

# Writing for Community Success In 4 Easy Steps

By **Dalya F. Massachi, M.A.**

It's no secret that written communication is integral to success in the nonprofit world. But how can you use words to advance your mission, and improve your programs, fundraising and public relations?

Those looming deadlines don't help much either.

I like to think of writing as simply a tool to help you think more clearly about your work — and what it all means. Every piece of writing is different, but you can use my basic four-step method as a starting point:

**Step 1: DEFINE YOUR GOALS.** What are you seeking to do with the piece you're writing? Examples might be:

- a) Educate and activate your readers
- b) Build trust and involvement in your organization
- c) Garner support for your good work

**Step 2: FOCUS ON YOUR AUDIENCE.** Writing with your reader in mind is like engaging in an intimate conversation. To get a good picture of who your reader is, I suggest asking yourself the following questions:

- a) Who are you communicating with? You probably have several different audiences in mind.
- b) Why should your audience care about your work? How can you relate your work to their real-life experiences?
- c) What does your audience already know about your work, and how can you build on that?

- d) Are there any important cultural differences between you (the writer) and your readers? If so, how can you navigate these differences?

**Step 3: IDENTIFY THE INFORMATION YOU NEED TO CONVEY.** Start outlining what you want your reader to take away after reading your piece. This might be a set of facts, a certain emotion, and/or a need to act. Recall the goals you pinpointed in Step 1. Jot down your answers to these questions:

- a) What is the problem your organization or project is addressing? Why is that issue important? What would happen if you didn't address this problem?
- b) What are the solutions you are proposing? What are the specific actions you're taking and/or asking your audience to take?
- c) What is your organization's vision? What would success look like?
- d) How has your organization made a difference in people's lives?

**Step 4: WITH YOUR AUDIENCE IN MIND, CRAFT YOUR MESSAGES.** Now take your answers from Step 3 above and convey that information to the audience you identified in Step 2. Think about what sequence makes the most sense.

Here are my Top Eight Tips (the rest couldn't fit in this article!):

- a) **Start with a punchy beginning.** Your first few paragraphs should draw your readers in and explain the essentials: who, what, when, where and why/how.
- b) **Focus on people:** People love to relate to the people they read about. The human connection is what you're striving to create.
- c) **Remember that your audience members have both heads and hearts.** Bring out your readers' sense of justice, excitement, and personal power by inspiring them.
- d) **Use accessible, user-friendly language.** Nonprofits are notorious for using jargon to explain even the simplest ideas. Don't fall into that trap.
- e) **Remember that when writing, less is more.** Concise statements are powerful.
- f) **Wait at least 12-24 hours before returning to your latest draft.** If your first draft is perfect then you MUST be doing something wrong. Sorry — no last-minute cramming!
- g) **Always read your piece out loud: how does it sound?** Most people hear words as they read them. Your words should roll off the tongue.

- h) **Complement your words with plenty of photos, charts, or other graphics:** Pictures are worth a thousand words — if used wisely. All graphics should depict your organization advancing your mission. Don't forget to identify your graphics with a short caption containing an active verb.

All of this assumes that you're following my final suggestion (a bonus tip!): **edit, edit, edit, and then proofread.** Every piece I write has improved by the third or fourth (or tenth) draft.

If all else fails, and you're struck by writer's block, just start writing whatever comes to mind. Get your creative juices flowing by warming up your pen (or keyboard).

Soon you'll begin to see your words help fuel your organization's take-off.

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## RESOURCES

*Elements of Style*, by Stunk and White (a classic on writing well)

**Telling Stories: Building Community by Improving Communications**,  
[www.goodnewsgooddeeds.org](http://www.goodnewsgooddeeds.org)

*SPIN Works!*, by Robert Bray / Independent Media Institute (press relations)

*Newsletter Sourcebook*, by Mark Beach and Elaine Floyd

*Guide to Proposal Writing*, by The Foundation Center (also many resources on their website:  
[www.fdncenter.org](http://www.fdncenter.org))

We Interrupt This Message (nonprofit organization): <http://www.interrupt.org>

Web tips: [www.useit.com](http://www.useit.com)