



Oscar-Worthy Words

Crafting top-notch correspondence for institutional leaders

BY MARY ELLEN COLLINS

Did you ever notice how many award-winning actors thank their writers? They praise the people who wrote the words they spoke, knowing that without first-rate material, it's nearly impossible to give an impressive performance. Although development officers seldom receive public recognition for putting words into the mouths of others, the ability to write convincingly in voices not one's own is an honorable talent.

The challenge of adopting another persona in order to draft correspondence can be daunting. Whether you're writing a congratulatory letter, a special acknowledgment, or a major gift proposal, here are some guidelines for honing your ability as a master of written impersonation.

Personal style

First, get to know the person for whom you're writing. Watch him in group settings and one-on-one situations. If he's relaxed and informal, use a more casual writing style:

What terrific news! I'm thrilled to hear that you've agreed to chair the West Coast campaign. I can't think of a better person to have on our team.

If he's low-key and reserved, let the tone and word choice reflect that:

I was pleased to learn that you have agreed to serve as our West Coast campaign chair. Your knowledge and expertise will be valuable additions to our efforts.

Study samples of the person's own

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writing. Does the board chair love exclamation points? Then use them (but with some discrimination). Also pay attention to her signature words and phrases. Does she describe a major gift as "marvelous" or merely "generous"? Is she "absolutely delighted to welcome you to our university family" or more succinctly "happy to welcome you to campus"?

The longer and more closely you work with someone, the easier it becomes to let her speak through you. Every trait you notice will help you adopt the proper frame of mind when you sit down at the computer to "impersonate."

Relating to the recipient

Once you get a handle on the leader's personal style, think about his relationship to the recipient of the letter. Is your institution's president writing to a donor whose family he's known for 30 years or to someone he's never met? The length and circumstances of the relationship will dictate how personal the correspondence is and the slant it will take.

I once had to draft three acknowledgments to the same donor for a million-dollar pledge. One was from the vice president for advancement; the second, from the board chair; and the third, from the campaign chair. The donor was an elderly undergraduate alumna who had been a generous longtime supporter.

The vice president was still new to the institution, but had met the donor once. Her letter was professional and respectful:

I was delighted to meet you recently, and to hear your wonderful stories about Simmons College in the 1930s. The entire Simmons community appreciates your long history of supporting important initiatives at the institution. I would like to add my

thanks for your most generous gift to the Centennial Campaign.

The board chair was a warm and gracious undergraduate alumna whose personal sentiments highlighted a common bond. Her letter went as follows:

I share your feeling that Simmons is a very special place that deserves our support, and I am honored that you are celebrating your 60th reunion by making this magnificent gift. Your generosity in creating a new campus center for our alma mater will continue your impressive legacy of dedication and commitment. You are an inspiration and a role model to all of us.

The campaign chair was a reserved and businesslike graduate school alumna who did not know the donor, so her letter stressed the importance of the gift to the campaign effort:

A new campus center is one of our most important priorities, and I am so pleased that you have chosen to demonstrate your continued commitment to Simmons College in this way. I look forward to the opportunity to show you the center, and I thank you personally for helping us realize our campaign vision.

It took some time to create them, but I'll bet the donor didn't know that all three letters came from me.

And the winner is ...

Writing in other voices requires a sensitivity to the nuances of personal style, an understanding of the context in which you are writing, and the ability to set aside your own persona while you step into someone else's shoes. There may never be a CASE award for "Best Writing by a Development Officer in a Supporting Role"—but you'll know you've succeeded when your letter comes back from your campus president signed and unchanged, with a Post-it note that says, "Thanks. I never knew I was so eloquent!" ■