How to Use White Space in Fundraising Appeals: 5 Ways to Increase the "Zone of Silence" Your Donors Crave (But May Not Know It)

In this free fundraising report, learn how to use white space more effectively in your nonprofit communications, so your donors and prospects will read more of – and be more inclined to take action on – what you write, from fundraising appeals to legacy inserts to donor thank-you letters and newsletters...

White space.

Wikipedia calls it negative space, or the portion of your page "left unmarked: the space between graphics, margins, gutters, space between columns, space between lines of type or figures drawn or depicted."

In other words, white space is *nothing*.

So why bother fooling with it in your fundraising appeals and other nonprofit communications?

Because your prospects and donors crave white space – they just don't know it.

The genius behind Before & After Magazine and author of three stop-you-in-your-tracks books including *Before & After Page Design*, now-retired graphic design instructor John McWade describes white space as no less than a "Zone of Silence" that:

- Gives your readers a welcome break from the printed word,
- Reduces visual clutter,
- Allows them to rest their eyes,
- Guides the eye to the next section, and
- Makes them more likely to continue reading.

www.lisasargent.com | lisa@lisasargent.com

Clients of mine will be nodding their heads when I tell you that white space helps reduce *cognitive load* by making printed or online material feel less daunting to read... and in a moment you'll see an example of what I mean by daunting.

My design colleague Sandie builds white space into every donor-facing project we work on, whether direct mail or digital. It's that critical.

But even if you work on the fundraising copywriting side of donor communications, like I do, or you're responsible for providing feedback to your creative team, there's a lot you can do to up your white space game and increase readability.

Starting with these six, super-easy-to-implement white space expanders...

White Space Expander #1: Use Reasonable Page Margins

I can't tell you how many direct mail fundraising appeals I've received with microscopic margins... leaving what I like to call a 'Wall of Type' remaining. Chances are excellent that no matter what you've written, your copy can be cut to accommodate healthy page margins: I aim for at least one inch (roughly 2.5 cm), right and left.

And don't skimp on the top and bottom margins either.

Adding page numbers and page turn prompts to your appeals is another way to increase visual breathing room while also grounding the reader and guiding their eyes to the next section.

At Right you'll see an example of the Wall of Type. Note how the tiny left/right margins make the copy feel dense and impenetrable.

Image Above: Bird's eye view of a fundraising appeal I received illustrates the wall of type that results without adequate white space.

In the letter to the right, the use of a photo is an improvement – historically this organization hasn't included them. But the pull of the picture is

vastly diminished by the intimidating block of text. Add hat to the tiny page margins, wide line measures, and long, unbroken paragraphs, and that page architecture just rolls up the welcome mat and locks the door. (This type of appeal runs rampant among organizations that strive to maintain a 'cerebral' image.)

White Space Expander #2: Mind Your Paragraphs

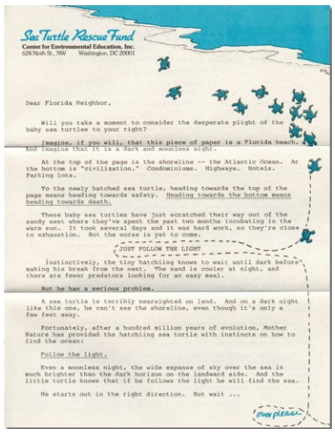
I use tabbed, or indented, paragraphs, with the indent set to about half an inch – no block format. Like teensy page margins, when paragraphs are flush left, it can add to the wall of type effect. (Refer again to above image.) I also add a manual – or 'hard' – return after my paragraphs, even though they're tabbed, and keep the line count on my paragraphs at or below seven whenever possible (forever hat tip to the legendary Mal Warwick, in *How to Write Successful Fundraising Letters*). Note: if you're wrapping copy around a photo, sometimes the seven-line rule can be broken, but it's a good ceiling to set when you can.

White Space Expander #3: Don't Scrimp on Signatory Space

Include at least one return before and after your signature block. (And plan for 3-4 lines for signature; using a miserly-sized signature makes it look cramped.) Designer Sandie always indents the signature block for me in layout, as well – we indent the whole block the same as the paragraph tab.

White Space Expander #4: For Longer Letters, Experiment with Subheads

An excellent example of a letter with subheads is copywriter Richard Armstrong's six-page Sea Turtle appeal on SOFII. (Yes, it was written many years ago. And yes, you can still learn from it. While we're at it, it's a letter that makes brilliant use of white space altogether.) Note how he guides the reader from one step to the next, while at the same time, using the subheads to pull in 'scanners' and 'skimmers,' the folks who don't read your appeal word-for-word.


Sea Turtle Rescue Fund
Center for Environmental Education, Inc.

Dear Florida Neighbor,

Will you take a moment to consider the desperate plight of the baby sea turtles to your right?

Imagine, if you will, that this piece of paper is a Florida beach. And imagine that it is a dark and moonless night.

At the top of the page is the shoreline -- the Atlantic Ocean. At the bottom is "civilization." Condominiums. Highways. Hotels. Parking lots.

To the newly hatched sea turtle, heading towards the top of the page means heading towards safety. Heading towards the bottom means heading towards death.

These baby sea turtles have just scratched their way out of the sandy nest where they've spent the past two months incubating in the warm sun. It took several days and it was hard work, so they're close to exhaustion. But the worse is yet to come.

JUST FOLLOW THE LIGHT

Instinctively, the tiny hatchling knows to wait until dark before making his break from the nest. The sand is cooler at night, and there are fewer predators looking for an easy meal.

But he has a serious problem.

A sea turtle is terribly nearsighted on land. And on a dark night like this one, he can't see the shoreline, even though it's only a few feet away.

Fortunately, after a hundred million years of evolution, Mother Nature has provided the hatchling sea turtle with instincts on how to find the ocean:

Follow the light.

Even a moonless night, the wide expanse of sky over the sea is much brighter than the dark horizon on the landward side. And the little turtle knows that if he follows the light he will find the sea.

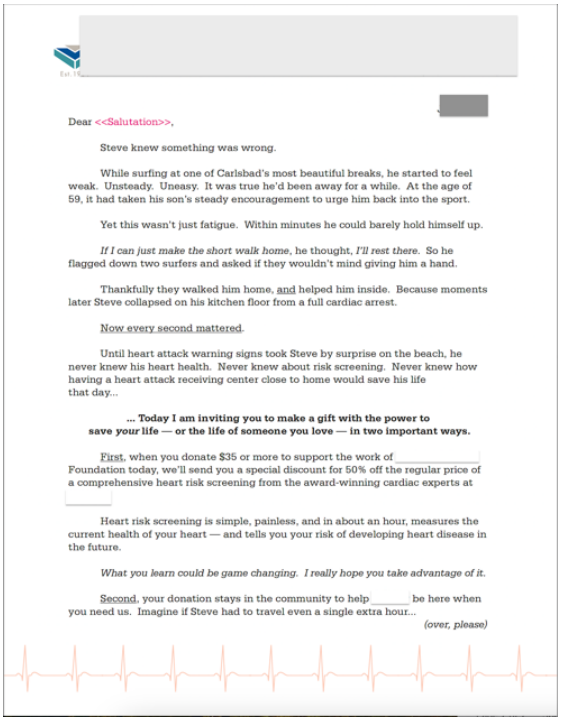
He starts out in the right direction. But wait ...

White Space Expander #5:
Indent Testimonials and Other Pull-Quotes

Another easy way to increase white space is to indent any testimonials, both left and right sides, by an additional half inch or so. Add a return before and after, and you've not only used the white space to set off the quote, but have also added to your reader's overall zone of silence.

White Space Expander #6:
Set Your Leading in the Sweet Spot

Leading (rhymes with wedding) is the vertical space *between* lines of type. When leading is set solid, or neutral, it's the same height as your font – meaning, for example, if your letter uses 14-point font, the space between each line of your copy will also be 14 pts. Think of solid leading as the barest of minimums: for readability and accessibility, you want to set leading at around 120% of your point size. So, in this case, if you're using a 14-pt font, a good, white-space-loving leading would be 16pts. More than that, for the record, is not typically better, and any leading less than neutral – called negative leading – can get so small that it chops off the tops and bottoms of your letters (think letters like y and g, and p, for example). At right, you can see page 1 of a letter from Designer Sandie and I that rolls out the white space welcome mat, right down to ideal leading. Easy to orient. Easy to read. Easy to follow.



Dear <<Salutation>>,

Steve knew something was wrong.

While surfing at one of Carlsbad's most beautiful breaks, he started to feel weak. Unsteady. Uneasy. It was true he'd been away for a while. At the age of 59, it had taken his son's steady encouragement to urge him back into the sport.

Yet this wasn't just fatigue. Within minutes he could barely hold himself up.

If I can just make the short walk home, he thought, *I'll rest there.* So he flagged down two surfers and asked if they wouldn't mind giving him a hand.

Thankfully they walked him home, and helped him inside. Because moments later Steve collapsed on his kitchen floor from a full cardiac arrest.

Now every second mattered.

Until heart attack warning signs took Steve by surprise on the beach, he never knew his heart health. Never knew about risk screening. Never knew how having a heart attack receiving center close to home would save his life that day...

... Today I am inviting you to make a gift with the power to save *your* life — or the life of someone you love — in two important ways.

First, when you donate $35 or more to support the work of _____ Foundation today, we'll send you a special discount for 50% off the regular price of a comprehensive heart risk screening from the award-winning cardiac experts at _____.

Heart risk screening is simple, painless, and in about an hour, measures the current health of your heart — and tells you your risk of developing heart disease in the future.

What you learn could be game changing. I really hope you take advantage of it.

Second, your donation stays in the community to help _____ be here when you need us. Imagine if Steve had to travel even a single extra hour...

(over, please)

And now you can do the same for every donor communications project you create! Go forth and do great good.

About Lisa Sargent...

Lisa Sargent is an award-winning fundraising copywriter and story strategist on a mission to transform the way nonprofits communicate with their donors, for visibly better results and retention. Contributing author to acclaimed decision science book *Change for Better* and upcoming author of *Thankology*, Lisa's free Donor Thank-You Clinics were named one of the world's "top 10 gifts for fundraisers" by SOFII (Showcase of Fundraising Innovation and Inspiration) and remain the most-ever visited exhibit there. Follow Lisa's no-holds-barred blog *Sargent Writes* and subscribe to her newsletter, *The Loyalty Letter*, at **www.lisasargent.com** for free insights on the art, heart, craft, and science of generous stories, fundraising writing, and donor communications.

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