

# ❧ CASE STUDY ❧



## Three A/B test panels from a million-household mailing by **American Heart Association**

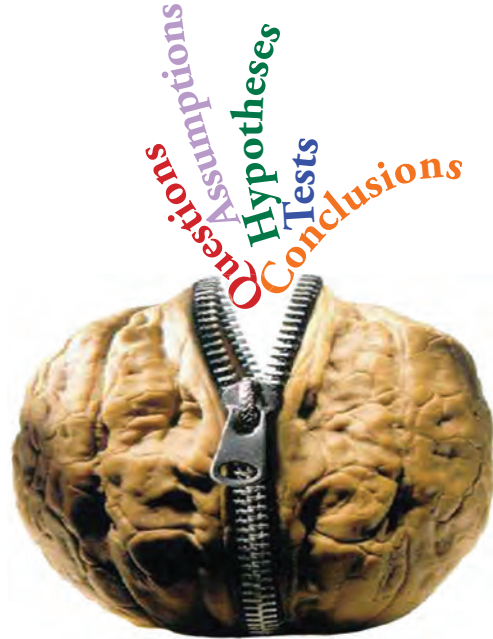
**How Computer HandScript™ Personalization and Canceled Discount Stamps Increased Net Income:**  
*The Impact of Paratextual (non-verbal) Variables on Results*



**Two Variables That *More than Doubled* Response and ROI**

An abridged chapter excerpt from  
*Writing the Voice of Philanthropy:  
How to Raise Money with Words*  
A Dissertation by Frank C. Dickerson, Ph.D.





“They only are loyal to this college who, departing, bear their added riches in trust for mankind.”

James Blaisdell  
Founding Fellow  
Claremont Graduate University



# The Case in a Nutshell

## Questions

- How did American Heart Association *increase response to a direct mail appeal by 346%*?
- What *discount postage treatment* produced response *equal to mail sent by first class rate*?
- How could this postage style have *saved \$301,578.36—36% of \$828,726.87 of net raised*?

## Assumptions

From Aristotle to Sigmund Freud, it has long been assumed that non-verbal dimensions of the *spoken word*, like shifts in tone of voice and changes in facial expressions, add to the impact of a *speech*. The same can be said for *writing*. Non-verbal dimensions of the *written word* add to the impact of a *text*.

## Hypotheses

I hypothesized that paratextual (non-verbal or physical) features *add to writing what a smile adds to speech*. I believed that manipulating these features in a card or letter could create a high touch feel, get *more mail opened and read*, and ultimately *raise more per dollar spent*.

## Tests

To test these hypotheses I analyzed the effects that manipulating physical variables had on the results of test mailings the American Heart Association sent to 1,077,067 households. This case reviews the results achieved in three 50,000-record A/B test panels from that mailing series.

## Conclusions

- Mail personalized with computer-simulated handwriting *increased response as much as 346%*.
- Simulated handwriting even *out-performed real handwriting* on response, average gift, and ROI.
- By canceling discount stamps, *mail looked first class and increased response 27.27%*.
- Using canceled nonprofit stamps *may have reduced cost \$301,578.76* without lowering response.

## ❧ SOURCE & SUBSTANCE ❧

The **source** of this article is my doctoral research on the discourse of philanthropy. The study's primary **substance** is a linguistic and rhetorical analysis of that discourse. Or putting it in plain English, *my dissertation profiles how fund raisers write*.

What I discovered was shocking. I found that most fund raisers write not to a donor, but for a professor who's no longer there. They need to be *deprogrammed* so their writing makes *an emotional connection with ordinary human beings* and portrays what I call *connecting narrative moments*. The emotional torque of a narrative moment—if emblematic of a cause and not so long it smothers the ask—can motivate giving and build donor loyalty.

My *Narrative FundRaising Seminar* (see pages 41-46), helps participants achieve these aims. It's a hands-on day of deprogramming that helps writers unlearn the overly formal habits that were drummed into them during college. Participants learn how to infuse the *written text* with the passion of *speech* and *narrative*. They learn how to avoid the five fatal flaws I found in 1.5 million words of copy in 2,412 fund appeals. It's like a *graduate seminar that includes principles, writing, criticism, and rewriting*.



This white paper now describes a secondary but *equally important* aspect of my research—*how fund raisers package what they write*. I describe how non-verbal physical factors affect response. I say *equally important* because *it really doesn't matter what's inside if the envelope doesn't get opened*. The importance of direct mail to the nonprofit sector was underscored in a 2011 research study by *Blackbaud's Target Analytics Group*. Despite the rapid growth of online giving, *Blackbaud* found that 79% of all donations were still being made through direct mail. And among the 10% of donors who preferred to give online, many were being driven there by direct mail fund appeals. So, to paraphrase Mark Twin, *rumors of direct mail's death have been greatly exaggerated*.

Several free papers like this are available at my research site, [www.TheWrittenVoice.org](http://www.TheWrittenVoice.org). My dissertation is not yet posted there, but should you like to obtain a copy, it *is* available from *ProQuest Dissertation Publishing*. *ProQuest* is the official dissertation repository for universities, having published more than 2 million graduate works since 1938. You can purchase a copy from them by going to <http://disexpress.umi.com/dxweb>. (Note: I receive no portion of the purchase price since *ProQuest* is primarily a service for academics who need access to scholarly works.) If you're interested in obtaining a copy, here's the ID and Title:

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Writing the Voice of Philanthropy

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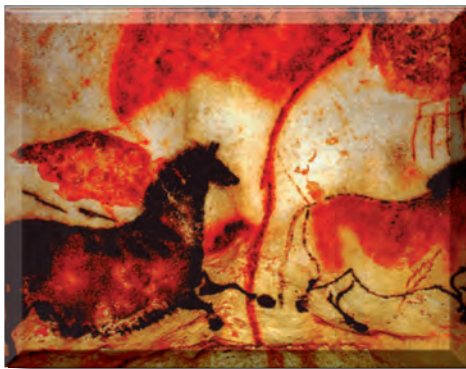


## ❧ PREFACE ❧

So it was accountants, not the poets, who invented writing. But these Sumerian number crunchers understood the power of image in communication.



Long before there was writing, cave dwellers told stories. They recounted escapes from fearsome beasts and reenacted the glory and gore of the hunt. Theirs was a powerful and personal medium that grabbed and kept attention. They knew how to harness the power of mental images!



Then the first move toward writing came in the murals they painted. Images recounted their dramatic narratives on cave walls. But it was a more mundane development that gave rise to writing—the need for a way to count and trade possessions. Agrarian economies had flourished in the ancient land of Sumer in Mesopotamia—literally *the land between the rivers*. Between the Tigris and Euphrates rivers, Sumerian culture blossomed and gave birth to written language 8,000 years ago.



We know this area as modern-day Iraq, Syria, Turkey, and Iran. From tells (mounds), archaeologists have unearthed counting tokens that stood for specific kinds of possessions like sheep, grain, and land. So it was accountants, not the poets, who invented writing. However, these Sumerian number crunchers understood the power of an image. Various *shapes* and *sizes* of tokens indicated the *types* and *quantities* of possessions one held.

Now fast forward to the twenty-first century and media flood us with mass-produced images and messages. Everything looks alike and it seems the most effective media are those that don't look like media at all. They connect at a personal level like the cave dwellers' stories of the hunt, like their hand-painted murals that preserved their clans' narratives, like the Sumerian accountants' handmade counting tokens. Today hand-personalized mail on which discount stamps are canceled, exudes the same kind of *personal touch* that characterized these ancient precursors of writing.





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## ❧ EXECUTIVE SUMMARY ❧

My doctoral dissertation, *The Voice of Philanthropy: How to Raise Money with Words*, profiled the *language* of fund raising. Or putting it in unvarnished English, I described *how fund raisers write*. A secondary research goal was to understand how *non-language* variables affect response to written fund appeals—*how fund raisers package what they write*. This excerpt from my dissertation reports the results of three tests that manipulated two *non-verbal package* variables:

- 1.) addressing and personalizing direct mail with computer-simulated handwriting, and
- 2.) affixing and canceling nonprofit stamps to mail to make discount mail look first class.

Because they work parallel to a *text*, I call these *paratextual* variables. Like a speaker's physical presence, which communicates more than the actual words *spoken*, paratextual variables affect a *written* message. They personalize a message by adding to text what a smile adds to speech.

Descriptive statistics reported here reflect the *overall lift* or *fall* in results. For example, a 5% *incremental lift* from 10% to 15% represents a 150% *overall lift* (e.g.  $1.5 \times 10 = 150$ ). First I compare A/B panels of American Heart Association direct mail campaigns that were sent to more than a million homes, focusing on a subset of 150,000 pieces divided among three 50,000-record segments. Each test consists of an A (control) panel and a B (test panel). I also compare variation between two 20,000-record A/B panels of a mailing sent by Franciscan Friars of the Atonement.

### *American Heart Association Segment 1*

**Panel A Control:** 25,000 *note card-style renewal campaign*, addressed and personalized in *real human handwriting*.

**Panel B Test:** 25,000 *note card-style renewal campaign* that differed only in style of writing. Rather than using real human handwriting, the test panel was addressed and personalized in *Computer HandScript™ simulated handwriting*.

**Results:** Computer HandScript™ simulated-handwriting *beat real handwriting*:  
response *increased* 108% | average gift *increased* 105% | gross *increased* 113% | net income *increased* 126%

### *American Heart Association Segment 2*

**Panel A Control:** 25,000-piece renewal campaign offering a *free box of greeting cards* in exchange for a contribution.

**Panel B Test:** 25,000 *note card-style renewal campaign*, addressed and personalized with *Computer HandScript™* simulated handwriting (same package in the test panel of segment 1).

**Results:** Computer HandScript™ simulated-handwriting *beat the free box of greeting cards*:  
response *increased* 138% | average gift *increased* 108% | gross *increased* 149% | net income *increased* 252%

### American Heart Association Segment 3

**Panel A Control:** 24,997-piece *double window envelope* economy-style renewal letter.

**Panel B Test:** 25,000 *note card-style renewal campaign*, addressed and personalized with *Computer HandScript™* simulated handwriting (same package tested in segments 1 and 2).

**Results:** Computer HandScript™ *simulated-handwriting beat the window envelope letters:* response *increased 346%* | average gift *declined -4%* | gross income *increased 331%* | net income *declined -11%* (note: a net income *decline* is actually acceptable when the goal is to *maximize renewals*)

### Franciscan Friars of the Atonement Test

In a final 20,000-piece A/B test for Franciscan Friars of the Atonement I measured the effect of canceling nonprofit stamps to make them look like full-rate first class postage. The question was, would this enhancement boost response?

**Panel A Control:** the nonprofit stamps on 10,000 envelopes of a fund appeal *were not canceled*.

**Panel B Test:** the nonprofit stamps on 10,000 envelopes of a fund appeal *were canceled*.

**Results:** The *canceled-stamp segment increased response* over the not-canceled segment: response for canceled-stamp segment was 5.6 % | response for not-canceled segment was 4.4% (this 1.2% *incremental lift* from 4.4% to 5.6% represents an *overall lift* of 127%)

### The Big Takeaway

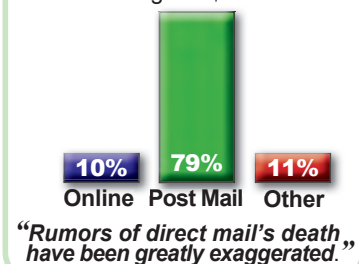
Understanding the influence of *paratextual* variables on response to direct mail is critical, since *it really doesn't matter what's inside if the envelope doesn't get opened*. This has always been true. But now a new study by *Blackbaud* confirms that despite the proliferation of e-giving modes and social media, the nonprofit sector continues to depend on direct mail.

*Blackbaud* discovered that among 15.6 million donors who donated \$1.16 billion, 79% of their gifts were made in response to direct mail and just 10% were made online. And many of the gifts that had been made online were contributed *after a direct mail piece had been received*. The study population consisted of organizations with above-average competence in online giving. For the average nonprofit, 95% of gifts are still generated by direct mail.

This is consistent with an April 2012 study by Campbell Rinker Research. Their data show that donors are 3 times likelier to give online *in response to direct mail* than to an e-appeal.

Covenant House's Joan Smyth-Dengler put it this way: "It's like getting a catalog from J. Crew and going online to order." Since direct mail drives most giving, including a large percentage of gifts made online, *any nonprofit that decreases direct mail and ignores what improves performance, does so at its peril!* This research evaluates several paratextual strategies that more than doubled direct mail response.

**Blackbaud report** on the giving channels preferred by 15.6 million donors who gave \$1.16 billion:





## What Thought Leaders Are Saying About This Research



"Frank, I tend to throw away many fund-raising letters and I never thought about analyzing the content and determining what works. I am pre-conditioned to favoring certain charities and causes and pay little attention to other solicitations. But your language analysis and findings are critical to practitioners."

**Philip Kotler, PhD**  
**Professor of Marketing**  
**Northwestern University**

"Frank, this is amazing work, just the kind of thing we should be doing more of."

**Grant McCracken, PhD**  
**Research Affiliate**  
**MIT**



"Fantastic. Great job in dignifying what I have also practiced: 'Write the way you talk.' I still do it and still dictate all my letters."

**Jerry Huntsinter, Founder**  
**Huntsinger & Jeffer**



"Wow, we are true soul mates when it comes to fund raising. Terrific. This stuff is great. I can't wait to highlight it in my work."

**Katya Andresen, C.O.O.**  
**Network for Good**



"Frank, wonderful stuff and we'd like our 7000+ readers of *The Agitator* to benefit from it."

**Roger Craver, Founder**  
**Craver, Matthews, Smith**

"I'm interested in referencing your findings in *The Nonprofit Marketing Guide*. Thanks so much for your contribution to the field!"

**Kivi Leroux Miller, Principal**  
**NonProfitMarketingGuide**



"OMG Frank! Your work is brilliant! This research is profound and needs to be shared widely."

**Michael Margolis, C.E.O.**  
**Get Storied**



"This work is extremely relevant for a large nonprofit organization like CARE. We know the importance of language in delivering our message. We've also been testing similar variables that you mentioned in your study, such as simulated hand-written fonts and nonprofit stamps vs. first class rate. Your research will be invaluable to us as we continue to try to 'crack the code' on what motivates individuals to take action through our direct response vehicles."

**Kymberly McElgunn Wolff,**  
**Former Vice President, CARE**  
**Sr. Vice President Resource Development, Habitat for Humanity**

"Dr. Dickerson, as part of his doctoral studies at Claremont Graduate University in California, analyzed more than 1.5 million words of online and printed fund-raising texts to determine how effectively fund raisers communicate with their audiences. While his findings were enough to fuel a 350-page dissertation, his thesis can be boiled down to a few short words: *Most fund-raising copy stinks.*"

**Peter Panepento**  
**Assistant Managing Editor, The Chronicle of Philanthropy**



## Practical Implications for Those Who Write Fund Appeals



"Imagine my pleasure realizing you're the author of the piece I read a few days ago that I hoped to commend in my e-newsletter. One of my chums in the nonprofit world said: 'Look, we're NOT all nuts; and here's the research to prove it!' Thank you. You've done everyone a big favor. Lousy written communications are costing the industry gazillions in lost revenue."

**Tom Ahern, Principal  
Ahern Communications Ink**

"I was pretty impressed. We need more research into the 'soft side' of fund raising—story telling is where it's at!"

**Gail Perry, Principal  
Gail Perry Associates**



"Dr. Dickerson shared the results of his exhaustive analysis of nearly one million words of fund-raising copy. He explains why nearly everything he studied came up short."



"This research agrees with what almost anybody who spends any time looking at the way nonprofits communicate already knows: Most fund raising copy is wooden, artificial, dull, and ineffective."

**Jeff Brooks  
Future Fundraising Now**



**Mal Warwick, Founder  
Mal Warwick Associates**

"*The Way We Write is All Wrong* is a wake-up call based on solid evidence, and it couldn't come at a better time."

**Andy Goodman, Principal  
The Goodman Center**



"Frank, a very impressive study. Having been in direct mail for more than 30 years, your research is a window to the craft of words and how important copy is to successful direct marketing. In fact, considering that twitter only allows 140 characters, I think the ability to write clearly and concisely is even made more important through social media."

**John McIlquham, C.E.O.  
The NonProfit Times**

"I completely agree with your take on the way we write. So much communication sent by great organizations is poorly crafted. And that makes it difficult to get people to listen to very important messages."

**Joan Smyth Dengler, Sr. VP  
Covenant House**



"Frank I will be brief. Awesome, as my young Canadian associates say. Keep it up and if you get to London—well, if you don't call me for a pub-crawl you're not half the man you think you are! Here is to the preservation of wisdom."

**John Sauv -Rodd, Principal  
Datapreneurs, London**

## ∞ INTRODUCTION ∞



My doctoral studies at Claremont Graduate University's Peter F. Drucker School of Management and its School of Educational Studies married the hard science of multivariate statistics with the soft art of language analysis to describe how fund raisers write. But Marshall McLuhan held that *the medium is the message*. So I not only evaluated the meaning of discourse in the symbols of words, but also physical (non-verbal) characteristics of the media that carried that discourse.

The study analyzed 1.5 million words of copy in 2,412 fund-raising texts from all 735 North American nonprofits that had raised at least \$20 million or more in direct public support and 145 smaller organizations, creating the largest *corpus* (body) of fund-raising texts ever assembled for this kind of analysis. Together they form the *Elite 880 Corpus*.

### Two overarching questions framed my research . . .

- How do fund raisers *write*—of 23 text genes, which do their appeals most closely resemble?
- How does the *packaging* of those appeals affect results—do paratextual (physical) factors matter?

The first question is addressed in an article described on page 39. The second question is now addressed in this article, which summarizes a chapter from my dissertation on American Heart Association and Franciscan Friars test mailings which measured the effects of altering physical (paratextual) aspects of direct mail. In one American Heart Association test, *response increased 346%*. In another, canceling first class presort stamps suggested that American Heart Association *could have saved \$301,578.76* on postage (36.4% of their \$828,726.87 net income). A similar campaign for Franciscan for Friars of the Atonement found that canceling nonprofit stamps *boosted response 27.27%*.



Documenting the results of fund-raising campaigns was difficult, since few charities and even fewer agencies are willing to disclose what works and what doesn't. But Sherry Minton at American Heart Association and Ray Morrissey at Franciscan Friars of the Atonement deviated from the norm and generously shared the data I now report. And over time data has trickled into the literature of the field. So I also review published reports that evaluated the impact of handwriting on direct mail response.

### The trends reported here continued seven years later . . .

Three of the mailings evaluated here were sent by American Heart Association from 2004-2005. Seven years later, in an address to the Direct Marketing Association's Nonprofit Federation National Conference (February 17, 2011), American Heart Association's Sherry Minton confirmed that the trends observed continued: "Handwritten mail to \$10+ donors increased response 100%. Significantly more donors made a second gift [yielding] greater lifetime value from early second gift donors."



**P**aratext makes the critical first impression. And that first impression seals a text's fate.

French literary theorist Gérard Genette observes that a text “is rarely presented in an unadorned state.” Titles, prefaces, and illustrations “surround and extend a text to present it (1977, p. 2).”

Philippe Lejeune, describes these elements as the “fringe of the printed text which in reality controls one's whole reading of the text” (1975, p. 45).

Collectively, these are *paratext* (literally, elements that work *alongside* a written work). Paratext makes the critical first impression. And that first impression seals a text's fate. A bad cover can sink sales of even a Pulitzer-prize winning title. The serious nature of first impressions was underscored by *The Times of London* writer Helen Rumbelow, who reported: “Studies show that a book . . . has about one and a half seconds to catch a reader's eye. If it is picked up, it is on average glanced at for only three to four seconds” (2005).

Illustrating the influence of image, Rumbelow described the impact a change in the cover art of Georgette Heyer's work, a historical novelist and contemporary of Jane Austen. “When her publishers changed all her cover art last year, the classy new Jane Austenish look doubled . . . sales.” And Patrick Janson-Smith, literary agent and former director at Transworld Publishing remarked: “I can't think of a jacket that has transformed the fortunes of a book, but I have seen books absolutely die on the back of a jacket.”

While these academics, journalists and publishers were thinking about books, their views equally apply to the lowly genre of direct mail. Every afternoon millions of households divide letters into two piles—toss or keep. Sadly, what most nonprofits send donors and prospects looks like everything else in the mail stream. So it unceremoniously lands in the toss pile. But this case illustrates how the problem of a negative first impression was overcome by American Heart Association and Franciscan Friars of the Atonement.



Although my company, High Touch Direct Mail, produces campaigns like those discussed here, the American Heart campaigns that my dissertation analyzed were produced by another direct mail agency. And while my arm's-length relationship to these tests ensured objectivity, *the computer simulated handwriting evaluated in the 2004 campaigns had, in fact, been created from my penmanship*. (The agency of record had obtained a license to use my Computer HandScript™.) For their 2005 roll out campaigns, however, American Heart used a less-realistic simulated handwriting. Segments of that campaign lost money. That data may be reviewed by downloading my unabridged dissertation chapter (see item 12 on page 35: **The Impact of Paratextual Variables on Response and ROI**).

**W**hat's more, this disconnected and impersonal feel extends well beyond the words of a text to its paratext—to the physical aspects of direct mail, which universally feels mechanized and devoid of human touch.



**Were I asked to describe in a word, the dominant impression I took away from my study of fund-raising discourse, I'd choose the word *connection*. Or more appropriately—*lack of connection*.**

Particularly disturbing was evidence that strong communication currents among nonprofit practitioners run diametrically counter to decades of advice by leaders in philanthropy. Overwhelmingly, the statistical evidence profiles a discourse that reads more like academic prose than the banter of friends discussing something they care about.

- The writing of fund raisers focuses more on transferring information than making personal connection.
- And although most would think that the typical fund-raising text narrates a compelling story that puts a human face on an organization's mission, ***the data indicate just the opposite***. My study found that the writing of fund raisers contains less narrative than academic prose. Worse yet, even the genre of official documents contains more narrative than the typical fund appeal.

What's more, this disconnected, impersonal feel extends beyond the words in a text to paratext—to physical aspects of direct mail, which universally looks mass-produced. This case summary reports the results of tests in which physical (paratextual) variables were adjusted to create a greater sense of human connection with the reader.

Specifically, the effects on response rate and ROI were measured for direct mail that had been 1.) addressed and personalized with ***computer-simulated handwriting*** and 2.) on which discount stamps had been ***affixed and canceled*** to give it the look of full-rate first class mail. The goal was to determine if these variables could make mass-produced mail look more like personal correspondence, and thus increase response. But is direct mail relevant in the digital era? To paraphrase Mark Twain: ***reports of direct mail's death have been greatly exaggerated***.

In his 1982 book, *Megatrends: Ten New Directions Transforming Our Lives*, John Naisbitt

predicted that high technology would spawn **high touch** counterforces. He wrote:

“The introduction of the high technology of word processors into our offices has led to a revival of handwritten notes and letters. We couldn’t handle the intrusion of this high technology into . . . our lives without creating some high touch human ballast” (1982, p. 38).

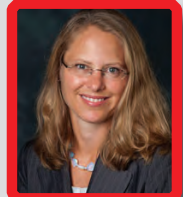
Ironically, social media—the latest counter-balance to the encroachment of high technology—were birthed from the belly of the very high technology beast that so alarmed Naisbitt. However, social media offer less content control than direct mail. And as emails hit against ever-higher, ever-wider spam control walls, research continues to report that email **open** and **click-through** rates are falling.

All this suggests that the hope for cheaper and more effective communication alternatives to direct mail may be going the way of tele-marketing. On the other hand, **a growing body of research shows the strongest fund-raising programs use both traditional and new media.**


**Maya Gasuk**, who led Cornell University’s annual giving efforts for ten years, commented on the role of social media in fund raising. Interviewed by Philanthropy Journal’s Ret Boney, she said:

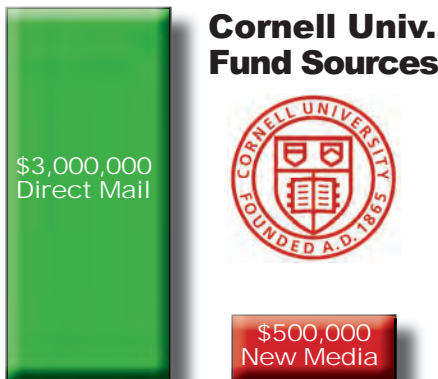
“People can get easily distracted by shiny objects like facebook and other social-media tools. There’s a tendency to think the next new thing will solve all of our problems.

“But at the end of the day it’s all about a **conversation with donors**. We need to continue to invest in the core of the business first and foremost and not get distracted by iPhone apps and facebook pages. Holding that same standard of accountability in the era of the novel is really important.



**Maya Gasuk**

**“The core of what we do is relationship building and asking.** Someday social media will complement that. But right now, I don’t think the answer to participation decreases is facebook, for example. It’s more important to look at your operations and figure out where things are disconnected.” 



**Figure 2. By 6:1 mail remains an indispensable medium**

After reviewing Maya Gasuk’s *Philanthropy Journal* interview, in which she cautioned against banking on new media (see side bar above), I followed up asking: “What percentages of Cornell’s annual giving comes through online media versus U.S. mail? She replied: **“about \$3 million in undergraduate annual funds via mail, and about \$500,000 via e-mail.”**

This ratio of 6:1 in favor of U.S. mail affirms it is still indispensable. Regardless the media, as Gausak says, “at the end of the day it’s all about a **conversation with donors**. This case shows **how handwriting can enrich that conversation.**



**The best story won’t raise a penny if the email, or the envelope it’s sent in, doesn’t get opened.** A 2008 *Nonprofit Times* review of research drove this home in an article on *email open rates*. Citing data from Convio, their report concluded: **“Getting a donor or advocate to open an email message is getting tougher, down to 14 percent from 22 percent”—a precipitous 36% drop.**

Then a March 2011 eNonprofit benchmark study by M+R Strategic Services and NTEN



reported: *“Email fundraising response rates dropped 19% from 2009 to 2010”* And of those, the clickthrough rate (the equivalent of opening an envelope) was just *“six tenths of a percent.”* Yet, the report found *“Direct mail programs were widespread. In our study, 87% [used] direct mail.”*

Now a study by Blackbaud reveals that 15.6 million donors gave \$1.16 billion primarily through *direct mail*: *“Five years in, it is clear that direct mail giving is still the overwhelming majority of fund-raising revenue, and organizations must find ways to optimize multichannel giving versus hyper-focusing on Internet giving alone.”*

#### BlackBaud Report on the Giving Channels Donors' Prefer Most

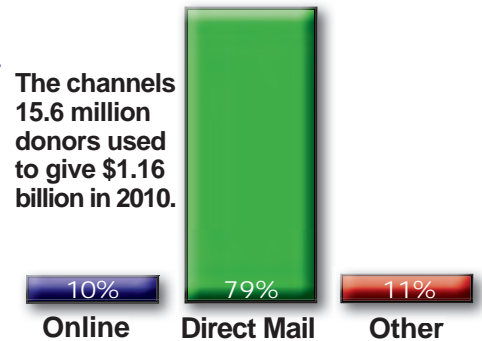


Figure 3. “Reports of direct mail’s death are greatly exaggerated.”

### Direct mail remains the backbone of fund raising for Covenant House



Joan Smyth-Dengler, VP

My analysis of fund-raising texts discovered that a direct mail appeal written by Jerry Huntsinger for Covenant House scored highest for narrative and personal connection among 2,412 texts analyzed. It was a two-page letter that grabbed you and just wouldn’t let go. Like a well-produced action drama, the letter put the reader in the middle of the protagonist’s life and caused him or her to feel like the story’s hero as they rescued a child in danger. Covenant House also confirms the continuing vitality of direct mail.

Joan Smyth-Dengler, the organization’s vice president for direct marketing, made the following observations on e-giving in a *Nonprofit Times* interview with Larry May (Oct, 2011):

- Dengler: We went online in the 90s and made \$50 the first year. Online revenue is now 5%.
- Larry May: For large mailers a very common number is 4% or 5% of gifts being made online, and most of that comes to the website immediately after the direct mail appeals are delivered.
- Dengler: Our experience is the same. It’s like getting a catalog from J. Crew and going online to order.
- Dengler: We’re dabbling in social media. There’s no measurable ROI, so we’re limiting investment.

### We read direct mail but give online like we browse BestBuy but shop at Amazon

An April 2012 survey by marketing research firm Campbell Rinker also found:



- donors are 3 times likelier to give online *in response to direct mail* than to an e-appeal,
- since direct mail drives e-giving, *nonprofits decrease direct mail at their peril!*

So it follows that it’s more important than ever to make direct mail work harder than ever. In speech, *paralinguistic* factors like tone of voice, gestures, and facial expressions work *parallel* to the *spoken* word. In fact, such non-verbal factors contribute more to a message than the actual words spoken. Similarly, several *paratextual* factors work *parallel* to the *written* word. These include physical factors like addressing envelopes in handwriting and affixing live postage stamps. Such *non-verbal factors add to a text what a smile adds to a speech* and thus ensure that mail lands in the *keep* pile. I now turn to how these variables affect response.

**T**his case examines how the physical appearance of simulated handwriting and canceled discount stamps works with language to affect response.



Figure 4. Balance Fallacy.

My doctoral research grew out of an MA thesis I wrote in 1985 in which I discussed John Naisbitt's high tech/high touch dichotomy. I discussed the three executive functions of fund-raising leadership—**strategy**, **management**, and **communication**. I concluded that while the notion of **balance** among these three domains sounded nice, balance was more like an intellectual comfort food than a sound leadership strategy. It sounded nice to envision a fund-raising executive holding **management**, **strategy**, and **communication** in pleasant balance—evenly proportioned like the three legs of a stool. But I came to believe that **imbalance was actually preferable**—that leadership in the nonprofit sector demanded a much greater focus on **communication**, particularly the **language** of fund raising.

Naisbitt's observations also led me to name my direct marketing consultancy **High Touch Direct Mail** in 1995. Then ten years after that, my doctoral research drilled down to examine rhetorical, linguistic, and dimensions of fund-raising discourse. I saw that as **paralinguistic** features of prosody (rhythms, stress, pitch, and tone) enhance speech, so **paratextual** features (bold or italicized type, graphics, photographs, and even handwriting) work alongside and enhance writing.

This case examines how the **physical appearance** of simulated handwriting and canceled discount stamps works **with** language to affect response. By creating what Naisbitt called **human ballast**, could these paratextual features increase response? Two technologies had set the stage for this study.

- First, the breakthrough of *simulated* handwriting had overcome the look of fake script fonts.
- And although USPS regulations prohibit canceling discount stamps, I got a special written exemption allowing me to cancel discount to make nonprofit mail look first class.

I believed these breakthroughs could enhance the personal look of mail, control costs, and increase response and ROI. My company was an early pioneer in the use of computer-simulated handwriting with my first campaign for Hillview Acres Children's Home in Chino, California in 1995. Ten years later American Heart tested a note card fund appeal addressed and personalized with **simulated handwriting created from samples of my own penmanship**. Another agency planned and implemented the mailings and I received data afterwards.

The following is a two-decade retrospective of literature highlighting past studies that describe the impact of paratextual factors on direct mail response rates.



## Two decades of literature sheds light on the impact that hand-personalization of direct mail has had on both response rates and ROI (Return on Investment)

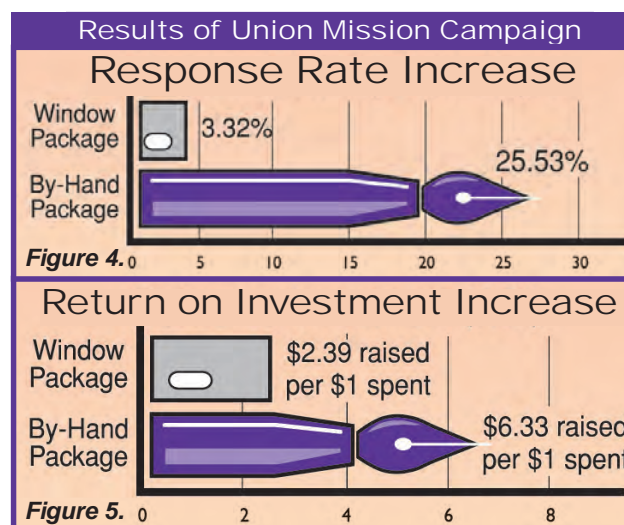
The following is a review of the literature highlighting past studies that describe the impact of paratextual factors on direct mail results. Reports come from both nonprofits and the agencies that serve them. My research now adds one more data point to this literature by documenting the outcomes of mailings sent to an aggregate of 1,077,067 households.



The first test *dates back to 1995*, the year I began my company, High Touch Direct Mail. *FundRaising Management* (May, 1997) described a handwritten fund appeal by Seattle's Union Mission improved response.

Data From Three Union Mission Campaigns			
Key Result Areas Measured:	Conventional Mailing April, 1995	By-Hand Mailing April, 1996	By-Hand Mailing December, 1996
Pieces Mailed	28,440	8,767	9,275
Responses	945	2,238	1,658
Response Rate	3.32%	25.53%	17.88%
Average Gift	\$42.27	\$53.51	\$89.50
Gross Income	\$39,943	\$119,747	\$148,395
Total Cost	\$16,729	\$18,916	\$16,881
Net Income	\$23,214	\$100,831	\$131,514
ROI	\$2.39:1	\$6.33:1	\$8.79:1

**Table 1. Adapted from Printz and Matby (1997).**



*Many published reports over the ensuing sixteen years reflect that these trends continue.* In 2002, The Domain Group (now Merkle) retained the writer's company, High Touch Direct Mail, to produce a donor renewal series using Genuine HandWriting™ note card for their client, Atlanta-based international Relief agency CARE USA.







*The Chronicle of Philanthropy* May, 2002) interviewed CARE's Beth Athanassiades, who summarized the results of their hand-written donor renewal campaign.

The package, produced by the writer's company, High Touch Direct Mail, included a hand-addressed and hand-personalized note card fund appeal to donors of at least \$50 who hadn't given a second gift within prior 11 months. "We call it our 'win back' package," said CARE's Beth Athanassiades, the organization's director of direct response.

The CARE card featured a simple black and white photograph of a young mother and child on the cover. And inside a brief 34-word handwritten note asked new donors to make a second gift.

**"It typically prompts 9 percent of recipients to give an average donation of \$41"** *Beth Athanassiades*



**Figure 6. CARE Win Back Card.**



*National Catholic Development Conference* (September, 2010) reported on a campaign by Food for the Poor.

The relief agency's president, Robin Mahfood, wrote a brief note in which the pre-printed "Dear Friend" salutation was crossed out and the donor's first name was printed in a computer-simulated handwriting.



**Robin Mahfood**



**Figure 7. Food for the Poor note card addressed and personalized in computer-simulated handwriting.**

The envelope was then addressed, and a P.S. note was written at the bottom of the card, in the same computer handwriting.

(While this was not produced by my company, High Touch Direct Mail, it is similar to a 150,000-piece note card appeal we produced for Food for the Poor.)



*The NonProfit Times* (2001) described three hand-personalized direct mail campaigns that typify performance for such strategies:



### Organization:

-  Life Outreach International (LOI)
-  Feed the Children (FTC)
-  Lighthouse Ministries (LHM)

### Outcomes:

- 2- to 3-to-1 increase in results
- 15 percent response
- Double normal response rate






**Table 2. Summary of three campaigns reported in *The NonProfit Times*.**

**LOI** reported sending one hand-personalized mailing a year that “typically outperforms other mailings **2 to 1** and often as much as **3 to 1**, considering return on investment. Response rates have also been well above average during the three years—ranging between **7 percent and 20 percent**” (p. 14).

**FTC** Vice President Larry Correa noted that their annual hand-personalized packages, targeted donors who give \$1,000 or more, “drops on December 25 to get that very last donation from the donor” (p. 14). Of their Christmas mailing sent to 100,000 donors, he noted that “the thank-you note card mailing . . . garnered an outstanding **15% response.**”

**LHM** president Dale Collie said that their Indianapolis-based outreach to the homeless used hand-personalized packages that usually yield **double the normal response rate** (p. 14).

**Mal Warwick Associates** (2003) reported in their company newsletter, the results of five handwritten fund appeals that performed well for the agency’s clients . . .

-  Increased response from **0.87% to 3.0% (244% lift)**.
-  Increased response from **2.6% to 9% (246% lift)**.
-  Achieved a **10%** response with a **\$172** average gift.
-  Achieved a **6%** response with a **\$43.75** average gift.
-  Achieved an **11%** response with a **\$138** average gift.

**Table 3. Review of handwritten campaigns by Mal Warwick.**



**Mal Warwick**

While he acknowledged having little experience with campaigns using simulated handwriting like the Computer HandScript™, Warwick made the following concession:

**“I admit I’ve seen computer-generated text that at first glance (and sometimes second) fooled me into thinking it was handwritten.”**

Mal Warwick Associates VP Steve Hitchcock commented on the elements of handwritten packages that make them work, warning as he wrote: “The trap that too many fundraisers fall into is to make the packages cheaper so they can mail them to more donors. Don’t do that! Our experience is that these handwritten packages work not just because of the handwriting. The note-card sized outer envelope, the attractive note card, the return envelope . . . and the use of . . . stamps—all these elements work together to create a mailing that moves lots of donors to respond (often, writing back personal notes of their own).”



**Steve Hitchcock**



Amy Syracuse of *Target Marketing* (August, 2008) described a hand-personalized piece Deborah Flateman, C.E.O. of the Maryland Food Bank, mailed to new donors requesting a second gift. The note card used a non-variable (generic) typed thank-you message, but below the message, in handwriting, is the statement:

“Thank you for your gift. Repeating your gift of (amount) would mean so much.” The latter is personalized with the amount of the individual’s donation” (p. 28).

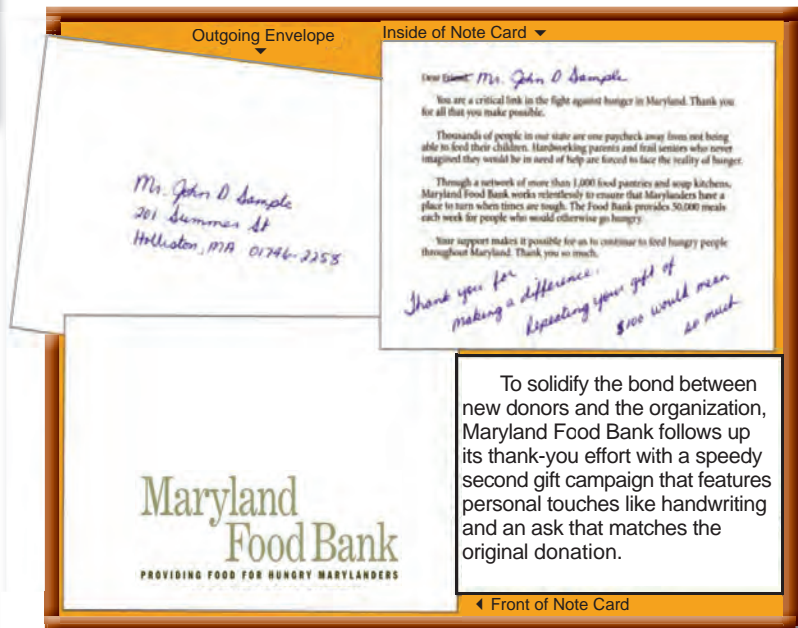


Figure 8. Maryland Food Bank hand-personalized fold-over note card fund appeal package.

## Results for Maryland Food Bank’s new donor second gift mailing

Response Rate:	Average Gift	Cost to Raise \$1	Retention Lift
8.5% - 13%	\$38.00	\$0.50	110%

Table 4. Maryland Food Bank hand-personalized fund appeal results.

The report on Maryland Food Bank’s campaign acknowledged a **positive 2:1 return**. But the organization’s leadership was quick to emphasize that the most significant benefit was not the ROI (though welcomed), but retention of new donors by securing their second gift.



Deborah Flateman

Flateman concluded:

**“Following the mailing’s introduction in 2007—it was the only change in Maryland Food Bank’s new-donor contact strategy that year—retention of newly acquired donors rebounded from 34.9% to 38.85 %.”**

These are but a few reviews of campaigns agencies and nonprofits have implemented using computer-simulated handwriting. A consistent pattern has emerged—the personal approach of such mailings has not only increased response, but has also raised more per dollar spent, despite the higher cost of production. My unabridged dissertation chapter provides a more thorough review of such campaigns, including source citations. This chapter is listed as item 12 on page 35: **The Impact of Paratextual Variables on Response and ROI**. You can download this chapter by going to [www.TheWrittenVoice.org](http://www.TheWrittenVoice.org).



The American Heart Association already knew handwriting out-performed conventionally addressed mailings. But would *simulated* handwriting work too?



My dissertation reviews a number of **A/B** test mailings sent by the American Heart Association to a total of 1,077,067 households over a two year period from 2004-2005. This summary is limited to a review of three donor renewal campaigns conducted in 2004.

**A/B**

The American Heart Association already knew handwriting out-performed conventionally addressed mailings. But would *simulated* handwriting work too? If so money could be saved.

In each test, mailings of equal counts were compared. Date of last gift and dollar ranges were controlled to ensure that the only variable tested was the use of hand personalization.



- A. Control:** Genuine-Handwritten Note Card Fund Appeal  
**B. Test:** Computer HandScript™ Note Card Fund Appeal



- A. Control:** Free Box of Greeting Cards (premium to *renew recent* donors)  
**B. Test:** Computer HandScript™ Note Card Fund Appeal



- A. Control:** Double-Remit Window Envelope Letter (*lapsed* donor appeal)  
**B. Test:** Computer HandScript™ Note Card Fund Appeal



**Audience Profile:** Donors who had given \$50 or more within the preceding 12 months

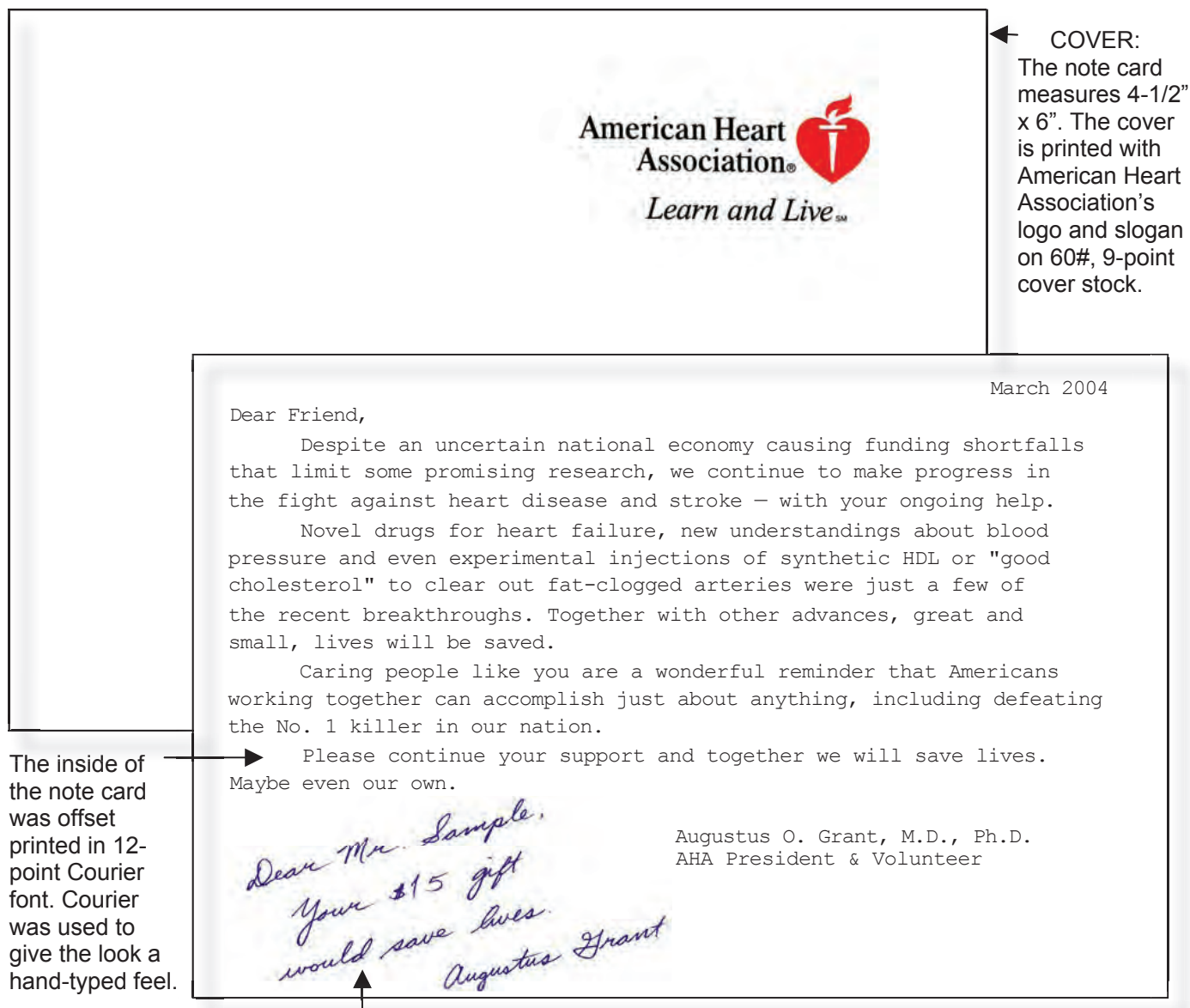
**List Profile:** Two equivalent **A/B** panels of 25,000 donors, totaling 50,000 records

**Package Profile:** Note card fund appeal that had been addressed and personalized with Computer HandScript™ simulated handwriting, made from samples of my penmanship. The same test package *was used in all three mailings reviewed here.*

**Mailing 1, Mailing 2, and Mailing 3 Test Package Sent to Panel B of Each Mailing**  
(All three test mailings used the same test package)

- **Fold-Over Note Card** pre-printed body with personalized P.S. in Computer HandScript™
- **A-6 Outgoing Envelope** addressed in Computer HandScript™ simulated handwriting
- **# 6-1/4 Reply Envelope**
- **Personalized Reply Device**

**1. Fold-Over Note Card**

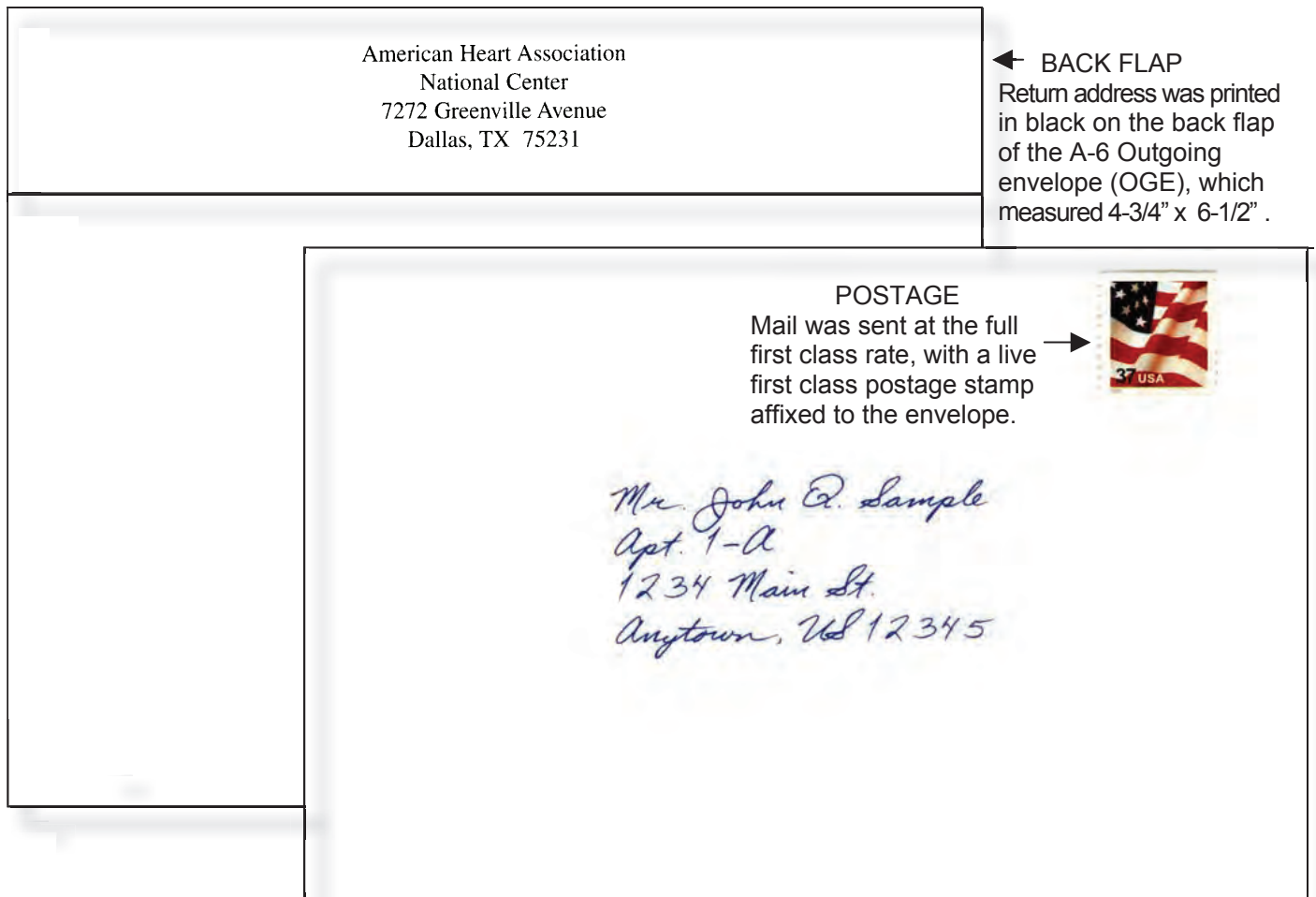


**COMPUTER HANDSCRIPT-PERSONALIZED P.S. NOTE:**

While the body copy of the note card was preprinted, a Computer HandScripted note, personalized with the donor's name, was printed at the bottom. The Computer HandScript used differs from out-of-the-box simulated handwriting fonts in that it was created from samples of real handwriting. Graphic glyphs were scanned, stored and connected to one another like genuine handwriting with a computer program that swapped individual **un**-connected characters for pairs of **connected** ones. The program also contained several alternate *versions* of many letters to add variety and thus realism to the HandScript (especially letters that join above the baseline).

**Figure 9. American Heart Association Computer HandScript™ test package note card.**

## 2. A-6 Outgoing Envelope



### OUTGOING ADDRESS:

The envelope was also addressed in Computer HandScript. Note the realistic look—how the letter **o** in *John* is slightly different than the letter **o** in *Anytown*. Also, the letters **b**, **o**, **v**, and **w** connect to adjacent letters **above** the baseline. Rather than leaving unnatural gaps as with simpler handwriting fonts, with Computer HandScript these letters connect, as illustrated by the **o** and **w** of *Anytown*.

### ***Hypothesis AHA Wanted to Test***

AHA wanted to see if they could get equal or better results with a less expensive simulated handwriting package as they had with mail personalized by human hand. They assumed that to work, the HandScript had to look real.

### ***Which is Real Handwriting and Which is Computer HandScript?***

The realism of the Computer HandScript that AHA chose to use is reflected in the following samples comparing real handwriting and Computer HandScript. One of the following lines was written in my own penmanship, scanned, then copied and pasted into the document. The other was created from a Computer HandScript created from my own handwriting (the AHA test was conducted using a Computer HandScript made from samples of my penmanship).

***On the Next Page, the Question of Which Line Was Written by Hand and Which was Printed is Answered . . .***

Line1: *Is this real or Computer HandScript?*

Line 2: *Is this real or Computer HandScript?*

**Figure 10. American Heart Association Computer HandScript™ test package OGE (Outgoing Envelope)**



### 3. # 6-1/4 Reply Envelope

CRE  
The package included a # 6-1/4 Courtesy Reply Envelope (CRE) that measures 3-1/2 x 6", printed on 24# white wove. Tests 1-3 do not use a stamp on the CRE.

American Heart Association  
Gift Processing Center  
PO Box 78851  
Phoenix, AZ 85062-8851

T6425

### 4. Reply Device

The donor's name was used to personalize the salutation area of the reply device.

A gift string, a suggested gift level series, was created.

Donor name and address data was printed.

T5585

***Your Continued Support is Greatly Appreciated!***


Dear Mr. Sample,

Thanks to you, we have made real progress researching the causes and the cures for heart disease and stroke. But today, we risk losing much of the momentum you've helped us gain. Could you help us with an additional gift of:

☐ \$15   
 ☐ \$20   
 ☐ \$25   
 ☐ Other \$ \_\_\_\_\_

MR. JOHN Q. SAMPLE  
APT. 1-A  
1234 MAIN ST.  
ANYTOWN, US 12345

*Please make your check payable to American Heart Association and return it in the enclosed envelope.*

American Heart Association 

*Learn and Live™*

1023327932803082300020342

#### REPLY DEVICE

The reply device measured 3-1/2" x 6" and was printed on 60# bond text weight stock. The body copy was lasered in 12-point Times Roman font and the logo and American Heart Association slogan were preprinted in black and red ink.

**The answer to the question: Which Line Was Written by Hand and Which was Printed in Computer HandScript?**

**Q:** On the previous page I showed two samples and asked which looked real and which looked computer simulated.

**A:** The handwriting sample on line 1 was written *in my own hand*. I wrote the question with a blue pen, scanned the line with an EPSON 4990 flatbed scanner, saved it as a 58 KB TIF file, then simply pasted into a text box.

The handwriting sample on line 2 was created from a **Computer HandScript** made from samples of my own handwriting. This is the same simulated handwriting used in the AHA tests. I first typed the words in Times Roman, then ran the text through a conversion program that joined the letters and even substituted a new single letter pair (*om*) for the individual letters *o* and *m* in the word *Computer* to avoid an unnatural-looking gap.

**Figure 11. American Heart Association Computer HandScript™ test package reply pieces.**

## ● American Heart Association Case 14

### Mailing 1 **Control Package sent to Panel A**

- **Fold-Over Note Card** with pre-printed body copy and P.S. note written by hand
- **A-6 Outgoing Envelope** addressed by hand
- **# 6-3/4 Reply Envelope**—1/2" wider than the test reply, so it had to be folded to insert
- **Personalized Reply Information** was printed on the back of the reply *envelope*. This *replaced* the personalized reply *device* used in the test package
- **Buck Slip**—a 3" x 5" legal disclaimer that was not included in the test package

#### 1. Fold-Over Note Card

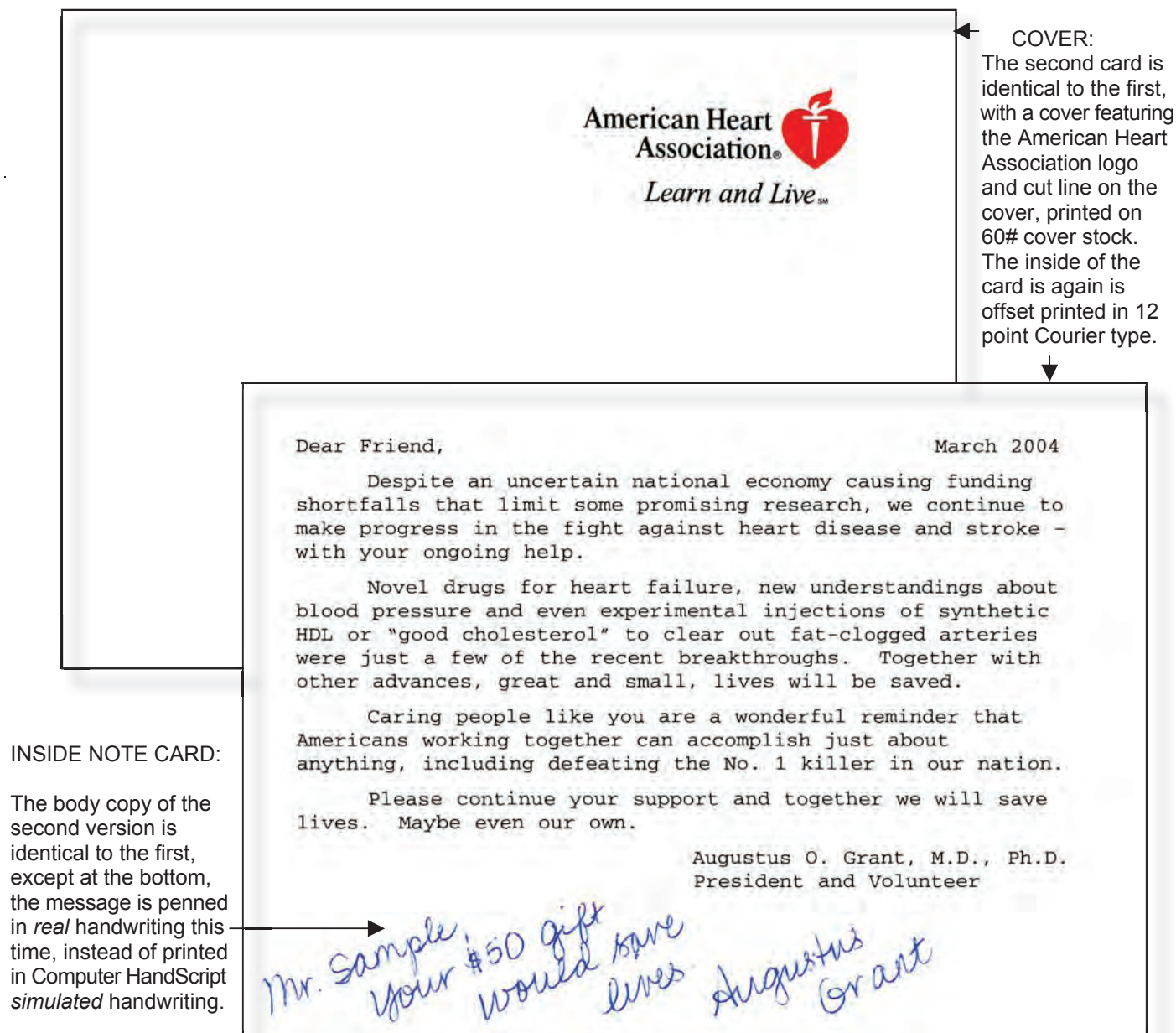


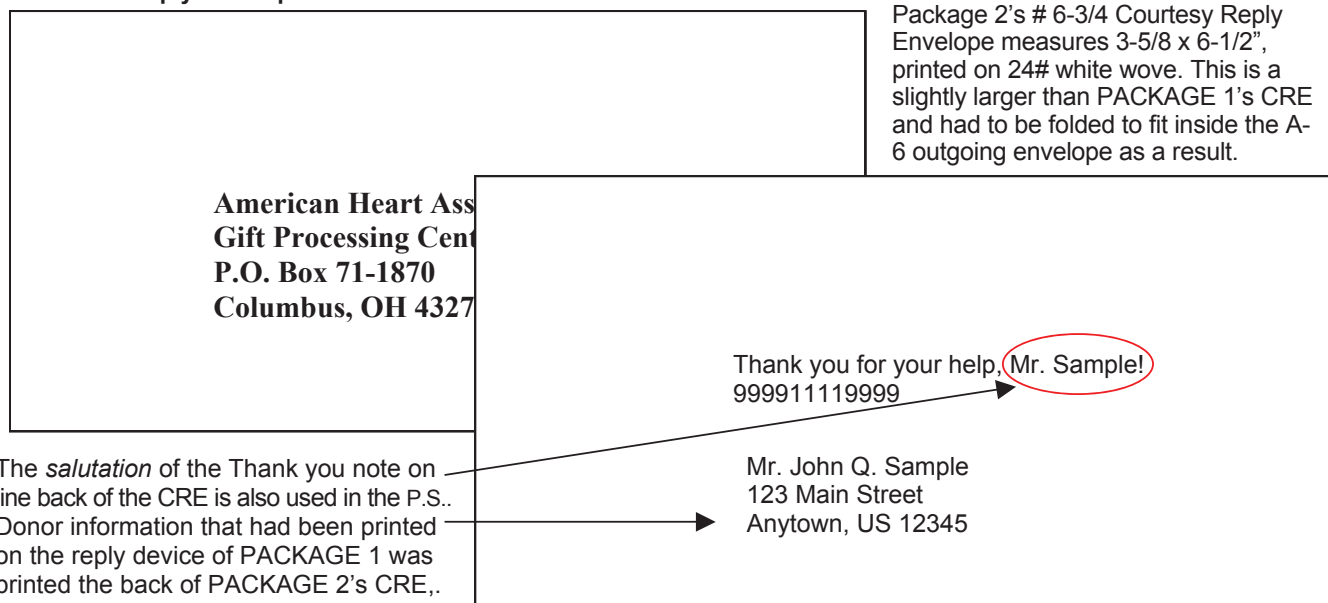
Figure 12. American Heart Association Real Handwritten control package note card.

## 2. A-6 Outgoing Envelope



CRE

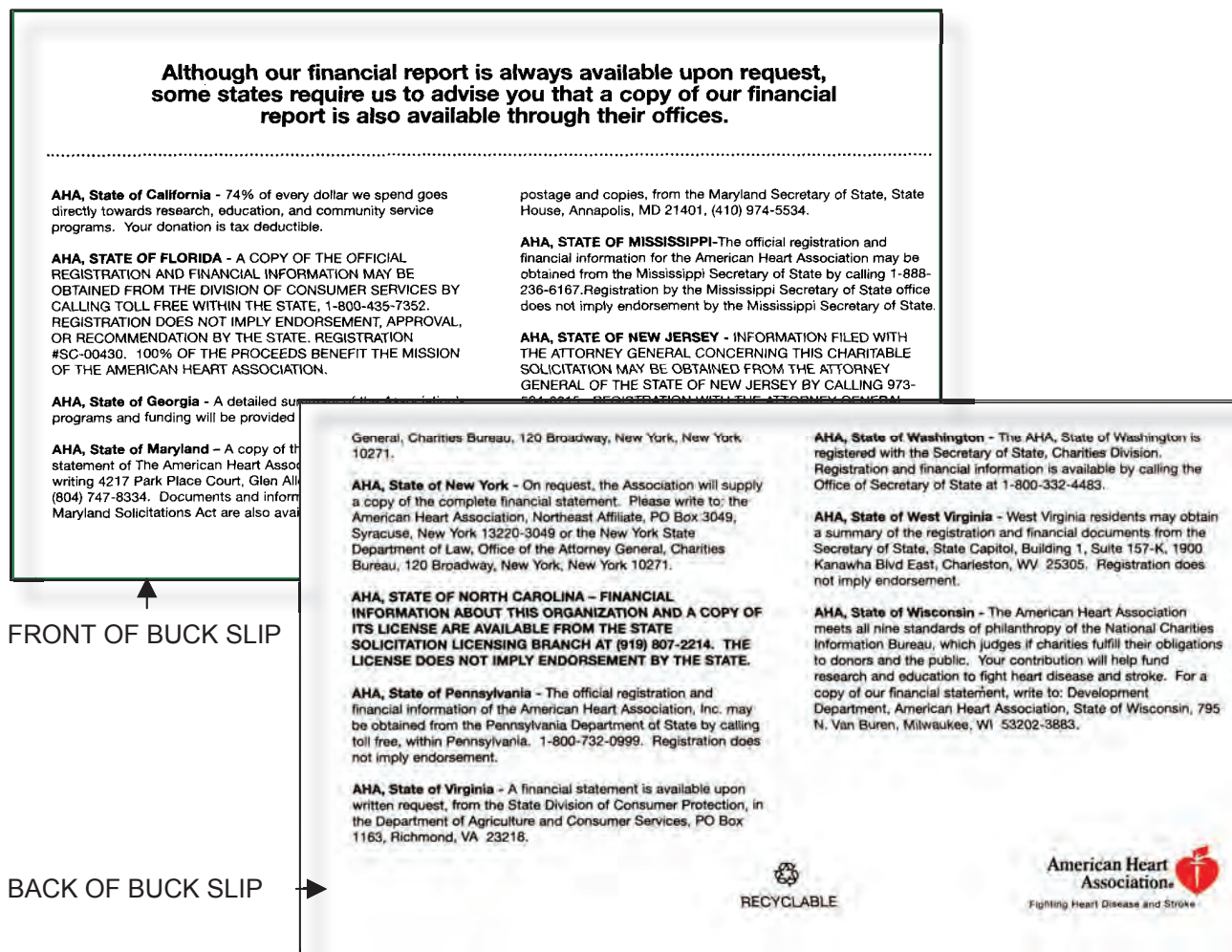
## 3. # 6-3/4 Reply Envelope



**Figure 13. American Heart Association Computer HandScript™ test package outgoing and reply envelopes.**



#### 4. Buck Slip



#### NOTICE OF FINANCIAL RECORDS AVAILABILITY

Stuffed inside the note card was a 3" x 5" slip printed 2/1 (Black and red on one side, black on the other) on 20# white bond paper explaining that the organization's financial information is available.

**Figure 14. American Heart Association Computer HandScript™ test package buck slip.**

#### **Mailing 1 Test Results: Genuine HandWriting™ vs. Computer HandScript™ Note Card**

Packages Compared:	# Mailed:	% Resp:	Avg. Gift:	Gross Income:	Net Income:
<b>A Genuine HandWriting™ (control)</b>	<b>25,000</b>	<b>8.45%</b>	<b>\$82.22</b>	<b>\$173,639.74</b>	<b>\$132,889.74</b>
<b>B Computer HandScript™ (test)</b>	<b>25,000</b>	<b>9.10%</b>	<b>\$86.20</b>	<b>\$196,015.00</b>	<b>\$167,515.50</b>
<b>Increase with HandScript™:</b>		<b>+108%</b>	<b>+105%</b>	<b>+113%</b>	<b>+126%</b>

**Table 5. Simulated handwriting outperformed real handwriting by American Heart Association.**

#### The BIG Surprise:

Simulated handwriting actually **outperformed real handwriting**. Computer HandScript™ retained the imperfections and random variation of human penmanship. But why did it raise more? Perhaps it was this realism, coupled with greater consistency across thousands of mail pieces being prepared.



**Audience Profile:** Donors who had given \$15-\$49.99 within the preceding 12 months

**List Profile:** Two equivalent A/B panels of 25,000 donors, totaling 50,000 records

**Package Profile:** Premium mailing of a free box of greeting cards

## Mailing 2 Control Package sent to Panel A

- **Mailing Box**—with window for address block
- **Cards**—two each of six cards with envelopes
- **Letter**—preprinted form with no personalization
- **Reply Device**—with outgoing address
- **Reply Envelope**
- **Buck Slip**—3" x 5" solicitation disclaimer not included in the test package

Cards were mailed in a gift box measuring 5-3/8" x 6-1/2" x 3/4".

### 1. Gift Box

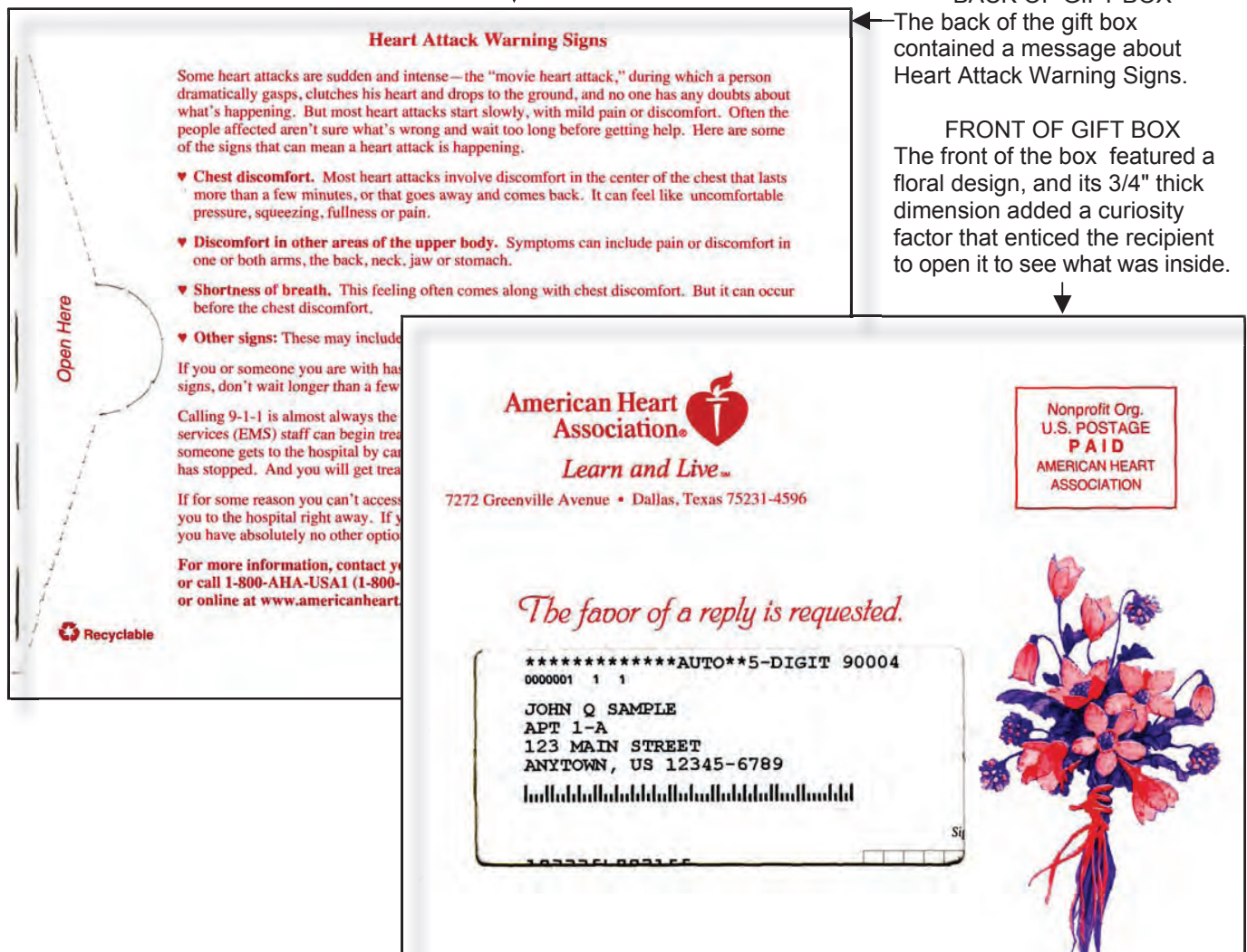
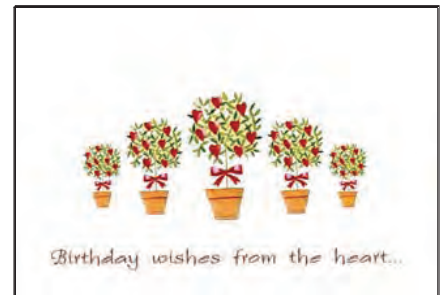
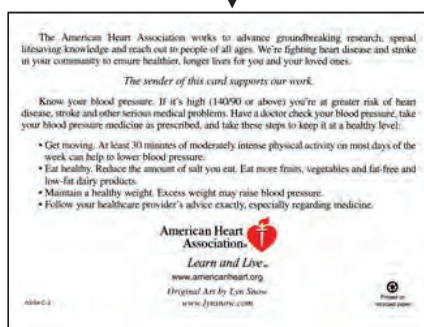


Figure 15. American Heart Association Box of Greeting Cards control package window carrier box.

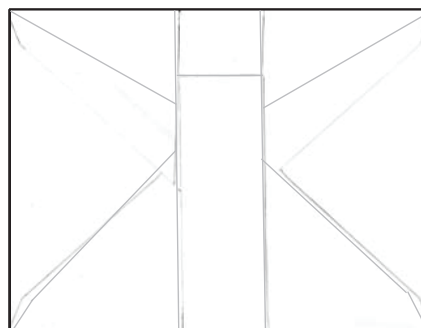
## 2. Note Card Set



On the back of each note card a message describes how to maintain healthy blood pressure levels and a the bottom of the first paragraph a note reads: *The sender of this card supports our work.*



A packet of a dozen envelopes was also provided with the card set.



**Figure 16. American Heart Association Box of Greeting Cards control package stationery contents.**



3. Letter (Page 1 of 2)

T6263



Dear Friend,

Let me tell you a story:

*The doctor turns away from the operating table, tired but jubilant. Another successful operation. Another saved life. Another chance for her patient to start a better life. She's spent hours in that operating room and now she begins to relax, sighing deeply as the tension in her body fades away. The doctor smiles with deep satisfaction. She has won another courageous battle in the war against cardiovascular disease.*

The American Heart Association has been helping make moments like these possible for over seventy-five years.

But, the war is far from over. Though we win small battles every day, heart attack, stroke and cardiovascular disease continue to be America's No. 1 cause of death.

To continue the important research and educational programs that provide doctors with more effective medication and surgery techniques, stroke victims a better chance at full recovery, and at-risk patients the chance to prevent heart attacks and strokes, the American Heart Association must have the support of caring friends like you.

To thank you for making our past victories possible, it is a pleasure for me to present you with your own personal collection of our 2004 note cards.

I know you will enjoy sending them to your friends and family.

While these cards are a gift and place you under no obligation, please know the American

(over, please)

**Figure 17. American Heart Association Box of Greeting Cards control package appeal letter front.**

3. Letter (cont. Page 2 of 2)

Heart Association's medical research and educational programs cannot go forward without the loyal commitment of friends like you.

I hope that you will choose to send a generous contribution to help our crucial cause. Just complete the enclosed reply card and return it to us with your tax-deductible gift in the reply envelope provided.

Although cardiovascular disease and stroke affect more Americans than any other health disorders, hopefully you'll never need us.

But, the fact is...we need you.

Thank you in advance for your compassion and generosity. I look forward to your prompt reply.

Sincerely,

*Augustus O. Grant*

Augustus O. Grant, M.D., Ph.D.  
President and volunteer

P.S. Play a personal role in your community's health by making a tax-deductible gift today. Your contribution will be credited to your local affiliate of the American Heart Association.

**Figure 18. American Heart Association Box of Greeting Cards control package appeal letter back.**



#### 4. Reply Device

**Reduce your risk of premature death...**

**For more information**  
contact your nearest AHA office or call:  
**1-800-AHA-USA1 (1-800-242-8721)**  
or online at [www.americanheart.org](http://www.americanheart.org)

**Making Physical Activity a Part of Your Life**

Whether you're at home, at work or at play, you can take a few simple steps to activity in your life. Swimming, cycling, jogging, skiing, aerobic dancing, walking activities can help your heart. Whether it is a structured exercise program or just exercise adds up to a healthier heart.

**The Benefits of Daily Physical Activity**

- May reduce the risk of heart disease by improving blood circulation
- Helps keep weight under control
- Improves blood cholesterol levels
- Helps prevent and manage high blood pressure
- Helps prevent bone loss
- Boosts energy level
- Helps manage stress
- Releases tension
- Improves the ability to fall asleep quickly and sleep well
- Improves self-image
- Counters anxiety and depression and increases enthusiasm and optimism
- Increases muscle strength, increasing the ability to do other physical activity
- Provides a way to share an activity with family and friends
- Establishes good habits in children and counters the conditions (obesity, cholesterol levels, poor lifestyle habits, etc.) that lead to heart attack and disease
- In older people, can help delay or prevent chronic illnesses and disease

© 2004 American Heart Association

American Heart Association  
**Learn and Live™**

**THE FUTURE DEPENDS ON YOU**

1023356907155

(Please detach at the perforation and return the bottom portion with your donation.)

☐ **YES**, I received my American Heart Association cards and will help save lives with a gift of:

( ) \$25 ( ) \$30 ( ) \$35 ( ) Other \$ \_\_\_\_\_

255031353 04I0ZDXEAA 00253

\*\*\*\*\*AUTO\*\*5-DIGIT 90004  
000001 1 1

JOHN Q SAMPLE  
APT 1-A  
123 MAIN STREET  
ANYTOWN, US 12345-6789

1023356907155

American Heart Association  
**Learn and Live™**

Please consider the American Heart Association in your will. For more information, please check this box.

Please make check payable to  
**American Heart Association**  
Use enclosed envelope or mail to:  
Card Processing Center  
P.O. Box 78851  
Phoenix, AZ 85062-8851  
Thank you!

I wish to charge my donation to:  
☐ AMEX ☐ Discover ☐ MasterCard  
☐ VISA Exp. Date \_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_/\_\_\_\_

Signature: \_\_\_\_\_  
(For credit card donations only)

1023356907155168500020347

#### 5. Reply Envelope

**An inactive lifestyle is a risk factor for coronary heart disease and stroke. Regular, moderate-to-vigorous physical activity done for at least 30 minutes on most or all days of the week helps prevent heart and blood vessel disease. The more activity, the greater your benefits. However, even moderate-intensity activities help if done regularly and long term.**

American Heart Association  
**Learn and Live™**

CARD PROCESSING CENTER  
PO BOX 78851  
PHOENIX AZ 85062-8851

#### 6. Buck Slip

14560

CITY OF LOS ANGELES  
Los Angeles Police Commission Charitable Services Section  
(213) 978-1144

**INFORMATION CARD NO. Y2056**

Issued Pursuant to Los Angeles Municipal Code, Chapter 4, Article 4, Paragraph 1

**AMERICAN HEART ASSOCIATION**  
816 So. Figueroa St., Los Angeles, CA 90017  
Person in charge of appeal: **Rob Fowler**  
For information about this appeal, call: (213) 291-1700

Activity: Appeal for donations through June 30, 2004

Solicitation Dates: July 1, 2003 to June 30, 2004 Anticipated Expenses: \$11,317,719

Purpose: To reduce death and disability from heart diseases and stroke

Previous Activity: 2002-2003 appeal collected a total of \$42,716,802 of which \$31,787,605 went to charity and \$10,929,197 (25.6%) were expenses

DOOR-TO-DOOR SOLICITATION RESTRICTED TO THE HOURS OF 8 A.M. - 8 P.M.

NOT AN ENDORSEMENT - FOR INFORMATION ONLY  
CITY OF LOS ANGELES  
BUSINESS LICENSE COMMISSION

Information Card No. 51

Issued Pursuant to Los Angeles County Code, Volume 3, Title 7, Chapter 12.4  
This Card, by Law, Must be Read or Presented to All Prospective Donors

**AMERICAN HEART ASSOCIATION**  
816 S FIGUEROA ST., LOS ANGELES, CA 90017

Chairman: ROB FOWLER Solicitation Dates: 7/1/2003 - 7/1/2004

Event: GENERAL APPEAL

Anticipated Expenses: \$11,317,719.00 Anticipated Cost: \$45,166,540.00

25% of Gross Cost

PURPOSE OF SOLICITATION

RAISE FUNDS TO REDUCE DEATH AND DISABILITY DUE TO  
CARDIOVASCULAR DISEASE AND STROKE

THIS CARD IS FOR USE IN UNINCORPORATED LOS ANGELES COUNTY AREAS ONLY

This card is compiled from the official statements on file and/or additional investigation. For further information, telephone (213) 974-7081.

To be used only by person whose signature appears below:

Business License Commission  
114 Keweenaw Hall of Administration  
Los Angeles, CA 90012

Date: 7/1/2003 Expires: 7/1/2004

(ANY ALTERATION OF THIS CARD IS A VIOLATION OF LAW)

This buck slip was required by Los Angeles, CA

**Figure 19. American Heart Association Box of Greeting Cards control package appeal reply pieces.**



## Mailing 2 Test Results: Box of Greeting Cards vs. Computer HandScript™ Note Card

Packages Compared:	# Mailed:	% Resp:	Avg. Gift:	Gross Income:	Net Income:
A Box of Greeting Cards (control)	25,000	8.02%	\$21.04	\$42,187.50	13,616.00
B Computer HandScript™ (test)	25,000	11.09%	\$22.67	\$62,854.80	34,354.80
Increase with HandScript™:		+138%	+108%	+149%	+252%

Table 6. Simulated handwriting outperformed free box of cards for American Heart Association.

## The Takeaway: Personal Connection Is More Effective Than A Giveaway

The purpose of American Heart Association's campaign offering a free box of greeting cards was to *renew recent donors*. Often called a front-end premium, the rationale for such giveaways is that enough donors will respond to both recover costs and produce net income.

Thus success is measured not only by net income, but also the total number of donors renewed. In light of the fact that new donor acquisition campaigns often gain supporters at a much higher net cost than donors renewed donors, even a relatively low-return renewal campaign is deemed a success.

However, the key to building long-term donor loyalty is to cultivate relationships with donors based on mutual commitment to the cause an organization represents. The American Heart Association's note card fund appeal sought to build on shared commitment to the cause of preventing and fighting heart disease. Their note card reflected this motivation and may have ferreted out those donors who give only when a tangible benefit is offered. A better quality of donor may well have been attracted by this appeal which had no quid pro quo other than helping prevent and fight heart disease.



**Audience Profile:** Donors who had given \$15-\$49.99 13 to 36 months prior to mailing.

**List Profile:** Two A/B panels of 24,997 (A) and 25,000 (B) for a total 49,997 records

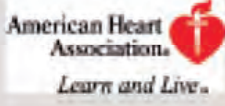
**Package Profile:** A low-cost double remit mailing using two window envelopes

### Mailing 3 Control Package sent to Panel A

- **Double Remit letter**—with chapter and donor information for address block
- **# 7-3/4 window envelope**
- **# 7-1/4 window reply envelope**
- **Buck Slip**—3" x 5" solicitation disclaimer not included in the test package

## 1. Double Remit Letter

TOP HALF REPLY OF LETTER IS REPLY DEVICE  
The top of the double remit was designed to be removed at perforation to eliminate the need to print a separate reply.



**Sampletown** Chapter  
12345 Chapter St  
**Sampletown**, US 12345-6789

Please consider the American Heart Association in your will. For more information, please check this box ☐.

Please make your check payable to "American Heart Association" and return in the envelope provided. Your donation is tax-deductible to the extent the law allows and is credited to your local American Heart Association office.


You will help save lives in **Sampletown**, perhaps even a loved one in the **Sample** family, by continuing your support with a gift of **\$XX** or more today.


**YES! Enclosed is my gift:**

[ ] \$15 [ ] \$30 [ ] \$50 [ ] \$\_\_\_\_\_

\*\*\*\*\*AUTO\*\*5-DIGIT 90004  
Ms. Pat Sample  
123 Main Street  
**Sampletown**, US 12345-6789

**Sampletown** Chapter  
12345 Chapter St  
**Sampletown**, US 12345-6789






---

Dear **Ms. Sample**,

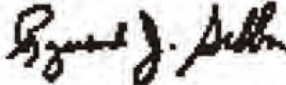
Did you know that diseases of the heart and blood vessels are responsible for over a third of all American deaths? This year, roughly **XX,XXX** people will die in **Samplestate** alone.

That's the bad news. The good news is that as you read this, researchers funded by the American Heart Association are working on scientific studies that will yield the next lifesaving breakthroughs in diagnosis and treatment -- advances that will impact your life and the lives of everyone dear to you.

**Ms. Sample**, I hope you will find it in your heart to send a gift of **\$XX** or more today to help us continue the fight against America's No. 1 killer. Generous and forward-thinking people like you make it possible for us to fund the research, education and community programs that are helping to save so many lives. And the next life saved might be yours.



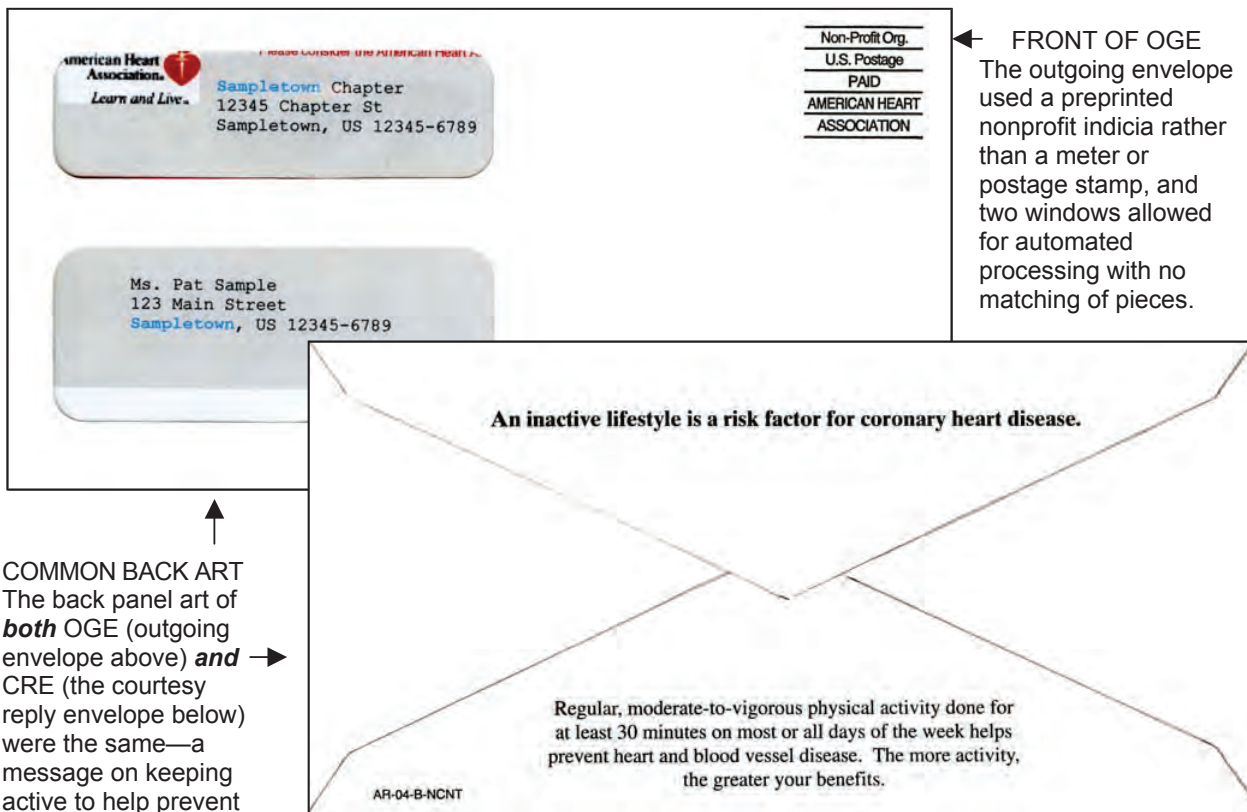
This seal signifies that the American Heart Association meets the BBB Wise Giving Alliance's Standards for Charity Accountability.



Raymond J. Gibbons, MD  
President and volunteer

**Figure 20. American Heart Association Double Remit control package appeal letter.**

## 2. #7-3/4 Double-Window Outgoing Envelope

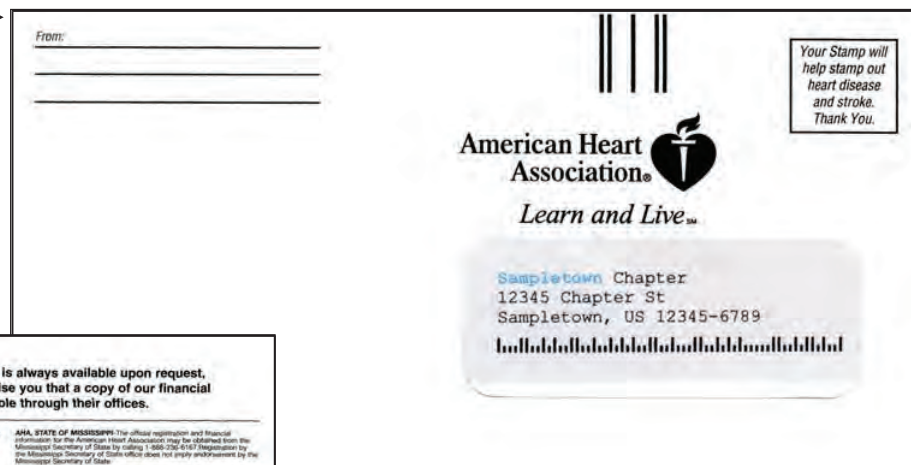


← FRONT OF OGE  
The outgoing envelope used a preprinted nonprofit indicia rather than a meter or postage stamp, and two windows allowed for automated processing with no matching of pieces.

COMMON BACK ART  
The back panel art of **both** OGE (outgoing envelope above) **and** CRE (the courtesy reply envelope below) were the same—a message on keeping active to help prevent heart disease.

## 3. #7-1/4 Reply Envelope

The custom-size #7-1/4 CRE measures 3-5/8" x 7-1/4" to accommodate the size of the reply device at top half of the letter form, which measures 3-1/2" x 7".



## 4. Buck Slip



← Back

Front →

NOTICE OF FINANCIAL RECORDS AVAILABILITY  
Stuffed inside the note card was a 3" x 5" slip printed 2/1 (Black and red on one side, black on the other) on 20# white bond paper explaining that the organization's



Figure 21. American Heart Association Double Remit control package reply pieces.



### Mailing 3 Test Results: Double Remit Package vs. Computer HandScript™ Note Card

Packages Compared:	# Mailed:	% Resp:	Avg. Gift:	Gross Income:	Net Income:
A Double Remit Package (control)	24,997	1.70%	\$23.49	\$10,007.00	\$5,185.58
B Computer HandScript™ (test)	25,000	5.89%	\$22.48	\$33,091.74	\$4,591.74
Increase with HandScript™:		+346%	-0.04%	+331%	-0.11%

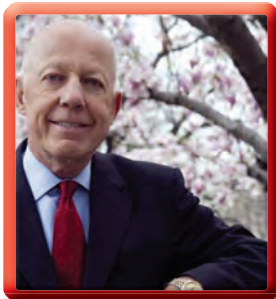
Table 7. Simulated handwriting regained more lapsed donors than American Heart's double remit package.

## Personal Connection More Effective Than Form Letter for Lapsed Donors

The purpose of American Heart Association's double remit campaign was to reach out to lapsed donors whose last gift had been made between 13 - 36 months prior to the mailing. Like their donor renewal campaign, the primary purpose of their lapsed donor campaign was to renew as many relationships as possible, so success was measured in terms of total donors regained. While the average gift and net income to the double remit appeal outperformed the Computer HandScript™ note package, *the response rate was almost three-and-a-half-times greater for the test package*. This measure outweighed average gift and net income factors.

### What This Case Says About relationships . . . Loyalty . . . and Fund Raising

*Harvard Business Review* published a landmark article, *Zero Defections*, by Harvard's W. Earl Sasser and Fredrick Reichheld. Their research of customer loyalty factors in 100 organizations dramatized how income grew exponentially by treating customers well (see sidebar). If resources flow from relationships, then these same technologies could (and *should*) be used as much to communicate appreciation as to ask for funds.



Cass Wheeler

Of my doctoral research, Cass Wheeler, who was American Heart C.E.O. from 1997-2008, wrote:

"Frank, thanks. I retired but I made sure that this research got in the

hands of AHA leadership. Keep me on your mailing list as I still do some consulting. So glad the team was helpful and thanks for your kind words about Texans. All the best and thanks for doing this important work."

One morning Charles Crawley, President of MBNA bank, frustrated by letters from unhappy customers, announced to his 300 employees, "From this day forward, we're going to satisfy and keep each and every customer." With no new acquisitions, their industry ranking went from 38th to 4th and profits increased sixteen-fold. **They found that . . .**

#### By cutting customer losses in half:

- duration of customer lifetime **doubled**
- relationship lifetime income **increased 55%**

#### By cutting customer losses 5% more:

- duration of customer lifetime **doubled again**
- relationship lifetime **increased 75%**

#### Win new v. upgrade current customers:

It costs **5 times more to win a new customer** than sell a current one. **Gartner research found:**

- It costs \$280 to acquire a new customer
- It costs only \$57 to make a sale to a current one


Connecting with donors with HandScript™-personalized mail and by using language that makes a personal connection and tells stories can achieve the same kinds of results in the nonprofit sector. 📧

## Epilogue (ep'uh-lawg) Gk: *epi* [upon] + *logos* [word]


Let me add an epilogue—a word or two *on top of* the literature review and my American Heart Association data. Two more data points, taken from work with clients, are presented—one for the Detroit Symphony Orchestra and another for the Union Gospel Mission, Spokane.

**The Detroit Symphony Orchestra**  
**Audience Profile: Donors**  
**List Profile: Current and Lapsed**

- ♦ **Response Rate: 26%**
- ♦ **Income Raised: \$160,000**



**“The campaign exceeded our wildest expectations.”**  
*Brian Lauterbach*  
**Sr. Director of Annual Giving**




While most packages tested have been *A-6 greeting card style*, this *number 10 letter package* looked very authentic. In fact, the director of development noted that a couple had called, asking: “Could you please help us settle a bet? Was this written by hand or by computer?” Obviously the HandScript™ P.S., complemented in the return address by the conductor’s signature, looked real.



**Union Gospel Mission, Spokane**  
**The HandScript™-Personalized Note Card fund**  
**appeal High Touch Direct Mail produced in 2009**  
*outperformed our prior year's appeal by 532%.*

*Dave Wall*  
**Director of Development**



Produced by:	Mailed:	Replies:	% Rate:	Total Cost:	Unit Cost:	Avg. Gift:	Gross Income:	Net Income:
UGM (In-house)	22,742	649	2.85%	\$11,472	50.4¢	\$42.00	\$ 27,472	\$15,734
High Touch	22,100	1,471	6.66%	\$16,424	74.3¢	\$68.00	\$100,065	\$83,641
Improvement . . .			<b>+234%</b>	<b>+143%</b>		<b>+162%</b>	<b>+364%</b>	<b>+532%</b>

The literature reviewed covered an April 1995 case on results achieved by Seattle’s Union Rescue Mission. That campaign achieved a 6.33:1 ROI. The above case, 14 years later, got a 5.09: 1 ROI. The trend still holds true. As John Naisbitt said: *handwriting adds human ballast.*



# “What a difference a mark makes!”

I hypothesized that by canceling discount stamps, such mail would look like it had been sent at the full first class rate, and more envelopes would thus get opened.



**Figure 22. A special exemption from the USPS allows a PostCode™ cancellation, gave discount stamps a first class look.**

Another campaign produced by the American Heart Association compared variation in response attributable to another paratextual variable—differing postage treatments.

- The *control* segment used full-rate first class stamps that had been canceled by the USPS.
- The *test* segment used pre-canceled first class stamps that had been canceled by the mail shop ***in order to make letters look as though they had been sent at the full first class rate.***

Contrary to what the word suggests, pre-canceled stamps (whether first class, nonprofit, or commercial standard) are not defaced ahead of time with the familiar wavy lines you see next to the circle where the date of mailing gets printed. In fact, the DMM [Domestic Mail Manual] ***actually prohibits canceling this class of postage stamps.*** So what the term *pre-canceled* really means is this—they don’t *need* to be canceled. But even though not *needing* a cancellation mark may be a convenience, it’s no *benefit*. That’s because a letter mailed with a *naked* stamp (one not canceled) actually looks like junk mail.

So High Touch Direct Mail requested, and has received a special written exemption from the rule that prohibits canceling these stamps. We are now authorized by the USPS to cancel all classes of stamps. I hypothesized that by canceling discount stamps, such mail would look like it had been sent at the full first class rate, and more envelopes would thus get opened. The results? ***“What a difference a mark makes!” There was no statistical difference between the response rate of either segment.*** Live stamps had been affixed to both segments. Both segments had been canceled. But the pre-canceled first class segment looked like ordinary full-rate first class mail, and as a result, just as many got opened.



The next question: ***“Would a mailing that used canceled nonprofit stamps also look like first class mail?”*** First I compared the difference in response in A/B tests in which half the nonprofit stamps were canceled and half were naked (not canceled). The first a test was conducted for Franciscan Friars of the Atonement:

- The *control* segment was mailed with naked (not canceled) nonprofit stamps.
- The *test* segment was mailed with nonprofit stamps that were canceled to make mail them look as if the letters had sent at the full first class rate.



## The Data

### Canceling Nonprofit Stamps Increased Response by 27.27%.

#### The Verdict

The only difference between the two segments of the Franciscan Friars of the Atonement mailing was the **presence or the absence of a cancellation mark that defaced the stamp**. Response to the canceled stamp segment was **27.27 percent greater** than response to the naked-stamp segment.

Without PostCode™

4.4%

With PostCode™

5.6%

Net Increase

1.2%  
(27.27% Lift)

Table 8. The increase in response attributable to canceling discount stamps.

## The Implications

This test, comparing variation in response to mail sent with *canceled* versus *naked* nonprofit stamps, has important implications for further research. But immediately *it suggests a way nonprofits might achieve significant savings by sending at the nonprofit (or at least the first class presort rate), mail that they are now sending at the full first class rate.*

The combination of realistic-looking simulated handwriting, married with canceled nonprofit stamps, overcomes the *negative first impression* that most nonprofit mail makes.

In the typical home, mail is sorted into two piles—*keep* and *toss*. Managing paratextual variables can help land mail in the *keep* pile.

In addition to the support of data, anecdotal experience adds to the strength of this argument. My company, High Touch Direct Mail, routinely receives back in the mail, address corrections for letters we had mailed at the commercial standard rate. Similarly, many clients for whom we send mail at the nonprofit rate receive address corrections on some mail.



This occurs *despite the fact that postal regulations state that undeliverable standard and nonprofit letters are to be discarded rather than returned to the sender.*

Postal workers are obviously mistaking such pieces for ordinary full-rate first class mail. So it's reasonable to assume that *if mail carriers aren't treating such pieces like junk mail, neither will donors.* Canceling nonprofit stamps gets more mail opened and can cut mailing costs by as much as 71% (e.g. \$0.45 at the first class rate versus \$0.13 for mail sent at the most favorable nonprofit rate).



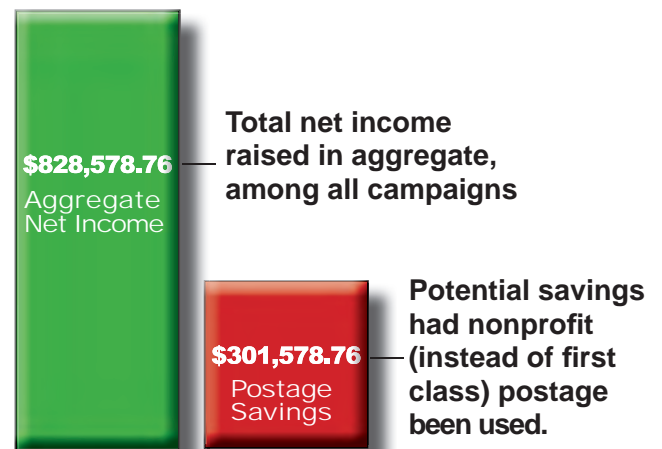
**The next steps: test canceled nonprofit stamps head-to-head against mailings sent at the full first class and first class presort rates. If the results show little or no difference in response, this could be a significant breakthrough in managing postage costs for nonprofit organizations.**

Although new media and email will keep growing in popularity, for many nonprofits direct mail will remain an important medium for attracting new donors and upgrading the giving of current supporters.

In fact, direct mail accounts for more than 80 percent of the typical nonprofit's income. Therefore, strategies that save money while boosting direct mail response should be welcome.

The magnitude of savings possible becomes dramatically clear when the numbers are crunched. Consider how much American Heart Association could have saved on the 1,077,067 pieces of mail they sent at the first class rate.

**How more than a quarter million dollars could have been saved!**



**Figure 23. American Heart's postage savings alone could have been 36% of total net income.**

Had American Heart's mail been sent at the nonprofit rate, 66% could have been saved, based on an estimate of 15¢ each for nonprofit postage—more than a quarter million dollars!

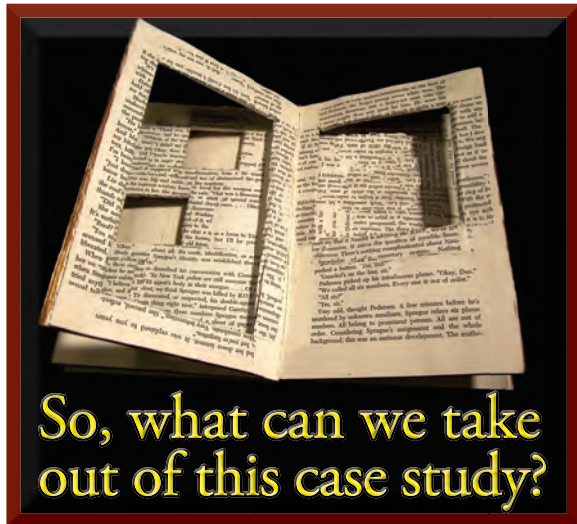
**Based on these assumptions, American Heart Association would have saved \$301,578.76. That's 36 percent of the \$828,726.87 in total net income their campaigns raised!**

### **The 2005 American Heart Association Roll Out Campaign**

In 2005, a variation on the campaigns reviewed here was rolled out to more than a million households. However, a change in the paratext (the look of the outgoing envelope, and the quality of the computer-simulated handwriting) led to less effective results. To read more about these campaigns, I have excerpted the chapter of my dissertation on the impact of manipulating paratextual variables. (See see item 12, **The Impact of Paratextual Variables on Response and ROI**, listed along with other resources on page 35).

Access this chapter by going to my academic research site ([www.TheWrittenVoice.org](http://www.TheWrittenVoice.org)) or download the document directly by typing the link on page 35 directly into your browser.

# The BIG takeaways from this case . . .



The linguistics data of my study of fund-raising discourse revealed a serious problem with the way nonprofit executives write. Their writing reads like academic prose and is devoid of stories.

And the paratextual (physical) aspects of direct mail are equally troubling. Most charities' mail looks mass-produced, so it often doesn't get opened. But this case proves that two features can help:

**Simulated Handwriting**      **Canceled Discount Stamps**

*Ms. Pat Sample  
123 Main Street  
Anytown, UT 12345-6789*



The following is a recap of the campaigns that used these features . . .

## Recap of Three American Heart Association March 2004 Renewal Campaigns


Description	Select Criteria	List Count	Gift Count	Resp. Rate %	Gross Income	Avg Gift	Income Per Ltr
Computer HandScript™ Note Card Test Package	0-12 mos \$15-\$49.99	25,000	2,772	11.09%	\$62,854.80	\$22.67	\$2.51
Gift Box of Free Greeting Cards Control Package	0-12 mos \$15-\$49.99	25,000	2,005	8.02%	\$42,187.50	\$21.04	\$1.69
Computer HandScript™ Note Card Test Package	0-12 mos \$50+	25,000	2,274	9.10%	\$196,015.50	\$86.20	\$7.84
Real Handwritten Note Card Control Package	0-12 mos \$50+	25,000	2,112	8.45%	\$173,639.74	\$82.22	\$6.95
Computer HandScript™ Note Card Test Package	13-36 mos \$15-\$49.99	25,000	1,472	5.89%	\$33,091.74	\$22.48	\$1.32
Double Remit Window Letter Control Package	13-36 mos \$15-\$49.99	24,997	426	1.70%	\$10,007.00	\$23.49	\$0.40
<b>March 2004 Renewal Campaign Totals:</b>		<b>149,997</b>	<b>11,061</b>	<b>7.37%</b>	<b>\$517,796.28</b>	<b>\$46.81</b>	<b>\$3.45</b>

**Table 9. Recap of results of 2004 renewal campaign testing Computer HandScript™ simulated handwriting against three control packages. (Data courtesy of Sherry Minton and Renee Warner, American Heart Association: Dallas, TX)**

The 2004 American Heart Association renewal campaign tested a note card fund-appeal package, personalized with a Computer HandScript™ simulated handwriting style (created from samples of my own penmanship) against three competing control packages. **Ensuring arm's length objectivity, none of the production was coordinated by the author's company, High Touch Direct Mail.**

Three separate firms were responsible for each test and American Heart Association managed planning, implementation, and evaluation. The competing packages included: 1.) a control package consisting of a gift box of greeting cards (commonly called a front-end freemium), 2.) a real handwritten note card and 3.) a double-remit form (a standing control package consisting of a single-sheet form mailed in a window envelope).

In the first two tests, the Computer HandScript™ package outperformed its competition on five measures: 1.) gift counts, 2.) response rate percent, 3.) gross income, and 4.) income per letter. The level of statistical significance was high in all tests—in test one alpha = .01, in test two alpha = .02, and in test three alpha = .01. Statistical significance was measured as P values, which represent the level of confidence that, were the same test repeated 100 times, the results would be the same.

This means, for example, that there is only a 2 percent chance that the results of test two (comparing simulated handwriting against real handwriting) were due to random occurrence. The most significant finding was that **Computer HandScript™ was so realistic that it actually beat real handwriting—underscoring its authenticity.** 



# About the research and its author



I did my doctoral research at Claremont Graduate University, studying at the Peter F. Drucker School of Management and The School of Educational Studies.

Working in the field of corpus linguistics, I married the soft art of language analysis with the hard science of multivariate statistics to describe the linguistic and paralinguistic discourse of fund raising. This article describes four tests within that study which

described how manipulating two paratextual (non-verbal) aspects of direct mail significantly affected response to fund appeals.

Special thanks is owed to Sherry Minton, Renee Warner, and Cass Wheeler at The American Heart Association and Ray Morrissey at Franciscan Friars of the Atonement for sharing data. Their uncommon kindness and willingness to share information many charities and agencies might hold tight as trade secrets reflects the very spirit of generosity that drives philanthropy in the U.S. and Canada.

I've studied the language of philanthropy since my undergraduate years at Ohio State University, where I studied rhetoric and mass communication and stumbled on an ancient fund appeal written around 90 C.E. by Pliny the Younger. That curiosity eventually led to doctoral research that drilled down in several academic disciplines to understand how fund raisers write.

One of the great joys of that experience was studying under Peter Drucker at Claremont's Drucker School of Management in the early 1990s. At the time Peter was writing his book on nonprofit management and was working with Frances Hesselbein to establish the Peter F. Drucker Foundation for Nonprofit Management (now the Leader to Leader Institute).

Though Peter is rightly acknowledged as the father of modern management, he earned that reputation because he was first a great writer and storyteller. He began his career as a journalist. People, not management principles, were the central characters in all he wrote and taught. And he recognized the centrality of communication both for commercial and nonprofit enterprises alike.

This came out in remarks Drucker made about a 1939 lecture that he had attended in Cambridge where John Maynard Keynes spoke on his economic theories. Of that experience he would later write: "I suddenly realized Keynes and all the brilliant economic students in the room were interested in the behavior of commodities, while I was interested in the behavior of people."

Early on I observed the same thing about fund raising—that it's all about people. I was

thrown into fund raising as president of a student organization my freshman year at OSU. My first experience raising funds had me driving back to my hometown of Mt. Gilead Ohio to raise funds for a student leadership project. My first visit with was with Roy V. Whiston.

Roy was an Ohio State grad (class of '24) and owned Whiston's pharmacy. He knew me as one of the high school kids who'd browse his pharmacy's magazine rack after school, but never buy anything more than a Payday candy bar. Now I was a college student living in a dorm next to the Horseshoe Stadium on campus. As we talked, Roy told me he remembered when they started building that stadium in 1920 during his freshman year at OSU.

Looking back on that visit, it was all about connecting with Roy, and telling stories about what was happening on campus. And plenty was happening in the anti-war era of the Nixon years. I must have asked for a gift, but I honestly don't remember. What I do remember is Roy folding a check and handing it to me. Then as I began to unfold it, he puts his hand on mine, indicating he doesn't want me to look at it right away.

I knew why as soon as I got to the car. I was stunned to see it was for \$200—the entire amount I had to raise. Doesn't sound like a lot. But that was 1969 when the Dow closed at 800, mean household income was \$8,500, gas was 35 cents a gallon, and the typical home cost \$15,000. In 2011 money, his \$200 gift would now be \$1,035.30.

Ratios have changed a lot since then. But the same human motivations that prompted Roy to help me, remain unchanged. People still give to people who do things that help people. And language that connects at a personal level and tells stories is the still the best way to motivate people to give. And when the medium is direct mail, the more personal the look of the piece the better.

My first job after college was working with a nonprofit organization, and I've spent my entire adult life working for, or consulting with nonprofits. Eventually I helped direct development at an organization that now raises more than a half billion dollars annually in direct public support—no government grants or fees, just real money from ordinary people.

Today I am C.E.O. of High Touch Direct, a production company that produces direct mail campaigns that are personalized with computer-simulated handwriting. I also lead a research group that analyzes how people write: [www.TheWrittenVoice.org](http://www.TheWrittenVoice.org). And to help individuals learn how to infuse the written text with the passion of speech, I conduct a day-long workshop called ***The Narrative FundRaising Seminar***. To learn more about my seminar visit [www.NarrativeFundRaising.org](http://www.NarrativeFundRaising.org). I also teach graduate-level university courses in marketing and communication.

Claremont Graduate University's founding president, James Blaisdell (1867-1957), expressed the spirit of the school's mission in a statement now etched on a ceremonial campus gate: "They only are loyal to this college who, departing, bear their added riches in trust for mankind." In the spirit of that mission, if I can be help you in any way, contact me by email: [Frank@NarrativeFundRaising.org](mailto:Frank@NarrativeFundRaising.org), call me on my direct line: 909-864-2798, or reach me by mail at: 7412 Club View Drive, Suite 200, Highland, California 92346-3993.

## A Select List of Articles, & Presentations by Frank C. Dickerson

The following resources grew out of my doctoral studies at Claremont Graduate University on the discourse of philanthropy. Each title is summarized in a paragraph. And if you're reading a pdf, you should be able to download any item just by clicking on the hyperlink following the summary. If you have trouble, copy and paste the link into your browser. If that won't work, email me and I'll gladly send a pdf of any item you want. Finally, if you're reading a paper article, you can download these and more resources from academic research site: <http://www.TheWrittenVoice.org>.

1. **The Way We Write is All Wrong** Published in *The Journal of the DMA Nonprofit Federation*, this article summarizes my doctoral research in the field of corpus linguistics. The underlying purpose was to describe how fund raisers write. The research method involved measuring the content of 2,412 printed and online fund appeals. Computer scans of 1.5 million words of copy made it possible to tally the use of 67 linguistic features in appeals from 735 U.S. nonprofits that raise \$20 million+ annually. I determined which of 23 text genres these fund appeals most closely resembled. The title describes what I found—*the way we write is, indeed all wrong*. The typical fund appeal I reviewed, drawn from all nine philanthropic sectors and divided evenly among printed and online appeals, failed to make a personal emotional connection, was devoid of narrative, and read like academic prose. [http://www.thewrittenvoice.org/uploads/DMA\\_Nonprofit\\_Federation\\_Journal\\_Article\\_on\\_The\\_Language\\_of\\_Fund\\_Raising.pdf](http://www.thewrittenvoice.org/uploads/DMA_Nonprofit_Federation_Journal_Article_on_The_Language_of_Fund_Raising.pdf)

2. **Writing the Voice of Philanthropy: Fixing the Broken Discourse of Fundraising** In this *Nonprofit Quarterly* article I observe that the way the human brain processes narrative differs from the way it processes exposition. I also describe research by the late Walter Ong, renowned Jesuit scholar of cultural linguistics at St. Louis University. Ong, who had been a protégé of Canadian media scholar Marshall McLuhan, describes how changes in communication technologies have shaped culture across four major epochs (prehistory, orality, manuscripts, and literacy). Then at 10:30 p.m. on October 29, 1969 UCLA graduate student Charley Kline inaugurated digital epoch by sending five letters over what we now know as the Internet. From UCLA's SDS Sigma 7 host computer he transmitted just five letters to Stanford Research Institute's SDS 940 host: LOGIN. [http://www.thewrittenvoice.org/uploads/The\\_Nonprofit\\_Quarterly\\_\\_Spring\\_2010\\_--\\_Writing\\_the\\_Voice\\_of\\_Philanthropy.pdf](http://www.thewrittenvoice.org/uploads/The_Nonprofit_Quarterly__Spring_2010_--_Writing_the_Voice_of_Philanthropy.pdf)

3. **American Heart Association Case Study** 1.) How did the American Heart Association *increase response 346 percent* to a direct mail fund appeal? 2.) What *discount postage treatment* did they use that produced response *equal to that achieved with full-rate first class stamps*? 3.) How could this postage treatment have *saved \$301,578.36—36 percent of their campaign's \$828,726.87 net income*? Non-verbal dimensions of the *spoken word*, like shifts in tone of voice and changes in facial expressions, add to the impact of a *speech*. Similarly, non-verbal dimensions of the *written word* add to the impact of a *text*. In three 50,000 A/B test mailings. I discovered that mail personalized with computer-simulated handwriting increased response as much as 346% and could cut costs up to 71 percent. [http://app4.websitetonight.com/projects/1/2/8/3/1283090/uploads/AHA\\_CASE.pdf](http://app4.websitetonight.com/projects/1/2/8/3/1283090/uploads/AHA_CASE.pdf)



4. **Debunking the Philanthropy Fairy Myth** In reviewing the curricula of more than 300 higher education programs that feature courses on nonprofit management, I found that few offer significant coverage of fund raising. They talk a lot about policy, but virtually ignore raising the money needed to fund the programs their policy-centered programs equip leaders to guide. And I found a similar problem in the curricula of professional associations. Organizations like CASE, AFP and AHP offer plenty of fund-raising training. But they fail to teach practitioners how to use the underlying language that shapes the fund-raising message their training equips practitioners to deliver. This lack of attention to the central tasks of fund raising and its language might lead one to think that higher education and association leaders believe some benevolent philanthropy fairy just tosses magic dust, waves her wand, and *poof*: money suddenly appears. *But there's no wand, no magic dust, no fairy . . . just real people who raise money the old-fashioned way. They ask for it.*

<http://malwarwicknews.com/2010/11/the-myth-of-the-philanthropy-fairy/>

5. **Harvard University's Failed First Fund Appeal of 1633** This unsuccessful direct mail letter is posted on the SOFII web site. It describes an appeal John Eliot made of Sir Simonds d'Ewes in 1633 seeking funds for a college in the Massachusetts Bay Colony. While Eliot's letter to d'Ewes failed, elements absent in his letter were present in the relationship between Nathaniel Eaton, the school's first head, and John Harvard, with whom Eaton had attended Trinity College, Cambridge. Eaton turned out to be a criminal who'd beaten a teaching assistant within an inch of his life. And his wife was accused of pocketing money intended for running the kitchen, stretching the students' porridge with goat dung. Despite the Eatons' character flaws and the Massachusetts Bay Colony's poor hiring judgment, the personal connection between John Harvard and Nathaniel Eaton, dating back to Cambridge and cultivated in the New World, ultimately prompted Harvard to make the bequest that gave the school his name. The lesson—whatever the medium, personal connection and story matter.

<http://www.sofii.org/node/603>

6. **The World's Oldest Fund-Raising Letter Written by Pliny the Younger** Posted on the SOFII web site, my research, along with that of Ken Burnett, describes a first-century direct mail letter written by philanthropist/politician/scholar Pliny the Younger. An avid letter-writer, Pliny was the first-century's equivalent of a blogger. His letter to senator Cornelius Tacitus describes a matching-gift appeal he had made to a group of parents gathered at his Lake Como villa. He had asked them to help fund a local school. Unlike Eliot's failed 1633 letter to raise funds for a Massachusetts Bay Colony college, Pliny's language shows he understood the art of leveraging language to make a personal connection and tell a purposeful story.

<http://www.sofii.org/node/559>

7. **How to Avoid the Five Fatal Mistakes Fund Appeals Make** This is an expanded 69-page speaking script of my 1-1/2 hour research briefing, originally presented during the Association of Fundraising Professionals International conference in Chicago. While it lacks the interactive portion of my hands-on Narrative FundRaising workshop, it does contain more than 50 specific writing tips divided across three domains of language.

[http://www.thewrittenvoice.org/uploads/Writing\\_the\\_Voice.pdf](http://www.thewrittenvoice.org/uploads/Writing_the_Voice.pdf)

8. **Narrative Fundraising Seminar: Writing the Stories of Philanthropy** This brochure condenses the findings and implications of my research and describes ways to cure bad writing. The workshop examines three domains of language, illustrates principles using samples of real writing, and engages participants in hands-on learning as they apply what principles they by writing their own connecting narrative moment, reading it aloud and receiving critiques. [http://app4.websitetonight.com/projects/1/2/8/3/1283090/uploads/Narrative\\_Fundraising\\_Seminar\\_Brochure.pdf](http://app4.websitetonight.com/projects/1/2/8/3/1283090/uploads/Narrative_Fundraising_Seminar_Brochure.pdf)

9. **Rhetorical Structure and the Neurology of Narrative** This excerpt of a dissertation chapter reviews two veins of research which inform the practice of writing copy that connects at a personal and emotional level, and tells stories. It reviews literature in 1.) rhetoric—particularly the work of Kenneth Burke, and 2.) neurolinguistics—reviewing the work of Antonio Damasio and a team of Italian neuroscientists who identified the effect of what they hypothesized to be mirror neurons (mechanisms in the human brain that cause individuals to empathize with others when they read emotionally resonant narratives). I argue that ignoring appeals to emotion in preference for a “just the facts” approach ignores human nature. [http://thewrittenvoice.org/uploads/Writing\\_the\\_Connecting\\_Narrative\\_Moment.pdf](http://thewrittenvoice.org/uploads/Writing_the_Connecting_Narrative_Moment.pdf)

10. **Writing the Connecting Narrative Moment** This excerpt of a dissertation chapter discusses three sets of linguistic features that can help you connect with your reader and narrate a story: 1.) twenty-three features to use, arrayed on one end of a bipolar scale that create highly interpersonal texts; 2.) five features to avoid, arrayed on the opposite pole of the same scale that create highly informational texts; and 3.) six features to use that create narrative texts, 4.) two exemplar letters show how these 34 linguistic features produce different effects, and 5.) an excerpt from a speech Jesse Jackson gave showing how he marshaled three elements of style (repetition, dialogue and imagery) to produce a connecting narrative moment. [http://www.thewrittenvoice.org/uploads/Writing\\_the\\_Connecting\\_Narrative\\_Moment.pdf](http://www.thewrittenvoice.org/uploads/Writing_the_Connecting_Narrative_Moment.pdf)

11. **Exhibits of Narrative Fund-Raising Formats** Several high touch appeal styles are showcased. Under the two tabs of my production company’s website: the Story Cards and Custom Cards tabs feature **Note Cards**—stories presented in cards that fold to 4.5” x 6”; **One Minute Digests**—one- or two-sided 4.5” x 6” sheets that tell a story and ask for a gift; and **Connecting Narrative Moments**—stories presented on 3.25” x 6” buck-slip style inserts. The rest of the site illustrates how five non-language factors add to a text what a smile adds to a speech, thus getting more envelopes opened, more stories read, and more money raised. <http://www.TheWrittenVoice.org>

12. **The Impact of Paratextual Variables on Response and ROI** This excerpt of a dissertation chapter describes a failure. After successfully testing packages using simulated handwriting and canceled discount stamps American Heart Association’s roll-out campaign switched from Computer HandScript™ to a less-realistic-looking handwriting style that was obviously fake and destroyed the personal-stationery look of their carrier envelope causing response to decline 66 percent, net income to plummet 161 percent, and the campaign lost \$52,018.87. Lesson: *if it ain’t broke, don’t fix it!* [http://www.thewrittenvoice.org/uploads/The\\_Impact\\_of\\_Paratextual\\_Variables\\_on\\_Response\\_and\\_ROI.pdf](http://www.thewrittenvoice.org/uploads/The_Impact_of_Paratextual_Variables_on_Response_and_ROI.pdf)

13. **The Best and Worst Fund Appeals From My Research** I feature fund appeals that make five fatal mistakes and others that avoid them. I feature an acquisition letter that was so successful Covenant House has used it more than 20 years. Another Covenant House letter rated highest on narrative and personal connection among the 2,412 texts. A brief online piece by Stanford reflects a connecting narrative moment while one by The University of Wisconsin produced a dense online piece that makes no connection, contains no narrative:  
[http://www.thewrittenvoice.org/uploads/The\\_Best\\_and\\_Worst\\_Fund\\_Appeals\\_From\\_My\\_Research.pdf](http://www.thewrittenvoice.org/uploads/The_Best_and_Worst_Fund_Appeals_From_My_Research.pdf)

14. **Simulated Handwriting** Computer HandScript™ technology increased response for American Heart Association by 346 percent. But when their roll-out campaign chose to use a less realistic, obviously *fake* handwriting style, their campaign actually lost money. This paper describes the computer simulated handwriting process used in American Heart Association's successful test panels:  
[http://www.thewrittenvoice.org/uploads/About\\_High\\_Touch\\_Direct\\_Mail\\_s\\_Proprietary\\_Computer\\_HandScript\\_Technology.pdf](http://www.thewrittenvoice.org/uploads/About_High_Touch_Direct_Mail_s_Proprietary_Computer_HandScript_Technology.pdf)

15. **Text Analysis Guide: Evaluating The Three Domains of Language** This is a draft worksheet used in exercises during my Narrative Fundraising Seminar.  
[http://thewrittenvoice.org/uploads/Examples\\_of\\_Linguistic\\_Structure\\_in\\_Right\\_\\_\\_Wrong\\_Fund-Raising\\_Discourse.pdf](http://thewrittenvoice.org/uploads/Examples_of_Linguistic_Structure_in_Right___Wrong_Fund-Raising_Discourse.pdf)

16. **Examples of Linguistic Structure In Right & Wrong Fund-Raising Discourse** This draft article is a tale of two texts. The titles of each signals the fundamental difference between them. One is called *Help Send Carley to Camp* and the other *Help Ameliorate Economic Asymmetry*. The former uses linguistic features that create a conversational tone and present a human-interest narrative. The latter uses linguistic features that read like dense, emotionless, personless, academic prose. But these words are vague adjectives—useless for someone who wants to know how to improve their writing. So the article drills down to the linguistic substructure of each text. I describe how 23 linguistic features cause *Help Send Carley to Camp* to make a personal connection and tell a story and how 5 linguistic features rob *Help Ameliorate Economic Asymmetry* of any human touch.  
[http://app5.websitetonight.com/projects/1/2/8/3/1283090/uploads/Examples\\_of\\_Linguistic\\_Structure\\_in\\_Right\\_\\_\\_Wrong\\_Fund-Raising\\_Discourse.pdf](http://app5.websitetonight.com/projects/1/2/8/3/1283090/uploads/Examples_of_Linguistic_Structure_in_Right___Wrong_Fund-Raising_Discourse.pdf)

17. **Marketing Leadership** A CBO report released on April 19, 2012 found that from 2007-2011, the number of Americans on food stamps increased by 70 percent, noting that “nearly 45 million recipients, one out of every seven U.S. residents, received food stamp benefits in an average month in fiscal year 2011.” And according to a June 2012 Federal Reserve Bulletin (Vol 98 No 2), from 2007 - 2010 the great recession wiped out nearly two decades of Americans' wealth. Median family income declined 7.7 percent, adjusted for inflation, and the average family's net worth plunged from \$126,400 in 2007 to \$77,300 in 2010. Nearly forty percent of middle class America's wealth had evaporated. This article discusses the implications of these troubling trends for fund raisers and marketers.  
[http://app5.websitetonight.com/projects/1/2/8/3/1283090/uploads/Marketing\\_Leadership\\_in\\_the\\_Twenty-first\\_Century.pdf](http://app5.websitetonight.com/projects/1/2/8/3/1283090/uploads/Marketing_Leadership_in_the_Twenty-first_Century.pdf)



# The Descriptive-Generative Dichotomy



I hope this article, and those listed above, equip you to help others. But based on my own consulting and teaching experience, I've learned that information is like a reflection in a mirror. A mirror can only reflect reality. It's powerless to create it. It's **descriptive**, not **generative**. Only what a fund raiser communicates matters.

Only what we write, show or say to a donor can make them scared, sad, glad or mad enough to share our passion and give. But as my data indicate, that's no easy task. So to help leaders apply what my research uncovered and improve their fund-raising communication, I've developed a day-long workshop called **The Narrative Fundraising Seminar**. Its purpose is to help people avoid the five fatal mistakes fund appeals make. While it costs \$189 and a day of time, continued ineffective communication is far more costly.

I learned that information is is costly more than 30 years ago. At the time I was leading U.S. fund-raising for an international charity that now raises more than half a billion dollars annually. I taught a course for thousands of fund raisers who met with donors in local communities. Each was taught how to call for an appointment, make a face-to-face presentation, ask for a gift, and end with a second ask—a request for referrals. (In 1993 I contributed chapter 17: *Getting Referrals* in Bill Dillon's book *People Raising*; Chicago: Moody Press, <http://www.amazon.com/People-Raising-Practical-Guide-Support/dp/0802464475>.)

Although they **knew** what to do, those I trained almost always had problems **doing** what they knew. Especially when it came to requesting referrals. They'd complain, "I do everything you taught, but it isn't working!" I'd respond: "Okay, **show** me what you're saying." Invariably the staff member would begin to **tell** me what they were doing. So I'd have to stop them and say: "No, don't **tell** me, **show** me." I'd videotape a role-play that captured what they were saying when they asked for referrals, after which I replay the tape to compare what they **thought** they were saying versus what they were **actually** saying. As we watched the replay I would review performance in light of a list of do's don'ts written on the white board. The self-perception of those I counseled was always way off. **They broke most of the rules on the list.**

Finally, I would take them through a **learning loop** to ensure they not only **knew** what to ask, but were **applying** what they knew. The goal was to help them form new discourse patterns using a learning loop that included both knowledge and application. Now three decades later, the data of my linguistics research indicate that the same lack of self-perception extends to writing. Nonprofit executives believe that they should make personal connections with readers and that human-interest narratives can animate otherwise abstract cause.

But even though most fund raisers believe in and **know** a good a story when they read one, few know what **makes** a good story **good**. And those who do understand have trouble **applying** what they know. They seem to be writing for a professor who's no longer there.

In homage to the scientific method, generations of obedient pupils have learned to write in a style that's diametrically opposite what generations of development practitioners have discovered works to raise funds—writing that uses the persuasive leverage of narrative to convince the doubting mind, touch the apathetic heart, and move the reluctant will to give.

Such writing is quite very different from what the average fund-appeal writer personally likes. Trouble is, those fund raisers allow their personal likes to guide how write to donors and prospects.

But what you and I like really doesn't matter. What matters is what works. Ironically, most executives agree with that statement. In fact, they affirm that narrative and emotion are critical to effective communication. Yet my research reveals that their typical appeal takes pains to present a set of facts, arranged in a logical frame work, devoid of emotion. Their writing has no story spine, creates no emotional torque, and *doesn't work!*

Fund appeals demand the emotional energy that human-interest stories generate. To cure this problem, the *Narrative Fundraising Seminar* acts as a day of *deprogramming*. Participants learn to think differently about how they write. They define effects to be achieved, then work backwards building texts to achieve those ends.


So to be blunt, *we're all addicted to academicese and we need to be deprogrammed.* The *Narrative Fundraising Seminar* achieves this end by using a learning loop. The first part of that learning loop begins with the dreaded "T" word—*theory*. Indeed, *lack of theory of writing has led to the current crisis in philanthropic discourse.* So theoretical *information* is presented. But that theory is anchored in reality. I *illustrate* what works and doesn't work, drawing from actual samples that were evaluated in my study. Then I *demonstrate* how these theoretical principles are at work in two exemplar texts that I constructed to show how specific linguistic features produce specific effects.

Finally, seminar participants apply the *information* presented, *illustrated* and *demonstrated*. They *simulate* what they learned by writing a text of their own. Their peers then *evaluate* their work. And based on those suggestions, participants *correct* their copy. *Through this iterative process of absorbing information and applying it, change occurs!*

I hope you'll also attend a future workshop. To review *The Narrative Fundraising Seminar* agenda, a copy of the workshop brochure is included on pages 40-45 of this case study. For our seminar schedule, visit <http://www.NarrativeFundraising.org> or to schedule a private workshop for your organization, call my toll free at 888-HighTouch (888-444-4868) or email [Frank@NarrativeFundRaising.org](mailto:Frank@NarrativeFundRaising.org).



This article has described the effect of *paratext* on response to fund appeals—important since *it really doesn't matter what's inside if the envelope doesn't get opened*. But assuming you're fortunate enough to get your envelope opened, the recipient will still decide in seconds whether to toss or keep your piece. So the bulk of my work describes the effect of *text—verbal factors that win and keep a reader*. I describe these verbal factors in a *DMA Nonprofit Federation Journal* article. Below is a preface to that piece, the title of which describes what I discovered: *The Way We Write is All Wrong*. Download your free copy from [www.TheWrittenVoice.org](http://www.TheWrittenVoice.org).



# Journal

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Fund Raisers,  
We have a problem!

## The Way We Write Is All Wrong

by Frank C. Dickerson, Ph.D.

Clear and direct speech or writing demands short Anglo-Saxon words. The Old Norse *get* gets to the point more quickly than the Latin *acquire*. And it's certainly better than the affected verb-turned-noun, *make an acquisition*.

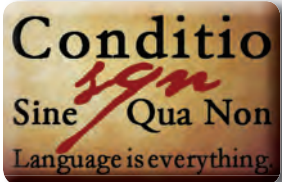
But to make the point that such points about language matter, the richness of the Latin legal phrase *conditio sine qua non* is better. It means *the condition without which not*. Without a strong language bridge between fund raiser and donor, no money is raised, no program is funded, and pretty soon ... a nonprofit organization simply ceases to exist.

More than 300 MBA-like graduate programs across North America equip nonprofit executives to lead their organizations. But most of these programs barely touch on fund raising. And while professional associations like AFP, CASE, and AHP offer plenty of practical training in technique, *they fail to teach practitioners how language shapes the underlying message technique delivers*.

This lack of attention to the central tasks of fund raising and its language might lead one to think our higher education and association leaders believe that some benevolent philanthropy fairy just tosses magic dust, waves her magic wand, and *poof*—money suddenly appears. But there is no wand, no magic dust, no fairy . . . just real people who raise money the old-fashioned way. They ask for it. And in asking, they leverage language to become the *voice* of those who have no voice. They become *the voice of philanthropy*—literally, *the voice of the friend of mankind*. The question is, *how strong is that voice*? New quantitative methods in the field of corpus linguistics answer that question.

Unfortunately, the answer is a harsh indictment on the discourse of the nonprofit sector. The sector's failure to teach language theory and practice is no less serious for fund-raisers, than were schools of engineering not to teach their professionals how to design load-bearing structures. That point was made by a tragedy on Friday July 17, 1981 when 114 people died at 7:04 p.m., crushed beneath two 32-ton walkways that fell to the lobby floor during a dance at Kansas City's Hyatt Regency. A bad choice in designing the tie-tods supporting the walkways had caused the collapse. This article is an exposé on the collapse of language in the nonprofit sector. The scope of that collapse is revealed in the largest research study of its kind.

The study marries the hard science of multivariate statistics with the soft art of language analysis. Its findings are shocking. They bring to mind the unsettling words that astronaut Jack Swigert radioed back to Houston on April 14, 1970 from Apollo 13. I echo Swigert in describing the implications of this benchmark research: *Fund raisers, we have a problem*.



Continued on page 16

While this article describes the problem with fund-raising discourse, the seminar described next solves those problems. (For a seminar schedule visit [www.NarrativeFundRaising.org](http://www.NarrativeFundRaising.org)).





# Narrative Fundraising

*A hands-on workshop for those who make live presentations, produce media, & write copy:  
Language that connects with donors & portrays compelling stories that move people to give.*



## *Writing the Stories of Philanthropy*



# The Way We Write is All Wrong: Do *your* fund appeals make these *five fatal mistakes*?

*Presented by*

**Frank C. Dickerson, PhD**



In the largest linguistics study of its kind, Dr. Dickerson analyzed a 1.5-million-word body of fund-raising texts across nine philanthropic sectors. Representing all 735 U.S. nonprofits that raise \$20 million or more, his computer analysis found five fatal mistakes in the 2,412 appeals profiled. Findings were based on texts' use of 67 language features.

The takeaway—marrying the hard science of multivariate statistics with the soft art of language analysis made it possible to describe how fund raisers write. Conducted at Claremont Graduate University's Peter F. Drucker School of Management and School of Educational Studies, the research peered beneath the surface of a 50/50 mix of printed and online appeals, subjecting them to the equivalent of a linguistic MRI. Frank says the disturbing discourse patterns revealed brought to mind the language of astronaut Jack Swigert's distress call from Apollo 13:

*Fund Raisers...We Have a Problem!*

## Language analysis revealed that the typical appeal ...

- reads like an *academic paper* for a professor who's no longer there rather than like a *conversation* between friends
- contains less *narrative* than *official documents*, using language that elevates *abstract concepts* over *people*
- lacks the three types of *characters* common to storytelling: *protagonists*, *antagonists*, and an *ensemble cast*
- fails to create *tension* by portraying *events* and quoting *dialogue* to make the reader *scared, sad, glad, or mad*
- neglects to show a donor how their gift can bring *resolution* to the narrative and make her or him its *hero figure*

## Ironically, this isn't the writing style leaders prefer ...

In addition to profiling texts, the research surveyed those who wrote them. To learn what factors nonprofit executives believe make a fund appeal effective, they were asked to score the importance of using an argument-centric (expository) style of writing on a 1 to 5 scale (with 5 being high). **Only 5.04 percent rated exposition high.**

Then they were asked to score the importance of using a more emotional, human-interest narrative writing style. **Those rating narrative high increased to 45.21 percent.**

But despite their 9 to 1 preference for narrative, the linguistic evidence of leaders' own writing samples revealed a wide gap between what they believe about good writing, and how they actually write.

This seminar will help you identify and avoid these five fatal mistakes in your writing. **You'll learn how to right the way you write.**

### Most-preferred Writing Style

Though nonprofit sector executives prefer narrative over exposition by a ratio of 9 to 1, their own writing doesn't connect at a personal level and is devoid of human interest—a grave disconnect between practice and beliefs. This hands-on seminar helps resolve this schizophrenia.

**5.04%**

**Exposition**

**45.21%**

**Narrative**

Percentage of nonprofit executives rating exposition and narrative high



# Three Keys to **R**ighting the Way You Write



Margaret Atwood

Canadian author Margaret Atwood tells a parable about a dinner conversation which, though *fictional*, illustrates the *reality* of how we think about writing.

The man seated next to Margaret introduces himself and asks: “**What do you do, Ms. Atwood?**” She replies: “**I’m a writer.**” The man responds enthusiastically: “**Really! When I retire I’m going become a writer too.**” Margaret reciprocates: “**And what do you do, sir?**” He replies: “**I’m a neurosurgeon.**” With a twinkle in her eye, Atwood shoots back: “**How interesting, I always thought that when I retire, I’d take up brain surgery!**”

## Few of us think about *how* we write.

Atwood’s acerbic reply frames how we think about writing—we don’t. We take it for granted. We use it in discourse about more weighty matters, but seldom do we consider writing as a subject in its own right.

And when we do think about writing, we’re more concerned about not embarrassing ourselves by flubbing up on some point of grammar or syntax. While the rules of writing are important, it’s far more important to *think about the larger picture, comprised of the three language domains.*



## You’ll Learn About The Three Language Domains . . .



### Domain 1: *Rhetorical Superstructure*

Architect Louis Henri Sullivan, known as the father of skyscrapers in late 19<sup>th</sup> century Chicago, wrote that **form ever follows function**. And like building a house (or erecting a skyscraper), as the architect of your text, you first have to define its **function**. What do you want your writing to **accomplish**?

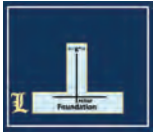


This seminar holds two premises to be true about the **function** of a fund appeal: 1.) stories make the **emotional connection** that motivates giving; 2.) stories build long-term **donor loyalty**. Decades of thought leaders have championed these premises. Yet research shows few leaders write effective narrative appeals. *They know a good story when they see one, but they don’t see what makes a good story good.*

*You’ll learn the ten secrets of writing a successful narrative fund appeal that . . .*

- **Connects** at a personal level by **reading** like a face-to-face conversation between friends **sounds**
- **Bonds** with your reader by introducing an appealing cast of characters **your organization helps**
- **Shows** how your organization can change the life of one person by reenacting a **narrative moment**
- **Anchors** your narrative moment in time and space by painting **word pictures that depict its setting**
- **Upsets** the protagonist’s narrative world-in-balance by depicting an event that **creates a sudden shock**
- **Describes** your protagonist as he or she struggles to set their world right again by **setting a strategy**
- **Unfolds** movement toward resolution by recounting key events in the protagonist’s **scary sojourn**
- **Offers** hope for resolution by describing how your organization can bring **specific resources to bear**
- **Portrays** how your reader can be the hero figure by **funding** the cost of providing those resources
- **Closes** the narrative by asking the reader to **accept the leading role of hero or heroine** by giving





## Domain 2: *Linguistic Substructure*

Like a contractor's raw materials of wood, wire, and pipe . . . a writer's stock-in-trade is the language she or he uses to compose texts. Computer analysis makes it possible to count the frequency of groups of words that create the tone of a document. For instance, twenty-three linguistic features create highly interpersonal texts, six produce highly informational texts, and six linguistic features create narrative.



*A sample of 67 linguistic features that work together to produce specific outcomes . . .*

### Personal Connection Features

- Private Verbs (I think, I feel)
- Contractions (don't, that's)
- 2<sup>nd</sup>-Person Pronoun (you)

### Dense Information Features

- Nominalizations (hopeful *vs.* hope)
- Prepositions (among, for, toward)
- Adjectives (supportive response)

### Narrative Features

- Past Tense Verbs (broke, hit)
- Public Verbs (said, told)
- 3<sup>rd</sup>-Person Pronouns (he, she)

*You'll see copy that fails to connect and tell stories so you can adjust your own writing*

### *Informational Non-narrative Text*

#### **Help Ameliorate Economic Asymmetry**

For mothers who are their families' sole source of support, economic impediments constrain their ability to make provision for childcare, adequate housing, and basic nutrition for their children. It is inopportune that as a consequence of these limitations, their discretionary funds for what social workers call bridging experiences, which research suggests are salient to the development of pre-teen youth, increasingly are being put in heightened jeopardy. Concurrently, anomalous revenue flows are curtailing county and city funding for the camping trips that would help inform the ecological views of at-risk youth, making philanthropy the only mitigating factor for ameliorating this causal economic asymmetry and its consequent malevolent outcomes. Thus, Wentworth, I remain hopeful, that your consideration might soon prompt a pace-setting contribution.

### *Interpersonal Narrative Text*

#### **Help Send Carley to Camp**

As soon as everyone was gone, I saw tears well up in Carley's eyes. She said: "Mama told me I can't go to camp 'cuz we can't 'ford it." Suddenly her little dream of a week at camp with friends had evaporated. Twenty dollars is all we ask families to pay. Not much. That's the cost of a few gourmet cups of coffee for you or me. But for Carley's mom, Laura, \$20 might mean her other three kids—Sally, Tom and Jon—could miss a meal. It matters! It broke my heart to think Carley and others wouldn't get to go to camp. But it takes money to get them there. And frankly, right now I just don't know where that money's going to come from. That's why I'm writing, John. Can you help Carley and her friends get to camp? Can you send a gift of \$20 or more in the enclosed envelope today?

*During this seminar you'll review and learn from real fund appeals like these . . .*

- A 1633 letter by John Eliot for a Massachusetts Bay Colony school that would become Harvard
- A 90 AD letter by Pliny the Younger to Cornelius Tacitus for a school in Pliny's hometown of Como
- The best narrative reviewed among 2,412 documents, written by Covenant House of New York
- An online appeal by Jewish Joint Distribution Committee to assist Holocaust survivors
- An online appeal by Stanford University that tells the story of a PhD candidate in Economics
- An online blog and letter by Partners Relief, a Norwegian human rights agency working in Burma
- A letter by the Girl Scouts of the U.S.A. that illustrates the problem with generalization
- A University of Wisconsin appeal that ranked highest among 2,412 texts for informational density

*Like no other workshop: We Believe in Language . . . not some mythical Philanthropy Fairy*

In reviewing the curricula of more than 300 higher education programs that feature courses on nonprofit management, few were found to offer significant coverage of fund raising. And while professional associations offer plenty of fund-raising training, they fail to teach practitioners how to use the underlying language that shapes the fund-raising message their training equips practitioners to deliver. This lack of attention to the central tasks of fund raising and its language might lead one to think that higher education and association leaders believe some benevolent philanthropy fairy just tosses magic dust, waves her wand, and *poof*—money suddenly appears. **But there is no wand, no magic dust, no fairy . . . just real people who raise money the old-fashioned way. They ask for it. This seminar will give you the language resources to ask effectively.**

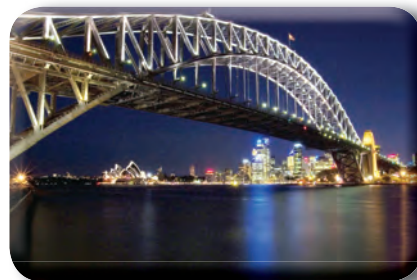




## Domain 3: *Stylistic Infrastructure*

Language is the bridge that connects us to others through what we write or say. But it's more than the sum of its linguistic and rhetorical parts. As the setting and design of the Sydney Harbor bridge creates an elegant scene, language can be structured to make a human connection.

The bridge spanning Sydney's harbor is the world's largest, containing 6 million hand-driven rivets and huge hinges to accommodate expansion. A fund-raising narrative contains its own support paraphernalia—elements of stylistic infrastructure that produce the emotional torque which enables it to . . .



- **Connect** at a personal level like two friends talking over a cup of coffee, and
- **Narrate** a compelling story that evokes an emotional response.

The primary task for an appeal is to create that emotional resonance with a narrative that motivates a donor beyond what the weight of facts alone can persuade him or her to do. While the weight of reason will indeed help a donor **decide** to give, reason can only confirm what the heart has first **moved** them to give. So writing and speech must **touch** the apathetic **heart**, **convince** the doubting **mind**, and **move** the reluctant **will**.

Sadly, most fund raisers are good at talking to the head, but lousy at touching the heart. This seminar will help you elevate the emotional quotient of your writing by building a connecting narrative moment.

*In real samples you'll see how the stylistic infrastructure of language can . . .*

- **Grab** attention with an opening that makes them want more (She glanced nervously up and down the street.)
- **Cut** a narrative window through which the reader sees and feels tension (Jan was shivering and was scared.)
- **Animate** scenes by replacing adjectives with verbs (My boyfriend beats me up. *vs.* He has been abusive.)
- **Quote** dialogue (Jan said "My boyfriend's gonna' be mad." Sister Mary asked "Boyfriend? You mean your pimp?")
- **Visualize** a gift's impact by showing tangible outcomes (Just \$3.57, the cost of a latte, will provide Jan two hot meals.)

## Putting It All Together in a Story-Raising Session: You'll build your own *connecting narrative moment*

Like an old-fashioned barn raising, this seminar will include a chance for you to roll up your sleeves and build a **connecting narrative moment**, which as the words imply, has three characteristics . . .



- **Connecting:** It makes an emotional personal **connection**
- **Narrative:** It **narrates** a story with people, tension, and resolution
- **Moment:** It does this in a short **moment** of copy space

Whether your connecting narrative moment will be used in a direct mail fund appeal or newsletter, a piece that will be emailed or posted on a social media platform, or it becomes the core of a face-to-face conversation with a donor, the message needs to include the three elements of a story: **People**, **Tension**, and **Resolution**.

*To write a connecting narrative moment you'll need to bring information about:*

### *People*

**Protagonist** | **Antagonist** | **Ensemble**

Fund appeals need to be more about **people** than ideas. But because details about **people** are hard to come by, writing often degenerates to a boring, lazy regurgitation of mission-statement babel. So **bring to the seminar, details on the three types characters found in stories.**





## Tension

*Sequence & Setting | Steady State | Sudden Shock | Solution Strategy | Scary Sojourn*

People are like toothpaste tubes. What's inside comes out when they get squeezed. It's the **tension** of conflict that does the squeezing. But to portray conflict, you need details. Only then can you write across the five elements of the story-arc listed above.



## Resolution

Your connecting narrative moment needs to show the reader how their gift can help resolve the conflict described. In a **commercial exchange**, the seller tells a potential customer how the product their money would **buy** could benefit **him or her**. In a **philanthropic exchange**, a fund raiser tells a potential donor how the charitable work their money would **fund** could benefit **others**. While a customer can kick the tires or thump the melon before **buying**, a donor depends on the promise delivered in words before **giving**. Bring the information necessary to write a compelling promise about what the donor's gift will do—the details needed to write the **offer**.



## Group Story Swap: Like cookies, stories are meant to be shared

Before you leave, like an old-fashioned **cookie swap**, you will have baked and shared with your fellow seminar participants, a brief connecting narrative moment. You'll receive constructive criticism and have the beginnings of a story that you can post online, use in face-to-face presentations, speeches, newsletters, and direct mail appeals.

## Finally, you'll learn how to ensure your story gets read



**The best story won't raise a penny if the email, or the envelope it's sent in, doesn't get opened.**

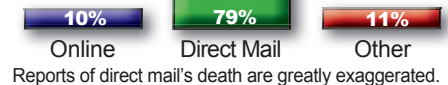
A 2008 *Nonprofit Times* review of research drove this home in an article on *email open rates*.

Citing data from Convio, their report concluded: **"Getting a donor or advocate to open an email message is getting tougher, down to 14 percent from 22 percent"—a precipitous 36% drop.**

While online giving keeps fluctuating, a Blackbaud report now opens a window on the strength of U.S. mail. Their 2011 analysis of 15.6 million donors who gave \$1.16 billion dollars concludes: **"Five years in, it is clear that direct mail giving is still the overwhelming majority of fund-raising revenue, and organizations must find ways to optimize multichannel giving versus hyper-focusing on Internet giving alone."** Given the confirmed prominence of mail, I measured the affect of **paratextual** factors on response.

### Giving Trends

The channels by which 15.6 million donors gave \$1.16 billion in 2010.



**Paralanguage** works **parallel** to the **spoken word** to **enhance the impact of speech** (e.g. tone of voice, gestures, facial expressions). **These non-linguistic variables contribute more to speech than the words spoken.** And **paratextual** factors work **parallel** to the **written word** to **get more mail opened** (e.g. addressing envelopes and writing notes in simulated handwriting, and canceling discount stamps to make them look first class).

### American Heart Association Campaign Data

## A/B Testing

	Qty	Resp%	Gift Avg	Gross
<b>A: Control</b>	24,997	1.70%	\$23.49	\$10,007
<b>B: Test</b>	25,000	5.89%	\$22.48	\$33,092
<b>Increases:</b>		<b>+346%</b>		<b>+331%</b>
<b>A: Control</b>				
<b>B: Test:</b>				

Double remit envelope  
Conventional address  
Indicia (no stamp)



Note Card envelope  
HandScript address  
Canceled stamp



American Heart sent mailings to a total of 1,077,067 households with similar results, and ongoing A/B tests **continue**. Speaking at the Feb. 2011 Direct Marketing Association Nonprofit Conference about recent campaigns, American Heart's Sherry Minton said:

**"Mail to \$10+ donors increased response 100% and significantly more donors made a second gift [yielding] greater lifetime value."**

You'll learn how simulated handwriting and canceling discount stamps not only increased response **346%** for American Heart Association, but also confirmed how **\$301,578.76 could have been saved on postage.**





# Narrative Fundraising

“Dr. Dickerson, as part of his doctoral studies at Claremont Graduate University in California, analyzed more than 1.5 million words of online and printed fund-raising texts to determine how effectively fund raisers communicate with their audiences. While his findings were enough to fuel a 350-page dissertation, his thesis can be boiled down to a few short words: *Most fund-raising copy stinks.*”

**Peter Panepento**  
**Assistant Managing Editor**  
***The Chronicle of Philanthropy***

“This is very interesting work and of course extremely relevant for a large nonprofit like CARE. We know the importance of language in delivering our message to donors and the public. It is both interesting and helpful to read your analysis of the current problems that plague written fundraising communications. We’ve also been testing similar variables that you mentioned in your study, such as simulated hand-written fonts and nonprofit stamps vs. first class rate to name a few. And, we continue to learn from our testing and tweaking of direct mail copy as well. *Your research will be invaluable to us as we continue to try to ‘crack the code’ on what motivates individuals to take action through our direct response vehicles.*”

**Kymberly McElgunn Wolff**  
**Former Vice President, CARE**  
**Sr. VP Resource Development, Habitat for Humanity**

## Language Research & Text Analysis

**Email:** [Frank@TheWrittenVoice.org](mailto:Frank@TheWrittenVoice.org) | **Site:** [www.TheWrittenVoice.org](http://www.TheWrittenVoice.org)

- Visit this site for posts about new research
- Contact us to have your texts evaluated
- You can download more than a dozen free articles on the discourse of philanthropy

## Direct Response Writing & Production

**Email:** [HighTouchDirect@msn.com](mailto:HighTouchDirect@msn.com) | **Site:** [www.HighTouchCommunication.com](http://www.HighTouchCommunication.com)

- Hire us to write your next fund appeals
- Have us can print, personalize your appeal
- You could increase response by personalizing mail in **Computer HandScript™**

## Higher Education Curricula & Training Seminars

**Email:** [Frank@NarrativeFundRaising.org](mailto:Frank@NarrativeFundRaising.org) | **Site:** [www.NarrativeFundRaising.org](http://www.NarrativeFundRaising.org)

- Get our seminar schedule
- Invite us to teach an on-site seminar for your entire team
- Keep up on research trends and best practice in nonprofit communication

**Frank C. Dickerson, Ph.D. | 7412 Club View Dr. Ste. 200 | Highland, CA 92346**  
**direct: 909-864-2798 | toll free: 888-HighTouch (444-4868) | fax: 509-479-2690**