

Development for Conservation

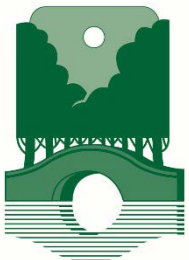
Irresistible Fundraising Appeal Letters

Prepared for

Land Trust Alliance Rally

September 2025

David Allen, Development for Conservation



**DEVELOPMENT
FOR
CONSERVATION**

Context

- By “members” we mean:

Donors whose annual (or more often) gifts are both expected and unrestricted

- Membership (renewal) money is the easiest money to raise and the hardest to screw up

Context

- The “Direct Mail” appeal letters we will discuss today relate to

**ASKING CURRENT MEMBERS FOR AN
APPEAL GIFT THIS YEAR**

NOT renewing members

Money Context

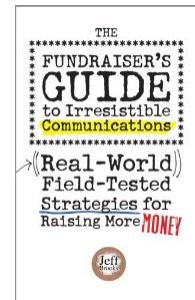
- In 2024 the median American household made \$80,000
- Three in ten households made between \$80,000 and \$140,000
- This was also the most generous demographic, giving away nearly seven percent of annual income
- Seven percent of \$80,000 is \$5,600

Money Context

- \$100 is now what many people take out of ATMs
- \$1,000 is a smart phone or cable contract (per year)
- \$20,000 used to buy a house.
Now it doesn't buy a new car.

Acknowledgements

- Jeff Brooks, The Fundraiser's Guide to Irresistible Communications
- The Nature Conservancy



A Dozen Rules for Writing Irresistible Appeals

Rule #1

If you're not testing, you're not learning.



Testing

- A/B Tests – make sure everything else is held constant
- Code the response cards
- Make sure each test group is demographically identical

Also, Look at ...

- NextAfter
- The Agitator Blog
- Jeff Brooks Blog - Future Fundraising Now

Winston's Weekly 
Digital fundraising optimization

Hypothesis:

Adding a "give monthly" button to a site's main navigation will achieve higher recurring donation rates.

Why might this work?

Giving the donor options for their gift creates more autonomy (like we discussed last week), gives more context to the decision, and increases the visibility of the recurring giving option.



Results:

The additional "Give Monthly" button led to a 143% increase in overall donations!

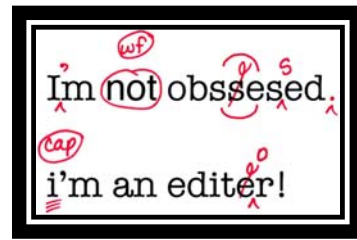
Here's what's most fascinating to me about this experiment though: it did not statistically move the needle on recurring donations.

Some possible reasons for this increase in one-time gifts may be:

- Adding the second button improved the **visibility** of both buttons.
- The inclusion of an additional giving option increases the perception of **autonomy** (as discussed last week), empowering the donor to choose how they want to give.

Rule #2

The secret to good writing is
in the editing.



Why People Give

People give because they believe:

- what you are doing is worth doing,
- you can get it done, and
- their gift will make a difference.

Editing

- Every number in your draft letter is suspect. Take 'em out.
- Use the we/us/our filter: do these pronouns include the reader?

Editing

- Use the Flesch-Kincaid reading ease tool and write letters at the 6th grade level (OK, maybe 8th)
- Is there an ask on each page? Is the ask clear and obvious?

Sample from Vermont

Because our work is not just about a legal transaction, but about building relationships over time and providing an ongoing service, we give our members the opportunity to make additional gifts during their membership year. Today I ask you to please consider making that extra gift.

Sample from Oregon

Please contribute to this effort and please join us on upcoming *Connect with the Land* tours, volunteer work parties and gatherings at Green Island and other McKenzie River Trust protected lands. And help spread the word on how *your* investments in clean water and shade trees bring smiles, and happiness, and life to a river. Thank you for your support of the McKenzie River Trust.

Sample from Wisconsin

Your holiday donation of \$100 will go a long way toward helping us with our mission to create, support, & protect the Ice Age Trail. Will you help us make 2016 even better?

Let's make 2024 even better!

You can help by making a \$100 holiday donation today. Together, we will create, support, & protect the Ice Age Trail – one step at a time!

Rule #3

Don't tell me, SHOW me.

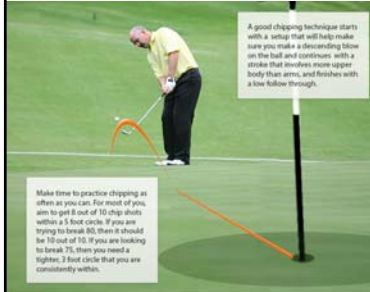


Tell a Story

- Stories convey emotion
- Stories stimulate the imagination
- Stories move us to action

- Make it a story about one person
- Make it first person
- Make the donor the hero

Rule #4



Technique matters.

(Don't trust yourself and don't trust your donors when it comes to technique.)

Useful Techniques

- Write longer letters
- Include a PS Note
- Communicate urgency
- Tell a story, or several
- Be corny, be obvious
- Clearly ask for a specific amount of money

Rule #5

Design for older eyes.



Design

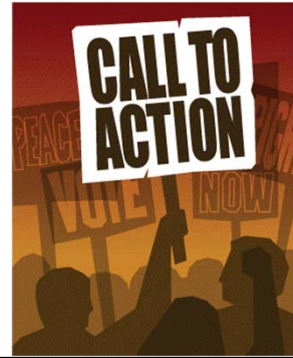
- 13 pt type
- 1.15 pt line spacing
- Double space between paragraphs
- 1.25 inch margins
- Serif font
- High contrast paper
- Minimal graphics; no print over graphics

Rule #6

Have a Call to Action.

Make it urgent.

Make it specific.



Specificity

Please ~~support~~ this important work by ~~making~~ a gift today.

Please ~~renew~~ your support

Last year you made a generous gift of \$50. **Please consider increasing your gift to \$100** this year. You can send us a check, or click on the QR code below to make a gift online.

Please join today with a gift of \$100 or more. Help make it possible for James and thousands like him to learn about nature. To even imagine that he could be a Naturalist.

Rule #7

Don't fall for these Killer Myths.

- Too much mail.
- Resting Donors Helps Results.
- Complaints from Donors are BAD.

Too much mail

- A typical donor gets 10 pieces of mail every delivery day – 3,000 pieces per year
- If you send 12 pieces per year, that's 0.4 percent of what s/he will get
- If you stopped mailing completely, s/he would probably not even notice
- And s/he would not give you more money either



Resting donors

The more recently a donor gave, the more likely s/he is to give again.



Complaints

- Complaints come from people who are angry
- Anger is an emotional response to an emotional stimulus
- So is giving
- PS: You don't have to keep mailing to people who complain!

Rule #8

Segment your file.

Tailor the response cards.

Segmentation

- Board and former board members
- \$1,000-plus members
- \$250-999 members
- \$100-249 members
- \$99-minus members
- Lapsed members
- Event only donors

Response Cards

- Keep it simple
- Include a space for email and phone numbers
- Have several boxes for gift amounts, but not too many
- “Other” is outside the largest gift amount, not the smallest
- Use the reverse side for a special message



Texture Ideas

- Include a real photo
- Include a leaf or pressed flower
- Or Bookmark
- Use a real stamp
- Use a textured stock

Rule #10

Don't let your appeals get in the way of your renewal letters.



Cull Out Your Renewals

- Renewals generate 65-80% response
- Appeals generate 25-45%

Rule #11

Rewrite your letters to be donor-centric.

Back to Brooks

What a year it was for Grand Prairie Friends! We organized workdays filled with volunteers helping take care of the prairies and forests we love. We sold native plants. We hired an Administrative Director. We dreamed of and constructed a hiking trail through Warbler Ridge. We purchased more land to protect and manage along the Embarras River. We pursued grant funds to carry out land conservation and stewardship work. And we did so much more.

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Self Centric

What a year it was for Grand Prairie Friends! We organized workdays filled with volunteers helping take care of the prairies and forests we love. We sold native plants. We hired an Administrative Director. We dreamed of and constructed a hiking trail through Warbler Ridge. We purchased more land to protect and manage along the Embarras River. We pursued grant funds to carry out land conservation and stewardship work. And we did so much more.

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Donor Centric

When my wife Erin and I first traveled over Kebler Pass, through the aspens alive with color, we were taken aback by the beauty of this special place. We felt that we had stepped back into another time. Erin and I had our first taste of what you have accomplished as part of the Crested Butte Land Trust.

Rule #12

Follow-up

Follow-up

Follow-up

Follow-up

Techniques

- Phone call
- Second and third letters
- Email before and after the letter

Non-Traditional Looks

- Newsprint
- Greeting Cards
- Postcards
- Multichannel Communications



One Way to Tackle Writing an Appeal Letter

By David Allen, Development for Conservation

There was a moment in time when I thought writing appeals letters would be a substantial part of my consulting work. I felt like I was good at it, and my letters seemed to hold their own and then some against client efforts from previous years.

But one day I learned that 22 states require Fund Raising Counsel to be registered. And because I couldn't control which states my clients were mailing into, registering in all 22 would cost me more than \$13,000. I could write letters all winter and lose money like crazy!

So I stopped writing appeal letters.

But if I were to write an appeal letter for you, these are the steps I would take:

1. Find the STORY

I would spend an hour or so on the phone with program staff, and I would ask them to tell me stories. The stories could be fictionalized in the sense that the names and details could be

obscured to protect people's privacy, but each story needs to either have actually happened in the way it was being told, or be so obviously fictionalized (like a talking bat, for example) that no reasonable person would take it literally.

And I would choose one. One that I could tell in an emotional way, or a humorous way, or both. I would aim for about 400 words. And I would tell the story using fairly simple words and fairly simple sentence structure.

Here's an example:

"Can I help?" asked Hannah. (Are there three more beautiful words in the English language?)

"Sure," said David. "We need to put these rocks back in the stream, where they belong. So fish can breathe."

Soon Hannah's whole family was involved. Taking the rock dam apart and putting the rocks back into the stream. So fish can breathe.

Hannah's family was on a hike up to the _____ on _____ Creek when they spotted David moving rocks around in the stream. David had come upon the rock dam that was backing up water behind it. A summer afternoon project from some other visitor no doubt. And he was putting the rocks back into the stream where they belonged. It looked like fun.

"Can I help?" asked the ten-year-old Hannah.

The cool part is that David was *volunteering* his work on the rock dam when Hannah came along. David had come along earlier that year and found a Senior Preserve Steward – Jenny – doing exactly the same thing – taking down a rock dam – on another part of the stream. Inspecting _____ Creek was a regular part of Jenny's job. Jenny explained that lots of people play in this creek every year. And _____ Creek is a great place to play! The water is cold, but full of opportunities for discovery and adventure. It's easy to see how putting the rocks together in a dam, and watching the water back up behind it becomes part of the fun. Unfortunately, it's not so good for the stream. When water slows down, it warms up. Silt collects. Oxygen levels go down. And it gets harder for insects and fish to breathe.

"Can I help?" David had asked Jenny.

“See here?” said David later to Hannah. “It’s called a stonefly. If we can find stoneflies, we know that the stream is healthy. Stoneflies are one of the signs that the water is clean and cold.”

Jenny and the other preserve stewards regularly monitor streams like _____ Creek. They pick up trash and break down rock dams. They look for stoneflies and measure dissolved oxygen. And they also talk to people about stream health. And stoneflies. And rock dams. People like David. And David ends up talking to people, too. People like Hannah. And we bet Hannah will talk to people, too.

“Can I help?”

2. Chunk it up

Next, I’m going to “chunk it up.” Meaning I’m going to separate the story into four or five pieces that I can deliver in between the more obvious pieces. In the example above, I have used color to show you where the chunks begin and end.

3. Write the other pieces

The other pieces I will need are a paragraph letting readers know that the story has been fictionalized (to the extent it has).

I need to stop here and tell you that Hannah and David are not their real names.
But their stories are real.

A way to relate the story to some part of the organizational mission that is supported when the reader gives to the appeal.

Rock dams slow the water down. Sediment can coat the bottom of the stream – including stonefly eggs – like a blanket. When it moves fast enough the sediment keeps moving. And stonefly eggs have a chance to hatch.

IF the water runs fast enough,

IF the water stays clean enough, and

IF the water has enough oxygen in it,

IF all those things are true, stoneflies will be there. In this way, they serve as an early warning sign for water quality. A “canary” for streams. When stoneflies are in the stream, the water quality is pretty good. When they’re not, it’s a sign that the something isn’t right.

At Land Trust, we care a lot about streams and water. Keeping things IN the water, like fish and stoneflies. And also keeping things out of the water, like garbage, and sediment, and rock dams. Now don’t get me wrong. The fact that kids and families are playing in _____ Creek is super important. Public recreation and enjoyment will help keep these places protected for years to come. And rock dams themselves aren’t the problem either – as long as they are removed when people leave. Like picking up your own trash, or reorganizing any other workspace or playspace, rock dams can be enjoyed and then put back. So stewards work each year with streams and creeks and Hannahs and Davids to maintain and improve water quality. For fish and stoneflies for sure, but for people, too.

Four (4) separate ask paragraphs.

I am writing because you can help, now, too. I am writing to ask you to make a special \$100 gift to the Land Trust this Fall. A gift that will help programs that keep stream water running clean and clear. For people and summer afternoons. And also for fish.

Land Trust needs your help this Fall. Your ongoing membership and additional support are an important part of this story. Your gift of \$100 or more makes a real difference for Land Trust and for Jenny’s ability to monitor and care for all those things that live and breathe in the stream. Please consider making your gift today!

Please make a special gift to the Land Trust this Fall. Please write a check for \$100 or more today.

You can help now – Make a gift to the Land Trust. Please consider a gift of \$100. If you can do more, I invite you to be as generous as possible. If not, please find a number that is right for you. No gift is too small to support more of Jenny’s work on the _____ Creek. And all the other stewardship work done throughout the county. Can you help Land Trust continue this important work? Will you?

And a PS Note:

Don’t forget to make your gift BEFORE December 31st!

4. Put it All Together

“*Can I help?*” asked Hannah. (Are there three more beautiful words in the English language?)

“*Sure,*” said David. “*We need to put these rocks back in the stream, where they belong. So fish can breathe.*”

Soon Hannah’s whole family was involved. Taking the rock dam apart and putting the rocks back into the stream. So fish can breathe.

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The cool part is that David was *volunteering* his work on the rock dam when Hannah came along. David had come along earlier that day and found a Senior Preserve Steward – Jenny –

doing exactly the same thing – taking down a rock dam – on another part of the stream. Inspecting _____ Creek was a regular part of Jenny’s job. Jenny explained that lots of people play in this creek every year. And _____ Creek is a great place to play! The water is cold, but full of opportunities for discovery and adventure. It’s easy to see how putting the rocks together in a dam, and watching the water back up behind it becomes part of the fun. Unfortunately, it’s not so good for the stream. When water slows down, it warms up. Silt collects. Oxygen levels go down. And it gets harder for insects and fish to breathe.

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Jenny and the other stewards regularly monitor streams like _____ Creek. They pick up trash and break down rock dams. They look for stoneflies and measure dissolved oxygen. And they also talk to people about stream health. And stoneflies. And rock dams. People like David. And David ends up talking to people, too. People like Hannah. And we bet Hannah will talk to people, too.

“*Can I help?*”

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No gift is too small to support more of Jenny's work on the _____ Creek. And all the other stewardship work done throughout the county. Can you help Land Trust continue this important work? Will you?

5. Format and Design

Last, I want to play with presentation and emphasis and a little bit with transitions. I'll indent some paragraphs to draw additional attention to them. I'll add white space. And make it fun.

I will need to leave room on the first page for my Board list. For the other pages I use 1.25-inch margins instead of the more normal 1 inch. And I bump the type size up to 13 pt, instead of 12 – doing so will make it easier for older eyes to read.

When it's all laid out, there should be an ask on every page, and the overall length should be four pages. No matter which page someone picks up, they should still get the message.

It's Fall!

Time to give.

The final result might look something like the insert here:

And that's how I would tackle writing an appeal letter.

That'll be \$13,000.

Cheers, and Have a great week!

-da

PS: Your comments on these posts are welcomed and warmly requested. If you have not posted a comment before, or if you are using a new email address, please know that there may be a delay in seeing your posted comment. That's my SPAM defense at work. I approve all comments as soon as I am able during the day.

Photo by RegalShave courtesy of Pixabay.

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David Allen
Development for Conservation
David@DevelopmentForConservation.com

Dear _____:

“*Can I help?*” asked Hannah.

(Are there three more beautiful words in the English language?)

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People like David.

And David ends up talking to people, too.

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“Can I help?”

Yes! you can, and your help is needed.

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No gift is too small to **support more of Jenny's work on the _____ Creek.** And all the other stewardship work done throughout the county. Can you help Land Trust continue this important work?

Will you?

If you have any questions about the Land Trust or any of these projects or programs, please contact us at the office – XXX-XXX-XXXX.

Thank you!

Signed

PS: Don't forget to make your gift BEFORE December 31st!

DAVID ALLEN

I am a non-profit fundraising consultant. I work with nonprofit boards and staff to help them learn how to be better leaders and advocates. I work almost exclusively with conservation organizations because that is where my heart is.

My background includes 30 years working in membership fundraising, major gift development, communications, and marketing. I worked for about half that time for Nature Conservancy (TNC) chapters in Oregon, Texas, and Wisconsin. In addition to my duties for the individual chapters, I served TNC as an internal fundraising consultant and major gift development trainer.

In 2000, I served as the vice-president of operations for the Wisconsin-based, international conservation organization Sand County Foundation, a position I held through mid-2009.



Gathering Waters Conservancy, a land trust service agency based in Wisconsin, called me in 2004 to ask whether I would be interested in teaching a seminar for Wisconsin land trusts on major donor development. From 2004, then, through 2009, I consulted on a nights and weekends basis with just a few clients each year.

In March of 2009, I launched my consulting business full-time using the name **Development for Conservation.**

Also in 2009, I partnered with Nancy Moore to form **Conservation Consulting Group.** Together we help land trusts by providing needs assessment, strategic planning, and leadership coaching services.

I consider myself a strategic thinker, problem solver, facilitator, educator, and program developer who brings a particular passion for conservation and the environment.

Practice Competencies

Fundraising

- Development Audit
- Strategic Fund Development Planning
- Staff/Board Training and Development
- Major Gift Coaching
- Capital Campaigns: Feasibility, Planning, Management

Organizational Development

- Strategy Development
- Practice & Process Assessment
- Problem Solving Facilitation
- Marketing

David Allen

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