

Strong words

Elizabeth Loudon shares tips on how to write clear, compelling prose that will give your fundraising proposals the edge

Even if you love to write, you may dread having to write fundraising proposals and letters. You're on deadline, trying to get busy people to part with their money or to please managers who insist on a house style.

It's hard to write with confidence under that kind of pressure. No wonder you sometimes hide behind passive sentences and dry jargon! You may freeze up completely, terrified of sounding gushy if you let down your guard for one moment.

Luckily, help is at hand. Follow the nine steps below, and you can once again write clear, compelling prose that's neither dry nor gushy.

Warm yourself up

Struggling with a thank you letter to a donor? Try writing an overdue thank you letter to somebody who helped you in the past: a mentor, perhaps, or a relative. You will naturally use heartfelt language. Now you can use those same words when thanking your donors. In a similar vein, write to a friend about your charity's work before writing to a foundation, then plagiarise the best bits for your proposal.

Make it real

Charities are goldmines of great stories about real people overcoming tough challenges. Such stories raise far more money than generalisations about abstract populations, so tell them as often as possible.

If your stories are getting stale, hunt for fresh ones. Interview the people you help (and their families) as well as staff and volunteers. Ask simple, open-ended questions: what do you think we do best? how have we changed your life? You'll gather new and unexpected tales from the front lines. Even if your charity has an impersonal cause, such as economic policy or climate change, you can still liven up your copy with sketches of people. You might describe a leader facing an ethical decision, for example, or an Inuit no longer able to cross to ancient hunting grounds.

Write loads of drafts

Not two. Not three. Loads. Professional writers don't expect to get it right first time – and they don't. In fact, few would let their early rough drafts see the light of day.

Read your drafts aloud. If you stumble over a sentence, it probably needs some editorial first aid (see the next three steps). You will also catch typos and repeated words when you read your draft out loud.

Let your reader breathe

Your poor readers have waded through enough heavy blocks of text for one lifetime. Their eyes are tired. Their concentration is fading. Refresh them with very short sentences and paragraphs, and mix and match the lengths as much as possible.

Clean out the jargon

If you keep reaching for words such as utilise, ensure, accountability and stakeholders, then you should know that funders dislike them as much as you do. Choose shorter, everyday words, such as help, use, promise, give, trust, people and you.

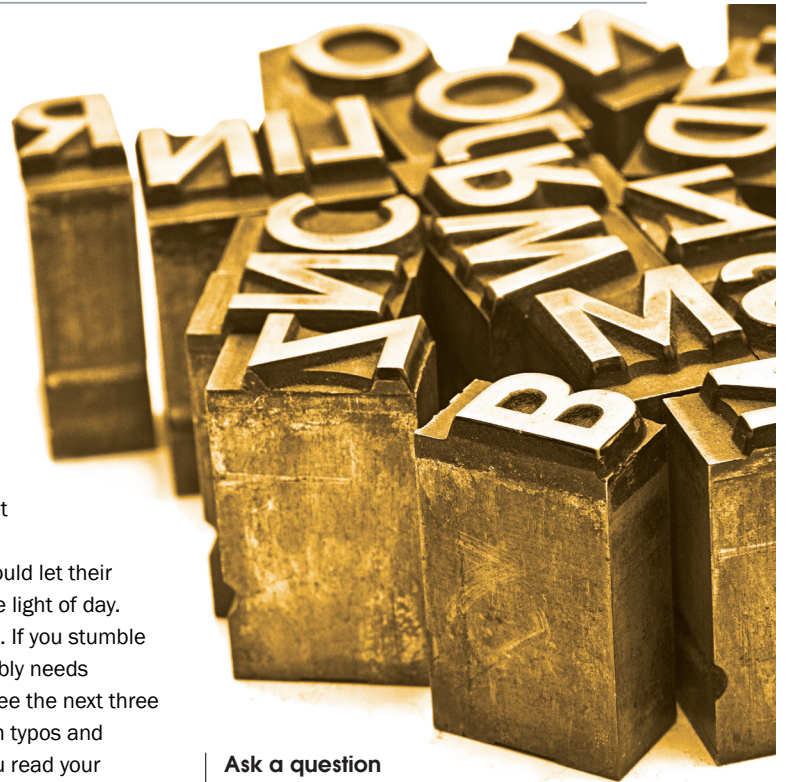
Boost your verbs

The sentence below feels like an uphill slog because you have to wait until the end for the verbs – and then they're passive:

"Following the exhibition the group takes part in a range of workshops through which issues of identity, stereotyping and diversity are debated and human rights and prejudice in all its forms are explored."

In just seconds, you could make the verbs active and move them closer to the beginning: "In workshops following the exhibition, the participants debate issues of identity, stereotyping and diversity and explore human rights and all forms of prejudice."

It's not great literature, but you've cut the sentence by a third and told us who is doing what.



Ask a question

Have you noticed how many journalists and novelists love this trick? Ask a question, and your reader instantly feels more involved.

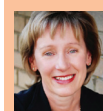
Share (but don't give it all away)

Professional writers show their drafts to trusted readers. They ask for specific feedback on what is and isn't clear. Then – and this is the important bit – they make any necessary changes *themselves*. So keep the pen in your own hand while your reader gives you feedback. That way, you'll develop your own distinctive voice.

You may think readers don't want to hear your voice, but they do. If you write to communicate rather than to hide, you'll sound bright, energetic and professional. Readers will enjoy 'hearing' you in their minds. You will bring your charity's work to life for them, and they will repay you with their trust and their donations. Enjoy the rewards!

PS: The author was obliged to followed her own advice when writing this article.

If you're an aspiring charity writer, you can attend Prospero Partners' Write To Right seminar on Tuesday, 9 October in central London. For more information, call 0208 741 7211 or contact Elizabeth Loudon at eloudon@prosperopartners.co.uk.



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