This chapter will focus on the development of a consistent, compelling message of need for your organization. While the content of your message will inevitably vary based on your institution’s goals and mission, there are still some basic guiding principles for how to construct an effective message.

Foremost, you need to capture the attention of the audience you are soliciting. This can be more difficult than you might imagine. Numerous organizations need money just as badly as you do. Always, be aware that there is significant competition even for the thirty seconds of undivided attention you need to deliver your message. Assuming that you get your message delivered, expect even more competition for those precious philanthropic dollars for which you are asking.

I will begin by providing some general principles for creating the message, for your written, e-mailed, and telephone solicitations. You’ll find tips on face-to-face solicitations in Chapter 9. To illustrate the principles, in this chapter, I’ll provide a telephone script that you will be able to adapt for the use of your own organization. You’ll also find useful examples of e-mail and written solicitations in the appendix.
Composing a Message that Moves People

Your message not only needs to inform people of your mission, but it must also inspire them to take out their wallet and give away their hard-earned money. The former is significantly easier than the latter and this is to the point where I often see appeals where the letter is information-heavy and inspiration-light. You need a balance.

A former colleague from Boston captured this sentiment in a moderately unsophisticated way:

*Think about it. Can you name one thing that Greenpeace has actually done in terms of helping to pass legislation for conservation or environmental justice? No, but they throw themselves in front of harpoons, so people give them money.*

Also, consider the words of another colleague as they discussed the seemingly incongruent difficulties in raising money for different clients:

*Save the Children has been such a great client to canvass for. You’re essentially saying to the people you talk to, “You don’t hate children, do you?” And it’s like magic. They give.*

The point here is that these non-profits have inspiration in abundance, which makes for a powerful message. My colleague, in speaking about Greenpeace, probably exaggerated a bit, but she was revealing a very important truth about philanthropy: it is an affair of the heart just as much as, if not more so, an affair of the head. We want an inspirational story just as much as we want to know the nitty-gritty details of how our money is going to be spent.

In a time where everyone is so busy, we often deal in images: the pelican covered in oil, the starving child in Somalia, a deforested region in the Amazon, a bald young boy in a hospital gown with tubes running in every direction. We try to summarize both our ethos and our mission in a picture.

This is okay—there is a place for those images: on your company’s website, in newsletters, on supporting material that you leave behind with donors on personal visits, and in selective mailings.

However, that is not to imply you should not spend some amount of time writing appeals. You need to paint that picture. You need to do it in as few words as possible and then you need to make the case for giving.