

# The Way We Write Is All Wrong:

## *Fixing the Broken Discourse of Fundraising*

by Frank C. Dickerson, Ph.D.

The discourse of fundraising involves some disturbing trends.

**Editors' note:** This article provides insight into the import of story and how we process the language of stories. Stories, of course, are the key to being good fundraisers and communicators of our organizational missions.

**T**HIS ARTICLE FEATURES SOME SURPRISING findings uncovered during my doctoral research. Why would this research be of interest to those running nonprofits? The findings indicate that the discourse of fundraising involves some disturbing trends. The good news is that addressing these problems in your own work can help you communicate more effectively with donors and help your organization succeed.

Like a linguistic MRI, my computer-based analysis of fundraising documents revealed troublesome linguistic and rhetorical patterns. These

patterns profiled a discourse focused more on transferring information than on creating interpersonal involvement. Fundraising texts were cold and detached, like doctoral dissertations rather than like friendly, personal conversations. Rather than gaining reader attention with emotionally rich human-interest stories, they contained less narrative than academic prose; in fact, they contained less narrative than official documents.

### Research Methodology

My research mined more than 1.5 million words of online and printed fundraising texts from America's largest charities. Of the 880 organizations represented, 735 report direct support of \$20 million or more on the Internal Revenue Service's Form 990. In total, I analyzed 2,412 Web- and print-based documents across nine philanthropic sectors. To date it is the largest study of its kind

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There is a wide  
gap between what  
fundraisers believe  
about good writing  
and what they write.

and was designed based on 2003 research of 316 fundraising letters and conducted by Ulla Connor and Thomas Upton at Indiana University.

Linguist Douglas Biber developed the computer algorithms in Connor and Upton's study and those in my study. Biber's methodology profiles texts by tagging and tallying the counts of specific sets of 67 linguistic features.

The data established that these linguistic features work together in texts to achieve specific communication goals. For example, personal pronouns, contractions, and private verbs (e.g., "I think" and "I feel") were among 23 linguistic features that occurred together to create interpersonal involvement in personal letters and conversation: two elements located on a continuum between high interpersonal involvement and high information. Conversely, on the high-information pole are features such as long words or words that weaken the power of verbs and adjectives by transforming them into nouns, such as by adding *-ion* or *-ity* (e.g., *evaluate* becomes *evaluation* or *intense* becomes *intensity*).

After scoring fundraising texts based on the frequency of such features, my research compared scores with those of 23 common genres. Among these genres, fundraising texts most resembled academic prose and official documents.

For linguists, this finding is interesting; for fundraisers, it's tragic. It's tragic because the style of writing among America's largest nonprofits runs counter to the advice of experts in direct-response marketing and fundraising. In fundraising, experts such as Jerry Huntsinger and Mal Warwick have long championed a writing style that creates interpersonal involvement and presents narratives. In fact, among the reviewed texts, one of Huntsinger's letters scored highest on the dimensions of interpersonal connection and narrative. His letter tells the story of Janice, a young girl who was rescued from sex traffickers by Covenant House workers. It put a compelling human face on the appeal.

While those who make a living by writing can craft documents with ease, it's hard work for the rest of us. We all know a good story when we see one. But knowing exactly what makes a story good . . . well, that's another story.

Two goals fueled my research. First, I wanted to help fundraisers better see and hear the stories that play out every day in their organizations: the narratives of need or opportunity that show how their work makes a difference. Then I wanted to help fundraisers translate what they see and hear to written form without draining a narrative of its human passion. I call this daunting task writing the voice of philanthropy: writing as if one were in fact speaking as a compassionate voice for someone who has no voice. The following highlights the most important lessons learned.

### Who Is Writing, and What Grade Is Deserved?

As a starting point, I wanted to learn which factors the executives at elite nonprofits have identified as elements of effective fundraising texts. So I asked respondents to score the importance of using an argument-centric (expository) writing style. On a 1-to-5 scale (with 5 being high), only 5 percent rated exposition high.

I then asked respondents to score emotional, human-interest narrative writing on the same scale. Those rating narrative over exposition highly increased by a ratio of 9 to 1. But despite the percentage of those favoring narrative at 45 percent, their writing revealed a wide gap between what they believed about good writing and what they actually wrote.

At the root of this disparity is that we all take writing for granted. We all can write. And most of us think we can write well. Yet the evidence of linguistics analysis refutes this assumption. The problem is that few of us critically consider the rhetorical superstructure and linguistic substructure of what we write. In short, we don't critically consider the language.

Stephen King, who was a high-school English teacher prior to becoming a best-selling author, drove this point home in explaining what motivated him to write *On Writing*, his book on composition principles and techniques. King's motivation came from a conversation with the author of *The Joy Luck Club*, Amy Tan. He asked her "if there was any one question she was never asked during the Q-and-A that follows almost every writer's talk . . . . Amy paused, thinking it

over carefully, and then said: ‘No one ever asks about the language.’”

The irony is that fundraisers should care passionately about the craft of telling stories on paper. In fundraising, language means a great deal. Someone selling a product creates an exchange based on the value of what is offered. And before making a purchase, a customer can kick the tires or thump a melon. For a fundraiser, the burden of raising money often rests squarely on the power of words. Yes, nonprofit donors occasionally visit a charity or see a video about its work. But many donors decide to give based on what they read. And unfortunately, what they read is usually not that good.

### Why Does Poor Writing Happen?

One reason may be the way we’re raised to write. Our education teaches us to use an abstract, impersonal writing style that runs counter to established fundraising best practices. This is consistent with research by Jeanne Bell and Timothy Wolfred, who found that 58 percent of nonprofit executive directors hold a master’s degree or

a doctorate. Most fundraisers write what I call “discourse de facto” (i.e., discourse as a matter of practice).

These nonprofit executives write as though they’re locked in a time warp and back in graduate school. Even though fundraising requires a different style of writing, they are living in another place, at another time, writing for a professor who is no longer there.

This unfortunate phenomenon also reflects a cultural shift from orality to literacy. Cultural linguist Walter Ong traced this shift, citing examples of orality in epic poems such as *The Iliad* and *Beowulf* and familiar stories such as David and Goliath. Then Johann Gutenberg’s repurposing of an olive press to print with movable type changed everything. Ong concluded that the innovation of printing brought a change in the way we produce and process knowledge.

He observed that oral cultures depicted agonism (e.g., the agony of people in conflict). The discourses of these pre-literate cultures were filled with scene, plot, characters, tension, and resolution: the stuff of stories. On the other

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hand, as movable type and literacy took hold, Ong observed that writing fostered “abstractions that disengaged knowledge from the arena where human beings struggled.”

The writing of marketers, public relations, and fundraising professionals tends toward an oral mode of discourse, even though the work is eventually reduced to the printed page or computer screen. These professionals tend to write like people talk. Thus a good fundraising letter will read like a conversation sounds: like the banter between friends over a cup of coffee, which is filled with personal views, concerns, stories, and emotion.

Effective fundraising copy sounds like human interaction.

### How We Process Language

The human quality of writing is consistent with neuroscientists’ discoveries about the way people process narrative. Seminal insight into this important area of language research originated with neuroscientist Giacomo Rizzolatti at the University of Parma. During the early 1990s, researchers identified a special class of neurons that fired in the brains of macaque monkeys during specific grasping activities. Researchers linked this mechanism to understanding language processing. This “mechanism was the neural prerequisite for the development of interindividual communication and finally of speech.”

At the core of this discovery is evidence from fMRI scans of human subjects for what was only suggested in experiments with monkeys: that the human brain contains “neural mechanisms (mirror mechanisms) that allow us to directly understand the meaning of the actions and emotions of others by internally replicating (‘simulating’) them without any explicit reflective mediation.”

### The Power of Narrative

Lisa Aziz-Zadeh and Marco Iacoboni found evidence that the triggers of mirror neuron response are not limited to visual input: just reading or hearing about an action can produce the same response as seeing the action firsthand.

According to their research of 12 volunteers,

the premotor cortex of their brains indicated the presence of the same neural activity when they heard words describing an action as when they saw it. Their research explains why it’s difficult to put down a novel but easy to fall asleep reading a textbook.

The evidence of neuroscience suggests that the writing style dominant among fundraisers actually circumvents the way the human brain is hardwired to process language. The implications are that fundraisers should not shy away from emotion: they should tell stories, and they should not formalize texts.

Science writer Gordy Slack summarizes the implications of mirror neuron research for creating, processing, and interpreting language. Slack wasn’t satisfied to just state the implications, but artfully illustrated the implications in a brief text that marshals linguistic features that paint a narrative scene (note his use of the past tense to report past actions and move the reader sequentially through time); intensify interpersonal involvement (note his use of contractions, first-person pronouns, private verbs, and conversational style); and produce empathy (note how the author makes you feel, thus achieving his rhetorical aim: to make you care).

A young woman sat on the subway and sobbed. Her mascara-stained cheeks were wet and blotchy. Her eyes were red. Her shoulders shook. She was hopeless, completely forlorn. When I got off the F-train, I stood on the platform, paralyzed by emotions. Hers. I’d taken them with me. I stood there, tears streaming down my cheeks. But I had no death in the family. No breakup. No terminal diagnosis. And I didn’t even know her or why she cried. But the emotional pain, her pain, now my pain, was as real as day.

My research confirms that linguistic features that involve readers and that paint connecting, narrative moments are woefully absent in fundraising discourse.

### The World’s Oldest Fundraising Letter

I close this article with what is perhaps the world’s

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oldest fundraising letter by Pliny the Younger from the late first century. Although 2,000 years old, the letter reads like one from a twenty-first-century parent seeking funds for a local private school. Its style is better than most fundraising texts from today's largest nonprofits.

Pliny's letter addresses his friend Gaius Cornelius Tacitus, a Roman senator. Pliny's purpose was to ask Tacitus to help recruit faculty for a school he hoped to found in his hometown. The letter recounts a meeting Pliny had with parents and children at his villa, during which he asked them to contribute to found a local school.

When I was in my native town recently, a young lad, the son of one of my fellow townsmen, came to pay his respects to me. "Do you go to school?" I asked. "Certainly," he replied. "Where?" "At Milan." "Why not here?" "Because," rejoined his father, who was with him and had in fact brought the boy, "we have no teachers here." "Why no teachers?" I asked. "Surely it would be tremendously to the interest of you who are fathers" (and quite opportunely several fathers were listening) "that your sons should by all means have their schooling here. For where could they live more happily than in their native town or be kept better under control than under the eyes of their parents, or at less expense than at home?"

It is no greater task, certainly, to collect money to hire teachers, and you can apply toward their salaries what you now spend for [the boys'] lodgings, travel, and the things that have to be paid for when one is away from home (and away from home everything costs money). Indeed I, who do not yet have children, am ready to give for the benefit of the municipality, as if for a daughter or parent, one third of any sum it will please you to assemble. I would even promise the whole if I were not afraid that such an endowment might one day be tampered with through political corruption, as I see happen in many places where teachers are hired by the municipality. This danger can be met by only one remedy, namely, if the right of hiring is left only to the parents alone and scrupulous care for choosing is instilled

in them by the necessity of contributing . . . then agree among yourselves, unite, and draw increased spirit from mine, for I am desirous that what I shall have to contribute shall be as large as possible.

I thought it necessary to repeat all this in detail and from the very beginning, as it were, so that you might the better understand how glad I should be should you undertake what I request. Now then, I request, and in keeping with the importance of the matter I beg, that you look around among the great number of students who come to you out of admiration of your genius for teachers whom we can solicit—on this condition, however, that I do not make a binding contract with anyone, for I leave complete freedom of choice to the parents. They shall judge, they shall select. For myself I claim only the trouble and the expense.

Pliny's letter contains clear narrative superstructure: a definite setting (his villa in Como), sympathetic protagonists (the children and parents), a noble quest (founding a school), and two barriers to fulfilling that quest (lack of funds and teachers).

The overarching narrative superstructure is supported by a linguistic substructure of features common to narrative (past-tense verbs, third-person pronouns, public verbs, and reported speech).

A major problem is that some fundraisers do not themselves suffer through the hard work of experiencing emotionally what William Labov called the "reportable event" in a narrative. This is what allows us to identify with a character and an issue: a connecting, narrative moment. It takes only a few lines to create a poignant scene that prompts an emotional response from a reader. It's much better to connect with your reader than to have your letter become yet one more recycling of babble from a mission statement: a regurgitating of stale goals and objectives without any scene, character development, dramatic tension, and resolution.

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