

Step By Step Guide to Writing Fundraising Letters

by Sandra Sims, Fundraising Coach
StepByStepFundraising.com

Fundraising letters are one of the most popular ways to request donations. Letters are used for a variety of purposes and can be sent to a large number of people or a select few. Results of a fundraising letter campaign can vary greatly depending on the purpose of the letter, the way the letter is written, and the recipient of the letter.

In this guide, I'll walk you step by step through the process of writing a letter. Each section includes many open-ended questions for you to think about and discuss with others in your organization before and during the letter writing process. Many of these questions will help you write your letter faster and easier than you may have thought possible.

Understanding there are many types of fundraising letters and organizations that use letters as part of their fundraising campaigns, the strategies included in this guide are meant to apply to a broad range of letters and organizations.

Step 1: Decide What Type of Fundraising Letter You Are Writing

The type of fundraising letter you wish to write will have an impact on how the letter is written. It is best to get a clear picture of the purpose of your letter before you even begin writing.

Request for Financial Donation - A donation letter specifically requests that the reader respond by making a financial gift. Sometimes this letter is also referred to as a membership drive letter, annual appeal, or special appeal.

Sponsorship Request – Corporate sponsors are often enlisted to help underwrite charity events. This type of letter is like a regular donation letter, except it is sent to specific businesses or individuals who may be interested in sponsorship. Financial amounts requested may be larger than a normal donation request. The sponsorship proposal normally provides some type of benefit to the donor, such as advertising at the event.

Request for Goods or Services – Letters are frequently used as a method for obtaining donations to be used as door prizes, auctions or raffles. Organizations may also request in-kind services or assistance from individuals or businesses by sending a letter.

The common thread among all types of fundraising letters is that you are requesting that the reader take action - either giving financially or donating goods or services. The action that you wish the reader to take must be very clear. Therefore, decide which type of letter you will send to which recipient.

Only include information that falls into the category of letter that you are sending. Do not ask for individual donations, prize donations, and corporate sponsors all in the same letter – this gives the reader too many options, and it becomes confusing.

Step 2: Know Your Audience & Compile a Mailing List

The most important question you must answer before writing your letter is who will be reading it. It is absolutely vital that you understand the message from the reader's point of view. Is this person familiar with your cause? Does he/she know someone in your organization? Is he/she able to donate financially at the level you are requesting? How strong will his/her desire be to donate?

To help answer these questions, consider the three types of mailing lists that organizations normally use:

Cold List – this includes lists purchased from mailing list companies, compiled from community directories, lists of new residents to an area, etc. The individuals on this type of list may or may not know of your organization. These are people that your organization does not currently have a relationship with.

Targeted List – this includes lists of previous donors, strong contacts, or individuals who fit certain criteria. It is best to create several targeted lists depending on your appeal.

Personal List – this includes friends, family and close associates of the person that is requesting the donation. Individuals who are volunteering for an organization and raising money as pledges for a walk-a-thon or similar program would write to people they know. The director or board members of an organization may access their personal list of contacts, when appropriate, to send a fundraising letter.

As you see from the above list, we moved from individuals who are least known, to those who are closest with the organization or person requesting the donation. You will generally find that the more a person is familiar with your organization, the more likely he/she is to donate. If he/she has a strong belief in or tie to your cause, then he/she will also be a stronger supporter.

I've often been asked if a non-profit organization should buy mailing lists. There is no catchall answer to this question. What is right for one group may not work for another, however most mailing list companies can provide lists of individuals who fit very specific criteria, such as geographic area, income and interests.

Many new organizations or small non-profits do not have the funds to purchase mailing lists. If you fit that description, do not despair. By hand compiling a list of strong prospects you will have just as great or even a greater chance at succeeding with your mailing.

It's A Match

Now, let's combine what we've learned in steps one and two. The type of letter you're sending will greatly determine who the recipients are. Match the type of letter to the people most likely to respond to such a request, and you'll increase the likelihood of a positive result.

For example, if you were to request prize donations for an auction or raffle, you would send request letters to a very specific audience. You would only send letters to organizations with products or services that can be donated. Service businesses, retail and restaurants are often happy to donate an item or gift certificate. Strong prospects include those who have donated in the past and business owners that are known to your organization.

Step 3: Decide What to Say

In steps one and two you decided which type of letter to write and to whom. Now with those two things in mind, we are going to plan the content of the letter. This section will introduce questions that will make the actual writing of the letter much easier.

First, we need to **anticipate the reader's questions and answer them**. When someone receives a fundraising letter, many questions arise, even if subconsciously. He/she wonders:

- Who is this group and what is its cause?
- Are they reputable?
- Will the donation go to the cause or administrative costs?
- How much do I have to send?

Answering questions like these in the letter will help overcome many of the possible objections!

What is the reason for writing this letter?

Who is your group and what is its mission?

What are you asking the recipient to do?

In requesting a donation, what amount or value are you requesting?

Ask for a specific suggested donation amount in the letter.

Tie this amount to something tangible. For example, "Your gift of just \$15 will feed one needy family this holiday season."

Offer several donation levels, making sure they are appropriate for your audience. You may list the specific amounts on the response card instead of in the actual letter.

When is the deadline for a response?

Giving a deadline increases the sense of urgency for the reader and increases the number of responses.

What will happen if the reader does not respond by the deadline?

Will you follow up with a phone call?

Will he/she miss out on an opportunity if there is no response?

Why should the reader respond to your request?

Put yourself in his/her shoes. What would motivate him/her to donate to your specific cause?

Consider other possible questions the reader might have that are specific to your particular letter and appeal. Then, answer those questions as you did above.

Step 4: Format the Letter

Next, let us take a look at the basic sections that need to be included in every fundraising letter.

1. Return Address – Ideally you will be using your organization’s letterhead or a specially printed paper designed for this mailing. The organization’s name, return address, phone number and logo should always be included.

2. Addressee – Name and Address of the person receiving the letter.

3. Salutation – Include the name of the person to whom you are writing. This would be either “Dear Mr. Smith,” or “Dear Joe.” It is best if each letter is personalized this way. This can be accomplished with a simple mail merge using your word processing program and database. If at all possible avoid using generic salutations such as “Dear Friend” because they are impersonal and immediately put the reader on guard.

4. Opening Line or Paragraph – The goal of the opening paragraph is to get the reader interested and keep reading. Keep your opening short, 3-5 lines, since this is most effective in grabbing the reader’s attention.

5. Body – The body of your letter should include several short to medium paragraphs. Refer back to the questions that you answered in step three to build the body of the letter.

6. Call to Action – Let the reader know exactly what you are asking for and the deadline.

7. Follow-Up – Following up by telephone is highly important when requesting large gifts, corporate sponsorship or donation of goods and services. If appropriate, let your reader know that you will follow up by phone within a week or two.

8. Closing Paragraph – Close the letter with a short paragraph, usually 2-5 lines. The call to action and follow up statement may be part of your closing paragraph.

9. Closing – End the letter with a closing phrase that feels comfortable for you, and yet professional. When in doubt “Best wishes” or “Kind regards” are always good closings.

10. Signature – Every letter must contain a signature. It doesn’t have to be hand signed, though. An easy solution is to scan the signature and insert as an image into the document. However, the more realistic it is, the better.

11. Typed Name – The signature should be followed by the full name of the person signing the letter and his or her title. Important: The letter should be signed by someone in authority in your organization such as the president, director, board member or other officer or staff person. There may be some situations where other members such as volunteer coordinator, volunteers, or honorary persons may sign the letter. You may wish to also include a direct phone line and email address underneath.

Using a [donation letter template](#) may help you get started writing and ensure that all of the proper sections are included in the letter.

Additional Formatting Tips

- Use of text features such as bold and underline, if used appropriately can further enhance your message.
- Use short paragraphs, with a blank line in between each.
- Use standard margins of 1 inch on each side of the page.
- Be sure to use a font that is easy to read, such as Arial or Times New Roman.
- A font size of 11 or 12 pt is usually preferred.
- Review the letter to verify the use of proper grammar and correct spelling.

Step 5: Craft Your Message

In steps three and four we decided what to say in the letter, now we will address how to say it. This is often the area where people get tripped up, or get “writer’s block.” However, you can overcome this hurdle by putting into action several proven strategies.

Write to ONE person – When you start writing the letter, imagine you are writing to only one person, not a group of people. In many ways this takes the pressure off mentally. It also will help your letter to sound more personable. Use singular word forms, not plural – avoid words and phrases like “some of you” or “anyone” when addressing the reader. Instead use the personal, singular form “you.” This mirrors the way that the letter will be read by the recipient.

Be Specific – If your appeal will benefit a specific project, mission or program, say so. Describe how the donations will help with this particular project. Include a few brief details about where the donation will be used and the positive results it will bring.

Stay Focused – As mentioned in step one, stay focused on the objective of the letter. Make one request and communicate this message clearly. Avoid discussing topics that are not directly related to your appeal or that do not support the message of your letter.

Descriptive Phrases – Use the most descriptive adjectives and adverbs in your letter to clarify your message. However, be careful not to over embellish or exaggerate.

Keep it Simple – It is important to include information about your organization and why you are writing. However, a fundraising letter is not the place to include lengthy official mission statements or a long description of your future plans. Don’t get too detailed with numbers and jargon that the reader may not be familiar with. Remember to focus on information that is relevant and compelling to the potential reader.

Personalization – If you are writing a letter to a specific donor, include specific information related to him/her. If it is a repeat donor, discuss ways that his/her previous contributions have made a difference in your organization.

Narratives & Success Stories – One of the most successful ways to get your message across is to describe a story of a specific person or situation that your organization has helped. If your group has made some major achievements and successes these can also be of use. Always remember to include stories that will engage the reader, not just show off accomplishments.

Step 6 – Make it Easy to Respond

There are at least two additional items that need to be included in your fundraising letter package:

1. Response Device. This could be a card, a full-page sheet, or a full-page sheet with a tear off coupon. Repeat the information about what is being requested, donation levels if appropriate and the address where the card needs to be mailed.
2. Pre-printed envelope, with your organization's address. A name or title of person who should be receiving responses may be included when appropriate.

Step 7 - One Final Review

Ask others in your group to read your letter and give feedback. Evaluate the letter for style, content and the flow of the letter.

Also ask people not familiar with your organization, so you can get a fresh perspective. Have someone with a flair for writing and a keen eye to proofread. Decide which changes you want to make, and edit the letter. Check and double-check the letter for misspellings and typos!

Step 8 – Stuff those envelopes!

Oh, the fun begins, stuffing envelopes. Yes, we all know it well! But wait, which type of envelopes are you going to send your letters in?

A variety of envelopes can be used such as coordinating stationery or envelopes specially printed for this particular campaign. Other options include card size envelopes or specially colored envelopes. Writing or colored print on the outside is often attention getting. Remember you need to get the recipient's attention so they feel compelled to open the envelope!

Following Up

Seeing those return envelopes in the mailbox is exciting! Be sure to keep records of donors and donation amounts. Send [thank you letters](#) to all who donate. Following up with a second mailing, postcard or telephone call, depending upon the type of request, will yield additional responses.

Need More Help? For additional resources to help write fundraising letters see the Sample Fundraising Letters e-book: stepbystepfundraising.com/sample-fundraising-letters-book/