



Writing a Support Letter

A Blog Series by DonorElf

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Write Authentically

As with any writing, your newsletter will be so much more readable if it's written in your own voice.

A simple tip to help: **Write like you talk!**

Since you're probably writing to your readers directly, it's ok to use fairly informal language. This isn't academic writing. You don't have to "sound smart" and use big, fancy words. Use simple, straightforward language. Use "you," "I," "we" rather than "one," unless it's absolutely appropriate. You don't have to keep a distant, clinical tone. That's actually a lot more off-putting than if you spoke to your readers like you were having a conversation with them. (That cold, sterile language is pretty hard to slog through no matter the context, anyway.)

And there's no word count or page number you need to meet, so you don't need to add extra words to drag it out. You can communicate just what you need to in simple, clear language — the language you'd use if you were chatting with them in person.



That's voice. Now, what do you write about?

Well, you're lucky. The people who are supporting you are already interested in you and in your work. You don't have to prove yourself. Share with them. Open up!

It can be a delicate balance. On the one hand, you don't need to air your dirty laundry for the world. On the other hand, these are people who care. They want to know what's going on with you, so that they know how to support you.

Here are some general topics that your donors are probably interested in:

- Your life
- Your work
- Ways you are learning or growing

We'll go into these topics in more depth in the next three blog posts. Just remember as you're considering how to share about your life, your work, and the things you're learning, it's you writing. It's you your readers want to hear from. So just be yourself!

Share About Your Life

One thought that can haunt you when you're writing, especially writing a newsletter, is: I don't have anything interesting to say.

That is just not true.

We can often be oblivious to the uniqueness of our lives. Sometimes it even takes visiting a new and very different city to think about how we live.

Even if you live a very ordinary life, there is beauty in the details of it. Natalie Goldberg writes, "We have lived; our moments are important" (*Writing Down the Bones*, 44). We need your story. It helps connect us to the truth of humanity.



Goldberg also writes, "The important thing is to go below the clichés to touch the texture of your experience" (*Old Friend From Far Away*, 121). Remember the power of detail. It's the details that make our lives interesting.

Your life *will* seem boring if all you tell us is, "On Tuesdays, I stop by the market on my way home from the community center." Try instead: "On Tuesdays, I climb the cobblestone hill to the market on my way home. Inside a large air-conditioned building with 12-foot ceilings, I make my way between the stands. I always buy watermelon from the man who has no front teeth and spinach from the old woman with the hunchback."

You are a very interesting person. Your readers want to know you.

Educate — Tell About Your Work

People who are supporting you are probably interested in learning more about the details of your work. Invite them in! Educate them.

Readers like writing that does one of two things: 1) tells a story, or 2) educates them on something. The best kind of writing combines these.

You are an expert

It might help you to remember that you are an expert. You know the things you're sharing about inside and out. You know your own life. You know why you are compelled by the work you do. You know the stories that touch your life every day. Now, share them.

Your supporters want to know more about what you're doing. Give them the details. Let them get to know the city or country or neighborhood of your service. Introduce them to the characters of your life.

One of the best supporter meetings I ever went to was for a couple that was moving to Sierra Leone. They had an open house that lasted a few hours, and right in the middle was a presentation about Sierra Leone and the work they'd be doing.

I learned about Sierra Leone. I learned about the 10-year civil war that ravaged West Africa and the child soldiers who had been dragged into it — many of them left as amputees.

I learned that Kroo Bay, a slum of Sierra Leone's capital Freetown, is home to over 6,000 people. It's basically the lowest point in the city, so during monsoon season, it floods, bringing the city's garbage down the alleyways and into homes. People are building their homes on floating islands of garbage.

I learned about the Saturday service my friends would help with. The eggs they'd give the kids at the end — maybe the only protein the kids would have all week.

I was touched. I became that much more invested. Share with your supporters enough of the picture that they can be touched, too.

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(“Educate – Tell About Your Work” continued)

Mix it up!

The other great thing about that presentation was it provided a variety of information, appealing to different tastes. Some people remember facts. Some remember faces. Give variety!

Build community by sharing what compels you

An added benefit of continually educating your supporters is that, now, they’re even more on board. When they really understand this work and why it compels you, they, too, will be compelled.

And you know what that means? They become advocates for you, too. They start sharing about the work they are a part of because they are supporting it by supporting you. If you’ve educated them well, they are informed enough to share with others.

Hands-on experience

One great way to inform your supporters about the work you do is to host some kind of event that allows them a glimpse into the work you’re doing. World Vision annually hosts a 40 Hour Famine. Youth groups and other supporters will host this fundraiser, fasting for 40 hours to feel what it’s like to be hungry overnight and gathering sponsors.

Some organizations that work with people who are homeless do fundraisers that have people live in a cardboard box overnight.

Wheelchair for a Day Challenge encourages people to spend one day in a wheelchair. Nothing helps you appreciate the weight of opening doors, the slight incline of the sidewalks, or the fatigue of using your arms all day like strolling around in a wheelchair.

Share What You're Learning

One great way to open up with your supporters is to share with them ways you are learning or growing. It's easy to talk about new ideas if you're excited about them.

Sharing about what you're learning is also helpful for you to process your thoughts. In your hectic life, you probably don't find a lot of time to journal or talk through life lessons with a friend. Writing about what you're learning in a support letter can serve this role. (Just be sure the things you're learning are appropriate to share with a larger audience. Never forget to filter.)

Vulnerability and humility go a long way

This can be a good opportunity to share vulnerably. Life lessons often come with great humility. When you share that with your readers, you are sharing very deep, true parts of yourself. Readers connect to vulnerability. It speaks to their humanness.

And there are probably ways that your learning can and will encourage or challenge your readers in their own lives. Just don't be pedantic—invite rather than lecture. If you're sharing vulnerably rather than condemning, you're on the right path.

Don't overuse quotes

A lot of what we learn comes from other sources like reading. It's a good idea to share quotes from what you're learning, just don't overdo them.

Big blocks of text from another source can be overwhelming—and very easy to skip over. What your readers want is to know why that quote stuck out to you. If you were writing a research paper, you'd include information from a trusted source, but it would only be used to enhance your own ideas, whether you were using it as support or refuting it.

If you are learning something through a book study, it's ok to write about it. You can certainly include a quote—just not too big of a block of text. Then explain why it's meaningful to you, what you are learning from it.

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I'M LEARNING



("Share What You're Learning" continued)

Any time you're writing and you use a quote, you should introduce it and draw a conclusion from it. Here's a good, brief example from Brene Brown's *The Gifts of Imperfection*:

Choosing authenticity is not an easy choice. E. E. Cummings wrote, "To be nobody-but-yourself in a world which is doing its best, night and day, to make you everybody but yourself—means to fight the hardest battle which any human being can fight—and never stop fighting."
"Staying real" is one of the most courageous battles that we'll ever fight. (51)

Brene's own thoughts—in bold—bookend the quote she uses. This way, the quote is supporting her own writing, not taking over.

Remember that an aptly chosen quote can add the perfect flavor to your letter, and serve as a springboard for you to share your own thoughts. But be sure that you do share your own thoughts and not just regurgitate someone else's writing.

Asking for Money in Your Support Letter

Be honest.

If you're struggling to raise enough support, say so. Don't beat around the bush. Don't try to guilt people into giving (e.g. "I guess if I don't get \$600 more a month, I'll have to come home"). If you're tired of asking for help or overwhelmed by the amount you have to raise, maybe it's ok to say that, too.

In this support-raiser's four years of experience, this letter was probably the most effective:

Now, as I wrote last month, I am preparing for a three-year contract. Even though I'm incredibly excited to pursue this calling, I feel a little bit of dread. Will I be able to find the means to stay? And then last month, my support account dipped into the negative for the first time.



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(“Asking for Money in Your Support Letter” continued)

So I write this letter to humbly ask for your help.

Besides several generous one-time gifts, I have had 13 loved ones graciously commit to supporting me monthly, a total of \$540. For my \$1,400 monthly net pay, I need to raise \$2,336 each month (which includes Social Security, taxes, insurances). This leaves \$1,796 for me to raise each month.

Can I tell you the truth? As I entered those numbers into the calculator and hit =, the \$1,796 came up like a punch in the gut. I feel like it's just too high, just an insurmountable task. And then I think about how I felt when I accepted the internship in the first place. Overwhelmed. How can I possibly raise this money? How can I ask for this?

Yet now, I think back over the past 10 months with gratitude. I have had so many loved ones help me raise all the money I've needed; I've been encouraged in incredible ways; and I've found myself in a community where I have been challenged to grow and learn, and where I have been able to offer my gifts and reflections and struggles. I know my heart has been able to grow in gratitude through this process. And I know it's about to grow a whole lot more, as I believe my needs will miraculously continue to be met.

You are doing this work for a reason. Your supporters have chosen to support you for a reason. Keep inviting them into your work, and keep inviting new people. Be honest, be authentic, be vulnerable. There's no need to be a sob story. But do invite with confidence and sincerity.

Be in Touch with Supporters Regularly

Keep your letters coming at a predictable pace. Regularity helps you remember to stay in touch, and it helps build a reliable connection to your supporters.

The pace of sending your letters may be predetermined by your organization, but if it's not, remember to keep them coming, but don't flood inboxes.

Monthly is a common timeframe. It makes sense, since many supporters give monthly, and your letter can serve as a reminder for them to send their check.

At a minimum, send a letter every three months. A quarterly update could be a timely occasion to send updates on your work. You don't really want to go longer than that in between letters, because you don't want your supporters to forget about you. Your newsletters are also a way to let your supporters know that they are a priority to you.

However frequently you send your letter, you need to send it regularly. Even if you don't have a lot to say or much time to write it, your letter coming keeps you in the minds of your supporters.

It also helps you. If you make connecting with your supporters a priority, it keeps them in your mind, too. And what a great thing to have on your mind: people who love and support you!

Additionally, writing regularly can be a way for you to process what is going on in your life, like we talked about in "Share What You're Learning."

January

S	M	T	W	T	F	S
1	2	3	4	5	6	7
8	9	10	11	12	13	14
15	16	17	18	19	20	21
22	23	24	25	26	27	28
29	30	31				

February

S	M	T	W	T	F	S
			1	2	3	4
5	6	7	8	9	10	11
12	13	14	15	16	17	18
19	20	21	22	23	24	25
26	27	28	29			

Support Letter Subject Ideas

We've established that it's important to send your letter regularly. It's also important that you don't just send junk content.

You're making the effort of sending your letter, putting it together and, if you mail it, paying for the supplies and postage to send it. So put in just a little more effort and make sure it's worth sending.

Now, sometimes there are things you'll want to tell your supporters—things you're just bursting to put out there. But sometimes you won't know what to say. So here are some subject ideas if you're stuck.



1. Write a list. They're easy to come up with, and they are fan favorites. Top ten reasons I love this city. The seven most-asked questions I get when I tell people what I do.

2. Tell us a story about a person you met this month who encouraged you in the work you're doing.

3. Introduce your fellow staff members. Provide colorful details about each person to show what they're like and what you appreciate about them. (This can be an encouragement to your coworkers, too!)

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(“Supporter Letter Subject Ideas” continued)

4. Talk about volunteers who help your organization. Maybe even interview them and ask why they want to help. This can be a new perspective on the work you’re a part of, and might connect with something in your readers.

5. Be a reporter for a week! Collect data. Conduct an interview with an expert. Research the local legislation. This is a great way to educate both yourself and your supporters on local issues. It could even be a useful piece for your organization to post on the website or in their print materials.

6. Bust out the color and use before-and-after photos of a project your organization has been working on.

7. Spend some time thinking about the next generation. If you work directly with kids, talk about how their lives are being influenced. No matter what kind of work you’re doing, it is affecting the world for the next generation. Tell us how.

8. What books have you read this year? Tell us about five that have made you think, and explain why.

9. Feature a community member in a “Day in the Life.” Obviously, you’ll need to ask that person’s permission to shadow them for a day. Take notes and—if it’s ok—film footage. This could be a really fun way for you to exercise your creative muscles as you put together both a short video and a written story to share with your supporters.

10. Check the local paper. Look for interesting topics that are affecting your city. You might not be thinking about them when you’re composing your newsletter, but local issues might be fascinating to your supporters, who may not know about what’s going on in your city or country.

Show, Don't Tell

All writers have been told this. It's maybe the most basic instruction given.

"Show, don't tell" is to take the reader into the event with you. You aren't telling about something. You're taking us there with you. You don't write about feelings; you write feelings.

Here are two versions of the same event.

Telling:

Daphne and I did yard work. It was hot. We drank water when we'd finished.

Showing:

Daphne clipped the rose bush and bled from her shoulders. I mowed. Then we both pulled weeds from the cracks of the sidewalk.

We chose noontime on a 96-degree Tuesday for our labor. Dirt stuck like flies to our glistening arms and legs. We wiped our brows with gloved backs-of-wrists and drank cucumber water from sweating glasses, whose condensation dripped down our happy chins.



Details are the currency of showing. Be specific. Give concrete details. In these examples, you can envision more of the scene with each progressive sentence:

We picked **flowers** on the side of the road.

We picked purple and yellow flowers on the side of the road.

We picked violets and daisies on the side of the road.

We took food to the street on our visit.

We took hot chocolate and cheese sandwiches to the street on our visit Monday.

We carried a five-gallon thermos of hot chocolate and two big Ziplocs of cheese sandwiches to our street visit last Monday night.

Remember that each detail you add increases the specificity of your scene, but too many details about unimportant elements can bog down your piece. You get to decide which details are important and which aren't.

Start it off Right — Captivating Intros

Journalism students learn to ask the who, what, where, why, when, and how and then to summarize those key points into their lead paragraphs. The idea is to give the most important information to readers right at the beginning so they don't have to read the entire article.

That's for strictly news articles. Feature writing gives a little more creative freedom. You have more space at the beginning to open with a story or a quote—or in some way grab readers' attention and pull them into the story, all while introducing the main idea.

After a more colorful introduction, the who, what, where, why, when, and how are still summarized in a sentence or short paragraph, called the "billboard paragraph" or the "nutgraf."

It's kind of like a thesis statement from your school papers. Clarifying your main idea lets readers know where you're headed, and also helps you to focus as you're writing (something we'll talk about in the next post).

Here's an example of the same article introduced with a news-style lead paragraph:

Tim Scott, from Bradford, is a catfish guide on the Mississippi River. He takes about 70 trips out a year, many of which are with Chicago residents 55 and older.

And here's a feature-style introduction with a story first:

"This is it. This is the one we've been waiting for," Tim Scott says, the excitement quieting his voice. "You ready?"

I approach the pole, heart pounding. I grab the cork of the rod above the reel, shove the lower end into my abdomen and prepare to reel in the biggest fish of my life.

I'm facing perpendicular to where the fish is, Tim reminding me to keep the tip up, allowing the design of the pole to absorb the pressure so that the line doesn't snap. I let the fish pull, reeling fast when it swims toward me and the line loosens a bit. It's getting closer to the boat, but my arms and hands are getting tired.

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(“Starting it off Right – Captivating Intros” continued)

“When it comes up for the first time, don’t get too excited. Just keep doing what you’re doing, even if it scares you,” Tim says, his words refreshing me.

The fish does surface; its yellowy-green body makes my heart flutter. It looks like the elusive catfish you see in the movies — too big to really be in my hands.

“Now, gently move the pole down toward the water, reeling as you go,” Tim coaches. “And then bring it up real slow.”

I do so a few times, then repeat without reeling because it’s so close. Tim slips the net under our catfish and heaves it out of the water.

“That is a nice flathead,” he says, grinning. “30, 40 pounds,” later deciding to call it mid- to upper-30s.

And that’s what it is about for Tim Scott, a catfish guide from Bradford — that next big fish.

If your newsletter is really more of a letter, having a lead paragraph or a thesis statement is maybe less important. If you’re writing your grandmother a letter, you don’t outline where you’re headed in the paragraphs to come. But, then again, those letters can meander for pages and not really get anywhere. It can be nice to have an informal, personal tone with your readers like you would with your grandmother, but you want your support letter to have more direction.

We’ll talk in the next post more about having direction in your letter.

One tip is to begin and end your letters with gratitude.

Communicate Clearly with Your Supporters

In the last post, we talked about how having an introductory paragraph can help you clarify what your letter is about.

Even if you don't choose to have a paragraph that summarizes the rest of the letter, it may be helpful for you to make an outline for yourself before you start writing your letter. Sometimes there are many points you need to cover for your supporters, so it's helpful to have direction.

This isn't to say you need to keep your letters as lean as possible, to cut the niceties and the excess details. Lively details will often help to capture attention. Just know where you're going, the ground you have to cover.

This is an example of a simple, focused support letter:

Dear family and friends,

An opportunity has come up for me to travel to Romania and Moldova this May, and I am just so thrilled.

Romania is one of our most established fields. About 15 Romanians and North Americans constitute the staff, and they work among at-risk children, youth who live on the streets and poor families. Our staff members help with school expenses, advocate for the children at their schools, and provide tutoring, meals and medical care at the community center. They also do training for families and schools about behavioral development and issues affecting children. Our Romania field does a great job of encouraging artistic expression and has been an inspiration to our global community.

Moldova is our newest community, actually started by our Romania field just this January. Staff members are currently volunteering with organizations that serve among at-risk children as they discern the precise direction they'll go.

We here in the sending and support office are meant to do a field visit about once a year. We have better understanding of our work when we get to see it in person. Our hearts are more invested. Because of funding and scheduling conflicts, I haven't visited a field since I visited Brazil two and a half years ago. That trip greatly encouraged me in the work I do.

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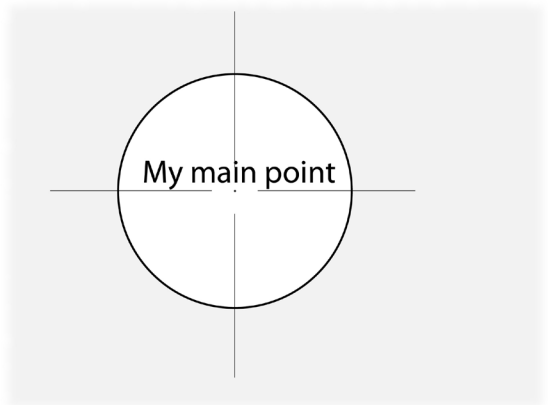
“Communicate Clearly with Supporters” continued)

I think I have felt the lack of field visits. I feel distant from my work.

Realistically, my support account is not in a healthy place to consider traveling in two months. But I need to go. I’m not using the term “need” lightly. I need to be reminded of the purpose of this work. I want to meet some of the kids who shape my co-workers’ lives. I need to be rejuvenated and inspired.

And I need your help.

I invite you to help make this trip possible for me. I’m asking you to consider giving a one-time gift specifically for this trip. I probably need about \$3,000 (sorry, I don’t have exact figures), and any contribution you make will truly help.



And, as always, I thank you for your love and support.

Much love to you.

This letter is very focused and straightforward. Even as a relatively short letter, it accomplishes many things:

- Lets supporters know about an exciting opportunity in her life (in the introductory paragraph)
- Tells about the work her organization does in the specific fields she hopes to visit
- Vulnerably shares about her needs, both for encouragement and financial support
- Invites her supporters to help (straightforwardly)
- Expresses gratitude

Brainstorm to find the points you need to communicate

Whether you’re searching for topics or need to hone in on the points you need to make, brainstorming or mind-mapping can help get you started. Once you know the points you need to cover, you can organize them into an outline. And then your letter is much easier to write.

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(“Communicate Clearly with Supporters” continued)

As an outline, the letter above might look like this:

- I. Intro: I have this opportunity to travel
- II. Introduce fields and work they do
 - a. Romania
 - b. Moldova
- III. Why I need to go
 - a. Staff requirement
 - b. Need the encouragement
- IV. What I need in order to go and how you can help
- V. Closing, with gratitude

When you're thinking about your letter, if you can name those points that you know you need to cover, you can easily figure out what to say. And that can help your letter to be focused and to the point.

What are your methods for finding focus in your letters?

Keep It Active — Active Voice and Action Verbs

Active language is far more likely to keep your readers engaged. When it comes to “active,” it means more than one thing: active voice and action verbs.

Use active voice rather than passive voice.

In active voice sentences, the subject performs the action.

Esperanza prepared lunch.

The **local government** is considering this new bill.

In passive voice sentences, the subject is acted upon. (So instead of being before the verb, it's buried in a prepositional phrase.)

Lunch was prepared by **Esperanza**.

This new bill is being considered by the **local government**.

Active voice:

- emphasizes who performed the action
- uses fewer words
- is usually easier to understand than passive voice
- clarifies the subject and object of a sentence (which helps you know who {subject} did what {verb} to whom{object})

Active voice will give you simpler, clearer sentences, and it is almost always preferred.

The few times that passive voice is better are when the agent performing the action is unknown, implied or unimportant.

- Our new computers were stolen last week. (Unknown agent: the thief. Active voice: A thief stole our new computers last week.)
- A young man was arrested yesterday as a suspect. (Implied agent: the police. Active voice: The police arrested a young man yesterday as a suspect.)
- Our organization's director was summoned by the prosecutor as a witness. (Unimportant agent: the prosecutor; more important: our organization's director. Active voice: The prosecutor summoned our organization's director as a witness.)

Here are a few other passive-voice phrases that like to sneak into our writing, but which you should avoid if possible:

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“Keep It Active” – continued)

- **“There are,” “There were,” “There is,” “There was”**
There are a lot of people helping us tonight.
Better: A lot of people are helping us tonight.
Better still would be to give a number—remember the importance of detail: Over 100 people are helping us tonight.
- **“It is”**
It is Tuesdays that are the hardest.
Better: Tuesdays are the hardest.
(Sometimes “it is” can be used for extra emphasis, like: “It is this kind of thinking that we must change.” But it will not stick out if you use “it is” all the time.)

Use colorful action verbs

Action verbs are not the same as active voice, which involves sentence construction. Action verbs are more about word choice.

There are three types of verbs:

- Linking verbs are a form of “to be” that connects the subject to additional information about the subject (I am tired; she is the director of our organization)
- State-of-being verbs communicate feelings or attitudes (feel, believe, hope)
- Action verbs express what the subject does—the action the subject performs (laugh, jump, eat, fart)

Action verbs are the strongest, most compelling verbs. They will give you short, simple sentences.

Here are some examples of action verbs that are stronger than linking verbs:

You and I are different.
You and I differ.

In her summary, she wrote, “
...”
She summarized, “ ... ”

Made a suggestion
Suggested



You can also cut out other words, like adverbs, by choosing the right action verb. You can use an adverb to describe how someone laughed (quietly, loudly, suddenly) or even an adjective to describe the kind of laugh (a cackling laugh). But what’s better is to let the right verb tell it instead (Mary cackled; Bob guffawed; snickered; giggled; chortled; chuckled). This cuts out unnecessary words, and simultaneously adds color to your writing.

Think of Your Audience While You Write

Your readers are real people. You need to remember that when you're writing.

- They're busy.
- They won't read something that bores them.
- They read things that interest them. It may be because of art, information, relationship, or just curiosity.
- You need to work to capture their attention.

Writing to your audience is a key skill for all writers. Magazine writers, for instance, need to know if they're writing to women, ages 45-65, upper-middle class, living in the Midwest.

The good thing is you know the specifics of your readership better than anyone. You need to write to that readership. Not everyone will love everything you write about, so mix it up. Keep them coming back, even if they don't read this letter all the way through.

You can mix it up by providing some variety in topics and content:

- Write stories.
- Provide data and research.
- Display it with charts and graphs.
- Include photos.

Avoid overly controversial topics

(This advice is strictly for support letters, not necessarily all writing!) Because you know your audience, you probably know some topics to avoid. It's not that you have to hide anything. Just focus more on what you all have in common than on differences.

If you do broach a controversial topic, always handle it delicately and with respect. While newspapers and magazines thrive by publishing opinion pieces that rile up readership, support letters really aren't the place for that.

The truth is, it doesn't really matter if your supporters all agree. You don't want a cookie-cutter supporter. You have a unique relationship with each supporter, because each supporter is unique. A diverse mailing list is an asset. What does matter are the core values that bring you all together. Just keep that in mind.

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(“Think of Your Audience While You Write” continued)

Don't use jargon

One other thing to avoid: jargon. In our organizations, we develop our own languages that can be confusing and even off-putting to readers. So remember to simplify.

It's also helpful to remember those supporters who may not share the same belief system as you. The language you use might be jargon to them.

You can always define terms that have many different meanings to different people. “I'm using ‘community’ in this context to mean ... ” “What I mean by ‘inclusive’ is ... ”

“‘Debriefing’ is common language for us—intentional time to process through what you're going through with people who want to know.”

Just remind yourself to keep your readers in mind while you're writing.

Write First, Edit Later

This is a mantra among writers, especially in the creative realm.

There are two main reasons to write first and edit later.

1. Your inner writer needs the space and freedom to say what she or he needs to say. Sometimes you need to write badly for a while to get through to what you're really trying to say.

Take writing an anecdote for example. You'll probably need to write out the whole (or most) of the story in detail. Later you'll be able to determine more and more details that can be trimmed out for brevity and clarity.

2. When editing, you need fresh eyes to see the words you've been laboring over.

As an editor of a magazine, I also occasionally wrote for the publication. In one piece that I wrote, another editor pointed out an error in my article. I couldn't see it as an error, even after three or four rereadings. The next day, I looked again, and was able to see it. It actually read as the exact opposite thing I was trying to say! I'd just been looking too closely for too long to be able to see its incorrectness.

A good rule of thumb for preparing your support letter: Give yourself enough time before that deadline to have at least 20 minutes between typing your last sentence and editing. More time is better, and coming back to it the next day is even better.

editing too soon

KILLS

creativity



Anecdotes — Give Your Letter Character

Sharing a short, interesting story is one of the most basic ways to add character to your writing. And readers love anecdotes. These little stories are often what people remember after reading an article or listening to a speech.

A few of the key attributes of a good anecdote:

1. Brief

You'll need to determine how much of the story needs to be told, and cut out unnecessary elements to keep it short and to the point. Also, make sure it supports the main point but doesn't take over. Anecdotes are supporting characters to the overall story you're telling.

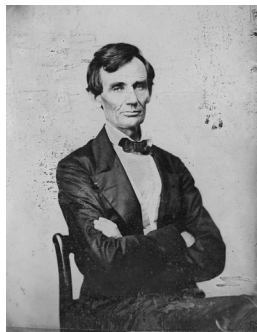
2. Relevant

Don't cram a story in that doesn't fit. That's a good rule of thumb for any type of writing. With a support letter, you can always include a story you want to share at a different point in the letter. Just don't try to prove a point with a story that takes away rather than adds to your meaning.

3. Detailed

Writing is better when it's specific—remember to show not tell. Again, you'll have to weigh detail against brevity. Be as specific as you need to be to make the anecdote clear and crisp, and cut out the rest. It's often helpful to write out the whole anecdote first, and then go back to trim the unnecessary pieces—possibly even making several read-throughs.

Using the right anecdote — one that fits, one that's short, and one that is specific — can add that perfect pop of color to any message.



Abe knew how to bring the character

Comma[n] Mistakes

We all make mistakes. Here are some common grammar mistakes involving commas with explanations of the rules, so you can make fewer mistakes — at least in the grammar department.

Comma splice

Two complete sentences cannot be merged with a mere comma.

Incorrect: This song is awesome, it's one of my favorites.

You can use a coordinating conjunction (and, but, for, nor, yet, or, so), a semi-colon (;), a dash (—), or a good old-fashioned period to split them up.

Correct: This song is awesome, and it's one of my favorites.

Correct: This song is awesome; it's one of my favorites.

Correct: This song is awesome—it's one of my favorites.

Correct: This song is awesome. It's one of my favorites.

However and therefore

The word “however” is one of the biggest accomplices in comma splices. It is not a coordinating conjunction like “and,” “but,” etc. “However” is a conjunctive adverb, on par with “therefore” or “furthermore.” As such, it cannot simply link two complete statements with a comma.

Incorrect: I wish it worked that way, however it doesn't.

You can fix it the same way you would with any other comma splice.

Correct: I wish it worked that way; however, it doesn't.

Correct: I wish it worked that way—however, it doesn't.

Correct: I wish it worked that way. However, it doesn't.

When “however” or “therefore” is used inside one complete statement, it should be set off with commas.

Correct: Therefore, I will write my sentences correctly.

Correct: I would be interested, however, to see how these grammar rules evolve.

(Continued on next page)

“Comma[n] Mistakes” continued)

Identifiers and [non]essential clauses

Commas are used to set off unnecessary details — these are called nonessential clauses. A nonessential clause gives information that doesn’t change the meaning of the sentence. Its nonessential, because you don’t need to know it.

These clauses need to be set off with two commas, or an opening comma and a period (if it’s the end of the sentence).

Correct: My husband, Hank, sells propane. (Correct because I only have one husband—I don’t *have* to include his name to identify which husband.)

Correct: I went to visit my brother, John. (Correct if I only have one brother.)

Correct: Jenny Thompson, a senior, works with campus life.

No commas are needed when the information is necessary to clarify a part of the sentence.

Correct: My friend Angela is on the swim team. (I don’t need commas around Angela because I have more than one friend. I need her name to clarify which friend I’m talking about.)

Correct: I saw the movie *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* with my friend Angela. (I didn’t include commas around the movie title because there are more movies than this one, and I have more than one friend — in both cases, you need to know the information.)

Correct: I saw the movie *Eternal Sunshine of the Spotless Mind* with my wife, Angela. (Like the above example, only now I used a comma before Angela because I can only have one wife, so her name isn’t necessary.)

Identifiers

Correct: Acclaimed author Henri Nouwen has dozens of books available.

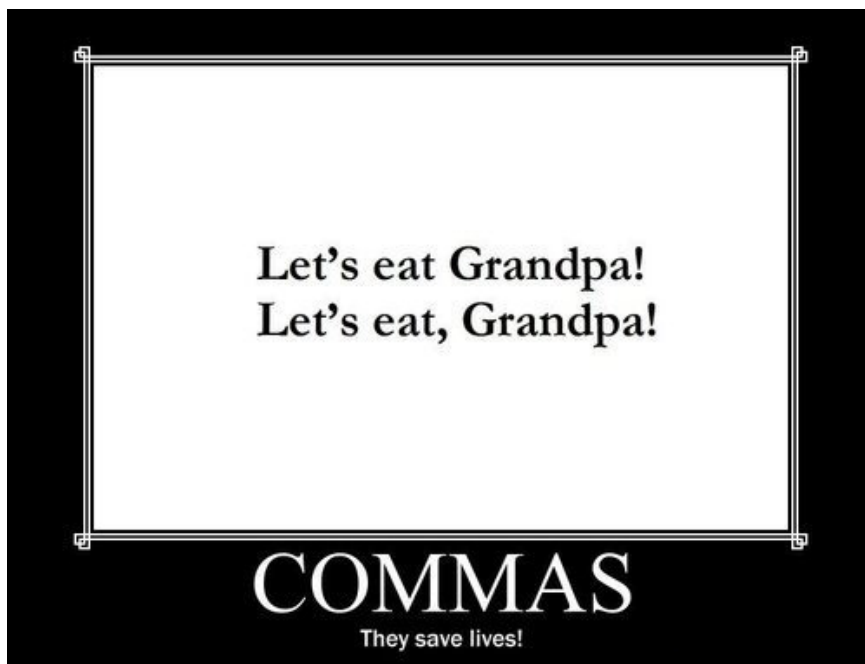
In that last example, “acclaimed author” is the identifier. It needs no comma before the name. However, if the identifier follows the name, it does need commas.

Correct: Henri Nouwen, acclaimed author, has dozens of books available.

Here are some more examples of correct and incorrect identifier commas.

Incorrect: Henri Nouwen, author of *The Inner Voice of Love* and dozens of other books passed away in 1996. (Incorrect because the closing comma is missing.)

(Continued on next page)



(“Comma[n] Mistakes” continued)

Correct: Henri Nouwen, author of *The Inner Voice of Love* and dozens of other books, passed away in 1996.

Incorrect: The film, *The Artist*, won the 2012 Oscar for best picture.
(Incorrect because the film’s title is necessary to clarify which film.)

Correct: The Oscar-winner for best picture in 2012, *The Artist*, is a black-and-white silent film. (Correct because you don’t need “*The Artist*”—it is one and the same as the identifier that precedes it.)

Correct: An Omaha man, Paul Yoder, developed DonorElf. (Correct because you could omit “Paul Yoder” because of “an.”)

Correct: My dad, who lives for Thanksgiving, was devastated when the turkey burned. (Correct because the “who” clause is nonessential, so it’s set off with commas.)

For more information on commas, check out:

- Purdue University’s OWL <http://owl.english.purdue.edu/owl/owlprint/607/>
- This New York Times article <http://opinionator.blogs.nytimes.com/2012/05/21/the-most-comma-mistakes/>

Make Your Letter Look Readable

You don't have to be a designer to know a good-looking newsletter when you see one. And newsletters that are nice to look at make them more compelling to read. Even if you use mainly text, you can make it look nice.

The basic idea is: Make it visually accessible.

Keep paragraphs and articles shorter — they *look* more readable

Did you know journalists are trained to break paragraphs every sentence or two? The shorter paragraphs look more accessible to readers (particularly when laid out in skinny news columns).

Bloggers and web-content creators are encouraged to keep articles short overall. People's attention spans are getting shorter all the time.

Use subheadings to break up the text

It's also a good idea to break up your support letter into sections. Maybe this means you have separate boxes for different items. Even adding subheadings will help. Write them as mini-summaries of what's coming in that section. This allows you to write for skimmers as well as for readers.

Another way to get your point across to skimmers is to bold your main points. Bolding main points let's people see what's important at a glance. Don't overuse bolding, though, or your whole letter will look like a giant ink spot.

Bullet-point lists are our allies

Bullet points are one more way to help break up text. They add some white space relief to the page (so it's not all text), and they are easy to skim. They also allow you to cut some words, since you don't have to write complete sentences for each point.

Bullet points *can* be complete sentences (in which case you should end each one with a sentence), or just a few words (no period needed) — but be consistent. Each point in the list needs to be in the same format as its buddies.

Everyone loves photos

Another great way to break up text is to include photos. And many people connect more visually. Your friends and family want to see you and the work you're doing. Color is usually best, but use your discretion with the cost if you're printing your letters.

(“Make Your Letter Look Readable” example)

Two Looks: Blocks of Text

If I write the exact same thing, but don't break up my paragraphs as often, it seems less penetrable when all you do is take a glance at it. When your supporters pull your letter out of the envelope or open the email (whichever the case may be), it should immediately look accessible to them. When we use long paragraphs like this top example, it is more difficult to want to even begin reading it. It's also helpful to use bullet-point lists, subheadings, and photos. These elements are all ways to break up text and engage the reader in different ways. A lot of skimmers will look at those very elements before they'd ever look at a section of text with no breaks.

Two Looks: Broken up

If I write the exact same thing, but don't break up my paragraphs as often, it seems less penetrable when all you do is take a glance at it.

When your supporters pull your letter out of the envelope or open the email (whichever the case may be), it should immediately look accessible to them. When we use long paragraphs like this top example, it is more difficult to want to even begin reading it.

It's also helpful to use:

- bullet-point lists
- subheadings
- photos

These elements are all ways to break up text and engage the reader in different ways. A lot of skimmers will look at those very elements before they'd ever look at a section of text with no breaks.

Remember CRAP Design Principles

Most of us haven't taken a design course. So here are a few helpful tips to keep in mind when you're putting together your newsletter.

Your design should use CRAP:

1. Contrast

Contrast means you need to make different items *different*. Design that makes items look similar but slightly different just makes your design look sloppy. This applies to size, color, font, shape, spacing, etc. One simple way to illustrate this point is with font size. If your body copy is size 12, your headers should be 18 to give happy contrast. Don't just use 14. The size is too similar, so it will not stand apart. Or, use 12-point font but bold it. The size is the same (not similar), but the thickness of the letters will set it apart.

Heading in size 18

This is body content in size 12 is contrasted — it is different from the heading.

Heading size 12, bolded

This font size is the same (not similar — not barely different), but the bold sets it apart.

Heading only in 14

This size-12 content is too similar but not the same. Yuk.

2. Repetition

Repetition gives your letter a consistent theme. Use the same font for all body copy. Use the same font size for all related headers. Repetition is a very simple way to unify your letter and strengthen its organization.

One of the ways newsletters often break the repetition rule is with fonts. If there are three different pieces, six different fonts will be used—each header and section of body copy will have its own font.

Your letter should use no more than **two** fonts. TWO. One for headers and one for body. You can even just use one font, contrasting the heading with size and weight.

If you choose to use two fonts, here's a good rule for you. There are two general families of font: serif and sans serif. Serif is Latin for "feet." So serif fonts have little feet (like Times New Roman, Cambria, or Georgia), and sans (Latin for "without") have no feet (like Helvetica, Arial, or Myriad Pro).

Feet make smaller font slightly easier to read, because they help create a line your eyes can follow. Choose a serif font for your body and a sans serif for your

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“Remember CRAP Design Principles” continued)

headings. This gives you great contrast. Now, be consistent throughout the document. Really, really: You can use just one font throughout (we did!). This is just a guideline if you want to use two.

Fonts to avoid: Comic Sans, Papyrus, Courier, and Bradley Hand. Just trust us. They are overused by amateurs, they’ve become a joke, and just, please, don’t use them.

3. Alignment

Items on the page should be connected to other elements on the page visually. Alignment again helps give your letter a clean, cohesive look.

Centering text is commonly used, but it is actually a sloppy look. Left alignment of both your body copy and your headings is better.

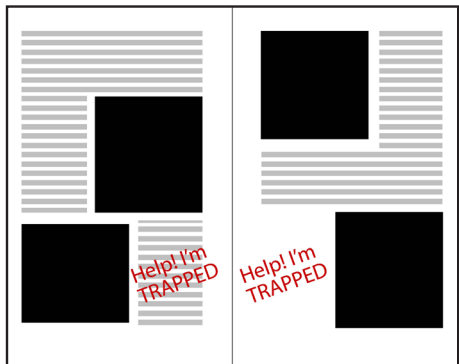
4. Proximity

Related items should be close together. So if you have two articles, keep the heading, the body, and photos for one article grouped together. Give a little breathing room between it and the other article’s components. That breathing room is called “white space.”

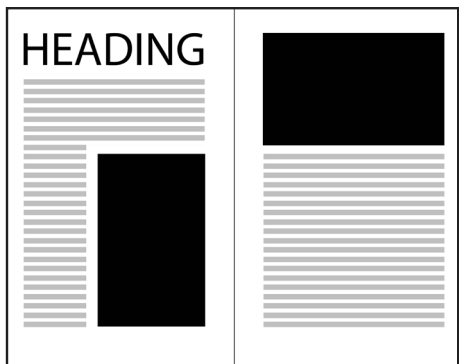
White space is a design principle that is hard for newsletter writers to employ. It tells you to leave some space empty, but we have a lot of items to include. We want to fit as much in as we can, and to print as few pages as possible. But your letter will look cleaner, seem more professional, and be more accessible to your readers if you allow some space for the eyes to rest.

One thing to know about white space is that you don’t want to trap it. Don’t have a box of negative space in the middle of your design, or it will look like a mistake. Margins are good. Some extra space between separate articles. But not odd blank spaces in the middle, trapped by text and images.

Contrast, Repetition, Alignment, Proximity. Just remember CRAP when you’re designing your support letter.



This is trapped white space. The boxes or text create awkward space. Design is claustrophobic. Please, for your own good, don’t trap it.



This layout is much cleaner. The heavy items put the weight on the inside or top and allow for flow and breath.

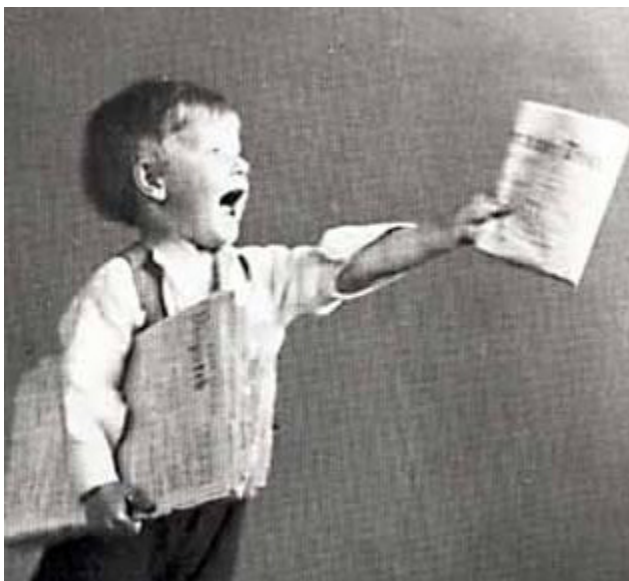
Print vs. Email — Review the Options

Many organizations have a system for sending newsletters already in place. But let's consider the pros and cons of print vs. email newsletters.

Pros for print

Print letters are often nice for your supporters to receive. There's that tangible reminder of you that they have in their hands. It's like how so many people prefer the weight and feel of a book in their hands to a tablet.

Many argue that people are more likely to read a piece of mail, because they'll see it rather than it getting buried in their email inbox. And you don't have to worry about getting caught in a junk filter.



Email perks

One of the most obvious benefits to using email is that it's free. With print, you have to pay for printing costs as well as shipping fees, and someone (you, a volunteer, or someone you or the organization pays) has to do the work of stuffing envelopes.

You would greatly reduce the amount of paper waste you're creating each year by using email.

Email can be scheduled, so you can do the work ahead of time and let it go out on the right date and at the right time.

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(“Print vs. Email – Review the Options” continued)

There's less restriction on how much you can include. Good judgment rather than page number will be all that limits your text. And photos will take up only kilobytes, not physical page space, plus there's no extra fee for printing in color. Plus you can include video links.

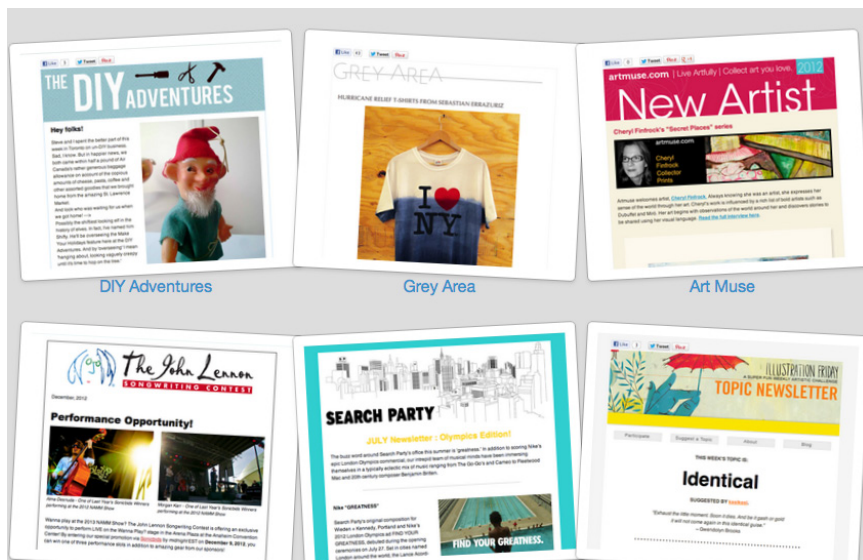
Electronic letters are easy to share on social media, which are becoming more and more legitimate for connecting to supporters. It would also be simple to coordinate your periodic emails with a blog you post to more frequently.

Bottom Line

So much of our world is online now it doesn't make sense not to have an online presence with your supporters. Even if you do send out a print letter (or if you send a print version once a quarter or something), you could pretty easily do an email version, too. This would give your supporters the option to read your letter in the format they prefer.

P.S. If you do send an email, make sure you have a compelling subject. Give a hint at what's included in your letter. This gives readers incentive to open it, as well as helps keep it out of the junk basket.

Apps for Designing a Newsletter or Email Blast



Newsletters featured on Mad Mimi's Gallery.

Layout and design used to be reserved for professionals. Nowadays, design technology is so readily accessible that even children can create compelling layouts.

We've compiled a list of some applications to try and an idea of the price. Some of them are strictly design programs, which you could use to lay out your newsletter either for print or to save as a PDF and attach to email. Others are email programs that let you design nice-looking emails.

Standard layout programs (that may even come with your computer)

Microsoft Word (available for PC or Mac) — \$109.99
(also available in Microsoft Office)

This basic word processing tool has come a long way in its layout capabilities. You can create a simple letter and pretty easily add photos. Many of us are familiar with this program, so it's a good one to start using for layout.



Microsoft Publisher (available for PC) — \$109.99

Microsoft says: “Publisher 2013 helps you create, personalize, and share a wide range of professional-quality publications and marketing materials with ease.”

Publisher has templates to help you design your documents. The interface is similar to other Microsoft products, so it should seem familiar and fairly easy to use.



Pages (for Mac users; compatible with Microsoft Word) — \$19.99

From Apple: “Pages is a word processor and a page layout tool that helps you create great-looking documents, newsletters, reports, and more.”



Pages has several templates you can use, or you can design your own layout and create graphs and charts. It's also a word processor and includes photo-editing software — this integration is really convenient.

Layout for the serious

Adobe InDesign (available for PC or Mac) — \$699 (also available in Adobe Suites)

Adobe: “InDesign® CS6 software is a versatile desktop publishing application that gives you pixel-perfect control over design and typography. Create elegant and engaging pages for print, tablets, and other screens.”



Many design professionals use InDesign and the other Adobe products. If you're an amateur, it is probably an expense you don't need, unless you're going to get really into design. However, if you are serious about publications design, it is a very good product. I prefer it to anything else I have used.

Quark — (available for PC or Mac) \$849

“QuarkXPress® is design software that lets anyone create and publish rich, compelling materials for print, the Web, e-readers, tablets, and other digital media in one easy-to-use tool — no coding or programming required.”

Again, this isn't a necessary expense for an amateur.



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("Apps for Designing Newsletter, Email Blast" continued)

Free* email programs with design capability

**A basic plan is free. You can pay for more advanced plans.*

MailChimp — free for 2,000 subscribers, up to 12,000 emails per month; other monthly plans or pay-as-you-go also available

MailChimp is an online program, so there's no download. You send email directly from MailChimp, but the sent-from address is your own email address.



MailChimp lets you design your own or use templates for your newsletters. It's easy to integrate with social media. It helps you maintain your mailing list, like allowing you to split your list into groups and not letting you have duplicates. It tracks how many people open your email, so you know if you're having an effective outreach.

I would say that if you are looking for a free email service, MailChimp is very good. I highly recommend it.

GroupMail — free for up to 500 contacts; one-time fee of \$99.95 for personal edition

GroupMail
newsletters, only better.

This is a downloadable program to which you can import your contacts. One of the downsides to this free edition is that you can't manage multiple lists, and the managing you can do is very limited.

Paid email programs with design capability

MadMimi — up to 500 contacts, infinite emails for \$8/month; more plans available — including a free plan for up to 100 contacts

Looks like a really excellent app, but I haven't used it personally. I think this is the one I'd check out if I were to pay for an email service.



MyEmma — 1,000 emails per month for \$35/month; more plans available



I have helped a friend with this before. It's nice enough, and my friend says their help has been invaluable. I think they have been working on growing the functionality of their design (not that it was bad before). But I wasn't overly impressed with it for the price and for what support-raisers would need it for. I just didn't think it was worth \$35/month when you could have most of the same features for free with MailChimp.

Constant Contact — 500 contacts for \$15/month; more plans available



I have used this while working at a small company. Again, I don't know that the \$15/month offers you much more than MailChimp gives you for free. It was fine. I wasn't overly impressed. Constant Contact does send resources via email — little marketing encouragements and tips. But those may or may not be helpful, as they are more directed at businesses doing marketing.

iPad Apps

iStudio — (design software) \$17.99 for iPad; \$49.99 for computer



This would be another design program that you could use for print documents or to attach in email. I haven't used it, but the company says this:

"iStudio Publisher is an easy-to-use page layout application for Mac OS X. It allows you to be a designer, easily creating stunning documents, ranging from a simple letterhead to professional magazines, adverts, reports, greetings cards and yearbooks. Whether you're writing a simple note or a full on brochure, you can use iStudio Publisher for anything and everything you need to layout and print."

Swift Publisher 3 — (design software) \$19.99

Again, this is a design program that I haven't used.

"Packing a streamlined interface and powerful layout and design tools, Swift Publisher provides all of the tools you need to create effective materials for your clients, partners, and friends. Fliers, brochures, letterheads, booklets, menus, and more, right on your Mac."



Hoolie — (email design software) \$39.99 (one-time fee)

Hoolie is an email program that you download to your iPad. It uses your Apple Address Book for your mailing list, so you can use groups you already have set up.



The company says this: "Hoolie makes it easy to design, send and manage email newsletter and marketing campaigns right from your computer with no limits, monthly costs or per email fees."

On the App Store, a reviewer who works with a non-profit had this to say: "Hoolie is the perfect app for our nonprofit to use in sending email blasts to all of our supporters. When you compare it to web services like iContact or Constant Contact, hoolie is both smoother to operate and far, far less expensive."