

Writing to Supporters

By Paula Cowan

Writing is still the primary means of communication with prayer and financial supporters, whether the letter is on paper or electronic. We are communicators.

Writing a letter that will go to more than one person:

Write to one specific person you know, and then adapt it as needed to send to others.

Use a computer if possible to individualize the salutation. It makes the letter warm and personal. i.e. "Dear Sam," rather than, "Dear Friends."

If there are not too many letters to customize, personalize each letter further by changing one short paragraph to comment on something personal between the recipient and you. This can be the first paragraph (probably the best), the last one, or what is very personal, a paragraph somewhere in the middle. Some examples: "I was just thinking about how we rode your horses along the river the last time we visited, and wish we could do it again." Or "Your apple pie came to mind today and it prompted me to write you a letter. Wish we could try some of that pie over a cup of coffee with you and catch up on your news. Here's what's happening out our way."

"You" is the most wonderful word in a letter. Try to start your letter with you, your, you're, etc. i.e. "You just came to mind and I thought I'd write. . . "or "You are a friend of mine."

Keep it short – one side of a page max.

You didn't invent the rules, but you play by them or lose. You are competing with sound bites of 7 seconds

The exception to this is intensely personal letters to close friends who are supporters, giving more details than a general letter. They feel like insiders because they are.

Tell one story about one person, project, or event. No more. (This is hard!)

Tell about people, if possible, people you are serving.

Connect the reader emotionally with your ministry and the people you serve. (I can identify with one person's pain or joy, not with a million.)

Describe projects, churches, and your ministry goals in terms of people, their needs, and connecting people with Christ. Donors are usually interested in people coming to Christ or growing out of their needs into His solutions. Ministry process bores most donors.

A good formula for your letter would be to describe a person you serve each time. You could recycle one in a while if there is progress. You may need to hide identities.

Be careful about the amount of space you give in your newsletters to news of your children. . . unless it is news about how they are helping you with the ministry. Then be sure and include them.

As much as friends and relatives love news about your family there will be some who wonder if all you are doing on the field is raising kids.

One solution would be to put your ministry news on one side of the newsletter and then family news on the other side. The recipients can choose to read as much as they like.

The exception to this is when big events happen: your children coming to Christ or their high school graduation or marriage.

Have someone read the letter who did not help write it, check for errors, double meanings, etc.

Thank donors for their giving. Don't be too effusive. A simple straight thank you for "x" amount is usually best.

If possible, tell the donor what you spent the money for, i.e. bought a set of tires.

If possible, tell how the expenditure moved your ministry forward. (Bought tires to keep driving gravel roads to tell people in the next village about Christ.)

Enclose a snapshot sometimes. It is far more personal than a printed photo.

Use good writing techniques

Write it fast in one sitting so you have smooth, continuous flow and conversational quality. Then leave it alone. Come back at least a full day later and rewrite. Take at least twice as long to rewrite and edit as to write the draft.

Omit the extraneous. Cut. Cut. Cut.

Use specific words. Paint a picture in the mind of the reader, i.e. "Red VW beetle" instead of "car" or "vehicle."

Use vivid verbs, when possible, that you can feel, smell, hear, or sense, i.e. "snapped" instead of "broke."

Use active verbs, not the dull passive forms, i.e. "The bat hit the ball," rather than "The ball was hit by the bat." Even better, "The bat smacked the ball."

Pick verbs that carry the information, instead of loading on adverbs, i.e. "He strolled," rather than, "He walked slowly."

Use short sentences, very short ones mixed with some up to about 22 words. No more if possible. (A University of Nebraska study showed readers' eyes start skipping after 22 words.)

Avoid clichés. Cut/rephrase them to a fresh expression when you edit. Another study showed readers' eyes skipped over sections where the words are in a familiar combination, plus skipped a few words on each side of the cliché.

Craft the letter as if your income was entwined with its content, tone, and expression of relationship . . . because it is.

Appearance

Make it pretty. Make it look appealing to read as soon as the reader opens the envelope. That means make it look like it will be easy and quick to read. The first glance is probably the critical moment that decides whether your letter will ever be read.

Use plenty of empty space, ample margins all around, especially at the top. Don't cram the page with type.

Craft short paragraphs, no more than four sentences. A blank line or most of a blank line between paragraphs invites and relaxes the reader.

Indented paragraphs are friendlier, more informal, and less business looking.

Fonts. (The size and shape of alphabet letters your computer prints.) Use no more than three different fonts per page; two is usually better. Note: Older donors have more money and dimming eyes. I recommend never using smaller than 12- point font.

Additional Notes for Newsletters

If you do a newsletter-style letter to supporters, the look is even more critical. You have stepped up (in the reader's mind) from a personal letter to a professional newsletter, like those sent by James Dobson, politicians, and vacation resort ads.

Use photos, but use them well. Use good photos, very sharply focused, clear, with the subject large. If pictures of people, get close up and show emotion.

One close up of a face is worth dozens of group shots.

The most important subjects are you and your people, ideally together.

If you can lay a dollar bill anywhere on the page without touching a photo or open space of some kind, it is too text heavy. If in the slightest doubt, try to get some professional layout advice or help.

Use side bars –blocks of text enclosed by a line box or something that sets them off from the main block of text. Sidebars contain one short story or list of information, etc.

Tie the newsletter strongly to you and your work, by title and photos.

Ray and Linda Saucy (pronounced so-see) do a good job with their "Saucyology" newsletter.

Higginbotham News is probably better than In Touch with Higginbothams.

Don'ts

Don't assume your readers remember your last letter or what you are doing.

Always give enough information that someone first encountering your ministry can follow the letter, know who you are and what you do.

This does not have to take much space, just short phrases, sidebars, etc.

Don't bore your reader by telling him you are telling him something exciting. Ditto for interesting, wonderful, very, fantastic, etc. Excite the reader. Tell him something exciting. But don't tell him it is exciting, let him decide.

Don't emote up your letter with exclamation marks. Save exclamation marks for exclamations such as Wow! And use them rarely. If you writing needs exclamation marks to give it fizz, start over and get some help.

Don't write anything you would not want the people you are serving to read.