

Writing the Voice *of* Philanthropy

A review of doctoral research
on the language *of* fundraising:

*The Five Fatal Mistakes That Fund
Appeals Make and How to Fix Them*

Frank C. Dickerson, Ph.D.



Preface

Peter Drucker believed a leader must plan for and manage objectives in eight key result areas. He believed these were *“the same for all businesses, for all businesses depend on the same factors for their survival.”* His list included: *“1.) marketing, 2.) innovation, 3.) human organization, 4.) financial resources, 5.) physical resources, 6.) productivity, 7.) social responsibility, and 8.) profit requirements.”*

I naïvely assumed that achieving a balance among all these domains of activity was ideal. However, Peter held an intentionally imbalanced and purposefully undemocratic view about two objective areas that he deemed to be more important than all the rest: *“Marketing and innovation”* he wrote, *“are the foundation areas in objective setting. It is in these two areas that a business obtains its results.”*

To eliminate any wiggle room, for emphasis he added: *“The business enterprise has two—and only these two—functions: marketing and innovation. Marketing and innovation produce results all the rest are costs.”* As one of his students, I sought Peter’s advice in how to apply these priorities to nonprofits.

Applying Drucker’s premise required accepting the notion that marketing for a company equates to fundraising for a nonprofit. And the implication was that nonprofits *must essentially run two businesses:*

- **Business-1:** The mission a nonprofit exists to achieve
- **Business-2:** Raising the funds necessary to sustain Business-1

To succeed at **Business-1** (mission), a nonprofit must succeed at **Business-2** (creating donors).

That means a fundraiser’s failure to craft effective appeal language would be like an engineer’s failure to accurately calculate stress factors for a load-bearing structure. Instead of causing a bridge to collapse, income would dry up, programs and staff would be cut, and a charity would close its doors.

This reminds me of the ominous threat Apollo 13 faced when Jack Swigert radioed mission control: *“Okay, Houston, we’ve had a problem.”* The craft was losing oxygen. As oxygen is critical for human life, so too language for fundraising is its *sine qua non*—it is *that without which not*. Apart from language that convinces the doubting mind and touches the complacent heart, the reluctant will is not moved to give. *The nonprofit sector is now facing a problem that can become an existential threat if not addressed.*

The Problem: My research reveals that the typical fund appeal makes *five fatal mistakes*. It . . .

- Reads like information-focused prose that fails to make a personal connection
- Contains fewer narrative linguistic features than are found in official documents
- Lacks the characters common to a story: antagonist, protagonist, ensemble cast
- Fails to create tense dramatic scenes with action, conflict, imagery, and dialogue
- Doesn’t ask the donor to cast him/herself in the role of the story’s hero by giving

The Solution: Fundraisers must be taught how to *write better* so they can *raise more*.

The Challenge: While the problem is clear, academic program leaders seem oblivious. I asked the founder of a top-ten ranked master’s program in nonprofit leadership (for which tuition, fees, and living costs exceed \$100,000): *“Does the program teach students how to solicit gifts on behalf of a nonprofit?”* He replied: *“The emphasis on fundraising is off key to us.”* I criticize this *myopic* view in more detail [here](#).

The Verdict: In sum, I found that university-based nonprofit programs fail to teach the language of fundraising. As I note above, this is as consequential for these programs as the neglect of an engineering school that would fail to teach its students how to calculate stress factors for load-bearing structures.

Frank C. Dickerson, Ph.D.

Thank you for connecting,

The next two pages are a 4-minute summary of my doctoral research on fundraising language. At Pepperdine University, MBA studies sparked my interest in nonprofit communication. Given that since the mid-twentieth century, charitable giving has stalled at around 2% of GDP, I wondered if the problem might be in how we communicate. That suspicion led me to the Ph.D. program at Claremont Graduate University.

Discussions with Peter Drucker pointed me to statistical research methods in corpus linguistics that made it possible to profile how fundraisers write. I collaborated with Doug Biber, whose doctoral research at USC in the 1980s had used factor analysis to identify bundles of linguistic features that created specific effects in texts. Applying Biber's methodology, I found three disturbing patterns in the writing of fundraisers.

I discovered that 23 linguistic features occurred together in highly interpersonal texts that read like personal conversations sound (*a form fund appeals should emulate*). Conversely, I identified 5 very different features in highly informational texts like academic prose (*a form that fund appeals must avoid*). Finally, I found 5 linguistic features to be common in narratives (*a form that humanizes fund appeals with stories*).

These three patterns emerged from a tally of 67 linguistic features in a 1.5-million-word body of texts. The 2,412 fund appeals analyzed came from 880 nonprofits, 735 of which raised \$20-million-plus annually. *Understanding how these variables create the voice of a text can now help you shape your own writing.*

My research replicated a similar study of fundraising language by Indiana University's Tom Upton and Ulla Connor. Using Biber's protocols, they had analyzed fund appeals produced by smaller Indiana nonprofits. They found the same problems listed above. But I questioned how ubiquitous that trend was.

I believed the Indiana data reflected the fact that Midwest nonprofits were not as sophisticated as their larger national counterparts. So I replicated that study, confident I could show that elite nonprofits wrote better fund appeals. Plus, I was sure this would yield *examples of language others could emulate*.

However, I found that like the fund appeals Conner and Upton had studied, the texts written by my supposedly elite nonprofits also *read like academic prose* and *had less narrative than official documents*. At minimum, I had predicted that texts in my study would score better. But not so! My corpus of appeals from large national nonprofits actually scored lower on *personal connection* and *narrative* than those in the Indiana study. Although my hypothesis was wrong, I did discover solutions to the problems exhibited.

Those solutions confirmed what my original fundraising experience had taught me as far back as my freshman year at The Ohio State University. I was a communication major and had become president of a student organization. However, it wasn't until I assumed the office that I discovered the president had to raise funds for the organization. A serious omission in the job description, I thought. I felt I'd been deceived!

But to my surprise, I actually enjoyed the process of making *personal connections* with individuals. I met with prospective donors in their homes. And as conversations unfolded, I would tell *stories* about what students were doing on campus. Then I would *ask* my host to support a project with a gift.

After graduating, I joined an NGO that now annually raises \$750 million worldwide. I led a division of the organization that helped thousands of individuals hone face-to-face fundraising skills. I also trained its staff members how to write fund appeals that told stories, read like conversations sound, and asked for gifts.

My academic journey has convinced me that research is like a mirror. It can only *reflect* reality and is powerless to *change* it. It's *descriptive*, not *generative*. So my work has now shifted from research to helping leaders at nonprofits write better and raise more. If I can help you with consultation or service, please reach out. And review the curated resources noted below. [Hyperlinks](#) provide immediate, free access to all of them:

- Page 2 describes three ways your nonprofit can receive help: *research, education, and service*
- Page 4 links to *ten research resources* that show how to fix the broken discourse of fundraising
- Pages 7-12 review my *Narrative FundRaising Seminar*, which *applies* my research to practice

In a sentence:

You can improve a fund appeal by telling a story, writing like you talk, and asking your reader to cast her- or himself in the role of hero in the story told by giving.

But don't pull out your grammar texts and style manuals. Avoid the academic prose you learned in college. Millennia ago, Aristotle warned that such language gets tangled on the path from thought to print:

Warning:

It is a general rule that a written composition should be easy to read and therefore easy to deliver. This cannot be so where there are many connecting words or clauses or where punctuation is hard, as in the writings of Heraclitus. To punctuate Heraclitus is no easy task, because we often cannot tell whether a particular word belongs to what precedes or what follows it.
(Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, III:5)

My research can help you untangle your tangled prose. It can help you write better and raise more by moving your prose toward an oral-storytelling style. Narrative discourse puts a face on a problem, making a story more effective than argument alone for convincing the doubting mind, touching the complacent heart and moving the reluctant will to give. Stories create *relevance, understanding, empathy* and prompt *action*.

This is consistent with the fact that prior to Gutenberg's fifteenth-century innovation of the printing press, speech dominated communication. Familiar patterns and rhythms of oral narrative had become deeply ingrained across cultures and centuries. Then post-Gutenberg, discourse wandered from long-held norms and became abstract, requiring more effort to decipher texts, draining discourse of emotion and connection.

In her book, *Talking Voices*, Georgetown linguist Deborah Tannen writes: "Ordinary conversation is made up of linguistic strategies which are pervasive, spontaneous, and functional in ordinary conversation. I call them *involvement strategies* because they reflect and create *interpersonal involvement*."

Fund appeals fail to create *involvement*. And although language is the raw material from which fund appeals are built, neither university-based programs for nonprofit leaders nor associations like CASE, AHP, and AFP, discuss *fundraising language*. How shortsighted! Hopefully what follows can help fill this gap.

James Blaisdell, Claremont Graduate University's founding fellow, held a pragmatic view about the purpose of education. He believed that *we are obliged to share what we have been blessed to learn*. Etched on the Pomona College Gate at Claremont are Blaisdell's words. They frame his view as a moral obligation:

They only are loyal to this college who, departing, bear their added riches in trust for mankind.
(James Blaisdell)

So if you find anything useful here on how to write narrative fund appeals, *please pay it forward*.

What follows intentionally repeats elements of this summary, while adding clarifying context . . .

You Know a good story when you see one . . . But do you see what makes a good story good?

My wife has taught fashion design professionally for many years. As a naïve newlywed, I accidentally became one of Kathleen's early students. I learned a lesson from her that would later inform my doctoral research on the language of fundraising.

That lesson began on a sweltering summer day in Columbus, Ohio. With the temperature and humidity in the 90s, we ducked into an air-conditioned department store. As we passed by a mannequin displaying a new design, I heard my wife say, "That's nice."

I remembered her comment, returned to the store, and bought the suit we had seen. What a mistake! Kathleen gave me a grammar lesson on use of the word nice. "Nice," she said, "can modify any of a garment's three dimensions (design, construction, style) for its intended market (youth, adult, mature) varying on use (casual to formal)."

- Kathleen hated the *design*: "Frank, the market for this suit is an old lady. I'm just 23!"
- And she hated the *construction*: "This material is for fall weather. I can't wear this in June!"
- But she liked the *style*: "However, the nautical theme does remind me of a cool breeze."

Had I been aware of those variables, I might have been spared my shopping misadventure. But then I would have missed my wife's grammar lesson that later helped me see that fundraising language has three dimensions too.

Writing in The Three Dimensions of Language

Like building a house, building a fundraising text requires attention to *design*, *construction*, and *style*:

1. Rhetorical Superstructure: *design*. As form follows function in architecture, a fund appeal's form must follow its function—to raise money. A story-based, conversational form creates interest, connection, and empathy. Then it invites a reader to cast her- or himself in the role of hero in the story told by giving.

2. Linguistic Substructure: *construction*. As a contractor uses wood, wire, and pipe to build a house based on a plan, a writer must use lexis (words) and grammar (rules of structure, order, and meaning) to craft a text that will raise funds.

3. Artistic Infrastructure: *style*. As an interior designer decorates a home with artistic elements to create cohesion, a narrative fund appeal must achieve this end by painting word pictures which stimulate the five senses with verbs, repetition, clarity, dialogue and vivid imagery. These language elements create cohesion as they portray characters moving from conflict to crisis to resolution on a dramatic story arc.

Storytelling is now being championed by thought leaders and practitioners across the nonprofit sector. However, telling stories to raise funds is nothing new.

For example, Pliny the Younger wrote to many prominent first-century leaders. Among his letters was one sent to Roman Senator Cornelius Tacitus.

Pliny told Tacitus a story about a school he hoped to found in his hometown of Como. In an attempt to enlist the Senator's support, Pliny told a story about his friends and their children whom a school would help.

Thought leaders and practitioners have recently championed storytelling in workshops, articles, books, and speeches. But missing has been detailed training on exactly how to build appeals like Pliny's—appeals that include elements of *design*, *construction*, and *style*.

My research fills in the gaps left in most discourse on storytelling. You'll gain practical writing skills that will help you *convince* doubting minds, *touch* complacent hearts, and *move* reluctant wills to give.

These skills emerged from a multivariate computer analysis of 1.5 million words in 2,412 fund appeals written by 880 of North America's largest nonprofits.

What follows will help you write better and raise more as you build fund appeals that read like personal conversations sound and that invite your readers to cast themselves as heroes in the stories that you tell.

Is Storytelling Credible?

Story is often disparaged in science as being *mere anecdote*. But the Greek etymology of the word anecdote (*an* [not] + *ek* [out] + *didonai* [give])—doesn't equate to unreliable. It means unpublished. Prior to Johannes Gutenberg's printing innovation in the 1400s, almost all knowledge transmission was oral. So anecdotal refers to *mode of transmission*, not *veracity of message*.

For millennia, fundraisers have preferred the narrative mode of storytelling over the expository style of argumentation. To see if they agreed, my research surveyed leaders of North America's 880 largest non-profits, 735 of which raise \$20 million-plus annually.

By a 9:1 ratio, the leaders of these organizations preferred storytelling over exposition. But multivariate analysis of their own writing (1.5 million words of text in 2,412 fund appeals) found that their appeals *read like academic prose and had less narrative content than official documents*. To echo Apollo 13 astronaut Jack Swigert: *Fundraisers, we have a problem!*

Even hard science is moving toward acceptance of narrative discourse as a legitimate form. Joe Williams of the University of Chicago was a catalyst in this surprising change. The American Medical Association had asked Williams to help its members write better.

Upon his 2008 death, the University of Chicago Chronicle celebrated Williams' legacy in his obituary. That article described his work for the AMA, which led to the creation of Chicago's academic writing program and Joe's book *Style: Lessons in Clarity and Grace*:

Williams pored through medical journals and discovered what he called 'medicalease.' It was a baffling text. It would be for anyone not in the field. But what was critical was the question Joe asked: Not What's wrong with these writers? but What would I need to see in this writing to understand it? It was a question about being a reader.

Joseph Williams tried to figure out the underlying principles of the medical texts and his conclusion became the cornerstone of his pedagogical approach:

What I discovered was the importance of story, that even abstract prose about highly scientific, medical, or intellectual concepts could move towards story. Even prose that may seem wholly discursive and abstract usually has behind it the two central components of the story: characters and their actions. Even social mobility can become a character in an abstract social science story.

Ways This Study Can Help You

Research: Two Greek words—*philos* (love) and *anthropos* (mankind)—define the writing my research seeks to discover, analyze, and help fundraisers emulate.

Writing the voice of philanthropy literally means writing the *voice* of the *friend of man*. That involves reducing to text, the compassionate spoken words of a person who is advocating for one who has no voice. It seeks to evoke an empathetic response. Like a parent on the news pleading for help to find their missing child.

I realize the prior sentence is incomplete. It assumes the same subject as the text that preceded it—a trait common to speech. This is warranted in the interest of creating *conversational style*. Effective communication *replicates speech*. It resembles what an actor says on stage for an audience or on camera for a director.

A fund appeal built on the foundation of a story includes conflict, an antagonist, a protagonist, and a hero. It seeks resolution by inviting the reader to cast her- or himself as hero in the story told by giving.

But my research discovered that fund appeals read like highly informational papers, written for professors who are no longer there. They read like academic prose and contain less narrative than official documents. In short, they're as boring as dirt. Like watching paint dry.

For a critique of your own writing, email me at: Frank@TheWrittenVoice.org or call 909-864-2798.

Education: Like a mirror, research only *reflects* reality and is powerless to *change* it. It's *descriptive*, not *generative*. So, to help leaders in fundraising write better and raise more, I conduct a day-long writing workshop. These are not just lectures. They use an interactive format. Students write, read aloud what they write, and receive feedback. I also offer custom workshops for nonprofits. See my curriculum on pages 7-12.

To attend or arrange a workshop, email me at: Frank@NarrativeFundRaising.org or call 909-864-2798.

Service: My goal is to create do-it-yourselfers who write for themselves. However, my consultancy, High Touch Communication, can also write, print, and mail fund appeals for your organization. For nonprofits with gross income under \$1 million, we work with a non-profit organization that will partially subsidize costs.

For writing, printing, or mailing service, email HighTouchDirect@msn.com or call 909-864-2798.

Three Historic Cases & Two Voices

Case 1: In discussing my doctoral research with Peter Drucker, we recalled failed efforts by pastor and Cambridge graduate John Eliot to raise funds for a college in the New World.

In Eliot's 1633 letter to wealthy English antique dealer Sir Simonds D'Ewes, he told him that a gift to build a colonial college would mean "a perpetuating of your name and honour." Like a baker frosting a cake, Eliot troweled on thick flattery. Flattery failed.

Case 2: In contrast to disingenuous flattery, John Harvard and Nathaniel Eaton had attended Trinity and Emmanuel Colleges at Cambridge. They were friends and shared a vision for a Massachusetts Bay college.

That friendship between Harvard and Eaton and their shared vision motivated Harvard to bequeath his library and half of his estate to the nascent school. His untimely death from tuberculosis at 31 eventually led to that school being named Harvard in his honor.

Case 3: Similarly effective was one of the world's oldest direct mail fund appeals. Around 90 A.D., avid letter writer Pliny the Younger wrote his friend, Roman Senator Cornelius Tacitus. He asked Tacitus to help him establish a school in Pliny's hometown of Como.

Pliny's letter told the story of a gathering with families at his lakeside villa. The story's characters were the parents and children visiting that day. The conflict the visit surfaced was that lack of a local school meant families had to send their children to school in Milan, a costly problem. My [Nonprofit Quarterly](#) article contains this letter and I discuss it on British research site: [Showcase of Fundraising Innovation and Inspiration](#).

Two Voices: What caused Eliot's appeal to fail and Eaton's and Pliny's to succeed? Eliot's letter was built on an **abstract idea**: education. Harvard and Eaton had **personal connection**. I can imagine them strolling the banks of the Charles River, embroiled in stories about the school and its students. Pliny shared a **drama** with **characters**, **conflict**, and a potential **hero**.

These were my intuitive observations. To move from intuition to statistically valid proof, I tallied in fund appeals, 29 linguistic features that factor analysis had associated with personal connection and narrative. I also counted 9 features associated with abstract and non-narrative prose. This identified two opposite **voices of philanthropy**: the **personal** and the **abstract**.

The Sector's *Sine Qua Non*

At Claremont Graduate University, I was one of Peter Drucker's students just as he had just finished his book on nonprofit management. He was interested in my analysis of fundraising discourse and his advice helped shape my research on the nonprofit sector's vital sign of fundraising language.

Peter viewed organizational performance in eight domains: "marketing, innovation, human organization, financial resources, physical resources, productivity, social responsibility, profit requirements."

My first impulse was to assume a leader should seek to achieve balance among these eight areas. But I was surprised to learn that Peter held a distinctly unbalanced and intentionally undemocratic view on which were more important than the rest. He wrote:

*Marketing and innovation are the foundation areas in objective setting. It is in these two areas that a business obtains its results. In all other objective areas, the purpose of doing is to make possible the attainment of the objectives in the areas of marketing and innovation. Because its purpose is to create a customer, the business enterprise has two—and only these two—basic functions: **marketing and innovation**. Marketing and innovation produce results, all the rest are costs.*

So Drucker clarified for me that next to its people-helping mission, fundraising for a nonprofit is what marketing is for a business. It is the sector's **sine qua non** (that without which not). Apart from clear, compelling language, funds are not raised, programs are cut, staff are laid off, and nonprofits are closed.

Bad writing poses a **sector-wide existential threat**. I reviewed 300-plus university-based programs for nonprofit leaders to find solutions for this problem. However, such programs barely touch on fundraising.

The founder of the program that U.S. News rates among the nation's top 10 told me: "The emphasis on fundraising is off key to us." And while associations like AFP, CASE, and AHP offer practical training in fundraising technique, **they fail to teach practitioners how language shapes the message technique delivers**.

These omissions are as serious for the nonprofit sector as failure to teach engineers how to calculate stress factors for load-bearing structures would be for engineering. All MBA programs teach rigorous courses on marketing. Yet education for leaders in the nonprofit sector lack instruction on the language of fundraising.

Research Findings and Resources

The following articles are posted on my research site, www.TheWrittenVoice.org. Or you can download those listed here by clicking on their hyperlinks.

I particularly recommend article #18 by William Zinsser. It will help you untangle tangled writing. And article #19 describes Joseph Williams' book *Style*, one of the most practical guides on clear writing. I secured permission to post Zinsser's article and the work of others posted on my site. Most items listed below are summaries of my own research:

1. [*The Way We Write Is All Wrong—A Profile and Prescription for Fixing the Broken Discourse of Philanthropy*](#): reviews my research my study and its implications for leaders in the nonprofit sector.
2. [*Writing the Voice of Philanthropy—Fixing the Broken Language of Fund Raising*](#): shows how to fix the problems I diagnosed, using as an example, the world's oldest fundraising letter, written in the first century A.D. by Pliny the Younger.
3. [*American Heart Association Case Study—How Special Packaging Increased Response 346%*](#): reveals how paralinguistic features enabled the American Heart Association to boost their response and ROI.
4. [*Debunking the Myth of the Philanthropy Fairy*](#): positions the effective use of language in fundraising as the nonprofit sector's *conditio sine qua non* (Latin for *the condition without which not*).
13. [*The Best and Worst Fund Appeals From My Research*](#): a dissertation excerpt, including the study's bibliography, showing the effects of linguistic features.
15. [*Analyzing the Three Dimensions of Fund-Raising Language—Rhetorical Superstructure, Linguistic Substructure, Artistic Infrastructure*](#): a rough draft document that creates an organizational framework for my research and showcases sample texts written by students who have attended my writing workshop.
18. [*Writing Good English by William Zinsser*](#) (Yale, Columbia, The New School).
19. [*A Reader's Writer by Joseph Williams*](#) (Univ of Chicago). Also available is a [*YouTube Video*](#) by Larry McEnerney, who assumed Joe Williams' role at Chicago.
28. [*Evaluating Nonprofit Leadership and Management Programs—A Critique*](#): describes the dearth of practical instruction on fundraising in university-based Nonprofit Leadership and Management Programs.

C.S. Lewis on Narrative Style

C.S. Lewis carried on correspondence with young fans of his writing. Often written in longhand with a dip-pen and ink, those letters are published in a book titled *Letters to Children*. On June 26, 1956 he gave this advice to a Florida teenager named Joan (p.64):

- Always try to use the language so as to make quite clear what you mean and make sure your sentence couldn't mean anything else.
- Always prefer the plain direct word to the long, vague one. Don't implement promises, keep them.
- Never use abstract nouns when concrete ones will do. If you mean "More people died" don't say "Mortality rose."
- In writing. Don't use adjectives which merely tell us how you want us to feel about the things you are describing. I mean, instead of telling us the thing is "terrible," describe it so that we'll be terrified. Don't say it was "delightful"; make us say "delightful" when we've read the description. You see, all those words (horrifying, wonderful, hideous, exquisite) are only like saying to your readers "Please, will you do my job for me."
- Don't use words too big for the subject. Don't say "infinitely" when you mean "very"; otherwise you'll have no word left when you want to talk about something really infinite.

In the introduction to his collection of letters to children, the editors describe Lewis' writing process, which reflects the common advice given to writers:

Don't Tell Me . . . Show Me.

Lewis innately followed this rule, observing that visual images fed his creative process: "I see pictures. I have no idea whether this is the usual way of writing stories, still less whether it is the best. It is the only one I know: images always come first. Everything began with images" (Dorsett & Mead, 1985, pp. 5-6).

Practical takeaways from Lewis for a fund appeal:

- Follow the example of Lewis—**showing** what your organization does rather than merely **telling** what it believes. Appeal to the senses.
- Construct a narrative arc of scenes that occur in particular settings and at specific times.
- Populate those scenes with people experiencing conflict, and a climax that requires a solution.
- Ask the reader to cast him- or herself in the role of hero in the story told by giving.



WHAT SCHOLARS & PRACTITIONERS SAY ABOUT THE NARRATIVE FUND-RAISING RESEARCH & WORKSHOP



ORIGINS OF THIS RESEARCH & WORKSHOP ON FUND-RAISING LANGUAGE

At **Claremont Graduate University**, Peter Drucker's advice focused my research on the language of fund raising. That research was shaped by his intentionally undemocratic and imbalanced perspective about which were the most important goals a leader must plan for and achieve. Peter was quite provocative, writing:

"Marketing and innovation are the foundation areas in objective setting. It is in these two areas that a business obtains its results. In all other objective areas the purpose of doing is to make possible the attainment of the objectives in the areas of marketing and innovation. Because its purpose is to create a customer, the business enterprise has two—and only these two—basic functions: marketing and innovation. Marketing and innovation produce results, all the rest are costs."

Drucker had just finished his book on nonprofit management when I was his student in the early 1990s. He helped me to see that as marketing is critical to the success of any business, **so too fund raising is critical to the success of any nonprofit**. And for commercial and nonprofit organizations alike, I came to see that the effective use of **language** is the critical factor in crafting a successful marketing or fund-raising message. My research profiled the broken discourse of fund raising. And now, **The Narrative FundRaising Seminar** shows how, by fixing the way you write, you can raise more money. Here's what thought leaders are saying:

"Frank, thank you for providing such an insightful workshop. I walked away knowing what I need to work on and how to improve my storytelling. This was the most useful training I've had as a fundraiser. Thanks again for sharing your knowledge."

*Giuseppe Nespoli, Director of Seaver Associates
Pepperdine University*

"Frank, your workshop was the best seminar on effective fundraising communication I've ever attended! Thanks. I will definitely recommend your workshop."

*Russ Gibbs, D.Min, CFRE
Asst. Dean & Director of Advancement, University of Houston Law School*

"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."

*Joan Smythe Dengler,
Sr VP Covenant House*

"Thank you for sharing your research. This is very interesting work and of course extremely relevant for a large nonprofit organization like CARE. We know the importance of language in delivering our message to donors and the public, and 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 will motivate individuals to take action through our direct response vehicles."

*Kymerly McElgunn Wolff, Sr. VP of Development
Habitat for Humanity, Formerly Sr. VP CARE*

“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 & TrueSense Marketing

“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

“Fantastic. Great job in dignifying what I have practiced: ‘Write the way you talk.’ I still do it and still dictate all my letters.”

Jerry Huntsinger, Founder
Huntsinger & Jeffer

“Frank I’ll 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 Sauvé-Rodd, Principal
Datapreneurs, London

“What an interesting extension of narrative research, Frank! Indeed, there are hardly any studies (that I know of!) that deal with the effectiveness of story-telling in fundraising—though it’s taken for granted, somehow, that without a good story one’s appeal for funds will not get you far. Let me hear more about what you’re up to. It’s very consciousness raising.”

Jerome Bruner, PhD
New York University School of Law

“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
Massachusetts Institute of Technology

“This research is a wake-up call based on solid evidence, and it couldn’t come at a better time.”

Andy Goodman, Principal
The Goodman Center

*The following pages describe the day-long writing workshop that I conduct in key cities or on the premises of nonprofit organizations that want to train their staff members. Call 909-864-2798 or email HighTouchDirect@msn.com to learn more. Beyond just championing the idea that story-telling improves fundraising, *The Narrative FundRaising Seminar* shows a leader exactly how he or she can **write better** and **raise more**. This practice-oriented workshop teaches how to craft a dramatic story that shows how, by giving, a reader can cast her- or himself in the leading role of hero in the story told.*

“Dr. Dickerson, as part of his doctoral studies at Claremont Graduate University, in California, recently 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, Asst. Managing Editor
The Chronicle of Philanthropy

“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

“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

“I am a better fundraising writer today thanks to the Narrative Fundraising workshop at Vanderbilt. Dr. Dickerson revealed the science behind crafting a successful fund appeal, using simple, direct language that tells a compelling story.”

Bill Smith, Sr. Director of Grants and Fundraising Services
Second Harvest

“Dr. Dickerson, I enjoyed hearing that you are another language vigilante struggling to keep everyday writing clear and plain. The subject of fundraising writing has never crossed my path in all my years of teaching various forms of writing. Thank you for your contributions to this craft.”

William Zinsser, Author of On Writing
Columbia Graduate School of Journalism

“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, 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, given 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, CEO
The NonProfit Times

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

Roger Craver, Founder
Craver, Matthews, Smith



Narrative Fundraising⁷TM

Writing the Stories of PhilanthropyTM

Doctoral Research on The Language of Fundraising:
How You Can Write Better and Raise More.

Discover **The Three Dimensions** of Language:
The Key to Building Stories That Inspire Giving.

This Research Describes . . .

- ◆ The Five Fatal Mistakes Fund Appeals Make
- ◆ The Two Factors That Increased Response 346%
- ◆ The One Medium That Accounts For 80% of Giving
- ◆ The Three elements of a Connecting Narrative Moment
- ◆ The Four Keys to Grabbing and Keeping Attention



"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



The Way We Write is All Wrong



Frank Dickerson

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.

Do your fund appeals make these
FIVE FATAL MISTAKES?

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.

45.21%



5.04%

Exposition

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*, described to me what she called “a very old writer joke” which she believes originated with another Canadian author named Margaret, Margaret Laurence. 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, Margaret?*” She replies: “*I’m a writer.*” The man responds with enthusiasm: “*Really! When I retire I’m going to 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, she 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.

The writer’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)

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 that 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 beyond what facts alone might convince the reader to give. It must create **identification**.

But . . .

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

You'll see how *four elements of stylistic infrastructure* can make stories readable and memorable:

This research will help you write copy that activates your reader's **five senses**. You'll learn the difference between **tell-me** writing (that argues a case) and **show-me** writing (that touches a heart). A story can make its reader **scared, sad, glad, or mad**. . . (thus moving him or her to act). A story can move the reader to become the **hero** of the story told by giving. This kind of writing creates a **connecting narrative moment** . . .

- 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 time and copy space.

Elements of a Connecting Narrative Moment

Whether a **connecting narrative moment** will be used in a direct mail fund appeal or newsletter, a message that will be emailed or posted on social media, as an anecdote to support a formal grant proposal, as the blueprint for a face-to-face conversation, or as a scene to be filmed, **the narrative must include these three elements:**

- **PEOPLE:** *moving beyond conceptual discourse to stories about people*
- **TENSION:** *dramatizing conflict that will produce tension in the story told*
- **RESOLUTION:** *showing how giving casts the reader in the role of hero*



Repetition



Clarity



Dialogue



Imagery



"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 • NonProfitMarketngGuide.com

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:

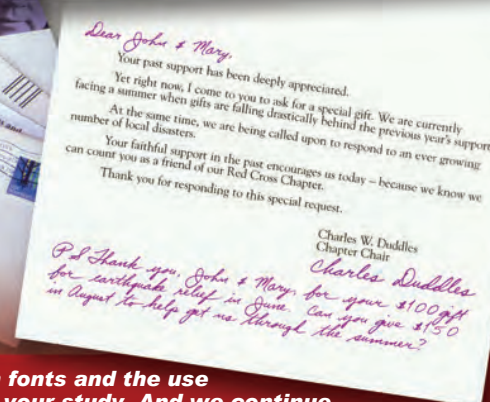
- Note Card Style Packages
- HandScripted Addresses
- HandScripted P.S. Notes
- Canceled Nonprofit Stamps

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."

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

Conclusion: “There is nothing new under the sun.” (Ecclesiastes 1: 9)

Aristotle on *touching hearts, changing minds, & prompting action*

“Pity may be defined as a feeling of pain caused by the sight of some evil, destructive or painful, which befalls one who does not deserve it, and which we might expect to befall ourselves or some friend of ours, and moreover to befall us soon. In order to feel pity, we must obviously be capable of supposing that some evil may happen to us or some friend of ours.” *Rhetoric II:8*

“Fear and pity may be aroused by spectacular means; but they may also result from the inner structure of the piece, which is the better way, and indicates a superior poet. For the plot ought to be so constructed that, even without the aid of the eye, he who hears the tale told will thrill with horror and melt to pity at what takes place.” *Poetics II: 14*

“Plot is the imitation of the action—for by plot I here mean the arrangement of the incidents. By Character I mean that in virtue of which we ascribe certain qualities to the agents. The plot, then, is the first principle, and, as it were, the soul of a tragedy. Character holds the second place. Third in order is Thought—that is, the faculty of saying what is possible and pertinent in given circumstances. Fourth comes Diction; by which I mean . . . the expression of the meaning in words; and its essence is the same both in verse and prose.” *Poetics I: 6*

“The poet should place the scene, as far as possible, before his eyes. In this way, seeing everything with the utmost vividness, as if he were a spectator of the action, he will discover what is in keeping with it, and be most unlikely to overlook inconsistencies.” *Poetics I: 17*

Jesus on *racial prejudice & defining love with a story of compassion*

On one occasion an expert in the law stood up to test Jesus. “Teacher,” he asked, “what must I do to inherit eternal life?”

“What is written in the Law?” he replied. “How do you read it?” He answered: “Love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your strength and with all your mind” and “Love your neighbor as yourself.”

“You have answered correctly,” Jesus replied. “Do this and you will live.” But he wanted to justify himself, so he asked Jesus, “And who is my neighbor?”

In reply Jesus said: A man was going down from Jerusalem to Jericho, when he fell into the hands of robbers. They stripped him of his clothes, beat him and went away, leaving him half dead. A priest happened to be going down the same road, and when he saw the man, he passed by on the other side. So too, a Levite, when he came to the place and saw him, passed by on the other side.

But a Samaritan, as he traveled, came where the man was; and when he saw him, he took pity on him. He went to him and bandaged his wounds, pouring on oil and wine. Then he put the man on his own donkey, took him to an inn and took care of him. The next day he took out two silver coins and gave them to the innkeeper. “Look after him,” he said, “and when I return, I will reimburse you for any extra expense you may have.”

Which of these three do you think was a neighbor to the man who fell into the hands of robbers? The expert in the law replied, “The one who had mercy on him.”

Jesus told him, “Go and do likewise.” *Luke 10: 25-37*

Epilogue: So What's Next?

To move from itinerant field to bona fide profession, fundraising must formalize what it teaches on *how to write fund appeals*, a nonprofit's cognate of what Drucker saw as the key to business success: *marketing*.

Consider the established professions. A surgeon learns where and how to cut. A CPA learns what and how to count. An engineer learns how to build a bridge that won't collapse.

At its heart, the practice of fundraising involves *producing discourse*—both written and spoken. That discourse must convince the doubting mind, touch the complacent heart, and move the reluctant will to give. But my multivariate analysis shows that most written fundraising discourse fails miserably. Fund appeals read like academic prose and have less narrative than official documents. Neither masters-level higher education programs for nonprofit leaders nor professional fundraising associations address this problem!

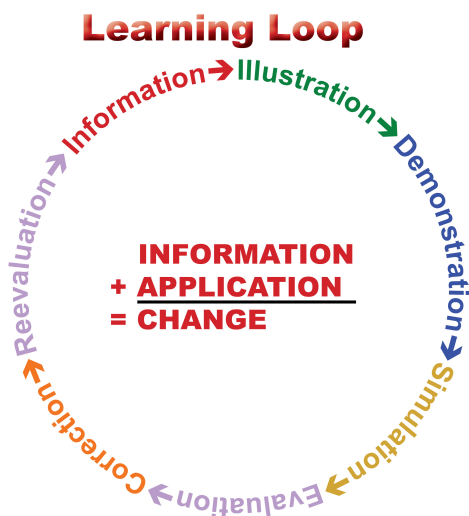
This neglect has a precedent in professional education. In 1910, *sham medical schools proliferated*. Little more than trade schools, entrance required only a high school diploma. Lecture classes rewarded the memorization of terms. Schools lacked cadavers. So students gained no experience exploring the human body.

Click this link ([The Carnegie Foundation](#)) to see how Abraham Flexner reshaped medical education. He inspected U.S. schools, issued a scathing report, and Johns Hopkins became the standard of excellence. In 1904, there were 160 medical schools. By 1935, only 66 survived. There are parallels in fundraising education.

Fundraisers are not taught the theory behind why some language works and other language fails to motivate giving. Practitioners must be taught practical theory so they can write better and raise more. While professional associations like AFP, CASE, and AHP excel at describing fundraising technique, they fail to teach how to write the messages technique delivers. And master's programs for nonprofit leaders do no better.

I asked the head of a nonprofit program U.S. News ranks among the top ten: "*Do students receive instruction on how to write fund appeals?*" He said: "*The emphasis on fundraising is off key to us.*" Given this dismissive view of *fundraising*, I'm sure his program teaches nothing about the *language* of what he dismisses.

The negligence of such a program is as irresponsible as the neglect of an engineering school that would fail to teach how to calculate stress factors for load-bearing structures. Here's help that addresses this problem:



I help develop writing skills by using an iterative seven-step learning loop. I teach how to write like you talk, tell the story of someone helped, and ask the reader to be a hero by giving:

Information is presented verbally

Illustration elaborates on information

Demonstration shows writing skill in use

Simulation allows the learner to replicate

Evaluation reviews a learner's performance

Correction allows a learner to plan adjustment

Reevaluation allows a learner to exhibit mastery

If I can help you write better and raise more, reach out.