

How to Use Dialogue to Pull Donors Into the Moment

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“One line of real dialogue can carry your whole story.”

Most fundraising writing works way too hard to explain things.

But one real line, spoken by the person at the heart of your story, can do more than three paragraphs of explaining things.

It's like you're handing the donor a set of headphones and saying, *“Here, listen to this moment.”*

They hear it. They feel it.

And suddenly,

they're not just reading your story,

they're *in* it.

Examples of Dialogue That Work

Below are snippets of dialogue that create connection, curiosity, and emotion.

You'll notice they're short, human, and easy to picture. These are the kind of lines that pull you right into a story.

They're especially effective at the *beginning* of a donor communication (to hook attention) or at the *end* (to leave the reader with a lasting feeling).

Use them as inspiration for spotting or crafting authentic dialogue from your own stories.

Beginning line examples

Here's what these can sound like:

- “Do you think God knows where I am?”
- “We haven’t eaten since Thursday.”
- “I told my kids it was a camping trip.”
- “Can I keep the blanket?”
- “I didn’t want anyone to see me cry.”

Ending line examples

And here’s what works beautifully at the end of a donor report or thank-you:

- “When I got the keys, I slept holding them.”
- “I still don’t know who paid for my surgery.”
- “She said, ‘Tell them I’m okay now.’”
- “He just whispered, ‘Thank you,’ and closed his eyes.”

So here’s what I want you to do.

I want you to **capture one short, emotionally charged line of dialogue** from a beneficiary, a staff person, a volunteer or even a donor, and place it where it’ll have the biggest effect.

When I say “**capture**,” I mean three concrete actions:

1. **Notice it in real life.** You’ll hear lines during interviews with beneficiaries, site visits, phone calls, staff huddles, or even in old case notes and transcripts.
2. **Record it verbatim.** Write the exact words down (Notes app or notebook) or make a quick voice memo — with permission if you’re recording. Exact wording matters.
3. **Tag the context so you can use it later.** Save three details with the quote: *who said it, where it happened, and what was going on in that moment.*

Where to look first (and what to do when you find one):

- **Interviews / intakes / follow-ups** → Keep a pad open. When a line hits you in the gut, write it word-for-word and circle it.
- **Program tours / site visits** → Step aside after a moment and jot the line with a one-sentence scene note.
- **Phone calls / thank-you calls** → If you hear a line, ask, “May I write that down exactly as you said it?”
- **Case notes / transcripts** → Skim for short sentences that carry feeling; copy them exactly and note the source.

Once you've captured your line, here's how to **use it**:

1. **Choose the placement.**
 - **At the start** of an *appeal* → grabs attention instantly.
 - **At the end** of a *donor report or thank-you* → leaves the donor with an image they can't shake.
 - Bonus: these lines also make *fantastic subject lines, headlines, pull quotes, or social post openers* to get people into the story in the first place.
2. **Frame the line with two quick moves:**
 - **Set the scene**: One or two sentences that place the donor in the moment — who's talking, where they are, and what's happening.
 - **Connect to the bigger picture**: One or two sentences that link this moment to the need (in an appeal) or to the outcome the donor made possible (in a report).
3. **Keep it human.** Don't tidy the grammar. Don't over-explain the line. Let it breathe.

Guidelines:

- Keep it under ~12 words.
- Choose *feeling* over facts.
- Resist the urge to explain right away — let the donor's mind fill in the gap.

Pro tip:

If you missed the exact words in the moment, recreate the **emotional truth** in natural speech: one short sentence that sounds like a person, not a press release. Keep the cadence. Keep the humanity.

Before & After — seeing it in action

Now I'm going to show you a *before* version without dialogue, then an *after* version with a Dialogue Drop-In added.

The first is an **appeal opening**. The second is a **donor report closing**.

Example 1 — Opening line in a fundraising appeal

Before (flat opening)

Our shelter has been busier than ever this year, with more families coming through our doors seeking help. Many of these families have faced job losses, medical crises, and other challenges.

After (Dialogue Drop-In opening)

“We haven’t eaten since Thursday.”

That’s what Maria whispered as she sat down in the dining room, her two little boys pressed against her sides. She didn’t say it for sympathy — she said it like she was explaining why she could barely keep her eyes open.

We see families like Maria’s every week now — tired, hungry, and hoping for a warm meal before nightfall.

Example 2 — Closing line in a donor report

Before (flat closing)

Thanks to your generosity, Maria and her boys have the food and shelter they need to rebuild their lives.

After (Dialogue Drop-In closing)

Thanks to you, Maria and her boys have a safe place to sleep every night. On their first evening in their new room, Maria tucked the blankets around her kids, then turned to the volunteer who helped her move in and whispered, “This is the first bed I’ve had in three months.”

Why this works:

- In the *appeal*, the dialogue hooks the donor before they can skim.
- In the *donor report*, the dialogue is the moment donors will remember — the one they helped make possible.

What to do now (mini checklist)

Here's what to do next:

1. Create a note on your phone called **"Dialogue Drop-Ins."**
2. Add this template:
 - Quote: " _____ "
 - Speaker: _____
 - Context: _____
 - Date/Source: _____
3. This week, capture **three** real lines.
4. Use one in an appeal opening *or* a donor report closing.

Why donors love it

Real dialogue bypasses the brain's logic filter and heads straight for the heart. It makes them feel like they were in the room — because in a way, they are.

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