

Writing Powerful First Lines for Fundraising Appeals

How to Hook Your Donors in 10 Words or Less



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The first line of your fundraising appeal is like the opening scene of a movie—it needs to hook your audience immediately.

If the first line doesn't grab attention, the rest of your message may go unread.

In this mini-course, you'll learn the rules, formulas, and techniques to craft compelling first lines that draw readers in and inspire them to keep reading. Remember: your goal is to hook your donors in 10 words or less.

The Rules of Writing First Lines

Before you start writing, it's important to understand what makes a first line effective.

These rules will help you create attention-grabbing openers that encourage donors to keep reading. Use them as a checklist when crafting your appeals.

1. Keep It Short:

- Aim for 5-10 words.
- Short sentences are easier to read and grab attention quickly.

2. Create Curiosity:

- Use mystery or unexpected facts to pique interest.

3. Tap Into Emotion:

- Trigger feelings like urgency, hope, or empathy.

4. Speak to the Reader's Values:

- Make it personal and relevant to the donor's worldview.

5. Use Action Words:

- Start with verbs that evoke movement or change.

6. Avoid Over-Explaining:

- Don't give everything away in the first sentence—leave them wanting more.

7. Get to the Point Fast:

- Don't save your most compelling story for the middle of your letter. If you don't grab attention in the first line, your donor may never see it.

8. Know the Context:

- Tailor your first line based on the medium. For example, a direct mail or email appeal needs a quicker hook than an in-person event or a conversation with a major donor.

Formulas for First Lines

Now that you know the rules, here are proven formulas to help you craft first lines that resonate with donors. These formulas are flexible and can be adapted to fit any nonprofit cause. Remember to keep your first line within 10 words to maximize impact.

1. The Urgency Hook:

Create immediate urgency to compel action.

Formula: "Urgent: [X] needs your help today."

Example: "Urgent: A family needs shelter tonight."

Formula: "Only [X] hours left to save [cause/person]."

Example: "Only 24 hours left to save the sanctuary."

2. The Shocking Fact:

Start with a surprising fact that grabs attention.

Formula: "Every [X] minutes, [Y] happens."

Example: "Every 30 seconds, a child goes hungry."

Formula: "Did you know [shocking statistic]?"

Example: "Did you know 1 in 5 families can't afford water?"

3. The Emotional Question:

Pose a question that tugs at the reader's emotions.

Formula: "What if [scenario donor can relate to]?"

Example: "What if you had no home to return to tonight?"

Formula: "How would you feel if [emotionally charged scenario]?"

Example: "How would you feel if your child went hungry?"

4. The Personal Appeal:

Make the donor feel directly responsible for making a difference.

Formula: "You can change [X] today."

Example: "You can change Maria's future today."

Formula: "Your gift means [specific result]."

Example: "Your gift means a warm meal for a family."

5. The Problem-Solution Tease:

Present a problem and hint that the donor can solve it.

Formula: "Without your help, [problem persists]."

Example: "Without your help, this school will close."

Formula: "[X] faces [problem], but you can change that."

Example: "Emma faces eviction—but you can help."

6. The Relatable Struggle:

Describe a struggle that donors can empathize with.

Formula: "Imagine [struggle that aligns with donor's values]."

Example: "Imagine being unable to feed your family."

Formula: "It could happen to anyone—even you."

Example: "One unexpected bill could change everything—even for you."

7. The Unexpected Statement:

Surprise the reader with an unexpected twist.

Formula: "This isn't the [X] we wanted to send."

Example: "This isn't the letter we wanted to send."

Formula: "We never thought we'd ask for this."

Example: "We never thought we'd need emergency donations."

8. The Basic Right Statement:

Appeal to universal values and basic human rights.

Formula: "No [person/animal] should have to [suffer injustice]."

Example: "No child should have to sleep on the floor."

Formula: "[Basic right] is something everyone deserves."

Example: "Clean water is a right, not a privilege."

Copy-and-Paste Ready First Lines by Nonprofit Type

Use these ready-to-go examples in your appeals or tweak them to fit your organization's voice. Each set includes five examples tailored to specific nonprofit types. Make sure to keep each line under 10 words for maximum impact.

1. Educational Organizations:

- "What if a child dropped out over book costs?"
- "Urgent: Scholarships needed for students next month."
- "Every student deserves a chance—you can help."
- "Imagine college dreams with no tuition money."
- "You can put a diploma in Sarah's hands."

2. Health and Medical Organizations:

- "No one should die waiting for a cure."
- "Urgent: Fund life-saving treatments today."
- "Every minute, someone hears 'You have cancer.'"
- "Your gift means care for a child."
- "Imagine battling illness without access to medicine."

3. Environmental and Conservation Organizations:

- "Every minute, an acre of forest disappears."
- "Urgent: Protect endangered wildlife today."
- "No child should grow up in pollution."
- "You can save a species today."
- "Imagine a world without clean air."

4. Arts and Cultural Organizations:

- "Theater lights may go dark without you."
- "Urgent: Save our community arts today."
- "Every child deserves access to the arts."
- "You can preserve history today."
- "Imagine a world without music."

5. Advocacy and Human Rights Organizations:

- "No one should be denied basic rights."
- "Urgent: Stand up for justice today."
- "Every voice matters—help amplify theirs."
- "Your support defends human dignity."
- "Imagine living in fear for being yourself."

6. Religious and Faith-based Organizations:

- "No family should go hungry this season."
- "Urgent: Help us serve those in need."
- "Your faith brings hope to others."
- "Imagine facing hardship without community."
- "You can be someone's answered prayer."

7. Professional and Trade Associations:

- "No professional should feel unsupported."
- "Urgent: Provide resources for industry growth."
- "Your support strengthens our community."
- "Imagine a world without skilled leaders."
- "You can empower future professionals."

8. Social and Community Service Organizations:

- "No family should sleep on the streets."
- "Urgent: Provide shelter for families tonight."
- "Every child deserves a safe home."
- "Your gift brings warmth to families."
- "Imagine tomorrow without a home."

9. Philanthropic Foundations:

- "Your generosity fuels life-changing projects."
- "Urgent: Fund innovations that change lives."
- "Every dollar multiplies impact."
- "You can spark change today."
- "Imagine the world your gift creates."

10. Animal Organizations:

- "No animal should suffer."
- "Urgent: Rescue pets from unsafe conditions."
- "Your gift means a second chance."
- "Every creature deserves care."
- "Imagine life without your beloved pet."

Examples of Ineffective First Lines (What to Avoid)

Even with the best intentions, some first lines can fall flat. Here are examples of ineffective first lines and why they don't work:

Overly Formal and Impersonal:

"We are pleased to announce our annual fundraising campaign."

Why it doesn't work: It's formal and lacks emotional appeal.

Too Much Jargon:

"Our organization has implemented a multi-faceted approach to community engagement."

Why it doesn't work: It's confusing and doesn't grab attention.

Burying the Ask:

"Since our founding in 1985, we have helped thousands."

Why it doesn't work: It delays getting to the point and lacks urgency.

Statistics Without Context:

"Homelessness has increased by 20% in our city."

Why it doesn't work: It's impersonal and doesn't create a connection.

Focusing on the Organization Instead of the Donor:

"Our team has been working tirelessly to support the community."

Why it doesn't work: It centers around the organization, not the donor or beneficiary.

Tips for Testing and Tweaking

Even the best first lines can benefit from testing and refinement. Here are some tips to help you optimize your fundraising appeals:

A/B Testing:

Test two different first lines in the same appeal to see which performs better.

Track Metrics:

Monitor open rates for emails and response rates for direct mail to gauge effectiveness.

Get Feedback:

Ask colleagues or volunteers to read your appeal and share which first line grabs their attention.

Tweak and Retest:

Don't be afraid to adjust your first line based on feedback and results.

Keep It Fresh:

Rotate first line styles to keep your appeals engaging and avoid reader fatigue.

The first line is your foot in the door—make it count.

Use the rules, formulas, and examples in this mini-course to craft opening lines that captivate, engage, and inspire action. Don't forget: keep it under 10 words to hook your donors and inspire them to give.

Want to Learn More?

If you found this guide helpful, imagine what you could learn in-person from the best minds in nonprofit storytelling! Join us at the Nonprofit Storytelling Conference, where you'll dive

deeper into techniques like this, discover new strategies to engage your donors, and connect with a vibrant community of fundraising professionals.

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