

"Wait, What?!"

Openers for Emails, Appeals, Social Media & More

How to Grab Attention with Unexpected and
Unforgettable Phrases



a Nonprofit Storytelling Conference Publication

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How to Grab Attention with Unexpected and Unforgettable Phrases

This will help you craft openers that instantly hook readers by using statements that surprise, intrigue, or plant unintended ideas. These openers get people to stop scrolling, open emails, and engage with fundraising appeals.

How These Openers Work

They tap into:

1. **Curiosity** – Readers want to know what happened.
2. **Implanted Ideas** – Suggesting something so odd that people consider it.
3. **The Unintended Consequence Effect** – Making people think, “Wait... did that really happen?”
4. **Playful Alarm** – Phrasing that sounds urgent or worrisome but isn’t what it first seems.

Opener Examples

Animal-Related & Playful Examples

- We Told Him Not to Lick the Frog... He Did Anyway
- Please, Don’t Let the Turtles Drive the Boat
- This Chicken Had One Job—And It Failed Miserably
- Nobody Said You Could Adopt a Llama
- We Swear, The Hamsters Were Fine Before You Got Here

Surprise Twist Openers

- We Told Her Not to Eat the Cake... So She Ate the Candle
- We Never Expected Him to Take “Make Yourself at Home” This Literally
- The Sign Said ‘Don’t Touch’—So, Of Course, He Did
- When We Said ‘Act Natural,’ We Didn’t Mean That
- Guess Who Just Set Off the Fire Alarm... Again

Nonprofit & Fundraising Adaptations

- “Don’t Give It to the Goat,” we said. You Can Guess What Happened Next.
- Please Don’t Let the Kids Redecorate the Shelter Again
- This Is Why We Can’t Have Nice Things... And Why We Need Your Help
- We Thought They Were Kidding About the Ice Cream Disaster—They Weren’t

- She Took 'Be the Change' Too Literally... Now We Need Quarters

How to Craft Your Own “Wait, What?!” Openers

1. Start with a Warning or Directive – “Don’t ” / “We Told Them Not To ”
2. Use a Playful or Misleading Setup – Suggest something slightly ridiculous but believable.
3. Create an Unintended Consequence – Imply that the warning had the opposite effect.
4. Add Just Enough Mystery – Leave the full story untold to make people want to know more.

Where to Use These Openers

- Email Subject Lines → Increases open rates with curiosity
- Direct Mail Envelope Teasers → Gets people to open the letter
- Social Media Hooks → Stops scrolling and increases engagement
- Event Invitations → Adds humor and intrigue
- Fundraising Appeals → Makes the letter stand out in a crowded mailbox

How to Deliver on the Opener (So It Connects to Your Mission!)

A great “Wait, What?!” opener grabs attention, but to make it work for your nonprofit, you must tie it back to your mission, fundraising goal, or donor action. Otherwise, it’s just a fun phrase with no impact.

Here’s how to make sure your opener delivers:

1. Make the Curiosity Pay Off

Your audience opened the email, read the post, or flipped the envelope—now what? Don’t disappoint them with something unrelated. Immediately transition from the playful opener to the real point of your message.

Example:

- “Please, Don’t Let the Turtles Drive the Boat”
- How It Connects: “Rescue teams were out on the water yesterday, saving sea turtles caught in fishing nets. It’s delicate work—and no, we don’t actually let the turtles drive—but we do need the right tools to navigate rough waters. That’s where you come in.”

2. Use the Opener to Frame a Problem or Need

The unexpected phrase should naturally lead to the bigger issue your nonprofit is tackling. Ask yourself:

- What's the real story behind this playful setup?
- Is there a challenge that needs solving?
- Can this highlight the why behind your work?

Example:

- "Guess Who Just Set Off the Fire Alarm... Again"
- How It Connects: "Meet David. He's six, loves grilled cheese, and is learning how to be independent. But in the group home where he lives, outdated appliances mean smoke detectors go off a lot—especially when kids are learning to cook. A new kitchen would mean fewer alarms and more life skills. Will you help?"

3. Transition Quickly to the Donor's Role

Make the leap from the quirky phrase to why the donor matters in just a few lines. Here's a simple formula:

Opener → Surprising Situation → The Real Issue → How the Donor Helps

Example:

- "This Is Why We Can't Have Nice Things... And Why We Need Your Help"
- How It Connects: "When the after-school program opened last year, we had brand-new art supplies. The kids loved them—maybe a little too much. Now, the paintbrushes are worn down, and the markers are running dry. Will you help restock the supplies so every child gets a chance to create?"

4. Match the Tone to Your Audience

Some nonprofits thrive with humor, while others deal with sensitive topics. The key is adapting the playful hook while keeping the message appropriate for your audience.

For a serious cause:

- "We Said 'Be the Change'—She Took It Literally"
- "Kara gave everything she had to escape homelessness. But now, she needs someone like you to give her a chance."

For a lighthearted approach:

- "Nobody Said You Could Adopt a Llama"
- "Our farm animal rescue wasn't planning on a llama. But when Larry showed up, we couldn't turn him away. Can you help us give him a forever home?"

The Big Takeaway

These openers work only if they lead to something meaningful. They are the fishhook that gets attention—but your story, mission, and donor connection must make it worth their while.

Try This:

Take one of the example openers, tweak it for your cause, and then fill in:

1. What’s the real story behind this?
2. How does it connect to our mission?
3. How can a donor make a difference?

Quick-Pick Opener Starters: 10 Ready-to-Use Attention-Grabbing Openers

Need a great opener fast?

Here are 10 general-purpose options that any nonprofit can use. Just copy, paste, and tweak to fit your cause!

1. This Is Why We Can’t Have Nice Things... And Why We Need Your Help
2. We Thought It Was Just a Small Problem—Until Everything Went Sideways
3. You Won’t Believe What Happened When We Tried This
4. Turns Out, Doing the Right Thing Can Get You in Trouble (In the Best Way!)
5. We Never Expected a [Blank] to Make Such a Difference—But It Did!
6. They Said It Couldn’t Be Done—Then Someone Proved Them Wrong
7. Oops. We Didn’t See That Coming... But Now We Need Your Help
8. Meet the [Person/Animal] Who Changed Everything
9. This Should Have Been a Disaster... But Then You Stepped In
10. Well, That Didn’t Go as Planned... But We Have a Plan B

How to Use These

- Drop in your own details where needed (e.g., “Meet the Kitten Who Changed Everything”).
- Use them as email subject lines, social media posts, or direct mail teasers.
- Pair them with a great story.

Want more options? Keep scrolling for 50 more openers, broken down by nonprofit type. (But don’t skip by them too fast—many of them can work across multiple causes!)

"Wait, What?!" Opener Library: 50 Ready-to-Use Attention-Grabbing Openers

Here's a list of attention-grabbing, unexpected openers tailored for different types of nonprofit organizations. Each one can be tweaked to fit your specific mission!

Educational Organizations (Schools, Literacy, Research, Scholarships)

- Please Stop Eating the Glue—And Other Things We Never Thought We'd Say
- If You Give a Kid a Paintbrush... Expect a Mess (And a Masterpiece!)
- This Kid Solved a Problem Einstein Couldn't. (Okay, Maybe Not... But Still!)
- They Said They Could Make a Rocket With Just a Soda Bottle. We Didn't Believe Them.
- Turns Out, "Nap Time" Is Not Just for Kids—Here's What We Learned.

Health and Medical Organizations (Hospitals, Mental Health, Disease Research)

- No, You Can't Just Tape It Back Together
- Someone Thought "DIY Surgery" Was a Good Idea. We Disagree.
- We Thought We Were Helping Her. Turns Out, She Helped Us More.
- Yes, Grandmas Can Be Rebels—And We Love Them for It
- What Happens When You Give a Puppy to a Cancer Patient? Pure Magic.

Environmental and Conservation Organizations (Wildlife, Climate, Sustainability)

- Please, Don't Let the Turtles Drive the Boat
- We Told Him Not to Lick the Frog... He Did Anyway
- Somebody Let the Goats in the Office Again
- Well, That's the Last Time We Let a Raccoon Make the Rules
- When Life Gives You Lemons... Sometimes You Just Need Clean Water Instead

Arts and Cultural Organizations (Museums, Performing Arts, Cultural Preservation)

- This Painting Was Worth \$1,000—Until a Toddler Got to It
- A Five-Year-Old Just Recreated Van Gogh's Masterpiece... Sort Of.
- We Thought the Play Was Over. Then the REAL Drama Started.
- This Music Program Was on Life Support—Until Someone Stepped In.
- They Said "Art Can't Change the World." We Have Proof That It Can.

Advocacy and Human Rights Organizations (Civil Rights, Social Justice, Equality)

- We Asked for Volunteers—Now We Have an Army (Send Snacks!)
- The Sign Said "Don't Touch"—So, Of Course, He Did.

- Turns Out, Change Looks a Lot Like a Bunch of Determined Grandmas.
- When We Said “Act Natural,” We Didn’t Mean That
- We Didn’t Think a Single Email Could Change a Law. We Were Wrong.

Religious and Faith-Based Organizations (Humanitarian Aid, Spiritual Support, Education)

- Yes, We Believe in Miracles—And We Saw One Last Week.
- They Said a Prayer. Then Something Unexpected Happened.
- Someone Just Walked 10 Miles for a Bible—Here’s Why.
- This Tiny Church Just Did Something Big.
- One Small Act of Faith Changed a Whole Community.

Professional and Trade Associations (Networking, Industry Advocacy, Unions)

- The Meeting Started with Coffee... And Ended with a Revolution.
- We Didn’t Expect to Find the Future of Medicine in a Garage.
- A Boring Spreadsheet Just Saved 100 Jobs—Here’s How.
- The Conference Almost Got Canceled... Until One Person Stepped Up.
- If You Think Networking Is Awkward, You Haven’t Met Our Team Yet.

Social and Community Service Organizations (Housing, Childcare, Workforce, Senior Support)

- She Showed Up for Job Training... And Left as a CEO.
- We Thought It Was Just a Hobby—Now It’s Saving Lives.
- He Only Had \$5 to His Name—Now He’s Feeding an Entire Block.
- We Never Expected a Bingo Game to Change Someone’s Life.
- She Said “I Can’t.” We Said “Just Watch.”

Philanthropic Foundations (Grant-Making, Donor-Advised Funds, Cause-Specific Support)

- One Grant. One Kid. One Future That Just Changed Forever.
- They Didn’t Think Their \$20 Could Make a Difference. They Were Wrong.
- This Scholarship Was Almost Lost—Until Someone Stepped In.
- A Boring Budget Meeting Just Funded the Next Breakthrough in Medicine.
- They Thought They Were Just Writing a Check—Then They Changed a Life.

Animal Organizations (Rescue, Wildlife Protection, Animal Welfare)

- Nobody Said You Could Adopt a Llama
- Well, That’s the Last Time We Let a Goat in the Kitchen
- We Found an Abandoned Puppy. What Happened Next Shocked Everyone.
- Meet the Dog Who Saved an Entire Family.
- Turns Out, Cats Are Really Good at Fundraising.

How to Use These Openers

1. Pick one that fits your mission or tweak an example to match your nonprofit.
2. Use it as an email subject line, direct mail teaser, or social media hook.
3. Make sure your story delivers on the promise—Use the worksheet to craft your message.

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If you found this opener toolkit helpful, please forward it to a friend who could benefit from these using these openers.

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