

Examples of Linguistic Structure in **Right & Wrong** Fund-Raising Discourse: **Help Send Carley to Camp** versus **Help Ameliorate Economic Asymmetry**

by Frank C. Dickerson, Ph.D.

I developed the following texts to *illustrate* the findings of my doctoral dissertation, which used corpus linguistics methods to profile the rhetorical and linguistic makeup of 2,412 fund-raising documents. These exemplars contrast conversational writing that contains human-interest narrative (text on left), with the overly technical style common to most nonprofits (text on right). The surprising outcome of my analysis of 1.5 million words of text spanning nine philanthropic sectors was that the average fund-raising document is more abstract and lexically complex than **academic prose** and contains less narrative than the genre of **official documents**. The challenge for those who write the discourse of fund raising is to quit writing for a professor who is no longer there and start addressing a donor audience who is both present and willing to be shown (versus told) why they should care. ***If you put a human face on your cause, your donors will give.***

In my study it was possible to accurately characterize texts by tagging and tallying the frequency counts of specific sets of linguistic features. Factor analysis had identified how certain sets of linguistic features occur together in a document to achieve specific communicative aims—to create an interpersonal connection or produce densely packed informational prose on one dimension, or to create a narrative or non-narrative style of writing on another dimension of measurement.

Twenty-eight specific linguistic features *mark* texts as having either a focus on interpersonal connection with readers or a focus on the production of densely packed information. And ten linguistic features were found to mark a text as being either narrative or non-narrative in focus.

The text on the left marks high on linguistic features that produce **Interpersonal Involvement** and that put a human face on the organization’s work through what I call a **connecting narrative moment**. These kinds of texts contain **contractions, personal verbs** (I **think**, I **believe**), **reported speech, third-person pronouns**, and **past tense verbs**. This style of discourse reads like the back and forth banter of friends discussing something they care about over a cup of coffee.

In contrast, the text on the right marks high on linguistic features that produce a **densely packed, highly informational** style of writing. These texts are filled with **attributive adjectives, long words**, and **prepositions** that work together to create precise statements and pack content in a short amount of space.

Help Send Carley to Camp High Interpersonal Involvement Fund-Raising Text	Help Ameliorate Socio-Economic Asymmetry High Informational Content Fund-Raising Text
<p>Carley said, when the club talked about going to camp, “I’ve never slept in a tent before, or gone in a canoe. Are there bears? And what’s a ‘smore,’ anyway?”</p> <p>You could tell her 10-year-old mind was already racing and spinning dreams of what it’d be like. Being with best friends. Adventure. Animals. Cooking out on a campfire!</p> <p>All that was exotic stuff to a child of inner-city Chicago.</p> <p>Then last week when she came to the club meeting, I could tell something was wrong. “You ok, honey?” I asked as kids were heading out the door.</p> <p>She looked up and waved bye to best friend Lori. Other girls had been laughing, planning and screaming as they left for home. Then when we were alone, and it was “safe,” I heard again what I hear every year from a child whose mom is their family’s sole source of support.</p> <p>When everyone was gone, tears swelled up and Carley said: “Mama said I can’t go to camp ‘cuz we can’t ‘ford it.”</p> <p>Twenty dollars is the share of the cost we ask families to provide. Not much. That’s the cost of a few gourmet cups of coffee for you or me. But for Carley’s mom \$20 might mean her other three kids miss a meal. It matters!</p> <p>It breaks my heart to think Carley and others won’t get to go to camp. But it takes money to get them there.</p> <p>That’s why I’m writing, John. Would you be willing to help Carley and others like her by sending a gift of \$20?</p>	<p>For mothers who are their families’ sole source of support, a confluence of economic, social, and psychic impediments conspire to constrain their ability to provide childcare, adequate housing, and basic nutrition for their children—especially in light of new economic downturns. Sadly, therefore, such primary responsibilities leave little discretionary income for what social workers call <i>bridging</i> experiences, salient to the development of pre-teen youth.</p> <p>Elucidating the <i>bridging</i> metaphor is the development of an emerging body of research confirming that such psychosocial opportunities indeed constitute a prominent variable in the development of pre-teen children. A study validating the notion of <i>bridging</i> as a useful sociological construct comes from a new study by the Northwestern University Urban Action Center that definitively confirms a statistically significant correlation between educational pursuit persistence and <i>bridging</i> experiences like camping and trips to cultural venues. While the development of the environmental factors supportive of the maximization of <i>bridging</i> opportunities remains our strategic goal, growing economic asymmetry in inner city Chicago threatens to mitigate goal achievement. Thus, I come to you for help.</p> <p>Despite economic trends, philanthropy represents a way to build <i>bridges</i> that coalesce into a complementary array of educational, social, and psychological resources for our city’s socio-economically challenged youth. You can help ameliorate the economic asymmetry that now threatens our ability to serve those who are Chicago’s hope.</p>

Table 1 illustrates how the *Help Send Carley to Camp* letter uses 23 specific linguistic features to create interpersonal involvement. Table 2 illustrates how the *Help Ameliorate Socio-Economic Asymmetry* letter uses five linguistic features to create densely packed, highly informational copy. The features that work together to create these kinds of texts are listed in the first column of each table, arrayed in rank order according to the strength of the factor. The value of each factor is listed in the Factor Loading column.

Table 1 Examples of Positive Features on Dimension 1 Showing How They Create High Levels of Interpersonal Involvement			
Linguistic Features in Rank Order	Factor Loading	Characteristic or Function of Feature in Creating Interpersonal Involvement	Example from the Letter: <i>Help Send Carley to Camp</i>
Private verbs	0.96	Expresses mental thoughts and feelings	<i>I felt my heart break...I know you've helped</i>
THAT-deletion	0.91	Reduces surface form, sounds conversational	<i>You could tell [that] her 10-year-old</i>
Contractions	0.90	Shortens words, adds fluency to discourse	<i>I've never slept in a tent before...They're</i>
Present tense verbs	0.86	Depicts immediate topics and actions	<i>Looking up, she waves. . .Tears almost come</i>
2 nd person prns	0.86	Specific addressee, shows interactivity	<i>Would you be willing to help. . .You OK, honey?</i>
DO as pro-verb	0.82	Substitutes for a clause, reduces density	<i>That did it...And I don't either</i>
Analytic negation	0.78	Conceptually simpler form of negation	<i>She would not be able [versus unable] to go</i>
Demonstrative prns	0.76	Noun substitute, understood by context	<i>That did it...that's why I'm writing, John</i>
General emphatics	0.74	Marks stance: affect, evidence, quantity	<i>10-year-old mind was really racing</i>
1 st person prns	0.74	Marks ego involvement, interpersonal focus	<i>I could tell. . .I know you've helped before</i>
Pronoun IT	0.71	Marks relatively inexplicit lexical reference	<i>it [paying \$20] might cost her kids a meal</i>
BE as main verb	0.71	Communicates state of being versus action	<i>all of which was exotic stuff to a child</i>
Causal avb subord	0.66	Adverbial because or as mark causation	<i>because it might cost her kids a meal</i>
Discourse particles	0.66	Attitudinal and structural discourse markers	<i>But I don't want...Hey now...So that's why</i>
Indefinite pronouns	0.62	General referent device often used like IT	<i>I could tell something was wrong</i>
General hedges	0.58	Informal markers of probability or uncertainty	<i>tears almost come, and Carley says</i>
Amplifiers	0.56	Lexical degree words to magnify verbal force	<i>for Carley's mom \$20 is very precious</i>
Sentence relatives	0.55	Speech-like relative, comments on context	<i>all of which was exotic stuff to a child</i>
Direct WH-?s	0.52	Direct questions, marks personal interaction	<i>What's wrong? I asked as kids were</i>
Possibility modals	0.50	Subjective, tentative, states possible reality	<i>Could you help us once more? Can you</i>
Non-phrasal coord	0.48	And acts as loose general purpose connector	<i>Are there bears? And what's ah Sa-More</i>
WH-clauses	0.47	Verb complement, to give personal viewpoint	<i>I knew what it meant. Carley's little dream had</i>
Final prepositions	0.43	Reflects surface reduction, marks speech	<i>simply don't know where it would come from</i>
(Adverbs	0.42)*	Often reveals stance, qualities and feelings	<i>Carley excitedly joined in...truly unable</i>

* Because **Adverbs** had a higher loading on another dimension when factors were extracted, even though at +.42 they load above the |.35| minimum, they were not used in the calculation of Dimension 1: *Interpersonal Involvement / Informational Content*. However, they remain of interest. Although this is a fictitious letter I created, it is useful for illustrating traits of an *Interpersonal Involvement* style of discourse.

Note. Adapted from Biber, (1988, pp. 102-103 & 221-245).

Table 2 Examples of Negative Features on Dimension 1 Showing How They Create High Levels of Informational Content			
Linguistic Features in Rank Order	Factor Loading	Characteristic or Function of Feature in Creating Informational Content	Example from the Letter: <i>Help Ameliorate Socio-Economic Asymmetry</i>
Nouns	-0.80	Nominalization of verbs adds density	<i>amelioration of the economic asymmetry</i>
Word length	-0.58	Long words lead make text hard to read	<i>Consequently, little discretionary income</i>
Prepositions	-0.54	Tightly packs highly nominal discourse	<i>facilitation of educational pursuit persistence</i>
Type/token ratio	-0.54	Different words (types) to all words (tokens)	<i>psychic social psychosocial: 2 types, 3 tokens</i>
Attributive adjectives	-0.47	Used to expand and elaborate meaning	<i>adequate housing, and basic nutrition for</i>
(Place adverbials	-0.42)*	Elaborate the where frame of an action	<i>in inner city Chicago...by a seminal study</i>
(Agentless passives	-0.39)*	Impersonal, detached, focus on patient	<i>so salient to the development of youth</i>
(Past part postnominal	-0.38)*	Integrates, elaborates ([which] = deletion)	<i>confluence... [which was] exacerbated by this</i>

* Because items in (parentheses) had higher loadings on other dimensions when factors were extracted, even though each loads above the |.35| minimum, none were used in the calculation of dimension 1: *Interpersonal Involvement / Informational Content*. However, they remain of interest. Although this is a fictitious letter I created, it is useful for illustrating traits of an *Informational Content* style of discourse. Unlike the *Interpersonal Involvement* letter, this text intentionally pushes features to a point of hyperbole to illustrate its point. Yet hyperbole seems warranted in light of research showing that fund-raising letters actually tend more this direction, than toward the style illustrated in my *Interpersonal Involvement* sample.

Note. Adapted from Biber, (1988, pp. 102-103 & 221-245).

Features that distinguish narrative and non-narrative aspects of texts are described in Tables 3 and 4.

Linguistic Features Listed in Rank Order	Factor Loading	Characteristic or Function of Feature in Creating Narrative Discourse	Example from the Letter: Help Send Carley to Camp
Past tense verbs	0.90	Surface marker of past events of a story	<i>Carley excitedly joined...I heard again</i>
3 rd person pronouns	0.73	Identifies actors in a narrative account	<i>her 10-year-old...she came</i>
Perfect aspect verbs	0.48	Marks past action with a continuing effect	<i>Carley had been turning her face</i>
Public verbs	0.43	Observable, they introduce statements	<i>She whispers: "Mama said I can't go"</i>
Synthetic negation	0.40	Result of negation, stated as a description	<i>They're truly unable to afford the cost</i>
Pres participial clause	0.39	Used to elaborate the frame of action	<i>Looking up, she waves to best friend</i>

Note. Adapted from Biber, (1988, pp. 102-103 & 221-245).

Linguistic Features Listed in Rank Order	Factor Loading	Characteristic or Function of Feature in Creating Non-Narrative Discourse	Example from the Letter: Help Ameliorate Socio-Economic Asymmetry
(Present tense verbs)	-0.47)*	Puts focus on information not persons	<i>accounts for...both inform ...and remain</i>
(Attributive adjectives)	-0.41)*	Information dense modifiers of nouns	<i>psychic impediments ... discretionary income</i>
(Past part WHIZ deletions)	-0.34)*	Relative pronoun (e.g. [which]) deletion	<i>impediments [which have been] exacerbated</i>
(Word length)	-0.31)*	Precise language requires longer words	<i>economic asymmetry... quasi-constitutive</i>

* Because items in (parentheses) had higher loadings on other dimensions when factors were extracted, even though each loads above the .35| minimum, none were used in the calculation of dimension 2: *Narrative /Non-narrative Content*. However, they remain of interest.

Note. Adapted from Biber, (1988, pp. 102-103 & 221-245).

The narrator's retelling of Carley's story in the letter above is an example of discourse that makes an *interpersonal connection* with a compelling *narrative* of past events. It reads like a conversation between friends over a cup of coffee. It's intimate, human, and focused on a person the storyteller cares about—Carley. The plot is focused on this sympathetic protagonist's dream of going to camp and eventually reveals a key point of conflict—that mama said she couldn't afford to go. Carley experiences a range of emotions—from joy and anticipation to sadness and disappointment. Then after the narrative part of the text, the writer shares her feelings (*It breaks my heart*). Finally, she turns to the reader for help, offering him or her the chance to take on the role of heroine/hero. By making a gift, the reader is afforded the chance to cast himself of herself in the role of rescuer. They can resolve the tension and bring the drama to a positive conclusion by giving.

Kenneth Burke, a scholar of rhetoric and literary critic, observed that all communication is essentially drama. And as drama it can be analyzed from five perspectives—*scene* (the whole context of the action), *act* (what happened), *agent* (those acting), *agency* (the means by which the action occurs), and *motive* (the purpose of the action). He called this ensemble of elements a *dramatistic pentad*. Analyzing *Help Send Carley to Camp* from the vantage point of *motive*, it's clear that out of all the potential events she could have reported on, the writer chose this one because it showed one young girl's plight, which was emblematic—many families can't afford the cost of camp. This worked so much better than the *Help Ameliorate Socio-Economic Asymmetry* letter because it put a human face on the nonprofit's work in a short span of text. I call this a *connecting narrative moment*. It 1.) *connects* the writer and reader, 2.) *narrates* a past event, and 3) does so in a short *moment*—just 171 words that take less than 60 seconds to read.

Specific linguistic features create involvement (*personal verbs* to express feelings, *present tense* to depict the unfolding drama, and *contractions* to create a conversational flow). And a *perfect past aspect verb structure* portrays dramatic tension (*Carley had been turning her face*). Contrasting the two exemplar letters, rather than *telling* the reader about economic needs of inner city youth, *Help Send Carley to Camp* *shows* the reader through a mini drama about one person who represented many inner city youth.

The writer reflects on the scene with a *first person pronoun* and a *personal verb* (*I could tell something was wrong*). Then having stated and illustrated the problem, the writer moves from commentary and scene description to report dialogue, using a *present tense private verb* (*whispers*). While technically a *public verb*, the word choice is also dramatic, suggesting a degree of intimacy, embarrassment, conflict and dramatic tension (She *whispers*: "Mama said I can't go to camp 'cuz we can't 'ford it.") Then using *synthetic negation* to describe the import of the story, the writer says: "They're truly *unable to afford* the cost." Suddenly a brief narrative moves the reader into the middle a scene in which the writer confronts the

reality of what poverty means in the context of a child unable to attend camp for lack of funds. Then the closing remarks challenge the reader to enter the drama—to come to the rescue by making a gift.

Some reviewers of my research have wondered if the consistently informational style observed might be attributable to a similarity of readership among elite nonprofits. But applying the heuristic metaphor of Occam's razor, that holds simple explanations are best, I'd suggest that the simpler answer is that most writers have had the same teacher.

That is, throughout their formal educations, most writers were taught to write in the same abstract, detached, and objective style—a style that diminishes narrative and elevates syllogistic reasoning.

Many have never learned how to tell stories framed in conversations. Yet narrative is critical when it comes time to explain the “so what” of an esoteric scientific discovery. Eventually, when science touches people where they live, discourse must trickle down to a text that begins, “So here's what all this means . . .”

Cultural linguist Walter Ong, a protégée of Marshall McLuhan, believed detached discourse reflects a cultural shift from orality to literacy. He traced this shift over the past three millennia, citing examples of orality in epic poems like *The Iliad* and *Beowulf* and stories like *David and Goliath* and *The Good Samaritan*. Then Gutenberg's re-purposing of an olive press to print with movable type changed everything.

Ong concluded that the innovation of printing brought with it a change in the way we produce and process knowledge. He observed that oral cultures depicted agonism (e.g. the agony of people in conflict). The discourses of these pre-literate cultures were filled with scene, plot, characters, tension and resolution--the stuff of stories. On the other hand, as movable type and literacy took hold, Ong observed that writing fostered “abstractions that disengaged knowledge from the arena where human beings struggled.”

The writing of marketers, public relations and fund-raising professionals tends toward an oral mode of discourse, even though their work is eventually reduced to the printed page or computer screen. These professionals tend to write like people talk. Thus a good fund raising text will tend to read like the banter of friends discussing something they care about over a cup of coffee—filled with detail and emotion.

To change anyone's writing habits is no easy task. Few have the patience to relearn again the basics of grammar. Despite this reluctance, with a minimum of instruction a few critical linguistic features can carve radically different patterns in writing habits—patterns that make writing **read** like a conversation **sounds**—filled with characters, plot, tension . . . and eventually resolution when a reader is asked to give.

A simple exercise can create effective fund-raising text.

- Take five minutes to outline in broad bullet points, a past event (versus a set of abstract concepts) that made you want to give—an event you witnessed, story you heard about, or description you read.
- Sit down with a friend and tell the story you outlined.
- Tape-record what you say.
- Then play back and write down what you said . . . word for word without editing. **DON'T OVER EDIT!**

A brief outline of an event without excessive detail, an informal oral presentation to a friend, then a verbatim transcription of the taped conversation avoids the editorial process that usually drains the spoken word of its passion. It yields a **connecting narrative moment**.

Of course, the temptation will be to formalize, complicate, and reshape the narrative to an abstract format filled with mission-speak and statistics. But the less the editing the better the letter. The challenge is to **infuse the written word with the passion of speech**.

Drilling deeper, the root cause of this problem seems to be a leadership failure among top nonprofit leaders and academics alike. In reviewing more than 300 university-level programs on fund raising and philanthropy, I found the vast majority of curricula focused on just about **EVERYTHING BUT** the raising of money. This would lead one to believe that academics think that some benevolent philanthropy fairy just . . .

- * **tosses** magic dust,
- * **waves** her wand, and
- * **poof** . . . money suddenly appears.

But there is **no magic dust, no wand, no fairy** . . . only real people who raise money the old-fashioned way -- **they ask for it**. But is higher education building and disseminating a knowledge base from which leaders can learn how to communicate? And do associations use this knowledge to train practitioners?

I analyzed practitioner-focused training programs. On this end of the education-training continuum, the shift in focus was more practical. However, in moving towards a focus on technique, training ignored the underlying structure of the language upon which technique depends. There seems to be a stubborn unwillingness and fear among association leaders to offer their members more than superficial training in technique. This underestimates the aptitude of fund raisers and their desire to acquire basic new knowledge.

The larger implication of my review of academic and training programs is this: leaders in the sector need to help fund raisers understand not only the “how-to” of effective communication, but also the “why-to” that guides that communication. Otherwise, they’ll have no decision-making context when circumstances change and they must change how they write. For instance, this may explain why, among all the texts examined in my study, those written for the Web were the worst. Perhaps the verbal skills of those who manage nonprofit Web sites don’t match their technical strengths.

The title of my research, *Writing the Voice of Philanthropy*, suggests that the solution is to infuse the written text with the passion of speech. The nature of this task is best understood by parsing the etymology of the word philanthropy. Translated literally from its Greek roots, philanthropy literally means FRIEND (philos) OF MAN (anthropos). The VOICE OF PHILANTHROPY thus entails speaking as the VOICE OF THE FRIEND OF MAN.

As the VOICE OF THE FRIEND OF MAN, a fund raiser’s written discourse must contain what Walter Ong called the “agonism of orality.” It must express the “agon” of need one might HEAR in the VOICE of a person crying for help on behalf of a loved one in peril. Yes, fund-raising discourse must contain an appropriate dose of argumentation that will convince doubting minds. But the dominant tone must touch stubborn hearts by creating empathy.

A poignant example of this gripped millions of viewers on January 15, 2010 when CNN’s Wolf Blitzer interviewed the parents of four missing Lynn University students, in the wake of the January 2010’s earthquake in Haiti. Len Gengel looked into the camera. The panic in his voice was palpable. He spoke for his daughter Britney and for the parents of three other families whose children were trapped beneath the rubble of Port au Prince’s Hotel Montana:

I am pleading, I am pleading to President Obama to please, please send more people to Haiti to rescue. As a father, President Obama, you must feel our pain in what we are going through. We were told that our children were safe, and rescued, and now we are told they are not. We need your help. We know you can do it. Father to father, I’m pleading with you to please, please get help and rescue those folks at Hotel Montana in Haiti.

That afternoon Len Gengel became THE VOICE OF PHILANTHROPY. In this case, he became THE VOICE OF HIS DAUGHTER BRITNEY. While the discourse of fund raising will seldom be as acute as Gengel’s cry for help, it does need to contain greater emotional depth. Educators and trainers alike must come to recognize that both knowledge and skill building in the area of communication are critical to the success of the nonprofit sector.

This view is consistent with the *undemocratic priority* Peter Drucker placed on certain *key result areas* that he believed were “the same for all businesses, for all businesses depend on the same factors for their survival.” His eight domains included 1.) marketing, 2.) innovation, 3.) human organization, 4.) financial resources, 5.) physical resources, 6.) productivity, 7.) social responsibility, and 8.) profit requirements. But “marketing and innovation,” Drucker asserted, “are the foundation areas in objective setting. It is in these two areas that a business obtains its results. In all other objective areas the purpose of doing is to make possible the attainment of the objectives in the areas of marketing and innovation.”

Fund raising that builds mutually-satisfying partnerships between donors and nonprofits is philanthropy’s cognate of marketing. As such, it deserves the same level of scholarship that marketing has attracted in the commercial sector, producing new fields of inquiry like consumer behavior. I hope my study debunks *the myth of fairy dust philanthropy* and provokes additional studies across disciplines like linguistics, rhetoric, and neurolinguistics. Such scholarship can only strengthen the *voice of philanthropy*—the *voice of the friend of man*.

My conclusion—academics and practitioners alike are shortsighted, given the essential nature of fund raising LANGUAGE. Mastering the LANGUAGE of fund raising is the nonprofit sector’s *conditio sine qua non* (Latin for “the condition without which not”).

Without effective fund-raising LANGUAGE, there is no nonprofit sector.