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A Mightier Pen Can Help Charities Spread Messages

By Maureen West

At Table to Table, an Iowa City antihunger charity, Bob Andrlik leads a staff of only three other people who are often busy working on the charity's programs.

So when he must write the organization's grant proposals or its newsletters, annual reports, or anything else going out to the public, he often turns to volunteers to read behind him.

They help to get his writing just right, he says.

One volunteer who has a way with words advises him specifically on grant proposals. Mr. Andrlik credits her suggestions for a community-foundation grant that the charity gets every year now that varies between \$5,000 and \$10,000.

"For many online [grant applications], you can't insert photos to help make your case," Mr. Andrlik notes. "You have to have data and passages that appeal to the heart working in concert."

Demand for strong writing skills among nonprofit employees is growing as Facebook, Twitter, blogs, and online communications take a role alongside the traditional news releases, fundraising appeals, and annual reports.

"Writing can't be siloed with one communications person anymore," says Jamie Millard, who manages communications at the Charities Review Council, a nonprofit watchdog group in St. Paul.

Writers Wanted

But many nonprofit workers don't have the skills they need to succeed, say experts.

Some need remedial writing help, says Dalya Massachi, author of *Writing to Make a Difference*.

She says bosses shouldn't assume that even college graduates can write at a professional level because so few institutions teach grammar or the critical thinking processes that go into good writing.

"Many nonprofit professionals haven't had that training but can get it easily from books, online, or more formally," says Ms. Massachi, of Oakland, Calif., who has spent two decades helping nonprofits

craft grant proposals and handle other writing projects.

Fortunately, she adds, many nonprofit organizations or associations and colleges offer continuing-education classes that can help people learn to write strong grant proposals or produce better social-media contents.

Nonprofit employees who are deeply involved in creating written communications should consider such training, says Kristin Dunstan, vice president for marketing and communications at the Community Foundation for Greater Atlanta.

But, she says, many of those courses focus on the techniques of winning grants and not on the general writing skills nonprofit workers must possess.

Even in this digital age, she says, “we still need people who can write effective speeches, letters of intent, newsletters, feature stories for the annual report.”

Ms. Dunstan, who has a background in the theater, recommends that more nonprofit groups hire writers with a natural ability to recognize great stories that connect emotionally.

“It’s a good time to invest in some good old liberal-arts majors,” she says, including those who studied English or journalism, “and then teach them the technical communications and marketing tools they will need.”

Ms. Millard, the Charities Review Council communications leader, is also co-founder of a literary magazine in the Twin Cities. She believes that creative writing is an essential ingredient of every message a charity sends.

She suggests exploring creative-writing programs that go beyond the needs of nonprofit organizations.

Reading short fiction and literary Web sites, she says, also helps her write concise, compelling blogs.

“And too often,” she adds, “we take ourselves too seriously. We can humanize our copy by lightening up and having some fun.”

Everyday Language

Sometimes writing lessons can come from unexpected places.

For example, Mr. Andrlik, of Table to Table, who took creative-writing classes in college, says detective fiction has taught him the power of tension and suspense, which he tries to incorporate into his writing on behalf of his charity.

While he doesn’t exactly channel Raymond Chandler in his nonprofit-related writing, Mr. Andrlik uses his storyteller’s knack for connecting to what different members of an audience care about, whether in a grant proposal or a speech about Table to Table, which distributes unsold food from bakeries, supermarkets,

restaurants, and elsewhere to soup kitchens and other places that feed the needy.

For some potential donors, the hot button is not wasting food. For others, it is the crisis moment of being there when people need help. After the Eastern Iowa floods in 2008, his fundraising appeal was, in part, “Life can be upended when you least expect it.”

“The floods were a shared experience for the community, and we tapped into what people cared about,” Mr. Andrlik says. “From a storytelling point of view, we already had an emotional connection, and we added the personal.”

Claire Meyerhoff, a communications consultant in Alexandria, Va., who specializes in fundraising, suggests paying attention to any writing that draws you in, even if it’s just an advertisement or a magazine article.

“If you find yourself entranced, then ask yourself: What is making you want to keep reading?” she says.

The answer, more often than not, is going to be conversational, jargon-free writing, Ms. Meyerhoff says.

Nonprofit communication is usually larded with jargon phrases like “capacity building” and “impacting,” she says, but they convey nothing extra for all their baggage.

“It’s better to just say in everyday language what you mean,” says Ms. Meyerhoff.

And it’s better to say it *every day*, say experts. Frequent practice can help all writers improve.

Since last May, Dawn Svenson Holland, president of FlashPoint Fundraising, a consultancy in Cedar Rapids, Iowa, has used the free writing Web site, 750words.com, which encourages daily writing.

She writes on any topic that comes into her head, but it often morphs into writing she can use for work. “It has definitely helped me get unstuck when I was doing proposals or case statements,” says Ms. Svenson Holland.

She has tried writing in journals, she says, but nothing motivates her like that automatic, daily online prompt at 1 p.m.: “Have you written today?”

Brainstorming Blogs

Perhaps no part of nonprofit work has caused more anxiety for those who struggle with writing than the increasing pressure to blog, tweet, or post on other social networks.

As Ms. Millard points out, “More donors probably now read your tweets than your annual reports.”

For extra support in meeting their on-the-job prose needs, some

charity workers are forming informal writers groups. Ms. Millard herself relies on a circle of friends who have similar communication jobs at local nonprofits. The six friends use an e-mail group to preview and critique troublesome blog entries and other writing. They also regularly discuss writing over lunch.

The buddy system can also help produce ideas for online media, not just refine the writing. At the Charities Review Council, the weekly staff meeting brainstorms ideas for tweets and blog entries.

“We have discussed ‘Kony 2012,’ the Komen controversy, and each week we talk about the latest things we have read,” Ms. Millard says. “Everyone brings a different interest to the meeting.”

In the past year, since the group has begun that brainstorming, she says, more staff members have become active online, and the number of followers engaging with its online communications have tripled.

Ms. Millard suggests requiring new employees to follow charities that are particularly good at social media.

She also recommends carefully monitoring and editing the tweets and writing of new employees before posting their writing online.

“It takes time from you to train them,” she says, “but it’s important, and it’s worth it.”

[See the entire continuing-education guide »](#)

A Blueprint for Building your Word Power

Seek feedback.

It’s crucial for improvement, says Dalya Massachi, an Oakland, Calif., writing consultant and author of *Writing to Make a Difference*. She suggests joining or forming a writers’ group of up to six co-workers or writer friends from other charities to review each other’s promotional text, blogs, and presentations.

Write down helpful tips.

The act of writing will help you remember good ideas, Ms. Massachi says.

Write to an audience of one.

Have one real reader in mind, such as a particular relative or a neighbor, says Claire Meyerhoff, a communications consultant in Alexandria, Va., who specializes in fundraising. Write as if you are speaking to that person. If, say, a family member helped you with a down payment on a car, you wouldn’t write that person a note saying, “Together we found the funds to purchase. ...” Just say thanks for the specific way the person helped.

Avoid complicated language.

Strike a conversational tone and avoid jargon. “Impacting youth is like double jargon,” notes Ms. Meyerhoff. If something affects kids, simply say it affects kids.

Don’t tell readers what they already know.

It’s boring and a quick way to lose their attention. Organizations do spend a lot of time recapping their missions even to people who are longtime supporters, Ms. Meyerhoff notes.


Break it up.

Encourage the eye to move down the page by avoiding block after block of plain text. In addition to small graphics or photos, you can break up paragraphs by using bold sentences, bullet points, and highlighted quotes, says Jamie Millard of the Charities Review Council, a nonprofit watchdog group in St. Paul.


When writing for online media, don’t copy and paste the title of an article and then just add the link, Ms. Millard says. Instead, take the time to write from your organization’s perspective to introduce the link. This will signal to your followers that a real person took the time to share a thoughtful resource.

Keep it brief.

Nearly everything you write can be shorter. If you can read something in 30 seconds or less, says Ms. Meyerhoff, you have a readable story for social media.

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Real-time updating is **paused**. ([Resume](#))

 **Howard Freeman** 1 hour ago

Great article, and so glad to see it appear. If you consider that foundation staff, in particular, read *so much stuff,* you realize that if you don't "write for an audience of one," or break up your text/keep it simple, etc., your proposal will be dismissed.

Alternatively, if you write well, your proposal will at least hold the reader's interest. Then, it's up to your ideas to carry the day with that person's individual or corporate goals.