

GRANTESE -- a sub-language to itself

Attached is a reprint of an article entitled 'Grammar for Grant Seekers' taken from Grassroots Fundraising Journal (August, 1983). It addresses basic tone and grammar important to grant proposals -- all of which should be familiar to us as people working with the written word.

Even more than entailing facility to use certain types of words or grammar, grantese [as I love to call that specific style of language evident in funding requests] reflects a certain way of thinking about and framing issues. It is most important to know the overriding concerns or priorities of your potential funder -- once done, you can easily adopt key words to show that you, too, are conversant with these concerns.

For instance, a few years ago if you were applying for funds from the Women's Program, Secretary of State, it was advisable to show how your project would link women together ('networking'). Now you might do better to focus on what individual women will learn ('skill development') and how they will become better for it ('empowerment').

In grantese your messages and sentences should both be as focused as you can make them, while being saturated with the broader context of your potential funder's goals. Your wording should both assume and show how your goals are the same as your potential funder's goals. Provide detail in appendices, tables or lists when you can so that your text will flow smoothly and remain focused on particular aspects of what you do. Your wording should always embody a strong sense of your organization's competence and appropriateness for funding.

For instance, a teen theatre troupe teaching about sexuality recently applied for government monies in both social services and arts. The proposal submitted to health-related departments focused on health education components, the educational impact on 'educator/actors' and 'audience participants', the potential for peer role-modelling, and the inadequacy of existing sex education for adolescents. The proposals only mentioned drama enough to argue that a play would be a more effective educational vehicle than classroom lecturing. The proposal, for the same project, to arts councils mentioned sexuality only in passing. Instead, the request focused on the provision of alternative dramatic experiences for both 'actors' and 'audience', the encouragement given by the project to teens to enter theatrical arts, provision of high-quality dramatic training, and the inadequacy of existing drama opportunities for teens. Some appendices were used for all applications (e.g. staff expertise, management capability, financial context of request); others were specific to one request (e.g. endorsements from experts, overview of similar existing programs). By focusing on the content of specific scenes in the play, funding could have been requested from various local organizations (e.g. parent associations, Gay Appeal, nursing organizations, Black groups).

It's more in what you choose to say, than in what you choose to do.

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Grammar For Grantseekers

THE OLD SAYING, "Don't judge a book by its cover," may apply to the selection of a good book, but not the world of fundraising proposals. Donors, foundation staff, and corporate philanthropy executives are bombarded with far more requests for funds than they can ever handle. For most philanthropists, therefore, the process of selecting which proposals or appeals to read takes place on many levels. This process is not usually based on the proposal's cover, as the introduction to this article might suggest. However, it can be based on other seemingly superficial criteria such as the writing style, format, neatness, and clarity of the presentation.

This article is dedicated to a discussion of style. While effective writing and presentation styles are not the only requirements for your organization to receive contributions, their absence may cost you some.

Our first recommendation to any fundraiser is to purchase *The Elements of Style*, by William Strunk and E.B. White. This small book covers the basics of style directly and briefly and is a valuable reference for any writer. Much of the following writing advice is borrowed from Strunk and White.

Be Brief. One of the basic rules of *The Elements of Style* is "Omit needless words." Most fundraisers should pin this saying to their bulletin boards, for it reveals a common and critical failure — lack of brevity. Given the large number of funding requests being submitted, short ones are more likely to get read first. A fundraising letter should be no longer than two pages and a proposal no longer than 10 pages. Condensing your material into fewer pages may seem difficult at first. It will force you to evaluate each section and, within each section, each paragraph for relevance and effectiveness. There is

great benefit to this process. In the end, condensation of your fundraising materials will probably make them much more effective.

Leave out extra words. The rule of brevity should be applied to every sentence in your fundraising appeal. Write short, concise sentences. Leave out unnecessary words.

Be positive. Focus on what your organization is doing, not on what it is not doing.

Be specific. People considering giving money are not overly interested in the generalities of the problem your organization is trying to address. They are more interested in the specifics. They are looking for answers to the following questions:

- what are your goals?
- how do you intend to achieve them?
- what exactly are you doing?
- where are you doing it?
- how much does it cost?

The more words it takes you to get to the answers, to these questions the more opportunities there will be for your reader to lose interest.

Proofread. Writers are often terrible proofreaders, and fundraisers are often terrible typists. It is not necessarily reasonable for a donor to reject a fundraising appeal because it contains typographical errors, but it has been done. Get someone to proofread your materials before they are printed or sent out, and correct the typos. If a page has so many corrections that it looks messy, take the time to have it re-typed.

Personalize your appeals. Donors like to feel that some special attention is being paid to them. Frequently, letters are sent out with a typed "Dear" and a filled-in name, or a blank is left so that the amount

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being requested can be filled in differently for each donor. These "fill-ins" are messy and can decrease the effectiveness of your appeals.

Making your funding appeals personal is costly and not always cost-effective. For example, if you are sending out 500 appeals for contributions of \$25 or more, you will not want to personalize each letter. However, if you can identify some donors among those 500 names who can give \$100 or more, you may want to pull those names out and send them a personal appeal.

If you are sending the same funding proposal to several funding sources, you need not retype it for each one. Write a personal cover letter.

Pay attention to grammar. Perhaps it is because social change organizations consider their work to be on the cutting edge of all kinds of change that they take so many liberties with the English language. Some of these liberties can produce negative reactions among potential donors. Therefore, it is important for fundraisers to pay attention to their use of the English language.

Punctuation, use of consistent tense, and placement of adjectives and adverbs are elements of grammar that evade many individuals who write fundraising appeals. Those who know grammar, however, often find improper use of it very distracting. If it is *your* donor who is distracted, you may lose a substantial contribution. If you are not confident about your writing skills, either find a way to improve them, or find an editor.

Avoid elaborate words. The simpler the language you use, the clearer your request will be. Never assume that your reader understands the technical jargon of the field in which you work. If you are not sure that your appeal can be understood by a layperson, try it out on a friend.

Don't turn nouns into verbs. One of the more offensive abuses of the English language is the way in which nouns have been turned into verbs. There are no such words, for example, as *impacting*, *dialoguing*, and *processing*. One has an impact and engages in a dialogue or a process. This transformation of the language has taken such place to such a degree that it is often difficult to

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tell which words are invented words. If you are not sure, be conservative.

Spell correctly. Misspelled words, like grammatical errors, are distracting.

Use lists. Writing a fundraising appeal requires presenting a large amount of information in as few words as possible. Lists are a good way to eliminate superfluous prose. Be on the look-out for instances in which a list is the most effective way to present your information.

Avoid redundancy. Repetition is the most frequent cause of lengthy funding appeals. It often reflects lack of clarity. Fundraisers are asked to present their organi-

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riters
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zation's goals in Section 1 and its objectives in Section 2. Not knowing the difference, the writer simply says the same thing twice, using different words. If you suspect your material is repetitious, get a second opinion. If you don't know the difference between goals and objectives, check the dictionary.

Some commonly misused or inappropriately used words and phrases

Effect/Affect: Effect can be used as a noun or a verb. As a noun it means *result*; as a verb it means *to bring about* or *to accomplish*. Affect means *to influence*.

Irregardless: This is not a word, regardless of how often you have heard it. The *less* of regardless provides all the negative you need.

Interesting: this vague word is simply overused.

We feel: a saying that should never appear in a fundraising pitch. The reader does not care about your emotions.

As to whether: the "as to" can always be omitted.

Grant: a frequently misused word. One does not "write a grant." One writes a proposal, or a request for a grant, or a grant proposal.

The reason why is that/owing to the fact that: both of these are wordy ways of saying "because."

There is no doubt that: "doubtless" or "no doubt" says it more efficiently.

It is a situation in which: six words that can usually be omitted entirely.