

Lautman Maska Neill & Company – Copywriting Checklist

The fundamentals of good copywriting are essential to creating an effective direct response fundraising appeal. Use the following checklist to evaluate your draft letter copy. Additional tips for writing effective online fundraising copy are included at the end of this list.

	Yes	No
Lead: Does the opening of the letter immediately engage you? Do you want to keep reading? If not, find another lead! Sometimes a better opening can be found a few paragraphs in. Your opening should draw the reader in right away.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Writing style: Does your letter use simple words, short sentences and short paragraphs? We know – your ED wants the letter to sound like a graduate-level dissertation. But 8th-grade level is what you are going for. It's easy to read, presents your case clearly and compellingly and doesn't make the reader work too hard. Omit any complicated words. And above all – do not use jargon!	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Tone: Is the tone of the letter friendly, emotional and direct? The most effective fundraising letters are just that.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Write to one person: Does your letter sound as if it has been written from one person to one person? Imagine writing to one donor – your mother or your grandmother, for example. Address the letter to this one person. Avoid making it sound like the donor is part of a group, such as “I'm writing to donors like you...” instead say “I'm writing to you....”	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The ask: Does the letter make a clear, direct request for a gift on page one, and again at the close? This is critical! The ask should be strong and unapologetic. Your mission is important – and your donors care about it. Do not soften your request with phrases like “I hope you will consider continuing your support...” Instead, directly ask “Please make a gift today to help us provide food for hungry families.”	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Make a strong case for support: Does your letter do this? The letter should clearly state the problem – followed by the solution that your organization offers. Make sure the donor knows that by supporting your organization today, he or she will help people in need.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Use stories and be concrete: Can you tell the story of someone helped by your services? Can you “show” what a donor's gift will do? Be as concrete as you can – this will help donors imagine the difference they are making through your organization.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Create urgency: Do donors finish the letter feeling that it's critical they send a gift today? Make it clear to donors that their gift is urgently needed, and that it will make an immediate difference to someone in need.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Focus on the donor, not the organization: How many times do you use the word “you”? The best fundraising letters use “you” many times throughout the letter. In fact, a good tip is to replace one paragraph that is about your organization with one that is about your donor and how his or her support is making a tangible difference.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

	Yes	No
Length: Is your letter long enough to make a strong case? The rule is – your letter should be long enough to tell your story well. For donor appeals, two pages is usually enough. Making the case to prospective donors (acquisition) usually requires four pages. (Remember, with acquisition, you want to cite all possible reasons for giving, since you don't know what will motivate each potential donor.)	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Does it look like a letter? The letter should use Courier or Times Roman fonts. Because these are serif typefaces (which means the individual letters have small elements that draw the eye to the subsequent letter), copy printed in these typefaces is more readable for donors. Indent paragraphs. Use short paragraphs. Do not use photos.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Make it easy to scan visually: Do you liberally use underlining, bold face and indentation to highlight the important parts of your letter? Many donors will not read the whole letter – so you want to make sure that someone who is just scanning it will notice the important points.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
The PS: Would your letter be less effective if you left off the PS? Even someone who doesn't read the entire letter will usually read the PS. Make sure that the PS restates the case for giving in your letter, and includes any critical points (a deadline, a matching gift, etc.). The best PS is one that adds an urgent fact to support your case for giving ... touches the donor ... reminds donors of why they cared about your cause in the first place ... or does all three.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>
Read your copy aloud: Does it sing? It's an extra step, but one that is well worth your time. Do you find yourself stumbling over any parts of it? When you read it out loud, you're more likely to catch clunky phrasing or awkward construction. Edit it out.	<input type="checkbox"/>	<input type="checkbox"/>

When writing online fundraising copy, keep these additional tips in mind:

- ✓ Craft your subject line carefully – it is your teaser! Your subject line can tell the donors something critical or urge them to take action, but the best subject lines pique donors' curiosity. The subject line should be short – no more than 50 characters, including spaces.
- ✓ Keep your message short. You can use links to provide additional information for those who want to know more.
- ✓ Use bulleted lists, and do NOT indent copy.
- ✓ Links should typically be bold and underlined, and in blue or another color. This helps them stand out as an area that is important - and clickable.
- ✓ Your call to action (whether to make a gift or take action) should be “above the fold” (i.e. in the first screen the reader sees).
- ✓ Use **Verdana** or **Geneva** fonts; these sans serif typefaces are the easiest to read online.