

# 21-½ Tips for Writing Better Fundraising Materials

By Lisa Sargent

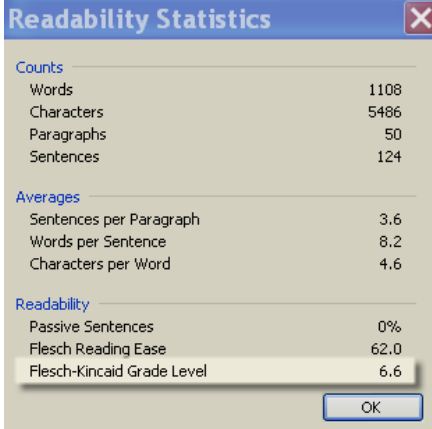
*A tried-and-true checklist to help your fundraising copywriting and donor communications shine... every time!*

- 1. Talk to Aunt Bertha.** Whether you write to donors via e-mail or direct mail, keep their “picture” in your mind. Is your average donor 75 years old, female and a grandmother? See her. How does she feel? What’s she thinking? Writing to one person gives your communications an intimate voice... and a human touch.
- 2. Be a “master of exclusion.”** That’s what the brothers Heath wrote in *Made to Stick* (read it if you haven’t). Knowing what to leave out keeps your stories simple. And people remember simple. So don’t introduce too many themes, people, pets, whatever. Keep it simple.
- 3. Add you, subtract we. (I is good too.)** Because of *you*, 20 children have fresh drinking water. Thanks to *you*, Fido has a loving home. With *your* support, five more adults can learn to read. People love to hear “you.” So: less “we.” Less “us.” The magic word is “you.”
- 4. Focus on benefits, hard and soft.** Does the donation come with a magazine subscription? Say so. Will it bring 25 pets in from the cold? Say that, too. And pay keen attention to the fact that the famous Seven Copy Drivers\* have nothing to do with programs. People give because you touch their hearts.
- 5. Avoid taboo words and phrases.** One example: animal welfare organizations must never use copy that objectifies pets. Why? Animal lovers see their pets as people. So it’s always, “pets *who*” or “dogs *who*.” Never “pets *that*.” Are there nono words and phrases in your nonprofit? Avoid them. Do you use a Style Guide? Make sure you refer to it.

**6. Turn on Flesch-Kincaid (\*or run your copy through Hemingway App).**

Studies show that even highly educated people read – and recall – more at about a 7<sup>th</sup> grade reading level. The FleschKincaid Readability Test gives you that level automatically. (Note stats for first draft of this report at right, including the 6.6 grade level.) Here’s how to turn it on:

In Word, go to *Tools*. Click *Spelling and Grammar*. Click *Options*. Select *Show readability statistics*. Click *OK*. You’re done.



Readability Statistics	
<b>Counts</b>	
Words	1108
Characters	5486
Paragraphs	50
Sentences	124
<b>Averages</b>	
Sentences per Paragraph	3.6
Words per Sentence	8.2
Characters per Word	4.6
<b>Readability</b>	
Passive Sentences	0%
Flesch Reading Ease	62.0
Flesch-Kincaid Grade Level	6.6

\* **Lisa’s Choice:** Try **hemingwayapp.com**, where you can paste text and have it evaluated instantly. Here’s a look at that – I use it almost daily.



**7. Pacing: chop long paragraphs.** Aim for 6-7 lines for your longest paragraph. And don’t make them all long (or all super-short): mix it up.

**8. Cross channels.** In e-news, refer to your magazine or website. In direct mail letters, refer to a great new resource on your website – just make sure the URL isn’t 7 miles long. (You can include a QR but we always add the URL too, for all readers. Just make sure the link isn’t 7 miles long.)

**9. Break unevenly.** If your letters are more than one page long, break the pages in mid-sentence, so reader has to turn the page to finish the thought.

**10. Speak plainly.** Choose small words over big, straightforward over cute. Give grandiloquence the heave-ho. Avoid too much jargon. (When in doubt, refer to Flesch-Kincaid test above.)

**11. Beware the voice of despair.** If you fixate too long on the nitty-gritty with your readers, they will *not get past the horror* of your story to enjoy (much less act upon) the rest of what you tell them. Tell a powerful story, but watch the gory.

- 12. Get to the point.** In that first draft, your lead is seldom where it should be... more often you'll find it buried in the middle. To spot the real lead, some writers I know literally cover the first paragraph with their thumb. (I rely on two or three drafts.)
- 13. Create cliffhangers.** There are successful outliers to this, BUT: fundraising appeals that conclude a story with a happy ending then ask people to “give and make more stories like these happen” typically perform worse than stories that need the donor to give and make the happy ending.
- 14. “Kill your darlings.”** Oft-quoted, heeded less. If you're attached to a poetic phrase you've written – what the late Joan Throckmorton called “deathless prose” – and your ego can't let it go, it's probably time to hit delete.
- 15. Tell the truth.** Your readers and prospects are smart, just like you. They can spot cleverly massaged copy a mile away, just like you. Never, ever, lie.
- 16. Make yourself clear.** To renew membership... for a holiday fundraiser... to build a clinic. If there's a specific purpose for writing, say so. To quote Throckmorton: “First, make sense.”
- 17. Give them a reason to give.** Urgency gets better results: “Donate \$75 by November 4<sup>th</sup> and the ABC Foundation will match your donation” is a whole bunch better than “Donate \$75 today.”
- 18. Ask the Big Three.** When editing your work, keep three questions in your mind:
  - a.** So what?
  - b.** Who cares?
  - c.** What's new?
  - d.** If you can't answer these, revise.
- 19. Check under the hood.** If the mechanics of your piece aren't in place, you'll look sloppy in the eyes of your readers. Always double check:
  - a.** Proper date
  - b.** Correct closing and signature
  - c.** Accuracy of any facts, figures and references
  - d.** Accuracy of any hyperlinks noted

- 20. Quadruple your proofing power.** Typos happen to us all. But too many make your organization look sloppy. And spellcheck is not enough. Try four separate proofs:
- a.** Read on-screen at 200-300% size.
  - b.** Print the piece, then read in your head. OR:
  - c.** Stand up, walk around, and read it out loud. AND:
  - d.** Let the whole thing sit overnight. Read again.
- 21. Say thank you.** Relationship-building is a two-way street. You can't do what you do without your donors. Don't they deserve to hear that? Say thank you.
- 21-1/2. Say thank you.** Yes, I said it again. Here's why: in my opinion, it's one reason donor retention rates have been plummeting into the abyss. Listen: when I give to your nonprofit, I'm secretly hoping you'll be the first to treat me like I'm more than an ATM machine. So please, say thank you. Sincerely. Clearly. Promptly. And personally.

**\* The Seven Copy Drivers:**

*Bob Hacker and Axel Andersson called them key copy drivers, and there are seven: fear, greed, guilt, anger, fear, exclusivity, salvation and flattery. Remember, though, the best fundraising and donor communications involve a subtle ebb, flow and nuance of emotions – hope, redemption, horror, shock, awe, triumph, grace, gratitude, and donor's universal truths like the desire to change the world, give to those less fortunate for all you've been given, leave a legacy, etc.*

## 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](http://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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