

Respecting Your Donor's Time (and Yours, Too)

How to write donor communications people actually want to read



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How to write donor messages people actually want to read

This booklet is for fundraisers who want to connect with donors without wasting words.

Whether you're asking, thanking, or reporting back, your job is the same: make your message feel easy, human, and worth reading.

When a donor opens an appeal, a thank-you, or a report, it should:

- Be easy to start
- Feel emotionally rewarding
- Lead to a clear next step

When you do this consistently, something important happens.

Donors trust you.

They read more.

They give more.

And they stick around.

Writing With Respect—No Matter the Message

The way you show respect changes slightly depending on what you're sending, but the heart of it stays the same.

Appeals: Start With What the Donor Can Make Happen

Don't warm up the reader.

Start where the story *matters*.

Open with the moment just before something goes wrong—or just before it gets better. This is the point where a donor's help actually changes the outcome.

Your job in the first few lines is simple:

- Show what's about to happen
- Show what's at risk

- Show that the donor can step in right now and make a difference

A strong opening sounds like this:

“Lila’s starting school next week, but everything she owned was lost in the fire.”

In one sentence, the donor knows:

- Who this is about
- What’s at stake
- Why timing matters

If your first paragraph only explains the program, the organization, or the background—and the story still works without it—cut it.

Respect means getting to the moment where the donor’s help matters, fast.

Thank-Yous: Make It Feel Worth It

A thank-you needs to show the donor their gift *matters right now*.

Respect means helping the donor feel confident and proud the moment they give. That starts by linking their exact gift to what it **is doing** or **is unlocking**.

A respectful thank-you sounds like this:

“Your \$50 is putting a backpack and school supplies into Lila’s hands—so when she walks into her first day of school, she won’t feel left out or behind.”

The donor now knows:

- The exact amount they gave
- What their money is actively funding
- Why it matters emotionally

This works whether the supplies are already purchased or still being packed.

Avoid process language like receipts, records, or internal timelines.

What the donor needs to feel is simple:

“*My \$50 is in motion. Something good is happening because I stepped in.*”

Reporting Back: Deliver the Payoff

Respect means closing the loop.

Don't overload donors with stats. Bring them back to the story and show how it changed because they cared.

"For Lila, going back to school wasn't just about supplies. Because of you, she walked in feeling confident. You gave her new clothes, school supplies, and you gave her what she really wanted: a way to show up on the first day and not be 'the girl whose house burned down.'"

Stick to one person. One moment.

Let the donor feel what they made possible.

What "Be Clear" Actually Looks Like

Here's how to be clear in practice:

1. Use simple, concrete words.

Unclear: "We facilitate educational success through resource distribution."

Clear: "You gave a child school supplies and helped them feel ready to learn."

2. Focus on one person, not a population.

Unclear: "Over 500 students will benefit from this year's back-to-school drive."

Clear: "Lila's starting school next week—but everything she owned was lost in the fire."

3. Say the emotional part out loud.

Unclear: "She received assistance."

Clear: "She cried when she saw the new backpack. She thought no one cared."

4. Be direct about what the donor did.

Avoid vague phrases like "support like yours." Say exactly what happened and why it mattered.

5. Put the point at the top.

The first sentence should hook the donor. Don't wait until paragraph four to say what this is really about.

Before & After Examples

Appeal Examples:

Before

Dear Friend,

As we gear up for our annual Back-to-School Drive, we are asking for your support to help us reach our goal of distributing 500 backpacks this fall.

After

Lila's starting school next week, but everything she owned was lost in the fire.

Your \$50 gives her a brand-new backpack, fresh clothes, and the confidence to show up proud.

It's not just stuff. It's Lila zipping her backpack closed and feeling ready.

Thank-You Examples:

Before

Thank you for your recent contribution to our 2025 Back-to-School campaign.

After

You gave \$50 and Lila walked into her first day of school with a big grin. She felt proud. And seen. That's the gift you gave.

Reporting Examples:

Before

This fall, our organization distributed 472 backpacks across three counties.

After

Because of you, Lila didn't just go back to school. She went back feeling confident. You helped rewrite her first day.

A 7-Second Gut Check

Use this for any donor message—appeal, thank-you, or report.

- Would I open this if I didn't work here?
- Does the first sentence make me feel something?
- Is the donor the hero?
- Is the ask or update clear within 10 seconds?
- Would I finish reading this on my phone?
- Do I know what to do next?
- Will the donor feel seen, not processed?

If most answers aren't "yes," rewrite it.

Respect Saves You Time, Too

Clear writing doesn't just help donors.

It helps *you* get unstuck and get things out the door.

When you know what matters, you stop overthinking. You write faster. You edit less. And you stop rewriting the same message five times.

Here's a simple way to make that happen.

Start with the ending.

Before you write a single sentence, decide:

- What should the donor feel at the end?
- What should they do next?

Write that line first—even if it never appears in the final draft.

Build backward using a story spine.

You don't need more content. You need structure:

- One person
- One moment of change
- One clear next step

If something doesn't serve that spine, cut it.

Reuse what already works.

Keep a running list of:

- Strong opening lines
- Clear ask sentences
- Simple emotional endings

Respecting your donor's time starts with respecting *your own*—by writing with focus instead of force.

A Final Thought

Respect is an emotion.

Donors can feel when you care about their time.

They feel it in:

- Clear subject lines
- Short, readable sentences
- Warm, human tone
- Emotional focus instead of information overload

Whether you're asking or reporting back, give them something that feels good to read.

Make it personal.

Make it easy.

Make it matter.

Want More Donor Messages That Work *and* Feel Good?

That's exactly what we help you build—step by step—at the **Nonprofit Storytelling Conference**.

You'll leave knowing how to write appeals, thank-yous, reports, and emails that donors actually want to read—and respond to.

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