



How to write effective emails

Tips and examples for planned and major giving

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Why email writing matters for fundraising

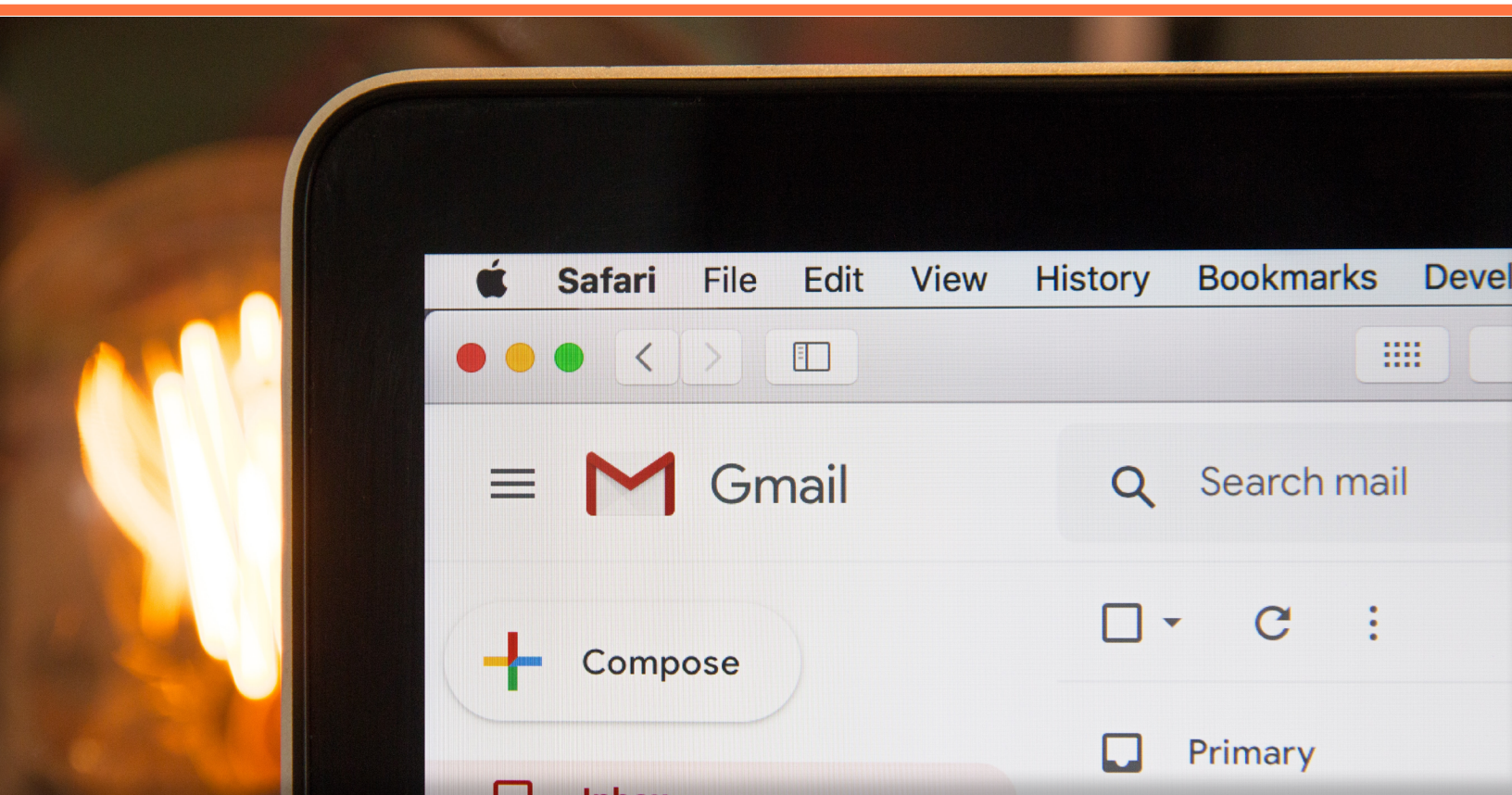
Email messaging is an integral part of effective fundraising strategies. In 2020, emails drove [19% of online donations](#), and for every 1,000 fundraising messages sent, nonprofits received an average of \$78.

Better writing means higher open and response rates. This directly translates to dollars for your mission. The more responsive your audience is, the more likely they will be to make a donation.

Furthermore, while many planned and major giving teams have traditionally focused on offline fundraising models (in-person visits and events, phone calls, etc), your supporters have moved online and are ready to give in a virtual space.

Older Americans now spend twice as much time online as they did three years ago. People do more “pre-shopping” before they make a purchase (i.e. donation), and many will want to read about your organization before they speak with your team.

And with only 8 seconds to capture your supporters’ attention with an email, your writing will need to be more effective than ever.



10 tips for effective emails

1

Clear

Emails written at a third-grade level receive [36% more responses](#) than those at a college reading level and 17% more than those at a high school reading level.

Make sure your writing is clear, uses words that you would use in everyday conversations, and can be easily skimmed for the main takeaways. For example, you can use headings and subject lines that pull out your biggest points.

2

Concise

When writing emails, try to keep them short and concise. More than 50% of emails are now read on mobile phones and the ideal length is about two to three paragraphs or 50 to 125 words. Cut out the unnecessary details and language in favor of fewer, stronger words that clearly convey your message.

Pro tip: Write a lengthy email first with plenty of details and then edit ruthlessly from there.

3

Persuasive storytelling

When writing with the goal of fundraising, tell a story about an individual your organization has helped. A [study](#) from the University of Pennsylvania shows that telling the stories of an individual over a group **increases gifts** to charitable organizations. However, presenting general statistics of a group alongside an individual's story **decreases gifts**.

Emotion also moves people and persuades them to give. Over neutral emails, emails that convey positive or happy sentiments [receive 15% more responses](#) and moderately negative emails receive 13% more.

4

The curiosity gap

67% of people say the [subject line of an email influences whether they'll open it](#), so you need to tap into their curiosity. The curiosity gap is the gap between what you know and what you want to know.

In your subject lines, you can pique your supporters' interest by withholding key information. This is similar to pausing a story at a climactic moment. Tapping into the curiosity gap can improve your email open rates — just don't overpromise and underdeliver.

5

The impact gap

Similar to the curiosity gap, the impact gap is the difference between what you need and what you have. Your job in writing will be to get your supporters to understand what is newly possible with their help. To do this, define the present situation for your organization, the problem you're facing, and the solution. For example, you could say: "This month, our animal rescue took in several new litters. But our shelter is facing rising pet food costs and the need for veterinary care. With your support, we can make sure these kittens get the food and help they need to be adopted and thrive in their forever homes."

Pro tip: As much as possible, emphasize the tangible impact your donor could make (i.e. "\$25 will provide two families with winter

6

Personalization

Always address your supporters by name in your emails. Hearing your own name triggers greater brain activation, particularly in the parts associated with social behavior and long-term memory. Personalized experiences also give people a greater sense of control and reduces information overload.

When you can, go beyond name as well. Remember and refer back to the personal information your donors or supporters have shared with you.

7

Humanity & empathy

Now more than ever, your writing and emails should be empathetic to your supporters and their situations. Start by being vulnerable with them, updating them on your life, to create an authentic, human connection. Acknowledge the current crisis, and be conscientious about your asks. Unless writing from multiple people, remove the 'we' as much as possible and speak from the 'I.'

For example, you could say: "I'm working from my couch while my fifth-grader attends online classes at our kitchen table, but I'm writing because [mission] matters more than ever."

8

Social proof

Social proof is a powerful, persuasive tactic for getting your supporters to give. When people see that someone else has taken an action, they often assume that action is correct and are more likely to copy them. To use social proof in your writing, you can invoke other donors and how they gave.

For example, you would say "Someone in the class above you, also from California, just donated stock, and got an almost 80% tax benefit" and not "You can save up to 80% on taxes through giving stock."

Pro tip: Avoid negative social proof, which won't persuade your supporters (e.g. "Only a fraction of our supporters respond. Will you be one of them?").

9

Conversational tone

When writing to supporters, especially for one-to-one letters, write as if you're speaking to a close friend or family member. Use simple, human language at a third-grade reading level, and cut out the jargon or big words that you wouldn't use in conversation.

“Because”

“Because” is a powerful word that drives behavior. When you ask for a favor (e.g. a donation), you will be so much more successful if you provide a clear reason for the ask.

In the Copy Machine Study from Harvard University in 1977, participants went over to a copy machine with the intention of cutting in line. They used three different versions to make their request with wildly different results:


- No reason: “Excuse me, I have 5 pages. May I use the Xerox machine?” — 60% granted the favor
- Real reason: “Excuse me, I have 5 pages. May I use the xerox machine, because I’m in a rush?” — 94% granted the favor
- Fake reason: “Excuse me, I have 5 pages. May I use the xerox machine, because I have to make copies?” — 93% granted the favor

Whether or not they gave a real reason, the results were nearly the same. As long as there was some reason for the ask, most people provided the favor.

9 examples & why they work

We've gathered nine nonprofit emails and letters from around the web and our partners to highlight effective writing examples that you can use in your own work.

Empathy & connection



CREATE A POWERFUL GIFT NOW

Nina,

We hope you and your loved ones are faring well and are taking every precaution to be safe during this challenging time. I understand that times may be tough for you right now and supporting your favorite causes might not be easy.

That's why I wanted to share a way you can support Defenders of Wildlife that will protect what matters most to you and costs nothing today: **leaving a gift in your will**. Even in the face of crisis, Defenders of Wildlife is hard at work protecting the wildlife you and I love. Wildlife and wild places were in jeopardy before the pandemic and they continue to be today.

CREATE A POWERFUL GIFT NOW >>

Everyone needs a legal will to ensure their assets benefit the people and causes they value the most. That's why I'm sharing a resource you can use to make a legally-valid will in 25 minutes or less – for free. **FreeWill** gives you an option to leave a gift to charity, and I hope you will consider including Defenders of Wildlife.

You can also use this tool to help get your affairs in order before speaking with an attorney. **By leaving a gift to Defenders of Wildlife in your will, you can create a legacy that will help us protect wildlife and ensure the survival of our organization both now and in the future.**

← Large, visual header that immediately grabs attention

← Uses the 'I' and 'you' to build a personal connection, and empathizes with the supporter during a difficult time

← Makes at least 3 asks: 2 indirect asks via highlighted links, and 1 large CTA

← Offers value to the supporter beyond the ask

← Provides a clear reason to follow through on the ask: protect wildlife now and in the future

CENTER FOR REPRODUCTIVE RIGHTS

This month has been exhausting and heartbreaking for everyone who holds dear the right to reproductive freedom.

But there is an inspiring silver lining in all of this: YOU, Megan.

More than 4,500 people have donated since election day to help us keep reproductive rights in America safe. You've stepped up when it mattered most.

Thank you for your support. Thank you for your generosity. Thank you for joining us for the battles that lie ahead.

You give me, and all of us at the Center, hope for the future—and the support to succeed.

Most sincerely,

Nancy

Nancy Northup
President & CEO

P.S. Now is the perfect time to invite your friends and families to join the fight. Share this link with them—because we're stronger together: reproductiverights.org/joinus.

DONATE NOW


← Acknowledges the difficulty of the past month

← Uses personalization to thank the donor and make them the hero of the story

← Includes specific social proof numbers to show that the donor is one of many making an impact

Social proof

Can't tag into our virtual relay? No problem!



Unable to make it to our virtual scavenger hunt for the Relay for Rescue on July 11th? There's another way you can support our animals and work towards a no-kill nation — at no personal cost today!

Many 4P4L supporters have asked about creating legacy gifts in their wills to support our animal rescue efforts for generations to come.

Now, we have a free resource to help you make the process easier than ever: you can write your legal will, protect the people you love, and create a powerful legacy gift that supports our dogs and cats forever, in 20 minutes or less.

Though you can't be with us on July 11th, I hope you'll consider "tagging in" to our relay and creating this powerful gift that will strengthen animal awareness and our advocacy efforts. [Get started here.](#)

← Grabs attention with a question

← Uses social proof on how other supporters have asked about creating a legacy gift in their wills

← Provides a reason to create a legacy gift



Fill her family's plates this Thanksgiving



Carolina, Redwood City

Hi,

Imagine not being able to fill your family's plates for a Thanksgiving meal. Then imagine struggling to fill their plates *every day*.

That's Carolina's reality — feeding a family of five in one of the most expensive areas to live in the country. Because of supporters like you, she can count on Second Harvest of Silicon Valley to provide her family with the healthy food she couldn't otherwise afford. She shared:

"Thank you to all the people that make it possible for us to have food on our table."

Your gift will help make sure local families like Carolina's can enjoy a memorable meal together this Thanksgiving. **Give by November 30** and your gift will be matched by the Khosla Family.

Double My Impact

If you've recently made a gift, thank you so much.

P.S. If you're 70 1/2 or older, you can join fellow Second Harvest of Silicon Valley supporters who make tax-free gifts from their IRAs each year. **Learn how you can save money while ensuring everyone has access to a healthy meal.**

← Large, compelling visual that tells an individual's story

← Draws on the supporter's imagination to understand the challenge their community is facing

← Uses an individual's story to demonstrate the challenge and make the supporter the hero

← Includes a testimonial as social proof

← Includes a matching gift opportunity from another family as social proof

← Includes social proof for IRA donations, inviting the supporter to join fellow donors

← Provides a compelling reason to give from an IRA: save money and ensure access to healthy meals



Endearing image that immediately grabs attention

Our supporters do crazy, heartwarming and hilarious things to raise money for clean water. Their incredible stories often inspire laughter, tears and even donations from our staff, and we'd like to share some of them with you too.



Trading Toys for Donations

Noah is 6 years old, lives in Miami and is selling his toys for \$20 each because "We have to help people in poor countries to live." You'll want tissues when you watch his video.

[You're not too old to buy these toys.](#)

Detailed examples of how other supporters are getting involved



Calling on a Village

Chris believes so strongly in the power of a community that he's raising \$10,000 one dollar at a time. And inspiring tons of "cashies" (selfies while holding \$1) in the process.

[Make Chris's day with a dollar.](#)



A Mini Monet in the Making

Cosette found out that many people lack access to clean water and decided to make and sell gorgeous paintings to help. She's 3 years old and way ahead of her time.


[Get yourself some art with heart.](#)

Includes numbers (ages and dollar amounts) as well as tells a story about these supporters

This isn't just our story; it's your story. You can do anything to raise money for clean water. If you have an idea that you've been sitting on, [come start a fundraising campaign right now](#). The craziest thing you can do is nothing!

START A CAMPAIGN

Storytelling



Wildlife needs you now

Will you help? ❤️

Dear John,

Like all snow leopard cubs, this cub was blind at birth. Its eyes opened when it was a week old. It will be dependent on its mother until it's at least one year old.

Imagine if this beautiful cub were orphaned today.

Tragically, a **snow leopard is illegally killed each and every day**. There are now fewer than 6,500 left in the wild.

From poaching to deforestation to climate change, nature around the world faces serious threats. **You can help!**

John, will you [act now to stop threats to nature and protect life on our planet](#) with a monthly gift to sustain our global conservation work? With your ongoing support, you will create a safer world for wildlife, protect amazing places, and help build a future where people live in harmony with nature.

Watch our snow leopard video >

← Appealing visual that directly relates to the story

← Powerful storytelling about an individual cub that presents a surprising fact (cubs are blind at birth), hooks the reader (imagining the cub orphaned), and presents a problem (snow leopards are killed illegally and endangered)

← Presents a compelling reason to help

HELP FAMILIES BEFORE IT'S TOO LATE CHARI



Mobina sits in the tent that her husband Bashir made from bamboo and tarpaulin in Cox's Bazar.

She clutches her newborn baby – she gave birth in her tent just 8 days ago.

A breeze drifts through the gap between the roof and the walls, as Mobina and Bashir recollect the journey that they were forced to take from their home in Myanmar, six months earlier.

"It makes me so sad, so upset. We lost our home, our neighbours. We faced so much pain, it was very difficult."

The young family managed to flee the armed men that torched their homes, but now they face a new danger: monsoon season.

Their tent is on a hill, and they are worried that the imminent rains and possibility of landslides might destroy everything that they have left.

In another part of the camp, Rahima shares a story that most of us could not even bear to imagine.

"I came here six months ago. I had three children with me on the way, now I have only one child.

"One of my children was killed crossing the border, she was only 11. My other child was only seven. When we crossed it was very cold and raining, we didn't have enough food so my child got sick and was taken by disease.

"When I lost my two children, I wanted to climb into the hole with them and lay there. We faced so much pain just to reach here."

How you can help



£25 can buy
hygiene packs
for two families

£25 >



£46 can buy a
shelter kit for a
family facing the
monsoon

£46 >



£100 can buy
kitchen sets
for five
families

£100 >

Powerful visual that sets up Mobina's story

Vivid story focused on an individual, including sensory details, such as the tent description, drifting breeze, and torched homes

Presents a strong story arc: Mobina just gave birth after fleeing armed men, and now prepares to face a new danger

Clearly shows how the donor can make a tangible impact on Mobina and her community

Tangible impact



Large visual that tells a story about the ways in which ARC helps

Dear Friend,

Were quickly approaching the final days of 2018, and Im looking back on this year in awe. While there are moments where I wish I could have done more to help others, I am incredibly proud of everything weve been able to do together. And while this is a time of celebration for many of us, we cant afford to slow down nowthere are still families out there who are counting on our help. [Can we count on your gift today to help those in need?](#)

Speaks from the 'I' to the 'you' to build a personal connection

Its not hard to see where those donations go. Ive put together a short list of some of my favorite things that we achieved with your support this year:



This past summer, helping children with cancer and other devastating diseases motivated more than **320,000 new and former blood donors** to roll up a sleeve and help save lives during our #MissingTypes movement.



Making homes and communities safer by installing **122,259 smoke alarms** during our first Sound the Alarm campaign.



Distributing more than **2.2 million disaster relief items to families** recovering from the wildfires, hurricanes and other disasters




Serving more than **28,678 families and community members** with funds raised during our Giving Day in March.

Lists specific, tangible actions the ARC has been able to provide with the donor's support




[Donate now to help more families](#)


Uses a large CTA that includes a reason or 'because': "to help more families"



Dear Friend,

This Friday, November 1, all SNAP (food stamp) participants will have their benefits cut. While a loss of \$36 a month for a family of four may not sound like much - here's what we purchased with \$36. This is SNAP and it's more than a government program, for some Americans it's breakfast, lunch, and dinner.





#ThisIsSNAP 

Our network of food banks cannot fight hunger alone, it takes partnership between Feeding America, government programs like SNAP, and help from supporters like you. [Make a gift today to help support Feeding America and our nationwide network of food banks](#) as we face increased demand for emergency food assistance in your community and across the country.

This loss will hurt the most vulnerable in our community -- households with children, elderly, and disabled who make up 76% of the recipients receiving SNAP benefits. And unfortunately the cuts may not end here. An additional \$40 billion is being debated right now as part of the Farm Bill.

Come Friday, Americans facing hunger will need our help more than ever. But you can help, [please donate whatever you can today.](#)

Very truly yours,

Bob Aiken
Chief Executive Officer
Feeding America

Donate Today

Includes a photo of the amount of food that can be purchased for \$36, showing how the donor could make a tangible impact with even a small gift

Includes 3 CTAs: 2 in-text asks and 1 large, very direct CTA button

Provides a clear-cut, easy-to-understand reason to give

How to find out more about FreeWill

Want to learn more about how FreeWill can unlock transformational gifts for your organization, including creating effective emails for your team? Please go to www.freewill.com/nonprofits.