

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The Way We Write is All Wrong:



*A Profile of and Prescription for Fixing
The Broken Discourse of Fund Raising.*

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Running Head: The Way We Write is All Wrong

Executive Summary

A new kind of data mining from the scholarship of linguistics and rhetoric has uncovered disturbing artifacts in the discourse of fund raising. These discoveries are the product of my doctoral studies at The Peter Drucker School of Management and The Claremont Graduate University.

I found that the discourse of fund-raising is *BROKEN*.

Like a linguistic MRI, my computer-based corpus analysis revealed surprising linguistic and rhetorical patterns in fund-raising texts. These underlying patterns profiled a discourse focused more on *transferring information* than *creating interpersonal involvement*. Fund-raising texts sounded *cold and detached* like doctoral dissertations rather than *warm and friendly* like personal conversations. Rather than gaining reader attention with *emotionally rich human-interest stories*, these texts *contained less narrative than academic prose*. They contained even less narrative than *official documents*!

A severe judgment? Probably. Accurate? Unfortunately, *YES*.

These counterintuitive conclusions grew out of research that mined 1.5 million words of online and printed fund-raising texts from America's largest charities. Of the 880 organizations represented, 735 reported direct support of \$20 million or more on IRS form 990, line 1a or 1b. I analyzed 2,412 web- and print-based documents across nine philanthropic sectors. The largest study of its kind to date, my research offers insights that can help improve communication among fund raisers at all levels—from direct mail to major gifts.

My study was based on a multivariate factor analysis.

Among 67 linguistic features analyzed, subsets were found to occur together in order to achieve specific communicative aims. For example, personal pronouns, contractions and private verbs (e.g. I *think*, I *feel*) co-occur to create interpersonal involvement in personal letters and conversation—two genres located on one pole of a continuum between high involvement and high information. Conversely, on the high information pole of the same continuum, long words and nominalizations that transform verbs and adjectives into nouns by adding *ion* or *ity* (e.g. evaluate becoming evaluat*ion* or intense becoming intens*ity*) were often used to densely pack information in genres like academic prose and official documents.

As a ruler describes length, linguistic scales describe texts.

These scales, which were calibrated by the factor analysis, provide a multi-dimensional view of the underlying linguistic features in texts that enable them to achieve their rhetorical aims. Profiles are available for 23 genres of spoken and written English. And now my research has added benchmark scores for fund-raising discourse: 1.) I first tagged and tallied counts of 67 linguistic features in my corpus (body) of texts; 2.) to avoid text-length skewing, I normalized these counts to their occurrence per 1,000 words; 3.) I then translated averages to units of standard deviation; finally, 4.) I compared my texts' dimensional scores to those of 23 common genres.

In addition to profiling texts, I surveyed those who wrote them.

My goal was to learn what factors these executives believe make a fund-raising text effective. To this end, I asked respondents to score the importance of using an argument-centric (expository) writing style on a 1 to 5 scale (with 5 being high). Only 5.04 percent rated exposition high.

I then asked them to score emotional, human-interest narrative writing. Those rating narrative high grew by a ratio of nine-to-one over those rating exposition high. But despite the increase of those favoring narrative to 45.21 percent, the linguistic evidence of their writing

revealed a wide gap between what they *believed* about good writing, and what they actually *wrote*. ***Belief did not match practice.***

The root of the disparity is that we all tend to take writing for granted.

We all can write. And we all think we can write well. Yet the evidence of linguistics analysis refutes this assumption. The problem is that few of us critically consider the rhetorical and linguistic substructure of what we write. We don't critically consider *the language*.

Stephen King drove this point home in explaining what motivated him to write *On Writing*, his book about composition principles and techniques. King's motivation came from a conversation with author of *The Joy Luck Club*, Amy Tan. He had asked her "if there was any one question she was *never* asked during the Q-and-A that follows almost every writer's talk Amy paused, thinking it over carefully, and then said: 'No one ever asks about the language'" (2000, p. 8).

Fund raisers, of all people, should ***care passionately about the art and craft of telling stories on paper***. In fund raising, the language is everything. Someone selling a service or product creates an exchange based on the value of what's offered. And before buying, a prospect can kick the tires or thump the melon. But for a fund raiser, the weight of raising money rests squarely on the power of words. Yes, there are those occasions when a person visits a charity, or sees a video about its work. But most potential donors decide to give based on what they *read*. And unfortunately, what they read is usually not that good.

What happened?

One explanation may be the way we're raised to write. Our educational upbringing teaches us to use an abstract impersonal writing style that is diametrically opposed to the expert advice of fund-raising practitioners. The persistence of this kind of fund-raising discourse is consistent with research by Peters and Wolfred (2001), who found that 58 percent of nonprofit executive directors hold Master's degrees or doctorates. They write what I call *discourse de facto* (Latin for *as if*, or *as a matter of practice*).

They write *as if* they were still graduate students. They continue to produce a style of discourse appropriate to a *past-bound setting*, dedicated to a *past-bound task*, created for a *past-bound* audience. Fund raising requires a different style of writing, but they seem to be living in another place, at another time, writing for professor who is no longer there.

Neuroscientists at Italy's University of Parma shed light on how we process language.

An important source of insight on effective writing comes from the seminal research of neuroscientist Giacomo Rizzolatti and his research team, which identified a special class of neurons that fired during specific grasping activities in the brains of macaque monkeys. The researchers linked the discovery of this mechanism to understanding language processing. This "mechanism was the neural prerequisite for the development of inter-individual communication and finally of speech" (1998, p. 190). They write:

We provide a unifying neural hypothesis on how individuals understand the actions and emotions of others. Our main claim is that the fundamental mechanism at the basis of the experiential understanding of others' actions is the activation of the mirror neuron system. A similar

mechanism, but involving the activation of visceromotor centers, underlies the experiential understanding of the emotions of others (2004, p. 396).

At the core of the Gallese, Keysers, and Rizzolatti discovery is evidence from fMRI scans of human subjects for what was only suggested in their experiments with monkeys—that the human brain contains “. . . neural mechanisms (mirror mechanisms) that allow us to directly understand the meaning of the actions and emotions of others by internally replicating (‘simulating’) them without any explicit reflective mediation” (2004, p. 396).

UCLA and USC researchers found that narrative texts create powerful neural responses.

Lisa Aziz-Zadeh from USC’s Brain and Creativity Institute and Marco Iacoboni, director of the UCLA’s Transcranial Magnetic Stimulation Lab at the Ahmanson Lovelace Brain Mapping Center in the David Geffen School of Medicine, found evidence that the triggers of mirror neuron response are not limited to visual input alone. Evidence suggests that just *reading* or *hearing* about an action can produce the same response as *seeing* the action firsthand.

The research team found that among 12 volunteers studied, the premotor cortex of their brains indicated *the presence of the same neural activity when they heard words describing an action as when they saw it*. “In sum” Aziz-Zadeh writes, “these results support a key role of premotor areas with mirror neuron properties for embodied semantic representations of actions, whether they are delivered through visual or linguistic modalities” (Aziz-Zadeh, Wilson, Rizzolatti & Iacoboni, 2006, p. 1521). Their research explains why it’s hard to put down a novel, but easy to fall asleep reading a textbook.

The evidence of neuroscience suggests that ***the current style of writing dominant among fund raisers actually circumvents the way the human brain is hard-wired to process language***. The implications: fund raisers should not shy away from emotion, they should tell stories, and they should not over-edit and formalize texts.

Science writer Gordy Slack summarizes the implications of mirror neurons to creating, processing, and interpreting language. He not only states, but also artfully illustrates implications in a brief text that marshals linguistic features to paint a *narrative* scene (note his use of past tense to report past actions and move the reader sequentially through time), intensify *interpersonal involvement* (note his use of contractions, first person pronouns, private verbs, and conversational style), and produce *empathy* (note how he makes you feel, thus achieving his rhetorical aim—to make you care).

A young woman sat on the subway and sobbed. Her mascara-stained cheeks were wet and blotchy. Her eyes were red. Her shoulders shook. She was hopeless, completely forlorn. When I got off the F-train, I stood on the platform, paralyzed by emotions. Hers. I’d taken them with me. I stood there, tears streaming down my cheeks. But I had no death in the family. No breakup. No terminal diagnosis. And I didn’t even know her or why she cried. But the emotional pain, her pain, now my pain, was as real as day. (2007, p. 1)

The data in my research confirms that linguistic features like those Slack used above—features that *involve* readers and paint *connecting narrative moments*—are woefully absent in fund-raising discourse. My article provides in-depth treatment of the issues only summarized here and includes examples of effective fund-raising texts. I also suggest strategies for improving writing—strategies that differentiate linguistic *dimensions* from rhetorical *structures*. Finally, my 350-page dissertation contains a literature review, exemplar texts that model linguistic features, and rules for increasing reader *involvement*.