



A Wake-Up Call for Fundraisers

A new study asserts "The Way We Write is All Wrong" and backs it up with a word-by-word analysis of fundraising appeals from over 800 nonprofits.

When a world-renowned historian discovered there wasn't a single school in his hometown, he decided to raise money to build one. Here are the opening sentences of the letter he wrote to launch his capital campaign:

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."

Given the stilted language, you've probably guessed this wasn't written yesterday. In fact, it was composed by the Roman historian Pliny the Younger nearly two thousand years ago, but it's still off to a livelier start than most fundraising letters sent today.

In just a few sentences, Pliny creates a scene and lets the narrative draw you in. The same appeal updated for a contemporary audience would probably read:

Studies show that children who travel more than 20 miles each day to school score lower on standardized tests than children who attend schools within their own city limits. Due to a severe shortage of teachers, our city closed its last operating public school earlier this year, meaning that 100% of our school-age children must now commute to neighboring cities.

If you think this dry, fact-heavy version is an exaggeration, talk to Frank Dickerson. Earlier this year, Dickerson, who has worked in fundraising for forty years, completed his doctoral dissertation on the language of philanthropy. His report, "The Way We Write Is All Wrong," is a blistering sector-wide critique and a must-read for fundraisers everywhere.

September 2009

A Wake-Up Call for Fundraisers

New study shows why many appeals fail

New - The Webinar on Webinars

Invest 1 hour to improve your online gatherings

Now Tweeting (Almost) Daily

September at The Goodman Center

Storytelling, presenting and design classes on tap



About Us

free-range thinking is written by Andy Goodman and edited by Lori Matsumoto. To read



Frank Dickerson

First Signs of a Problem: The Indy 100

Dickerson's study was spurred by a 2003 analysis of direct mail letters sent by approximately 100 nonprofits in and around Indianapolis. Two researchers, Thomas Upton and Ulla Connor, used a computer model developed by Douglas Biber that analyzes individual words and groups of words, and then classifies them as involving, emotional and likely to be part of a narrative (i.e., very desirable qualities) or strictly informational, unemotional, and devoid of storytelling (less desirable qualities).

In short, Biber's model acts like a sorting machine into which Upton and Connor poured thousands of words from fundraising letters. When the sorting was done, Upton and Connor pored over the data and discovered that the fundraising letters were "more informational than even academic prose," and lacked virtually any emotional appeal. The letters didn't tell stories - they presented cases with all the warmth of a hospital chart. The report prompted Dickerson to determine if the Indianapolis results were indicators of a wider problem.

Working under the auspices of The Drucker School at Claremont Graduate University, Dickerson launched a nationwide study in 2004. He collected fundraising appeals from 880 nonprofits, almost all US-based. Over 700 of these organizations raised at least \$20 million annually, a reasonable assurance that the appeals were coming from accomplished fundraisers. In all, Dickerson collected 2,412 documents (evenly divided between direct mail and online solicitations) and loaded 1.5-million words into Biber's sorter.

The Grades Are In (And They're Not Pretty)

Dickerson evaluated the documents primarily along two dimensions. First, he looked at their language to determine whether it was "highly involving" or "highly informational." A document that was as engaging as a face-to-face conversation would receive the highest possible score: 35. A document that was as information-choked as a page full of government regulations would receive the lowest possible score: -20.

The average score on this dimension across all 2,412 documents was 12.8. (As a letter grade, this would translate roughly to a D.) "Fundraising discourse," Dickerson concludes, "reads like the academic prose found in journal articles and doctoral dissertations."

The second dimension of analysis determined whether the appeal was primarily narrative or non-narrative in nature. For this dimension, the highest score was 7 and the lowest was -4. The average score across all documents was -3 (the equivalent of an F). Dickerson concluded that fundraising appeals, both in direct mail and online, "contain less narrative than official documents like government regulations and legal briefs."

back issues, download free publications, and to learn more about our work, please visit www.agoodmanonline.com and www.thegoodmancenter.com.

To reach Andy directly, please call (323) 464-3956 or send an email to andy@agoodmanonline.com.

To subscribe to this newsletter, [click here](#). To unsubscribe, [click here](#).



a goodman

GOOD IDEAS FOR GOOD CAUSES

a goodman

444 North Larchmont Blvd.,
Suite 102
Los Angeles, CA 90004
323.464.3956

Why Do Good Causes Write Bad Letters?

Dickerson offers three possible explanations for the low scores. First, there's the too-smart-for-our-own-good theory. According to a 2001 study, 58% of nonprofit executive directors hold Masters' degrees or doctorates. Little wonder, Dickerson suggests, that they approach writing as if they were still in graduate school.

Then there's the monkey-see, monkey-do theory. As much as Americans may claim to be rugged individualists, we still like to look over our shoulders to see what the other guy is doing. And when all the other guys (and gals) are writing fundraising appeals in a certain way, we tend to follow suit.



And finally, Dickerson adds, we're in denial. "We all can write," he states in his report, "and we all think we can write well." In truth, writing is hard, and most people are simply not very good writers.

While the report is subtitled, "A Profile of and Prescription for Fixing the Broken Discourse of Fundraising," it's longer on criticism than guidelines for improvement. Good causes that want to write more compelling appeals will find some good advice here, but they will need to look

elsewhere for support or training. This shouldn't diminish the value of Dickerson's contribution, though. "The Way We Write is All Wrong" is a wake-up call based on solid evidence, and it couldn't come at a better time.

(To download a free copy of "The Way We Write is All Wrong, visit thewrittenvoice.org.)

[^ back to top](#)

NEW - The Webinar on Webinars

Give us an hour, and we'll help you take the distance out of distance learning and ensure your online meetings are worth attending.

To save time and money, more organizations are conducting trainings and meetings online. But most of us have not been taught how to run a successful "webinar." As a result, these virtual gatherings are often mind-numbing, technically-challenged affairs that waste the time they're supposed to save.

So get some training! Join us for one hour, and The Goodman Center will show you:

- How to keep participants engaged from beginning to end
- How to use your two assets (voices and visuals) to maximum advantage
- What we learned from talk radio that makes webinars work



To learn more and to register for either September 17 (9-10a PDT) or October 1 (9-10a PDT), [click here](#).

[^ back to top](#)

Now Tweeting (Almost) Daily



I'm always on the lookout for articles, books, websites and other resources that can help public interest communicators work smarter, and now I'm sharing these tips several times each week via Twitter. To follow me, [click here](#).

[^ back to top](#)

September Classes at The Goodman Center

Sharpen your storytelling, polish your presentations, and learn to avoid common design mistakes that could be driving people away from your website, annual report, and more.

Storytelling: Tapping the Power of Narrative

September 8th, 15th, 22nd and 29th (9-10a Pacific)

Our most popular online class returns in September to help you relocate your inner storyteller. In four hours (spread over four weeks), we focus on the structure and qualities of good stories - which you often use unconsciously - and explain how you can apply them in advocacy, fundraising, recruiting and other aspects of your work.



The Goodman Center will offer this class on September 8, 15, 22 and 29 from 9-10a Pacific (12n-1p Eastern) each day and is currently registering students online. Tuition is \$500 and discounts are available to organizations registering 3 or more students. To find out more and reserve your space, [click here](#).

Presentations: Bore No More!

September 16th and 23rd (9-10a Pacific)

Based on unprecedented research and incorporating the advice of twenty highly regarded public-speaking experts, "Presentations: Bore No More" is a two-hour online class designed to help presenters at all levels, from newbies to seasoned veterans. Curriculum in this two-hour course includes:

- The five most commonly made mistakes in presenting and how to avoid them
- How to structure presentations to ensure your audience learns more
- Why PowerPoint should never be used as a presentation and a handout
- Techniques to help you deliver talks with greater confidence



Classes will be held on September 16th and 23rd from 9-10a Pacific each day (12n-1p Eastern), and tuition is \$250 per student. (Group discounts are available.) To learn more and register online, [click here](#).

Design: Deciding on Design

September 18th, September 25th, and October 2nd (9-10a Pacific)

Even if you don't work directly with print or web designers, you may have to evaluate and approve designed materials before your audience sees them. Learn what to look for (and what to avoid) in this fast and informative overview of graphic design.



In three one-hour classes conducted over three successive weeks, we'll cover:

- Basic principles of page layout for print and the web
- Using color and typography to convey your message
- Techniques for getting the most from photos and illustrations
- Fundamentals of website design
- How design contributes to your brand

Classes will be held on September 18th and 25th and on October 2nd from 9-10a Pacific each day (12n-1p Eastern), and tuition is \$375 per student. (Group discounts are available.) To learn more and register online, [click here](#).

[^ back to top](#)

[Share this newsletter with a colleague](#)

 **SafeUnsubscribe®**

This email was sent to lori@agoodmanonline.com by andy@agoodmanonline.com.
[Update Profile/Email Address](#) | Instant removal with [SafeUnsubscribe™](#) | [Privacy Policy](#).

Email Marketing by



a goodman | 444 North Larchmont Blvd., Suite 102 | Los Angeles | CA | 90004