

# Guide to Writing Appeals



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**MUIR**

# GUIDE TO WRITING APPEALS

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# 5 THINGS TO THINK ABOUT BEFORE YOU WRITE YOUR APPEAL

Before you sit down to write your appeal get your juices flowing by thinking of:

1. A compelling story.
2. A photo that reinforces your story. Ideally this is a close-up of one person looking straight at the camera. Use a caption under your photo.
3. A narrator. This could be your head of school, parent of child you served, celebrity, Board president or an unexpected narrator like a can of food at your food bank, or a sick kidney.
4. A compelling opening line. You have 2 seconds to get their attention and get them to read on so use it wisely by opening with something startling or stating in the middle of the action.
5. Your ask – a.k.a a problem your donors can solve. What are you asking donors to support? Is it believable? (If you suggest to me that my \$100 gift will end hunger, I won't believe you. If you tell me it will buy 300 meals for a hungry person, that's something I can comprehend). How will it make a difference? Why is their support needed now? Remember: you will need to make your ask at least 3 times in your appeal.\*

## THE 3 SIMPLE INGREDIENTS OF AN APPEAL

There are 3 essential ingredients in any appeal:

1. There's a problem. Problem: Kids with cleft palate and cleft lip in poor countries.
2. We need your help to fix it. Solution: A simple medical procedure.
3. Here's how your gift will solve it. Call to Action: Your \$100 will give a child life-changing surgery and a beautiful smile.

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\* Source: **Clarification**



# YOUR EMAIL APPEAL TEMPLATE

## From

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*Your appeal should come from a real person (with a real email address) on behalf of your organization not "Big Brother's Big Sisters" or [Development@anynonprofitcan.org](mailto:Development@anynonprofitcan.org) or – worst of all – a do not reply email address. 60% of people say they read an email because of the sender. Sending emails from an email address that your donor doesn't identify or can't respond to will decrease your open rates and make your message more likely to be deleted, or listed as spam.*

## Subject line

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*You can write the best email appear in the history of fundraising but without a great subject line it won't be opened. Keep it under 50 characters (or 7 words) to ensure it's mobile optimized. You can spark curiosity, i.e. "**This doesn't happen often ...**" or "**How many lives can you save with \$50?**" try urgency "**[48 hours left] to make TWICE the difference**" or ignite your donor's passions "**This can't keep happening to kids!**"*

## Salutation

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Personalize with their first name.

## The Opener – an emotional or compelling hook

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*Think of any book you pick up. If it doesn't grab you with the first sentence you put it down. Open with a shocking truth, or by starting a story in the middle of the action, or with a vivid emotional story such as "**They escorted us into a private room. You could tell it was the place they take you to give you bad news.**" Or "**This is a very difficult letter to write. But if telling you my story could help find my missing son or prevent another child's abduction, I will gladly accept the heartache it brings me.**" Or "**When we found Misty on side of the road with her litter of puppies all she could move were her front legs.**"*

## Ask #1

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*Tell your donors why their gift is needed NOW. Why is it better to give now than later? Is there a deadline, i.e. school is starting? You can create a deadline with a match expiration date.*

## The offer

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*Your offer is the single most important part of your appeal. It tells the donor what their money will do. i.e. **“\$25 pays for one x-ray for a chimpanzee who may be hurt and in need of urgent medical care”** or **“\$100 pays for a month’s worth of formula for an orphaned chimp”** Tell potential donors exactly how the money will be used, and what outcome will result from the dollar amount you’re requesting. This helps donors connect the dots between their gift and the outcome they seek.*

## Ask #2

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*Tell the donor exactly what you want them to do and how they can do it, i.e. **“Click here to make your tax-deductible gift now”***

## Closing

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*Thank the reader for their attention and signed with a real person’s name, preferably using an image of their signature.*

## PS (Ask #3)

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*The P.S. is one of the first things donors read. A P.S. in an email actually boosts responses. The P.S. is your chance to reinforce the sense of urgency and give your donor another invitation to make their gift, i.e. "P.S. You are my daughter's best hope of getting a healthy kidney. Please click here to turn your \$100 gift into \$200" or "Remember, your gift of just \$25.18 will provide a hot supper every day for a week. Please give today."*

### 6 TIPS FROM JOHN HAYDON TO WRITE FUNDRAISING EMAILS

- Step 1: Tell a good story. (This needs to be an unfinished story that demonstrates the problem your donor can help solve. Ideally this story is about one person [animal, etc]). Use emotion to pull at your donor's heartstrings and make the donor the hero.
- Step 2: Make it about your reader. Use their first name. Tell them why their support is invaluable.
- Step 3: Talk about the money. Be transparent about your funding gap, i.e. "Sponsors and grants cover administrative costs, but we need your support to make sure programs like Science Friday continues to reach people like you". This approach communicates transparency and responsibility - making donors feel confident about how their dollars will be spent.
- Step 4: Tell them what their money will do. i.e. "It costs \$50 per week to provide one adult chimpanzee with fresh food." Or "For just \$40, you can connect a classroom of 20 children with a healthy school breakfast for an entire month".
- Step 5: Keep it sentences and paragraphs short and break up text with headlines.
- Step 6: Ask 3 times.



# ANATOMY OF AN APPEAL LETTER

Consider a bold  
18-24 point font  
headline at top

## Why did my baby have to die? ←

First Name Last Name

1234 Any Street

Anytown, USA 12345

← Use a serif font 12  
- 14 points

Dear First Name, (NEVER "dear friend") ← Use a serif font 12  
- 14 points

**Opening sentence** "It's a terrible thing to outlive your child." ← Indent paragraphs

### Your story

This should be an emotional story should be about one person or animal and use descriptive details. Ideally this story is about an unmet need and the donor's help is needed to solve the problem. Make the donor the hero of the story

Write like you  
talk (keep it  
conversational).

**Your offer** ← "You" is your donor's love potion

This is the #1 most important part of your appeal. Tell the donor what their money will do. i.e. "Your \$100 will pay for a month's worth of baby formula for a hungry orphan" Tell how the money will be used and the outcome that will result from the dollar amount you are requesting.

### The ask

Convey urgency. If the donor doesn't respond to this will the need go unfilled? Tell your donor why their gift is needed now. Make the donor feel like this is a solvable problem: "But there is hope. And it's so incredibly simple. The solution is water. Clean, pure drinking water."

### Reinforce the ask & Close

Thank the reader for their attention and reinforce your call to action.

"For all you do, please know that you have my deep heartfelt thanks"

"Every meal makes a difference and **your monthly gift will feed hungry kids all year long**"

"You are Billy's best hope of not going to bed homeless tonight"

Graphic enhancements  
work: underlining, bold,  
highlighting, handwriting  
in the margin (Ideally  
you can make this look  
like a post it note)

### Sign off

If this letter is coming from a person, it must use their name. Use a signature in blue ink. Use a closing that reinforces the offer if you can, i.e. "For the love of dogs"

### P.S.

Reinforce your call to action. Add a deadline if you have one. "Just \$20 a month can feed one hungry child for a year"

## 7 PHRASES TO MAKE THE ASK

"You make it possible."

"Take this step..."

"You can make a difference"

"Please join me..."

"This work completely depends on you."

"Make your gift right now."

"Can't do it without you..."

## 10 WAYS TO ROCK YOUR P.S.

1. Show what a donation buys i.e. "\$56 feeds 100 disabled vets a Thanksgiving meal"
2. Make your donor mad (at the problem you solve) "I've included a sad photo of a
3. Mention your deadline i.e. "The match expires tonight at midnight, give today to turn your \$100 gift into \$200!"
4. Mention your front end- premium
5. Suggest a larger gift i.e. ""Your last gift was \$250. If you could match it again (or even increase it a little), I'd be mighty grateful to you."
6. Draw their attention to an important enclosure you included in your package i.e. "I've included a voucher to provide warm nutritious meals to hungry homeless vets living in our shelter"
7. Invite them to take action i.e. "If a loved one or friend is struggling with depression please call 1 800 459 222. Because of your generous gifts, we will be here to offer advice and help to those in need."
8. Stress the Urgency of Your Appeal i.e. "Thousands of baby seals are at risk right now of starving to death. Please save these animals and rush your gift right now"
9. Ask a question i.e. "Did you know half of our students are here on scholarship?" or "Did you know \_\_\_ does not receive any funding from \_\_\_?"
10. Describe what happens if the donor fails to act "I need to rush these vaccines to Ecuador within 10 days or we will miss this opportunity" \*\*

\*\* Source: **Fundraiser Help**



# 15 APPEAL WRITING TIPS

1. Write like you talk. Test this by reading it out loud. Does it sound conversational?
2. Avoid jargon like “underserved”.
3. Tailor your appeal content to your audience segments i.e. active donors, monthly donors, lapsed donors etc.
4. Use ‘you’ words twice as much as ‘I’ or ‘we’ words.
5. Use a serif font of at least 14 points.
6. Indent paragraphs.
7. Use short sentences and short paragraphs.
8. Write at a 6th – 8th grade reading level.
9. Use a closing that reinforces the offer, i.e. “For the love of cats” or “With a heart full of music” or “For the love of children”.
10. Secure a match and do the math for the donor “Turn your \$250 gift into \$500!”.
11. Use a descriptive story. Ideally this story is an incomplete story about someone you haven’t helped yet, or a problem or need that your donor can solve.
12. Make the donor the hero.
13. Use photos with subjects looking straight at the camera and captions if they reinforce your story or amplify the need.
14. Mention the donor’s previous gift amount, date or purpose i.e. “I know you care, Julie, your recent gift of \$100 helped homeless pets find their forever families.”
15. Ask at least 3 times in an email and at least once on each page in a multipage appeal.



## GIVE YOUR COPY THE AHERN AUDIT!

Want to test your copy for readability and to make sure you are using donor-centered language? Simply paste your copy here:  
<https://bloomerang.co/ahernaudit/>

# YOUR APPEAL CHECKLIST

- ✓ Does it have a short, powerful opener?
- ✓ Is it conversational?
- ✓ Is it personalized?
- ✓ Is there a reason to give now or sense of urgency?
- ✓ Is it tailored to your audience segments i.e. active donors, monthly donors, lapsed donors etc.?
- ✓ Do you ask for a specific amount?
- ✓ Is there a clear offer? i.e. "Your \$100 gift will save chimpanzees from painful and lonely deaths"
- ✓ Are there at least 3 asks in the appeal, near the beginning, midway and in the PS?
- ✓ Have you given yourself the [ahern audit](#) to make sure you are writing at 6th – 8th grade reading level and are using twice as many "you" words as "we" words?
- ✓ Have you removed any jargon or acronyms?
- ✓ Is the same campaign theme/offer being used across all your channels (email, mail, social)?
- ✓ Does it make use of white space, underlines, bold, and indentation to guide the reader?
- ✓ If you used a photo are the subjects looking straight at the camera? Does the photo have a caption? Does the photo reinforce your story or amplify the need?
- ✓ Is the font at least 14 points?
- ✓ Do you use make good use of the P.S. with another call to give?
- ✓ Does your sign off include a signature?
- ✓ Does the email come from an actual person with an actual email address?
- ✓ Do you have a winning mobile friendly subject line?
- ✓ Have you tested your appeal multiple times (and run it through a grammar check)?
- ✓ Is there a live signature in a different color ink in a letter or a scanned signature for email?
- ✓ Does storytelling use descriptive details and make the donor the hero?
- ✓ Are you prepared to properly thank your donors with email thank you autoresponders, letters, cards and calls?



## ABOUT RACHEL MUIR, CFRE

Rachel has worked every side of the Rubik's cube that is the nonprofit sector. When she was 26 Rachel Muir launched Girlstart, a non-profit empowering girls in math, science, engineering and technology in the living room of her apartment with \$500 and a credit card. Several years later she had raised over \$10 million and was featured on Oprah, CNN, and the Today show. Today Rachel delivers keynotes, custom trainings and board retreats that transform people into confident, successful fundraisers. Learn more about Rachel at [www.rachelmuir.com](http://www.rachelmuir.com)



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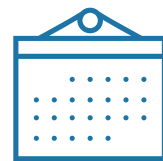
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