



The Written Voice Discourse Audit

- ◆ Does your writing **connect** with your reader, or focus on **information** like an academic journal?
- ◆ Does your writing read like a **caring human voice**, or does it sound **passive** and **disconnected**?
- ◆ Does your writing put a **human face** on what you do, or does it read like an **abstract mission statement**?
- ◆ Does your writing infuse text with the **passion of speech**, or **lull readers to sleep** by the end of line one?

Understanding How You Write is the First Step Toward Improving Your Copy.

The Problem:

The Way We Write is All Wrong

In the most comprehensive computer-based evaluation of its kind to date, *The Written Voice* profiled 1.5 million words of paper- and online-based fund-raising discourse. The research was completed by Frank Dickerson during his doctoral studies at Claremont Graduate University's Peter F. Drucker School of Management and its School of Educational Studies.

The writing of fund raisers, in nine different philanthropic sectors, was analyzed. Multivariate statistical algorithms profiled the writing style of 2,412 documents that had been produced by 880 elite nonprofit organizations. Of these nonprofits, the IRS reported that 735 had raised at least \$20 million in direct support. Like a linguistic MRI, this benchmark study described texts based on their linguistic makeup. Two disturbing patterns emerged . . .

- ◆ The discourse of fund raising focuses more on **transferring information** than creating an **interpersonal connection** with readers. Rather than sounding like the back-and-forth banter of friends discussing something they care about, the typical fund appeal reads like a precise, densely-packed piece of technical prose from an academic journal article.
- ◆ Seldom does a fund appeal **show** what a nonprofit organization does through an emotionally rich human-interest story. Rather, it **tells** the reader about outcomes using the sterile vocabulary common to mission statements. Fund-raising texts contain less narrative than academic prose. . . even less narrative the genre of official documents.

The Solution:

Know How You Write

In the 1970s everyone was having "their colors done." Based on skin tone, you'd be categorized as a winter, spring, summer, or fall. That made it possible to choose colors for your wardrobe that flattered your skin tone.

Something like that occurs when your fund-raising discourse is profiled. First we describe the linguistic makeup of writing. Then we evaluate its fit given function—to motivate readers to give. We do this in three steps by . . .

- 1.) tagging 67 linguistic features like contractions, private verbs (like *I think* and *I feel*), and personal pronouns;
- 2.) averaging their occurrence per-thousand-words of text; and
- 3.) comparing your frequency scores to those of 23 genres, ranging from academic prose to personal conversation.

Change Your Writing Based on Data

Chances are that your writing is not unlike that produced by the vast majority of nonprofit organizations. Knowing the linguistic patterns that consistently recur in your writing can be the key to improving it.

For example, while everyone knows a good story when they see one, knowing what makes a story good . . . well that's another story. Based on your text profile, we'll be able to make specific recommendations like:

- ◆ how to create a rhetorical structure for your writing that better **matches its persuasive purpose**,
- ◆ how to use 23 linguistic features that can help you make a **personal connection** with your reader, and
- ◆ how to use 6 linguistic features that are critical to writing an effective **connecting narrative moment**.

What Others Are Saying About This Research . . .

- ◆ "Frank, I enjoyed reading your letter and hearing about your work. I tend to throw away many fundraising 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, Ph.D.: Prof. of Marketing, Northwestern Univ.
- ◆ "Frank, this is amazing work, just the kind of thing we should be doing more of, thanks for letting me know."
Grant McCracken, Ph.D.: Research Affiliate, MIT
- ◆ "Imagine my pleasure, receiving your email and realizing you're the author of the piece I read a few days ago that I hoped to recommend 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!' I hope your paper gets VAST circulation, especially among younger fundraisers who are eager to get it right (write?). Thank you. You've done everyone a big favor. Lousy written communications are costing the industry gazillions in lost revenue."
Tom Ahern: Ahern Communications Ink
- ◆ "Frank, thank you very much for the heads up on your very impressive study. Having been in direct mail for more than 30 yrs, 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
- ◆ "Jerry Huntsinger has sent your great piece of work. Wonderful stuff and we'd like our 7000+ readers of The Agitator (www.theagitator.net) to benefit from it."
Roger Craver: Founding Partner, Craver, Matthews & Smith
- ◆ "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: Founding Partner, Huntsinger & Jeffer
- ◆ "Dr. Dickerson shared the results of his exhaustive analysis of nearly one million words of fundraising copy—and found that nearly everything he studied came up short. He explains why."
Mal Warwick: Founder & Chairman, Mal Warwick Associates
- ◆ "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: Datapreneurs, London
- ◆ "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: The Goodman Center
- ◆ "OMG Frank! Your work is brilliant! Would love to profile your research in an upcoming newsletter and support you any other way we can."
Michael Margolis: President, Get Storied
- ◆ "Wow, we are true soul mates when it comes to fundraising. Terrific. This stuff is great. I can't wait to highlight it in my work. Is it okay to blog parts of your papers?"
Katya Andresen: C.O.O., Network for Good

To Discuss Auditing Your Fund-Raising Discourse, Here's My Contact Information:

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