

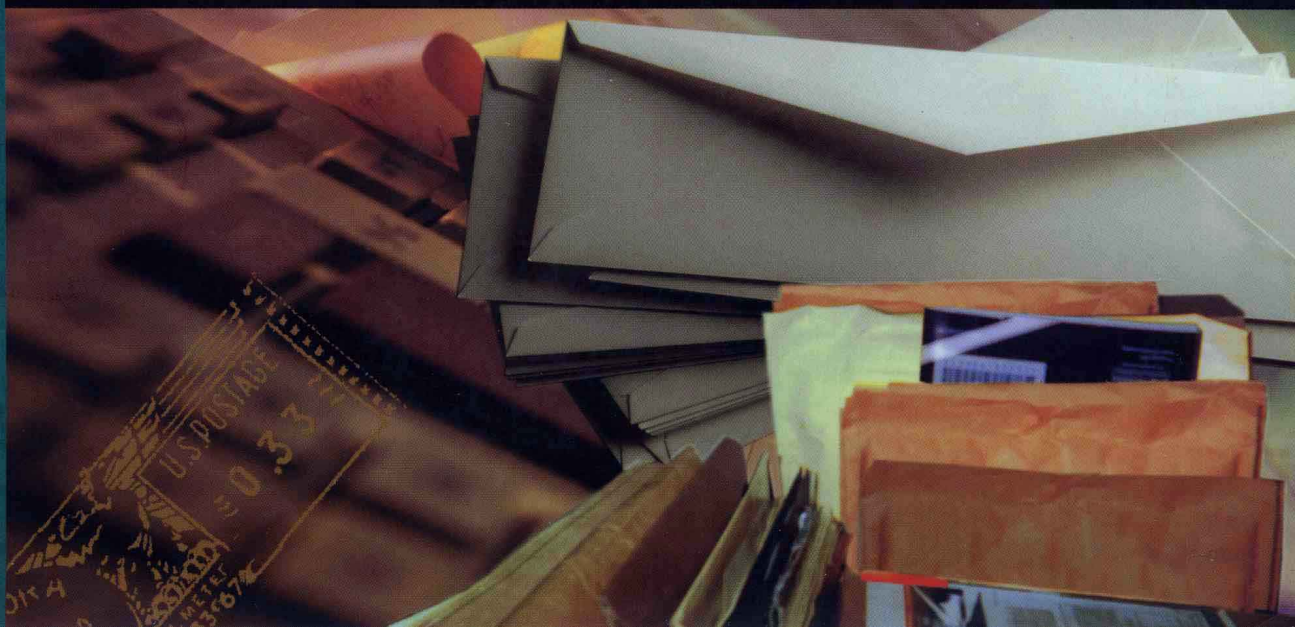
REVISED AND UPDATED

**MAL WARWICK**

**HOW TO**

# WRITE SUCCESSFUL FUNDRAISING LETTERS

**SAMPLE LETTERS • STYLE TIPS • USEFUL HINTS • REAL-WORLD EXAMPLES**





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**M A L W A R W I C K**

**H O W T O**  
**WRITE**  
**SUCCESSFUL**  
**FUNDRAISING**  
**LETTERS**



**SAMPLE LETTERS • STYLE TIPS • USEFUL HINTS • REAL-WORLD EXAMPLES**



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# Preface to the Revised Edition

Just in case you're curious how this revised edition is different from the first, I'll get that out of the way right off the bat:

- The book's contents have been completely reorganized into a more logical and smoothly flowing sequence (thanks to Johanna Vondeling, my eagle-eyed editor at Jossey-Bass).
- I've pored over every sentence, cutting a word here or there or adding some new insight that flitted through my mind.
- I've added fresh examples and some carefully selected new material.

And here's what I did *not* do in producing this revised edition: I did *not* add a whole lot of words. Readers of the first edition told me that one of that book's greatest virtues was its compact size and the ease with which they could refer to key points whenever the need arose. I chose not to run the risk of burying those key points in verbiage or superfluous examples. Besides, although I've been regarded as a radical most of my life, I'm a very *conservative* radical; I don't favor change for the sake of change alone. So if a paragraph I wrote for the first edition or an example I used struck me as equally relevant and instructive today, I left it alone. New isn't always better.

## How This Book Is Organized

This revised edition is structured in four parts.

Part One begins where the writing of any fundraising appeal should begin: peering into the mind of the donor. These first five chapters examine the stuff of which successful fundraising is made:

- An appreciation for the broad range of motives that lead people to contribute money to good causes and important institutions
- An understanding of the dynamics in the relationship between the fundraiser and the donor
- Insight into the ways that donors view the fundraising letters they receive
- The characteristics of an effective fundraising letter

To put this understanding into a truly practical context, Part One concludes with a paragraph-by-paragraph tour through a successful appeal.

Part Two looks at the nuts and bolts. We'll approach the task of writing a fundraising letter from a strictly practical, down-to-earth perspective. In successive chapters in this part, we'll cover:

- What to do before you sit down to write a fundraising appeal
- The nine steps I recommend following in crafting a fundraising package
- The eight concrete cardinal rules that determine whether your appeal will be a success (or a dud), along with a self-assessment form that will help you evaluate the likely effectiveness of a fundraising letter in the light of these rules
- The practical guidelines of style and syntax I urge you to follow when you're writing a fundraising appeal—or, for that matter, any other prose that's meant to persuade the reader to act

The seven chapters in Part Three take you on a walking tour through the thickets of fundraising, visiting each of the most common types of fundraising letters to examine their unique characteristics and distinctive demands. In the course of Part Three, we'll study letters designed to do the following:

- Recruit a new member or donor
- Acknowledge a gift from a new donor
- Appeal for a special (additional) gift
- Request a year-end contribution
- Solicit a high-dollar-amount gift
- Persuade a donor to send a bigger gift
- Seek an annual gift

Part Four is where I invite you to steal my ideas as you might see fit. These resources are for your unregulated use—a bag full of treatments for the dread disease of writer's block:

- Sixty successful outer envelope teasers
- Fifty-four strong leads for fundraising letters
- Ninety ways to use the word *you* in a fundraising letter
- Sixty-three ways to handle awkward copywriting transitions
- Forty-one powerful ways to end a fundraising letter
- Fifty-eight ways to start a P.S. in a fundraising letter
- Fifteen ways how *not* to get results from your writing
- Ten other books to help you write successful fundraising letters

## How You Can Use This Book

I'll feel fulfilled as a writer only if you absorb every word in this book with the loving care I invested in it. On a more practical level, however, I'm confident you will find *How to Write Successful Fundraising Letters* useful in at least three additional ways (as some readers of the first edition have told me they did):

- As a source of examples and inspiration when a writing task comes due and your mind won't stop thinking about everything other than fundraising
- As a quick-and-easy guide to the distinctive types of fundraising letters (found in Part Three)
- As a collection of crib sheets (the resources in Part Four) that will help you resolve some of those thorny letter-writing challenges

In any case, please use this book however you see fit. I wrote it for you.

## Acknowledgments

The conventions of the publishing industry conspire to give the impression that one person alone writes a book. While there may be circumstances in which that's true, it's certainly not the case with this book. A number of people played roles in the conception and preparation of this book.

Stephen Hitchcock, as president of Mal Warwick & Associates, suggested I build a book around EditEXPRESS, a letter-editing service I offered from 1990 to 2000. This book has become far more than that. Nonetheless, Steve's imprint is visible on every page. His decade-old list of "reasons people give" was the starting point for my work on Chapter One. More important, Steve has been my writing mentor for more than a dozen years. Much of what he has taught me about writing for results is reflected in the following pages. He reviewed every chapter, page by page, painstakingly editing the most challenging parts. Also he has played a major role in freeing me from the burdens of the day-to-day management of Mal Warwick & Associates, so that I was able to undertake the time-consuming project of writing this book.

I'm indebted to the following EditEXPRESS clients for their gracious permission to reproduce here the work I performed for them:

- Co-op America, Washington, D.C. (Alisa Gravitz, Denise Hamler, Erin Gorman)
- Peace Action, Washington, D.C. (Peter Deccy, Monica Green, Carole Watson)

Three of my clients insisted on anonymity, so I've removed any evidence of their identity from the case studies and examples of my work for them.

With one exception, every letter included as an example in Chapters Ten through Sixteen was drafted by someone else. In many cases I don't know the identity of the author. I urge you to recognize that it was not I. Most of the time, my contribution was limited to playing the critic. (That's the easy part.)

The central theme of this book is that there are different types of fundraising letters and that each type presents unique challenges to the writer. To dramatize the unique aspects of each type of fundraising letter, I lead off the seven chapters in Part Two with illustrations from one nonprofit organization with an extensive and well-organized direct mail fundraising program. I wanted to make clear that a single charity may indeed need to write letters of all the types described in this book. To fill that bill, I turned to Bread for the World in Washington, D.C., a client of Mal Warwick & Associates since 1989. I owe special thanks to David Beckmann, Joel Underwood, Alice Benson, Diane Hunt, and their col-

leagues for their generosity and cooperativeness in granting permission for their materials to be reproduced in this book.

The lists in the resources in Part Four represent some of the best work of my colleagues at Mal Warwick & Associates. Significantly, ideas were suggested by staff involved in almost every phase of the creative and productive process: Stephen Hitchcock, Bill Rehm, Julie Levak, Deborah Agre, Judy Reimann, Marsha Mathews, Lissa Rosenbloom, Julie Weidenbach, Cherie Chavez, Christina Chavez, Sheila Bell, and Ramona Allen. Julie Levak and Deborah Agre won a free lunch at Berkeley's famed Chez Panisse Café for contributing more ideas to the lists than anyone else: seventy-one between the two. (You see? Writing fundraising letters *can* be fun!)

The freelance copywriting team of Deborah Block and Paul Karps generously took time out from a particularly busy season of their work on bread-and-butter fundraising projects to review the first draft of the manuscript. They paid particular attention to the case studies. Because of their sharp eyes and extensive knowledge of fundraising letters, they uncovered a great many inconsistencies. Their detailed critique helped me enormously in transforming a bunch of unrelated assignments performed over a three-year period into this book. I'm greatly indebted to them.

This book would not have seen the light of day without the help I received from Ina Cooper and Ramona Allen at Mal Warwick & Associates. Ina served as production coordinator, and Ramona faced almost daily assignments to scan or transcribe text and prepare seemingly endless rounds of photocopies. The hours they invested in this project may have equaled my own, and I'm very grateful to them.

Two other people have gone to great lengths to save me from my own excesses in preparing this revised edition. My editor, Johanna Vondeling, has been an unfaltering source of shrewd judgment about the structure and flow of this book. It is now much the stronger as a result of her efforts. Her fine editorial eye and sensitivity to style and syntax have made this job a great deal easier and more enjoyable for me.

My assistant at Mal Warwick & Associates, Kimberly Araña, cheerfully endured the deadly combination of my erratic schedule and the many, and often unpredictable, demands on her time that this project has occasioned. Her patience, thoroughness, and commonsense organizing skills helped keep me steady through this sometimes unsteady process.



I owe special thanks, too, to the many readers of the first edition who encouraged me to think that this book was worth every bit of the time and effort I put into it. I hope you too will find this book to be helpful in your continuing effort to raise money for good causes and enduring institutions. I wish you the very best of luck.

*Berkeley, California*  
*December 2000*

Mal Warwick

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# About the Author

**MAL WARWICK** is an internationally recognized consultant, author, and public speaker who has been involved in the not-for-profit sector for four decades. He has founded or cofounded four loosely affiliated companies that provide a wide range of fundraising and marketing services to clients throughout North America: Mal Warwick & Associates, a full-service direct mail fundraising firm; Share Group, one of the nation's leading telephone fundraising agencies; donordigital.com LLC, cofounded with Nick Allen to assist nonprofit organizations in using e-mail and the Internet for fundraising, marketing, and activism; and Response Management Technologies, which supplies data processing, donor file management, and laser-printing services to nonprofit organizations.

Warwick has written or edited ten books of interest to fundraisers, including *The Five Strategies for Fundraising Success* (Jossey-Bass, 2000) and the classic *Revolution in the Mailbox* (retitled and republished as *Raising Money by Mail*). He also edits *Mal Warwick's Newsletter: Successful Direct Mail, Telephone and Online Fundraising*.

Warwick's clients have included many of the nation's largest and most distinguished nonprofit organizations, as well as six Democratic presidential candidates. Together with his colleagues, he has raised more than \$500 million during twenty-one years as a fundraiser.

Warwick served for ten years on the board of the Association of Direct Response Fundraising Counsel (the national trade association of direct mail fundraising agencies), including two years as its president. He is a member of the Direct Marketing Association Nonprofit Federation and the National Society of Fund Raising Executives and has spoken annually at the latter's conferences since the 1980s.

As a cofounder of Business for Social Responsibility, he served on its national board and executive committee in 1993, its first year. He cofounded a community foundation, the Berkeley Community Fund, in 1992, and has served on its board ever since. He also has been vice president of the Berkeley Symphony Orchestra since 1991.

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# Introduction

## *Why You Should Read This Book*

 immodestly recommend that you read this book for a number of reasons:

- If you write fundraising letters for a hospital, a college or university, a museum, a health agency, a social service organization, a public interest advocacy group, or any other nonprofit that needs funds
- If you want to write letters that raise more money for your organization
- If you serve in a leadership role in a nonprofit organization as executive director, development director, or marketing director
- If you are a member of a nonprofit's board of directors and you want to measure the effectiveness of your fundraising appeals
- If you're involved in public relations, advertising, or marketing for a nonprofit organization or institution
- If you want to understand better how fundraising works
- If you want to learn how to write to get results
- If you want to be a more effective writer

If fundraising by mail is a science (a dubious proposition at best), its fuzziest, most inexact, least scientific aspect is writing the letters. There are those in the field who claim fundraising letters can be written by formula, but I'm not one of them. Writing this stuff is tough work, because what's effective for one organization may prove counterproductive for another. And what worked last year or last time may not work today.

The reality is that for most of us, writing of any sort is a royal pain in the neck. But there are ways to reduce the fuzziness and the pain and to raise the odds that your letters will bring in every nickel you need, and more. Talent helps, but experience counts for a lot too.

Over the years, I've read tens of thousands of fundraising appeals, written or edited thousands of those letters myself, and shared in the creative process as a manager or consultant in thousands of other mailings. All of this experience has given me a front-row seat in a never-ending "copy clinic"—a close-up view of what works and what doesn't (and sometimes even why). This book conveys what I've learned about writing fundraising letters.

In other books I've written, I've explored many of the elements of fundraising by mail—from choosing mailing lists to working with consultants, from measuring results to designing and producing packages, from strategizing to scheduling. This book isn't about any of those things. It's about *writing*. My topic here is the effective use of written English in the pursuit of charitable gifts.

Over my varied career, I've written newspaper stories, magazine articles, science fiction stories, and comic book scripts; ads for newspapers, magazines, radio, and television; sales letters, brochures, and pamphlets; technical manuals; speeches for others and speeches for myself—not to mention all those fundraising letters, plus eight other books about the craft of fundraising. I've written fiction and nonfiction, eulogies and humor, short pieces and long. I've written in three languages and translated from one to another.

Yet despite all this writing, I don't consider myself a particularly gifted writer. I'm no poet; my prose doesn't sing. I've written no unforgettable passage, contributed no timeless witticism to the language. But through long practice and difficult trial and error, I've learned to do one thing moderately well with my writing: *get results*. And there's just *one* result I want from this book: to help *you* write successful fundraising letters.

This book is a guide to the techniques and approaches that have proved successful for me—a tool chest of ideas and examples that will help you sharpen your own writing. If you prefer, look on it as a comprehensive review to help you gain perspective on the challenges you face as a writer of fundraising letters.

And there's one more result I hope to achieve with this book: I want you to enjoy reading it. I've found I do best what I enjoy the most—while

those things I approach with deadly seriousness are least likely to turn out well. I suspect you too will find that the more fun you have when you write your fundraising letters, the more money you'll raise.

## **Why a Fundraising Letter Is Always More Than Just a Letter**

Although the title of this book refers to fundraising letters, you'll see examples that aren't just letters. The reasons for this discrepancy are that most people refer to fundraising appeals as letters and the letter is almost always the most important component of an appeal. But the letter is never the only component of a fundraising package. Many other components of the package are important too. You'll need an envelope for your fundraising letter. And almost all the time you'll need at least two other items as well: a reply device (variously called a response device, coupon, card, form, or something else), plus an envelope to mail it back in. Without a reply device and an easy way to return it, most fundraising letters would generate precious few gifts.

Beginners at the craft of writing fundraising letters commonly treat these other components as afterthoughts. I hope after reading this book you won't do so. In fact, you may find you need to devote just as much thought to the reply device and the envelopes—both envelopes—as you do to the letter itself.

## **About the Letters Reproduced in This Book**

Five of the seven case studies in Chapters Ten through Sixteen are drawn from the files of EditEXPRESS, a letter-editing service I offered from 1990 to 2000. To judge their value as illustrations, you need to understand how that service worked.

I operated EditEXPRESS as an editor of fundraising appeals, not as a writer of them. I took pains to make as few changes as possible in the letters I was sent to revise. My primary responsibility, as I saw it, was to increase the readability of the appeals. Although the writer or the fundraiser in me may have yearned to introduce new information—or even to take an entirely fresh approach—I usually contented myself by reshaping and rearranging the material I was given. (To get a sense of

what I mean by this, take a look at the edited copy reproduced in Exhibit 1. That's the sort of thing I often do when I take on an editing job.) Most of the time, I'm told, that sort of copyediting has been good enough to achieve a significant improvement in results.

### Why You Can Learn from the Case Studies— Even Though Your Organization Is Different

The causes and institutions represented in this book cover a wide range—from human services to the environment to lobbying against hunger. But what if your organization doesn't happen to fit into one of those categories? Or if it does fit, you're convinced it's really too different to benefit from the examples? In fact, you can learn a lot from fundraising letters written by other nonprofit organizations. There are three reasons I strongly believe this:

1. You can learn how the *fundamental rules of writing* apply (or don't apply) to the craft of writing fundraising letters. The fundamentals have nothing to do with your cause or your constituency.
2. By studying examples from other organizations, you can learn how the *special techniques of fundraising* and direct marketing can be put to work in fundraising letters. Those techniques change very little from one cause or constituency to another.
3. You can learn how to improve your fundraising letters if you *distance yourself* from the everyday needs and details of your organization's work. Often it's much easier to see the forest rather than the trees if you're looking into someone else's forest.

Take my word for that. I've been wandering around in other people's forests for a very long time.

In a sense, I worked on the first edition of this book for more than three years. In a larger sense, however, I started the project in 1979 when I founded my direct mail fundraising firm, Mal Warwick & Associates, or even in 1949, over half a century ago, when I wrote my first “fundraising” letter home from summer camp. I've put a lot into this book. I hope you get a lot out of it.