

Fundraising Assignment 10 Writing Guide

I'm certain that all of us get bogged down with writing from time to time. We have the normal responsibilities of our job—and then need to write content for our websites and send out regular newsletters. It can be difficult to maintain sometimes.

There are a number of things that you can do to make writing easier—with the result of higher quality, more useful work with a smaller time investment.

Here are the three main techniques that I use to get going:

1. Having a simple goal.
2. Having a multipurpose subject that can be used for different projects: Write once—get three publications.
3. Tricks for getting started a writing project.

Technique 1: Having a Simple Goal.

Goals, ugh. I don't know about you, but when I hear the word 'goals' I immediately think of a huge pre-project to the project that I actually need to get started. I feel like my urgent project is off there in the distance in a shimmering mirage on the highway: I'm never going to quite reach it.

But the stark reality is that it doesn't have to be that bad. I will start off with a very simple goal, write it down in a Word document, and save it to a folder. As time goes on and I'm reflecting on what I want to write, clarifications for the goal pop into my mind. I simply begin adding those tidbits to my Word document—and voila—I suddenly have a template that I can work with. It changes my preconceived vision of drawn out, goal development meetings into one of a simple working tool that will improve over time.

Let's take a really simple example. Here's a goal development process that you can do in a few minutes prior to actually starting writing. And again, once you get this template set up, you can use it as a template for future writing projects and speed up the process incredibly.

So let's say that I want to increase online donations.

Simple Goal: Increase Online Donations

Clarifications:

Increase online donations from \$2,000 a year to \$10,000 a year in the upcoming calendar year (an \$8,000 change)
 $\$8,000 \text{ divided by } \$100 \text{ average donation} = 80 \text{ new donations per year.}$

How can I do this:

Write interesting monthly pieces on our people and our work to inspire our existing donor base to make a donation.
Determine what exactly would be interesting for our existing donors to read about.
Then, write 12 monthly newsletters over this next year [communications calendar!] that would be interesting to donors.

Be efficient by consolidating writing tasks:

What else do I need to be writing during that same time period? Can I design my newsletter campaign so that it provides content for some of these other responsibilities too?

- annual report
- donor (grant) reports
- staff training manuals
- website fundraising copy

Where is the intersection between what would be interesting for existing donors to read and other writing that I need to accomplish at the same time?

Do we have any existing content that we can update (edit) and republish (this is called repurposing).

This goal overview took me all of 15 minutes to write. I've got a template now. I can do exactly the same thing using this template for two other related goals: increasing our volunteer base and growing our mailing list. Then I'll have three goal templates.

As you begin writing your first monthly installment to your 12 month plan, you'll begin reflecting on who you are writing this for, and (for example) come to the realization that most of the donors that you know for your organization tend to be women in their 60s and 70s. So you can add that as a clarification to your goal statement.

Consequently, over the next few months of writing, your goal template will become clearer and more focused—which will help you in the writing process.

Bonus: This process can impress your boss when she sees your detailed goal statements for your individual campaigns!

Technique 2a: Having a dual-purpose subject that can be used for different projects.

1. So let's say that in month nine of the coming year you need to begin preparing an annual report—and that it will also double as a promotional piece for your annual, end-of-the-year fundraising drive.
2. Over the past couple of years you've had the opportunity of meeting some of your programs' beneficiaries and you have included brief sketches about them and a photo now and again in newsletters. You've also interviewed a few of your local donors and included brief sketches about them and a photo in newsletters too.
3. So you come up with the idea that your monthly installments can be people pieces that feature a program beneficiary and also a donor who's contributed to that program. You can also add an inset that describes the impact you're hoping the program will have and a few bullet points emphasizing your successes.
4. Since you need to get started right away on your first monthly installment, you're able to mine recent beneficiary and donor interviews, improve upon them with a little editing and create a template in month one for the next 11 installments.

So now you have a plan which places a compelling donor/beneficiary newsletter every month into the hands of donors. Your first newsletter created the template which will simplify the following newsletters. To save time, you were able to repurpose the best of your earlier interviews. Come October, you can begin the process of collating the 10 completed newsletters into an annual report in time to release it as a fundraising tool in December.

Let's assess what we've accomplished so far.

So you set a simple goal which really simplified the process. You saved time getting started by updating existing material you already had. You created a template in the first month so that each newsletter will look alike. And you've turned what could be an arduous production of an annual report into collating nine months of fairly simple to write newsletters.

You've also learned a lot in the process about the further clarification of your goal. You also will have received immediate feedback on the success of your plan. Did you actually get seven or eight new donations each month as a result of your newsletter? Was your annual report's concept effective as your end of the year fundraising campaign?

If your newsletters were effective, can you make minor modifications to the concept for the following year—and make them even more effective based upon what you've learned?

Bonus: Could you alternate the monthly newsletters to be aimed at donors one month and volunteers the next month?

Technique 2b: Having a multipurpose subject plan that can be used for different projects.

Having a subject to get started writing about has at times been a big stumbling block for me. That's why, I find it's really useful to have a larger, umbrella plan. Taking an hour to come up with a 12 month plan (like we did with compiling interviews for an annual report) means that when I sit down to begin writing a given month's newsletter I don't need to think about the subject. I know what the subject is going to be for that month already and I can just get started writing.

Let's look at another example to further expand upon this multipurpose concept.

Let's say that you need to write a simple manual for volunteers who work two days a week at your food bank. The manual would be a combination of developing consistency between existing volunteers and a guide for new volunteers. So let's put together a really quick table of contents:

- rules and procedures
- health and hygiene
- receiving food
- handling food
- storing food
- displaying food
- how to greet and work with clients
- filling orders
- surveying clients about preferences
- receipts and paperwork
- end of the day inventory and re-orders
- closing shop at the end of the day

Now this might seem mundane, but it's a project that needs to get done. And, I'll bet you that you can turn this into fodder for monthly newsletters.

Newsletter 1: For example, your newsletter recipients who are made up of donors, volunteers and possibly clients, might not realize the complexities of running a food bank—and might find aspects of it very interesting and informative.

So for example, you could do a quick interview with a supplier (this could be an individual community member, a restaurant, or a grocery store) and describe what they provide, how they provide it, and how the interaction works between the supplier and your food bank.

Newsletter 2: Having received the food, what do you do with it? Does it need to be protected? Does it need to be refrigerated? Here again, you could do a quick interview with a volunteer and a photo of them doing their job.

Newsletter 3: Then on Saturday morning (food pick up day), how is the food set out for the visiting clients? Is it arranged by category? Is it arranged into pre-organized boxes ready to take away? A quick conversation between a client and a volunteer could help you better describe how this interaction happens to help a new volunteer to learn how the process works.

Take great photos!

So now, you have three things to write about over the course of three months that relate to receiving food, handling food, and dispensing food. Well written, this could make your volunteer manual much more engaging—and will make excellent newsletters which would captivate donors, potential volunteers, and potential clients by letting them in to the process behind the scenes. Write 4/5 newsletters and you will find that you will have much of a manual completed as well.

Then: Collate them for your annual report too!

The Umbrella Idea. If you can come up with a simple concept for 12 related newsletters—it can really simplify your writing process. So two umbrella ideas we talked about were 1) monthly interviews of both a food bank client and a donor and, 2) writing a volunteer training manual through a thread of 12 related newsletters. By doing this, you don't have to sit down each month and think of something interesting to write about—you already have the umbrella concept for the series of newsletters. Look at the Magee Example Assignment 8 to see what this can look like.

Technique 3: Tricks for Getting Started:

There are two hurdles to overcome with getting started: figuring out what to write about, and sitting down and writing about it.

We pretty well solved the monthly newsletter subject challenge in the previous two techniques.

But what if you want to write a one-off piece on something you feel is important and engaging? In the example of a food bank, this might be a mind opening piece on food security, nutrition and the growing homeless population.

Sometimes, people get stuck writing because you might not be an expert on this subject. Not many people are! Having a good idea, a way of expressing that idea, and a way of distributing information are what's important. The next step is simply doing some research.

A woman at a university who writes a textbook doesn't just pull it out of her head—she conducts research to better understand the latest findings and resources that are available on her subject matter. A New York Times reporter may not be an expert in the homeless situation—but is compelled to write about it—and so does research by conducting interviews.

So if you have an idea and desire move forward, spend a little time on the Internet researching the latest, cutting-edge information, and write your piece.

Literally Getting Started.

The hardest part about getting started is: getting started. I don't know why this can be so difficult to do. For me, one reason might be that I project into the future about how much work it is going to be to develop a piece. Another reason for me can be other pressing responsibilities lingering in the back of my mind. Sometimes it's more attractive to consider knocking out three or four, 5 minute tasks on my to do list than it is to sit down and face the uncertainty of writing a brand-new piece. So here are some techniques that I use for getting started.

Plant a starter seed in my subconscious mind.

If I know that I have to write a piece, a simple technique for me is to begin thinking about it when I'm doing something else. During morning exercise. While making breakfast. Driving back from running an errand. If I can just begin thinking about what it is that I need to write, then ideas start coming forth, and I began getting enthusiastic.

Another technique that I use as well is to visualize that I am describing the topic that I'm writing about to another person. I'm sure that we've all had the experience of sitting down with a friend to talk over a problem we're stuck with and suddenly finding that during the conversation solutions pop up. You can do this with an avatar too!

I find that by actively thinking about the topic and explaining the topic, I begin to discover that I am developing a beginning, a middle, and an end to a story. I also tend to come up with a few problems that I hadn't thought about before. If I get away from this active thinking for a few minutes and do something else, frequently solutions pop into my mind.

It's really a good idea to have a pen and a piece of paper handy. I've learned the hard way that when I come up with compelling ideas, that I have forgotten some of them by the time I get home from running my errand! Just jot down a few one word notes as reminders and you won't forget the ideas.

Sitting down and getting started.

The methods described above are the most successful for me. Typically, I can hardly wait to sit down at the computer and begin hammering the piece out once it's alive in my head.

But.... there are times when I don't have the process above started yet and I really do need to sit down and just get started. This is the hardest part for me.

Write for half of an hour.

If I can do nothing more than type for half an hour—at least then I have something that I can begin editing and improving upon. Once I get past that first half of an hour—it's all go and I find I have trouble stopping!

Set a timer.

So what do you do if you can't force yourself to sit down for half an hour and write? Set a timer. I have an old fashion egg timer that I set for 30 minutes (I actually set it in the next room because it's so damn loud that it scares me when it goes off!).

I don't care who you are, anybody can sit down and write for half an hour. It's the thinking about sitting down and working for eight hours that's the stumbling block. So setting a timer for 30 minutes and staying there for the full 30 minutes gets you going. I typically find I'm in the middle of a paragraph by the time the timer goes off—and I don't want to stop!

So this system really works.

What about if you're surrounded by distractions and can't pull yourself free to actually sit down for half hour? It's one thing managing distractions when writing a two-page newsletter. But, I've found that when I have a larger project, where I need to write a certain amount every day for a longer period of time, the distractions become more difficult to handle on a consistent basis.

My trick here, is to set up a separate writing space so I can get away from distraction. This doesn't mean getting a way to Paris! It might mean a converted storage room next your normal office. You don't need much. I usually set it up with two tables. One table to work on with my computer, and a second table to spread things out where I can leave them there on a semi-permanent basis and not have to set up from scratch every day.

I then get an old laptop and a second monitor that can be left in the space on a semi-permanent basis as well. Depending on the complexity of the project I might hang a bulletin board or white board on the wall where I can sketch out ideas or organize 3 x 5 cards that I've put little notes on.

I don't let myself have a telephone in this special room.

The biggest piece of self-discipline that I need to exercise is that I also don't allow myself access to email while I'm writing in this retreat space.

I also try to locate the room where no one will disturb me. So for example, I've effectively use a guest bedroom for this purpose, and worked on projects for an hour or two before going to work.

Another thing that I try to do is to schedule my time so that there is a consistent time slot (an hour before going to work) and I try not to work too long. I find that after two hours of intense writing I begin to lose my freshness.

Tech Tools:

1. For efficiency, I'm a huge advocate of the two monitor system. You can buy a 22 inch monitor for less than \$100. Many laptops have a monitor plug in the back and with a few simple tweaks in the display section of your control panel you can have the two monitors (your laptop's monitor and the second 22" monitor) up and running. By having two monitors you can have multiple documents open.

So if I've written a prior piece and I want to include portions of it in this new project—I can open it up in the upper monitor and copy from the original document and paste it into the new document in the lower screen. This not only saves time, also you don't lose track of which document you're working on because one is hiding behind the other in a single monitor.

2. Voice recognition software. I've been using a software program called Dragon NaturallySpeaking for a number of years now. You open it up on your computer, speak into little a little microphone and it writes everything you say into a Word document (or Excel or your email program or whatever).

It's much faster than typing by hand—and it really is more natural. It writes things down in the same way the way that I would say it conversationally to another person.

Try it! You may like it.

My final bit of advice is to get your writing done prior to when it's due. I received a newsletter recently from an online organization, and they said that they invoke a six week deadline. In other words, a newsletter needs to be completed six weeks prior to its publication date. They are a large enough organization that they're actually doing this for coordinational reasons—but they also pointed out that having a little distance between having written something and actually publishing it allows for new insights during a final edit.

And that's why I do this. If I can finish something even two or three days in advance—and then get completely away from it—when I go back and read it a final time before publication I frequently find clumsy sentences and things that could be worded better. I also find mistakes!

What are your techniques for writing?