3rd Wednesdays of the month

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