

Slide Rule for Fundraising

Line-by-line story tactics that raise more
gifts from appeals and emails



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Many nonprofit professionals write as if donors are duty-bound to read their appeals.

But the truth?

Nobody has to read your fundraising.

And even if they start... they don't have to finish.

Every sentence must earn the next.

This isn't about manipulation. It's about respecting attention and rewarding curiosity, just like your favorite book, show, or article does.

And the most powerful tool you have to do that?

Story.

The "Slippery Slope" of Reading

Joseph Sugarman, one of the greats in direct response, said:

"The sole purpose of the first sentence is to get you to read the second sentence."

"The second sentence exists to get you to read the third."

That's the slippery slope. And your job as a fundraiser?

Build it. Grease it. And make it fun to slide down.

A well-told story is the ultimate slope.

People don't need to be *convinced* to read a good story. They need to be *invited into it*.

And when more people read your appeal or email, more people give.

Here are six techniques to keep donors reading:

1. Start with Friction-Free Sentences

Short. Easy. Intriguing.

Examples:

- “Suzy wasn’t supposed to be here.”
- “We nearly missed the moment that changed everything.”
- “This story almost didn’t happen.”

Keep your first few sentences short.

Like, really short.

Even one-word sentences?

Allowed.

2. Keep Paragraphs Light and Quick

No paragraph should be more than 3–4 lines.

Visually, this feels breathable.

Psychologically, it says: “This won’t take much effort.”

Even stories need space to breathe.

Wall-of-text = death of interest.

3. Use “Open Loops” to Build Curiosity

End paragraphs with a question or incomplete idea.

Examples:

- “But then the phone rang.”
- “We thought that was the end of the story. We were wrong.”
- “What she did next left us stunned.”

These create natural tension, and tension keeps people reading.

4. Use Rhythm and Transitions to Pull the Reader Forward

Think musical phrasing.

Speed up when tension rises. Slow down for drama.

Transition phrases are glue that guide the reader along:

- “And then...”
- “But here’s the thing...”
- “Meanwhile...”
- “Which brings us to...”

Great stories have great rhythm.

Your appeal should *feel* like it’s moving—even when it’s standing still.

5. Use Dialogue and Internal Thoughts

They create immersion.

They *drop* the reader into the scene.

Example:

“You’re not in trouble,” the teacher said gently. “We just want to make sure you’re safe.”
Jasmine looked down at her shoes and nodded but she didn’t say a word.

Notice: we didn’t explain the mission. We showed the moment that mattered.

6. Tell a Story—Even a Small One

If you only remember one thing from this QuickApply booklet, let it be this:

People keep reading when they care what happens next.

And *nothing* creates that feeling like a story.

Even one paragraph of story can transform your appeal:

Before:

“We serve over 3,500 families every year and need your help to keep our programs strong.”

After:

“Last winter, Angie bundled her baby in two hoodies and walked five miles to our shelter. She’d never asked for help before. She didn’t know what we’d say.”

Guess which one gets read?

Story makes people care. Caring makes people continue.

THE 10-SECOND GUT CHECK:

Ask this before sending your next appeal or email:

- ☒ Would I keep reading past the first 2 sentences?
 - ☒ Do I create curiosity or just explain?
 - ☒ Do I reward the reader's attention?
 - ☒ Does this *feel* like something written for a donor—or for a boss?
 - ☒ Is there a story—or at least a story moment?
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Want to test your copy like a pro?

Try this:

Read your appeal out loud.

If you trip, stumble, or lose interest, **rewrite until it flows.**

Every sentence should be like a link in a chain.

Break one, and the whole thing falls apart.

Want to Master the Storytelling That Makes People *Want* to Read—and *Want* to Give?

That's what the **Nonprofit Storytelling Conference** is built for. We teach ethical, emotional, *effective* techniques for creating fundraising that works—because people *read it*. Come to the conference:

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