

Required or Elective? The Importance of Creative Writing Skill to the Practice of Donor Relations and Stewardship

By Daphne B. Powell

In this article, the author argues for the importance of writing as a fundamental skill in donor relations and stewardship. Definitions of types of writing are presented along with how they might be useful in donor relations and stewardship. Hiring good writers is reviewed, with attention to testing skills during an interview. Developing and enhancing writing skills through training and practice are discussed. Organizational structure and distribution of writing assignments are also reviewed. A list of books and other resources conclude the discussion.

- Writing as an essential skill in donor relations and stewardship
- Types of writing
- Writing style and writing for someone else
- Staff roles and writing skills
- Developing skill as a writer
- Style guides and writing conformity
- References for further information

Glossary:

- **Expository Writing:** The main purpose of expository writing is to explain a concept or idea while including details for support. Support is provided through facts, not opinions. It is mostly used in textbook writing, how-to articles, recipes, news stories, and business, technical, or scientific writing.
- **Persuasive Writing:** Like expository writing, persuasive writing uses specific details and examples for support, but opinion is largely used with emotion playing a large role in affecting the reader. It is mostly used in opinion/editorial pieces, advertisements, reviews (books, music, movies, restaurants, etc.), letters of recommendation or complaint, and cover letters.
- **Descriptive Writing:** The main purpose of descriptive writing is to entertain versus inform and is found in fiction and poetry. It is most often used in journal writing, nature writing, and descriptive passages in fiction.
- **Narrative Writing:** Like descriptive writing, narrative writing entertains, but by telling a story rather than through the beauty of it's verse. It is most often used in novels, short stories, novellas, poetry, autobiographies and biographies, anecdotes, and oral histories.

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The Journal of Donor Relations & Stewardship, known simply as The Journal, is a serial publication specific to issues of donor relations and stewardship for fundraising organizations. It explores the role of stewardship practice within the larger perspective of nonprofit operations. The content is set apart from other offerings now available to the field in that it is focused on theory over day-to-day practice and encourages self-reflection and professional debate.

Book number one, Definitions, will be available in early summer 2016. Contributing authors include Erika Bernal, Julia Emlen, Nancy McKinney, Anne Manner-McLarty and Daphne Powell. Please visit journaldrs.com to pre-register for your copy.



Author's note: I want to begin by stating that I don't consider myself an excellent writer. I had wonderful teachers throughout my youth who taught grammar and punctuation well. I was one of those kids who enjoyed diagramming sentences and singing along with the Saturday morning Schoolhouse Rock episodes. I managed to pass my audition for creative writing at the Alabama School of Fine Arts, but there were many students with greater talent for writing poetry and fiction. I do feel, however, that I have an innate skill that has been nurtured and developed—one that is significantly lacking in the professional world today, and that skill helps me in making good decisions for UAB as I oversee a portion of what the university is communicating to donors. In this article, I will talk about that skill—one of recognizing good writing and having a sense for what makes a good story. We need this in our practice to bring our donors along in their philanthropy to our institutions.

Introduction

At UAB, I am responsible for gift agreements for named endowments, spaces, and programs; for ensuring that governing rules are met; for setting the standards for donor recognition university-wide; and for managing the recognition of and reporting to our major donors who have made gifts of \$25,000 and above. Recognition components include acknowledgment by university leadership, along with the preparation of documents for our board of trustees, and management of and consultation on physical donor recognition projects. Reporting includes endowment reports and impact reports that are prepared for all major gift donors to the university. Our office does not handle donor cultivation and recognition events or the aspects of donor communications which for UAB includes donor newsletters, on-demand print publications and proposals, web communications, and social media.

A writer is a person who uses written words in various styles and techniques to communicate ideas. Is being a writer a requirement for being the conductor of donor relations and stewardship activities at your institution? Arguments can be made for and against this notion, but my personal opinion is that it is essential for the leader of these efforts to be at least a semi-skilled writer, among the many other talents necessary to carry out the mission of the department. It also is critical that this individual has an understanding and appreciation for what creative writing means to the practice of donor relations and stewardship.

This article will take you through my thinking about why creative writing is important, the general types of writing styles, what aspects of a donor relations and stewardship program are defined by good writing, what types of writing are needed to enhance the donor relations and stewardship programs, what organizational structure dictates concerning the disposition of writers within an institution, how to manage writers, and what resources I would personally recommend to develop and enhance writing skills.

Job Responsibilities

There are various forms of donor relations and stewardship departments. Some are largely focused on duties such as acknowledgments and reporting, while others have a broad array of responsibilities that include not only all aspects of donor reporting and recognition, but also the management of scholarship awards to students. There are those that pile even more under this umbrella, including prospect research, proposal writing, and donor communications, along with social media.



Acknowledgment writing is one of the key elements of any donor relations and stewardship department. If these letters are the only communication with donors that your shop handles, it is critical that creative writing play a part in what you do. Penelope Burk has revealed through donor surveys that brief but meaningful correspondence in a timely fashion is key to donor retention and to increased giving. The same letter to all donors just doesn't carry as much weight as a personal letter to each donor which reflects gratitude and impact and leaves the person feeling good about the gift made.

Types of Writing Skill Needed

Any professional must have a general foundation in writing, grammar, punctuation, and proofreading, but particularly those in a relationship-based career. For some activities associated with the donor relations and stewardship profession, a solid foundation is preferred. As long as an understanding of how to communicate well is there, an individual is likely to learn and grow in time through mentorship, education, and networking opportunities.

There are four main types of writing styles (compiled from online sources):

1. Expository Writing:

The main purpose of expository writing is to explain a concept or idea while including details for support. Support is provided through facts, not opinions. It is mostly used in textbook writing, how-to articles, recipes, news stories, and business, technical, or scientific writing.

- Expository writing usually explains something in a process.
- Expository writing is often equipped with facts and figures.
- Expository writing is usually in a logical order and sequence.

2. Persuasive Writing:

Like expository writing, specific details and examples are used for support in persuasive writing, but opinion is largely used with emotion playing a large role in affecting the reader. It is mostly used in opinion/editorial pieces, advertisements, reviews (books, music, movies, restaurants, etc.), letters of recommendation or complaint, and cover letters.

- Persuasive writing is equipped with reasons, arguments, and justifications.
- In persuasive writing, the author takes a stand and asks you to agree with his or her point of view.
- It often asks for readers to do something about the situation (the call-to-action).

3. Descriptive Writing:

The main purpose of descriptive writing is to entertain versus inform and is found in fiction and poetry. It is most often used in journal writing, nature writing, and descriptive passages in fiction.

- Descriptive writing is often poetic in nature
- Descriptive writing describes places, people, events, situations, or locations in a highly detailed manner.
- The author communicates what the reader will see, hear, taste, smell or feel

4. Narrative Writing:

Like descriptive writing, narrative writing is for entertaining the reader but through the telling of a story versus through the beauty of its verse. It is most often used in novels, short stories, novellas, poetry, autobiographies and biographies, anecdotes, and oral histories.

- In narrative writing, a person tells a story or event.
- Narrative writing has characters and dialogue.
- Narrative writing has definite and logical beginnings, intervals, and endings.
- Narrative writing often has situations like actions, motivational events, and disputes or conflicts with their eventual solutions.

For our donor relations and stewardship efforts, we primarily use expository and persuasive writing to state the facts and strengthen the case for ongoing support from the donor. When I am looking for a writer, therefore, I am looking for someone who can write well while explaining a process or a measurable result of a gift and who can complete a sufficient amount of research to logically and persuasively write about a giving impact area.

I also look for the ability of that person to write like someone else. I will go into greater detail later in the article about the tests that I use to help screen applicants for a writing position, but when I ask candidates to complete the letter-writing component of this test, I give background on our leader and ask the individual to write the letter as close to what she or he thinks that person would say. The candidate not knowing the individual makes this test somewhat unreliable, but it is still an indicator of how well the candidate can “hear voices.”

Hearing someone’s voice and translating it into words on paper is not always an easy task. To be frank, I firmly believe that voices tend to be regional and that more often than not it takes an exceptional—not just above average, but exceptional—writer to “get” a voice that is outside what he or she is accustomed to. When you have people who believe they are strong writers and know everything about the process of writing for another when they really don’t, the effort of “righting” that person to your path can be futile because of this lack of awareness. Perhaps there is even internal resistance to change or doing things in a different way.

Is there any hope for the strong writer who cannot hear a voice outside his or her own head? I believe that there are three approaches to solving this problem. First of all, the ability of a writer to track the voice of another person when writing a letter or preparing remarks can be tested during an interview. You can present a candidate for a writing position with documents from people within the organization for whom the candidate might be preparing documents. Can the candidate point out in the documents the elements that constitute the voice of the other person? Can the candidate emulate the voice of the other person in a writing exercise conducted during the interview? This would most often be composing a letter of acknowledgment for a leader of the organization.

Second, if measuring the sensitivity of a new writer to the voice of other people for whom the writer may be responsible for letters or remarks hasn’t been completely successful, providing training during the early months of the writer’s employment may bring the writer into greater conformity with the other person’s voice. This process may take a considerable amount of time, but the positive result that may ensue will have considerable value for the organization. Good writers are hard to find.

Finally, if the assessment process during hiring and training in early employment do not help to develop the new writer into an emulator of the executive's voice, there may be opportunities to assign a good writer to other projects. It might be that the writer is better at exposition than creativity, or has skill at persuasion. These are writing styles that the organization may need and finding a place for a good writer and seeking the "other voice" talent may be a reasonable course of action.

What's Culture Got to Do With It?

We all know the communication of ideas is important to the profession, but that may not necessarily mean that the director of an institution's stewardship program must be a talented writer. In many respects, it will depend on the organization itself, along with its particular donor base, marketing strategy, structure, and culture. These unique features define how stewardship fits into the fundraising paradigm at each organization, and when certain aspects of donor relations and stewardship are handled by other related departments, it can completely alter the dynamics of the skillset needed to direct the defined aspects of that organization's donor relations and stewardship efforts.

There are a multitude of consultants and firms who have proven through studies and surveys that written communication can make or break the monetary fundraising goal and related efforts to recruit and retain donors. These studies confirm what those who have spent time in the field know inherently. In my 17 years in the fundraising world—from starting regular stewardship reporting to donors, to leading fundraising initiatives for various campus units, to developing an ever-evolving donor relations program—it is clear that having a way with words, both written and spoken, boosts success.

The skillset needed for directing the unit's responsibilities greatly depends on how your organization is structured, how donor relations and stewardship are defined, and what is squeezing under your umbrella that doesn't really fit. Several organizational scenarios follow, and each might require a different level of creative writing skill for the person overseeing donor relations and stewardship.

As discussed above, just because someone is hired for the wrong job doesn't mean that he or she isn't a strong candidate for another position on the team. More and more managers restructure their units to accommodate the strengths, as well as the weaknesses, of all team members. When I was faced with a situation such as this, we offered the incumbent opportunities that better fit her skills within other areas of development. We recognized this writer's strengths and built upon them to our mutual satisfaction.

The Lone Ranger

I started out in the new position of stewardship coordinator within the donor services team at UAB. There was no designated office of stewardship; donor relations was not a phrase widely used at the time; and my major responsibility was to implement endowment reporting at UAB. Soon I realized what a demanding job it would be to coordinate the information needed, write the reports, and ensure the appropriate people were receiving the letters. I also saw the need for an organized structure and approach to all aspects of donor recognition and stewardship at the university. Despite limited resources and a tendency to be given "special project" assignments, I became The Lone Ranger for Stewardship, working toward a goal of structured donor recognition versus being just a simple reporting arm of gift processing.

Over the years, I can't tell you how many times I have heard from donor relations and stewardship professionals who are the only individuals in their organizations responsible for donor recognition. This doesn't even begin to touch on those organizations that are so small and with such limited budgets that one person is prospecting, proposal writing, soliciting, acknowledging, recognizing, and reporting on gifts. Whew!

I do have some advice for those in this business who are working alone to appreciate those who have been generous to the organization and to reach out to those who might see the organization as a worthy investment. Since this article is about the importance of writing to the practice of donor relations and stewardship and to realizing our goal of keeping our supporters close, I will say that selecting a few opportunities to write a well-crafted letter or speak publicly about the effect of philanthropy on the realization of the mission of the organization are more important than organizing an event or preparing multiple endowment reports. What good writing does is position us to select the opportunities to say something important to a few critical philanthropists and to the larger group of those who are developing their philanthropy to our organization. Use your resources to speak with gratitude to the individuals who make a difference now and to speak about the mission to a larger group who are beginning to pay attention.

Regardless of the litany of duties that could be thrust upon an individual, the lone ranger must have a versatile writing style, adapting to the specific assignment, audience, and messenger. Being rich in words and able to express them both orally and in writing are critical skills for the donor relations writer. There is no doubt that being an effective communicator in this role is essential for success. How does someone become rich in words? Clearly, word richness means possessing and deploying a significant vocabulary. Building a vocabulary comes from being a reader as well as a writer. There are many sources available in print and on the Internet for enriching one's vocabulary. A few examples are listed at the end of this article. Opportunities to enrich a writer's vocabulary exist within the organization as well. Writers should attend as many programs offered by the organization as possible to build a rich organizational vocabulary as well.

Centralized versus Decentralized

Many institutions, frequently in higher education but also in organizations with multiple campuses or a national presence, have a central office that handles gift processing and major gift development, while they have fundraisers assigned to various units or regions of the organization. The larger the organization the more that the job responsibilities will be more focused within a central office. Our team operates in a decentralized environment where we have specific individuals assigned to focused responsibilities based on their performance strengths.

Having a centralized donor relations and stewardship office gives us the opportunity to speak to our donors in one voice. In large organizations, a few donors may support a number of units, and the central donor relations office can deliver institutional messages to these donors in a seamless and standardized manner. The program units themselves can focus on managing the relationship with these donors rather than segmenting their efforts into fundraising and stewardship.

This does not mean that the units don't have donor relations and stewardship responsibilities. In a centralized effort, production-based donor relations and stewardship, such as acknowledgment writing and report generation, and the activities I manage at UAB, are efficiently managed so that gift officers can cultivate prospects and solicit new gifts. Our chairs are warm so that gift officers' chairs can be cold.

Delivering a consistent message in a centralized donor relations and stewardship organization requires as much coordination and cooperation as operating in a decentralized organization. Understanding the emerging relationships with the donors comes from collaboration with the units, but coordination with a communications office and the executive staff in a centralized environment means greater efficiency of operation.

Executive leadership must create and maintain an effective centralized donor relations and stewardship effort because only the executive can overcome a feeling in the organization that donors belong to one unit or another. Controlling the resources for donor relations and stewardship is one way to press the issue of centralized services. Surveying donors and auditing the donor relations and stewardship work of the units can help to press the cause of centralized activities.

Staffing and Work Distribution

In my department at UAB, I have a *reporting specialist*, a *communications specialist*, and a *stewardship associate*. These three individuals have different, complementary skills. The reporting specialist must be able to produce narrative-based writing to communicate the messages provided by students, faculty, and staff of the university. The communications specialist focuses on descriptive and persuasive writing, and also adapts messages for different constituents from a variety of university leaders. The stewardship associate focuses on assuring quality and managing production and works closely with me to understand these components as we review various materials for distribution to a multitude of individuals and organizations.

Stewardship reports are a good example of how work flows through my department. Reports are initiated by the reporting specialist, who passes along a full creative report to the stewardship associate. After the stewardship associate proofreads the report, he sends it to the senior director for comments. The report is then returned to the reporting specialist for corrections and to the stewardship associate for production and distribution. From the beginning to the distribution takes about two days. This is a constant process, and the work is tracked using a software system called WorkFront. This system is not perfect, but it does keep us on track.

After I began working at UAB, the university created a development communications team that takes many messages from across campus, tailors them to the audience, captures those audiences with stories, and delivers them in ways that appeal to many readers—donor newsletter features both in print and online, web-based announcements, social media posts, and a variety of other mediums. They address both solicitation marketing and donor recognition pieces showing the ongoing impact of philanthropy. Creative writing is critical to all that they do.

We work closely with the development communications team and university relations so that we are carrying forward appropriate messages. We meet with the development communications team frequently, often daily, to remain in the loop on current messages. These then infuse the various donor relations activities, especially during our current campaign with the tagline, “Give something; change everything.” We repeat important messages and concentrate on the five mission pillars of the university: research, education, patient care, community service, and economic development. We also meet regularly with the director of development communications to look ahead at the calendar and projects on the horizon. We discuss how we can promote and facilitate the director’s efforts and collaborate with our own.

Hiring Excellent Writers

Although all members of our team must be able to communicate clearly in writing, I put greater emphasis on the particular skill of writing when hiring a stewardship communications specialist versus a stewardship reporting specialist. During an interview for a communications position, writing and proofreading tests are given to all applicants selected.

I ask each applicant to write a letter acknowledging a major gift from Mr. James Donor. The test instructions include a note from the pretend donor saying his gift is in support of diabetes research and is given in honor of his sister, Jane Donor, who has type 1 diabetes, and in memory of his mother, Charity Donor, who passed away from complications of type 2 diabetes. The letter provides a chance to see what type of research a candidate will accomplish in the time allotted and reflects the individual’s style at work under pressure. I find it is a fairly good indicator of future success of the chosen candidate. It also allows me to see what level of research and personalization I can expect from the applicant if selected for the job.

In addition to the letter-writing test, I provide a sample report from one of our faculty members for the applicant to proofread. I have purposely chosen a document that was written by a brilliant faculty member for whom English is a second language. The successful candidate will perform above average on punctuation and grammar correction and will go beyond the scope of the assignment to rearrange the document for a more logical read.

These tests have worked for me time and again. I am proud to say that every person I have ever hired has been successful; however, that doesn’t mean there weren’t some growing pains along the way.

Training Talented Staff to Fit the Job Requirements

There are many good resources for improving writing skills. My training style goes beyond teaching components and begins with a more philosophical approach to behavior and appealing to an individual’s ego and psyche. The book *How to Win Friends and Influence People* written by Dale Carnegie was one of the first best-selling self-help books and was published in 1936. I highly recommend it for all to read.

A reading list is included as an appendix to this article, and there are writing workshops available. Although I do not have any to personally recommend, I suggest picking a workshop or class that is specific to the

improvement in skill desired. For example, if a person needs improvement in reflecting the impact of gifts, perhaps a storytelling workshop is best, while a more technical grammar and punctuation series (see Appendix A for a TED-Ed recommended series) would be suitable for an individual whose use of commas and sentence structure is sporadic.

One of the most basic things I recommend, that I must admit is rarely used by those to whom I recommend it, is the taking of notes as an individual is telling you what they want to say. Whenever you can capture some of the speaker's own words it will make the writing, whatever it is, more genuine and, therefore, more effective.

A good writer can enhance the overall reach of a service-based organization and is essential to its ongoing growth and success. Likewise, a poor writer can hurt the organization even with the best of intentions. It is critical for those responsible for donor relations and stewardship to have a good understanding of what creative writing means to success and, in most cases, to also be able to write well in the various styles discussed in this article.

Every organization produces a style guide and this should be in each writer's portfolio. The style guide is usually based on a published style manual. Most organizations elect to use either the *Associated Press Stylebook* or the *Chicago Manual of Style*. There are countless other style manuals that can be reviewed with an Internet search on style manual or manual of style. Other style guides, such as *The Elements of Style*, can be accessed in the same way.

These guides help writers present a consistent voice and way of communicating to readers. Areas of individual style or conflict in usage can be resolved with reference to the style guide. For instance, the question of whether to put one or two spaces after punctuation can be resolved by referring to the style guide. Individual preference succumbs to organizational style.

The organization's style guide can step off from the published manual to include use of the organization's logo, titles, names of departments, etc. Conformity with the style guide is critical to presenting a unified face to the public and reduces confusion as well. Part of the orientation of all employees within the organization should be introduction of the style guide. Writers should be trained and evaluated on their consistent and correct use of the style guide.

We often find ourselves invited by our fundraising colleagues in the units to proofread their correspondence and other writing. We always oblige them and use these occasions as opportunities to spread the word about the style guide and how to use it. We don't expect that these individual efforts will convert all our colleagues, but we are pleased to be invited to help them represent the organization in clear prose that is in line with the style standard.

Our human resources department offers training on writing for the university. Many other organizations probably have training like this as well. I encourage my staff and my colleagues to take advantage of these workshops and other training offered on the Internet, at proprietary workshops, or at conferences like those offered by ADRP, CASE, and AFP.

Conclusion

First and foremost, those of us who work in donor relations and stewardship are communicators. Being able to write well, to express ourselves in words, whether in letters, reports, or in remarks for oral delivery, we serve as proclaimers of the mission of our organizations. We use well-chosen and well-crafted words to connect philanthropists and those who would be philanthropists to our organizations.

Is writing critical to donor relations and stewardship? Writing is the foundation of our practice. There are many styles of writing, from exposition, to creative, to narrative writing. All good writing, however, is interesting to read, and often compelling. Mixing styles to attract and retain the attention of the reader is often necessary, especially in writing for donor relations and stewardship.

If writing is fundamental to donor relations and stewardship, then practitioners have an obligation to prepare themselves to take on the array of assignments and responsibilities that require an excellent command of the various forms of verbal expression. Anyone interested in pursuing a career in donor relations and stewardship might expect to be tested during a job interview to assess the level and quality of skill.

Managers also must be prepared to assess the level of competence of new employees in writing across a range of styles and purposes, from acknowledgment writing to report generation to crafting remarks for speakers at events. Managers themselves must be skilled composers of letters and all forms of executive communications. Keeping and promoting good writers requires thoughtful management of staff and conversations with the organization's leadership about how the institution itself can invest in training and retention of good writers.

Being a good writer entails responsibility beyond the immediate confines of the office of donor relations and stewardship. Promulgating the brand identification tools and style guides of the organization is an important part of management. Reaching out to others across the advancement team to help those who are not strong writers is an obligation, not simply a courtesy. Offering to present staff development workshops or conversations over brown bag lunches makes a difference in elevating the quality of verbal presentation across the fundraising department and the organization.

Reading List and Other Resources

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Media:

TED-Ed Blog: Be a Better Writer in 15 Minutes: 4 TED-Ed lessons on grammar and word choice.

<http://blog.ed.ted.com/2014/05/29/be-a-better-writer-in-15-minutes-4-ted-ed-lessons-on-grammar-and-word-choice/>

Mary Norris is authoritative, humorous, and insightful in her explanations of "all facets of language."

video.newyorker.com/series/comma-queen

Facebook Daily Tips:

<https://www.facebook.com/DailyWritingTips/?fref=ts>

<https://www.facebook.com/writerscircle/?fref=ts>

<https://www.facebook.com/grammarly/?fref=ts>

<https://www.facebook.com/GrammarGirl/?fref=ts>

Style Guides:

Associated Press Stylebook

<https://www.apstylebook.com/>

The Chicago Manual of Style Online



www.chicagomanualofstyle.org/

MLA Style | Modern Language Association

<https://www.mla.org/MLA-Style>

Institutional style guides:

<https://www.uab.edu/brand/home/standards/writing>

UAB's brand home provides a complete representation of all the possible areas where design or writing style might pertain. Studying what UAB has compiled in one place will be instructive in determining how your organization might approach the important subject of branding, including design elements and writing style.

<http://brand.iu.edu/apply/editorial-style/style-guide/>

Indiana University's brand guide is comprehensive. Notice the listing of all outside sources used by IU to determine its style.

<http://www.cincinnatichildrens.org/assets/0/78/315/339/42f1df01-d9b4-4774-ac96-7a58a53a4668.pdf>

Cincinnati Children's Hospital also publishes its style guide. The range of resources used to compile this guide is different from that used by universities and colleges.

<http://www.amnh.org/our-research/scientific-publications/for-authors/style-manual>

Style guides like this one for the American Museum of Natural History cover the organization's rules for preparing manuscripts for production and publishing.

http://aspcapro.org/sites/pro/files/aspcamymbrandstandards_toolbook.pdf

Brand standards toolkits can be whimsical like this one for the ASPC.

Becoming a better writer:

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