



# Narrative Fundraising™

## *Writing the Stories of Philanthropy™*

A Writing Workshop *for* Those Who Make  
Presentations, Produce Media, & Write Copy

Learn How You Can Build A Story That Inspires  
Giving *by* Writing *in* Three Language Domains

\* **LEVASIS** Presents Doctoral Research That Reveals:

- ◆ The Five Fatal Mistakes Found *in* The Verbal Language of Fundraising Texts
- ◆ The Two Non-Verbal Language Features That Lifted Direct Mail Response *by* 346%



\* **LEVASIS** is the California nonprofit organization that supported this doctoral research on the discourse of philanthropy and now sponsors the Narrative FundRaising Seminar as an educational outreach to key leaders within the nonprofit community.

Seminar Schedule: 9 am - 4 pm • Cost: \$225.00 | Briefing Schedule: 4:15 pm - 5 pm • Cost: Free

During this hands-on writing workshop you will learn how to build a compelling story that motivates giving. You will apply what you learn by writing elements of a narrative appeal. Then, you'll read selections of your writing to the workshop and get immediate feedback.





## The Way We Write is All Wrong



Frank Dickerson

### Do your fund appeals make these FIVE FATAL MISTAKES?

In the largest linguistics study of its kind, Dr. Frank 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 linguistic features.

### Language analysis found that the typical fund 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 character types common to storytelling: protagonist, antagonist, and supporting cast member.
- Fails to create tension with action, conflict, imagery, and dialogue in order to make the reader scared, sad, glad, or mad.
- Neglects to cast the donor in the role of hero by showing how his or her gift can bring resolution to the story told.

#### 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

### It doesn't matter that the email or envelope gets opened . . . if what's inside doesn't get read!

Doctoral research that married the hard science of multivariate statistics with the soft art of language analysis made it possible to describe how fund raisers write. The study was conducted at Claremont Graduate University's Peter F. Drucker School of Management and the university's School of Educational Studies.

Computer analysis peered beneath the surface of a 50/50 mix of 2,412 printed and on-line fund appeals. Texts were subjected to the equivalent of a linguistic MRI that yielded counts for 67 language features in each appeal. These counts made it possible to judge which, of 23 text genres, the appeals analyzed were most like.

Conclusion: *the writing of fund raisers most closely resembled the genres of academic prose and official documents.* This was shocking given that on a survey, study participants had indicated they actually preferred narrative over expository writing by a ratio of 9-to-1. *They believed one thing, but did another.*

**This seminar will help you avoid this schizophrenia by revealing the root cause of the mistakes fund appeals make. Then you'll learn how to RIGHT the way *you* WRITE.**



*"Frank, I tend to throw away many fund-raising letters and I never thought about analyzing the content to determine what works. Your language analysis and findings are critical to practitioners."*

Philip Kotler, Professor of Marketing • Northwestern University



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

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



# Three Keys to Righting the Way You Write

Margaret Atwood, author of *The Handmaid's Tale*, shares this parable about a dinner conversation. Though *fiction*, it illustrates the *reality* of how we think about writing . . .

The man seated next to Margaret at a Toronto banquet 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, asking: *"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. While we use language to engage in discourse on any number of subjects, we seldom give it much thought.

And when we do think about writing, we're more concerned with how to avoid the embarrassment of flubbing up on some rule of grammar or word choice than with how to communicate effectively. But the rules of grammar and lexis merely reflect common language patterns at a point in time. And as those patterns change over time, so change the rules that govern them.

So, while language rules matter in polite society, *what matters more in fund raising is understanding and writing in the three domains of language.*



Margaret Atwood



## Learn About the Three Domains of Language



### Rhetorical Superstructure

Architect Louis Henri Sullivan, known as the father of skyscrapers in late 19th century Chicago, wrote that *"form ever follows function."*

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 four premises to be true about the function of a fund appeal:

- 1.) A fund appeal must make an emotional human connection that will motivate someone to give.
- 2.) A story is the best way to make that connection.
- 3.) But a story must not camouflage the cause.
- 4.) Nor can a story be allowed to suffocate the ask.



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

Mal Warwick, Founder & Chair • Mal Warwick Associates



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

Grant McCracken, Ph.D. • Research Affiliate MIT





## Linguistic Substructure

Like a contractor who builds a house with the raw materials of wood, wire, and pipe . . . a writer builds a text with words, grammar, and narrative. The type and number of linguistic features used gives a text its **voice**. Twenty-three linguistic features create the voice of personal connection, six make a text sound dense and detached, and six more linguistic features produce a narrative tone.

**A sample of 67 linguistic features that, if built into the foundation of a text, will produce three specific effects . . .**

### Personal Connection Features

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

### Dense Information Features

Nominalizations (make a donation vs. donate)  
Prepositions (among, for, toward)  
Adjectives (supportive response)

### Narrative Features

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

# VOICE

**A fund appeal is only as strong as the language with which it's built.**

**But . . .** in reviewing hundreds of higher education programs on nonprofit leadership, most focused on topics like governance and ***totally ignored the subject of fund raising.*** Of course, the folly of this omission is that apart from fund raising, a nonprofit has nothing to govern.

And while professional associations like AFP, CASE, and AHP offer high-quality training on how to raise funds, they focus on technique ***while ignoring the underlying language used to shape the message technique delivers.***

This lack of attention to the central tasks of fund raising and its language might lead you to think that higher education and association leaders believe in ***some benevolent philanthropy fairy who tosses magic dust, waves her wand, and poof—money 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. This workshop will give you the language resources to strengthen your **voice** so you can **ask effectively.**

**You'll learn from some of the oldest, best, and worst fund appeals . . .**

- A 1633 letter by John Eliot for the Massachusetts Bay Colony school that became Harvard
- A 90 AD letter Pliny the Younger sent to Senator Cornelius Tacitus for a school in Como, Italy
- The best narrative reviewed of 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 an Economics PhD student
- An online blog and letter by Partners Relief, a Norwegian human rights agency in Burma
- A letter by the Girl Scouts of the U.S.A. that illustrates the problem with generalization
- A University of Wisconsin appeal ranking highest of 2,412 texts for informational density

**There is no philanthropy fairy . . .  
only the hard work of writing!**



***"I was pretty impressed. We need more research on the soft side of fund raising. Storytelling is where it's at."***

Gail Perry • Gail Perry Associates



***"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





## Stylistic Infrastructure

Language is the bridge that connects us to others through what we write, show, or say. But it's more than the sum of its linguistic and rhetorical parts. As the setting and design of Australia's Sydney Harbor bridge create 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.

A fund appeal must create emotional resonance with a narrative that motivates a donor beyond what naked facts alone might convince him or her to give.

### But . . .

while everyone knows a good story when they see, hear, or or read one one, few know what **makes** a good story good. This workshop will help you leverage four elements of stylistic infrastructure to build stories that move people to give.

### You'll put all the pieces together in a story-raising session . . .

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, as an anecdote to support a formal proposal, or as a blueprint for what will be a face-to-face conversation with a donor . . . the message needs to include *the three elements all well-built stories need*:

- **PEOPLE**
- **TENSION**
- **RESOLUTION**



You'll learn four elements of style that will make your stories both readable and memorable:



*"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 Huntsinger, Founder • Huntsinger & Jeffer



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

Kivi Leroux Miller, Principal • NonProfitMarketingGuide.com





Writing the Stories of Philanthropy™  
An Interactive Writing Workshop Presented by Frank Dickerson, PhD

## Swap Your Story and Learn How to Get it Read



### 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. *Stories inspire and persuade across all media.*



**BUT ...**

**The best story won't raise a penny if the email or the envelope it's sent in  
DOESN'T GET OPENED.**

### Giving Trends

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



Tech company *Blackbaud* has opened a window on the strength of U.S. mail. Their research analyzed the channels that 15.6 million donors used to give 1.16 billion dollars: *"Five years in,"* their report concluded, *"it is clear that direct mail giving is still the overwhelming majority of fund-raising revenue, and organizations must find ways to optimize multi-channel giving versus hyper-focusing on Internet giving alone."*

blackbaud

Social media have similarly proven less effective than direct mail. Reporting in *The NonProfit Times*, Herschel Gordon Lewis wrote: *"Response rates for Facebook ads are an almost inconceivably small 1/20 of 1 percent. That's one response per 2,000 message-recipients. It doesn't begin to compete with even the weakest conventional medium."*

**To paraphrase Mark Twain:  
"Reports of direct mail's death have been  
greatly exaggerated."**



*"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



## See Two Factors that Increased Response 346%



### Simulated Handwriting . . .

looks realistic because it's crafted from genuine penmanship, complete with imperfections and variability.

### Canceled Nonprofit Stamps . . .

make mailings look first class. In tests comparing mail using canceled nonprofit stamps to identical packages using an indicia or window envelope, the stamped segments lifted response up to 27.27%.

### NON-VERBAL FEATURES TESTED:

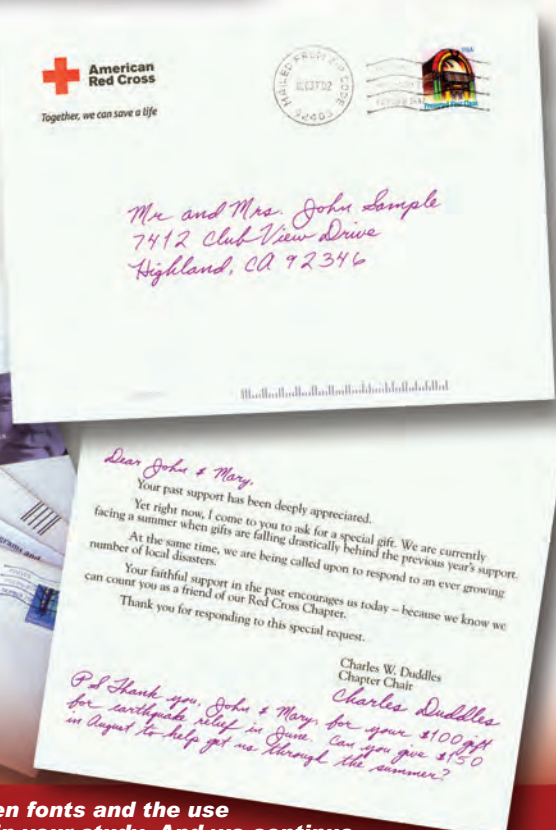
Note Card Style Packages  
HandScripted Addresses  
HandScripted P.S. Notes  
Canceled Nonprofit Stamps

## Handwriting & canceled nonprofit stamps add to mail what a smile adds to speech. Result: more envelopes get opened . . .

- 1.) American Heart Association addressed mail in simulated handwriting.
- 2.) That lifted the response rate to their donor renewal campaign by **346%**.
- 3.) And they could have saved **\$301,578.76** in postage by using canceled nonprofit versus first class stamps in their roll-out to 1,077,067 homes.

This Detroit Symphony Orchestra fund appeal used computer-simulated handwriting and canceled nonprofit stamps. It got a **26%** response and raised **\$160,000**.

The Chronicle of Philanthropy reports that CARE got a **9%** response and **\$41** average gift to a renewal appeal sent to lapsed donors. A note card package, it also featured hand-written personalization.



**"Frank, we've also been testing simulated hand-written fonts and the use of nonprofit versus first class rate stamps as you did in your study. 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 keep trying to 'crack the code' on what motivates individuals to take action through our direct response vehicles. Thank you. This is very interesting work and extremely relevant for large nonprofit organizations."**

Kymerly McElgunn Wolff, Sr. VP for Development • Habitat for Humanity | Former Sr. VP for Resource Development • CARE





**Frank C. Dickerson, Ph.D.**  
**Narrative Fundraising**  
**7412 Club View Drive**  
**Highland, California 92346**

Dear Colleague,

I started my fund-raising career in 1969 as president of a student organization during my freshman year at Ohio State. That led to 20 years in the nonprofit sector, during which time I eventually directed fund raising for a charity on the *Philanthropy 400* list that now raises more than half-a-billion dollars annually.

Then, while consulting with nonprofits over the next two decades, I also conducted academic research that culminated in a linguistics study profiling the discourse of philanthropy.

This seminar grew out of my doctoral research at Claremont Graduate University, which discovered five fatal flaws in the writing of fund raisers. Because so much rides on what they write, I've developed this seminar to help nonprofit leaders frame effective narrative fund appeals that move people to give.

The cost is \$225.00. But the cost of ineffective communication is far greater. If you can't attend, you're invited to a free research briefing after the seminar from 4:15-5 pm. And if you can't attend the briefing either, email me for a free seminar summary and cases. One case shows how a paralanguage factor increased response by 346%.

Sincerely,

*Frank C. Dickerson*  
 Frank C. Dickerson

*What you learn could significantly lift your fund-raising results.*

# Narrative Fundraising™

*Writing the Stories of Philanthropy™*

## Narrative Fundraising Seminar

A hands-on workshop for those who write & tell the stories of philanthropy.

**Cost: \$225.00**

Who should come:

- VP Development & Advancement
- C.E.O. • Major/Planned Giving staff
- Development Director • Alumni staff
- Annual Giving staff • PR professionals

**Schedule: 9 am - 4 pm**

## Free Research Briefing

Can't make the seminar? Then learn what the research uncovered.

**Cost: FREE**

What you will learn:

- 5 fatal mistakes in 2,412 appeals
- 10 secrets of narrative fund appeals
- 2 paralanguage factors that boosted response 346% for American Heart

**Schedule: 4:15 pm - 5 pm**

## Free Research Article & Case Study

Can't make the seminar or briefing? A summary of seminar and case studies presented are available free upon request.

**Cost: FREE**

- Seminar Summary
  - Seminar Case Studies
- Limited slots are available for test mailings replicating American Heart campaigns.

**Email: Frank@NarrativeFundraising.org**

**REGISTER or Request FREE Information online, by fax, phone, or mail.**

Sign up online or complete the form below to register and pay for a seminar, reserve **space at a free research briefing, or request** a free seminar summary and case studies.

Online: [www.NarrativeFundRaising.org](http://www.NarrativeFundRaising.org)

Mail: Send check, made to LEVASIS, to:  
 7412 Club View Dr. Highland, CA 92346

Email: [Frank@NarrativeFundRaising.org](mailto:Frank@NarrativeFundRaising.org)

Phone: 909-864-2798 FAX: 509-479-2690

**Writing Workshop: \$225.00 | 9 am - 4 pm**

**Briefing: Free | 4:15 pm - 5 pm**

**Presenter: Frank C. Dickerson, Ph.D.**  
**Claremont Graduate University**

**Sponsor: Levasis, a California Nonprofit**

**Dates: See [www.NarrativeFundRaising.org](http://www.NarrativeFundRaising.org) for a listing of upcoming workshops in your area or call Dr. Dickerson at 909-864-2798**

**REGISTRATION** Go to [www.NarrativeFundraising.org](http://www.NarrativeFundraising.org) to register and pay by credit card or Paypal. Or complete and mail this coupon, with a \$225 check payable to LEVASIS (the nonprofit sponsor of the seminar), to the address below (lunch & parking not included). If you can't attend, but wish to come to the free briefing, want a free seminar summary and case studies, or you want test mailing information, indicate that below or email [Frank@NarrativeFundraising.org](mailto:Frank@NarrativeFundraising.org).

Name \_\_\_\_\_ Organization \_\_\_\_\_

Address \_\_\_\_\_ City \_\_\_\_\_ State \_\_\_\_\_ Zip \_\_\_\_\_

(if paying by credit card, print credit card billing address here)

Position \_\_\_\_\_ Ph (\_\_\_\_\_) \_\_\_\_\_ Email \_\_\_\_\_

☐ Check enclosed ☐ Charge my: ☐ Discover ☐ Mastercard ☐ VISA ☐ AMEX

Card Number \_\_\_\_\_

Exp. Mo/Yr \_\_\_\_\_

Security # \_\_\_\_\_

Name on Card \_\_\_\_\_

Check all that apply: I'll attend: ☐ Seminar ☐ Free Briefing in \_\_\_\_\_ on \_\_\_\_\_

City

Mo/Day

☐ Please email article, case studies & test mailing information

**LEVASIS • 7412 Club View Drive • Highland, CA 92346 • 909-864-2798 • Fax: 509-479-2690 • Email: [Frank@NarrativeFundraising.org](mailto:Frank@NarrativeFundraising.org)**