

Crafting the Fundraising Email

Narrative Strategies for
Inspiring Action

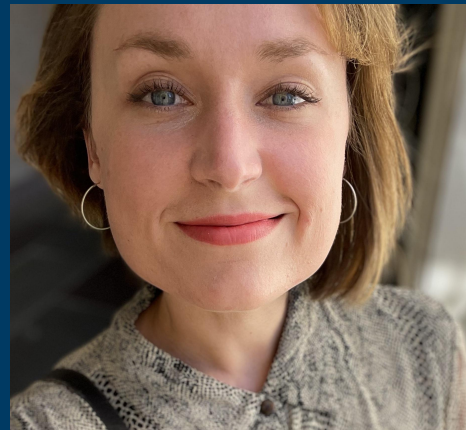


Iana Robitaille, PhD
Copywriter, DonorPerfect

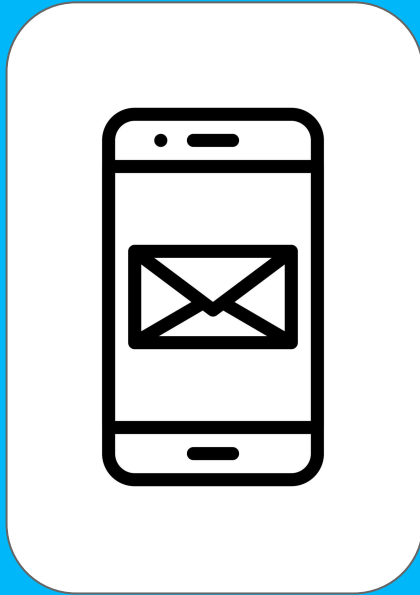
Hello!

I'm Iana Robitaille, PhD

I am a narrative strategist and copywriter with DonorPerfect. I love helping organizations find and tell their story!



Introductions



- Where are you joining from today?
- What role do you play at your organization?
- How often do you **send** fundraising emails—weekly? Monthly?
- How often do you **receive** fundraising emails?

What's missing?

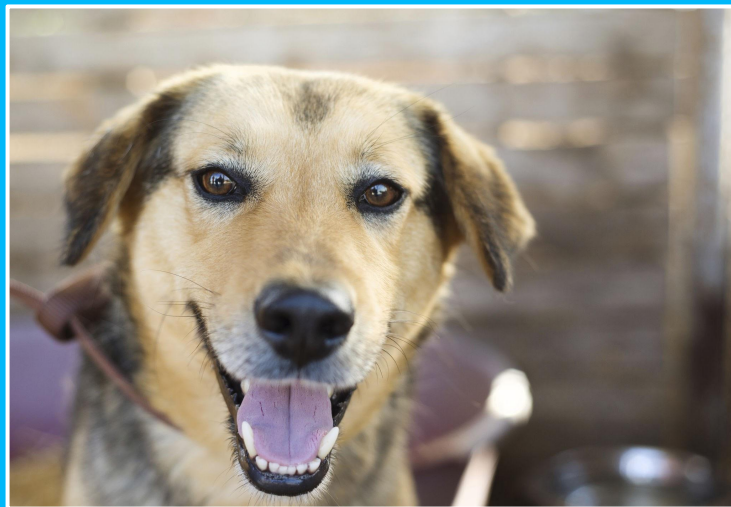
For more than 25 years, City Animal Rescue has provided shelter, medical care, and adoption services to animals in need throughout our region.



Information $\neq$ Story

Imagine . . .

For more than 25 years, City Animal Rescue has provided shelter, medical care, and adoption services to animals in need throughout our region.



Will you keep reading?

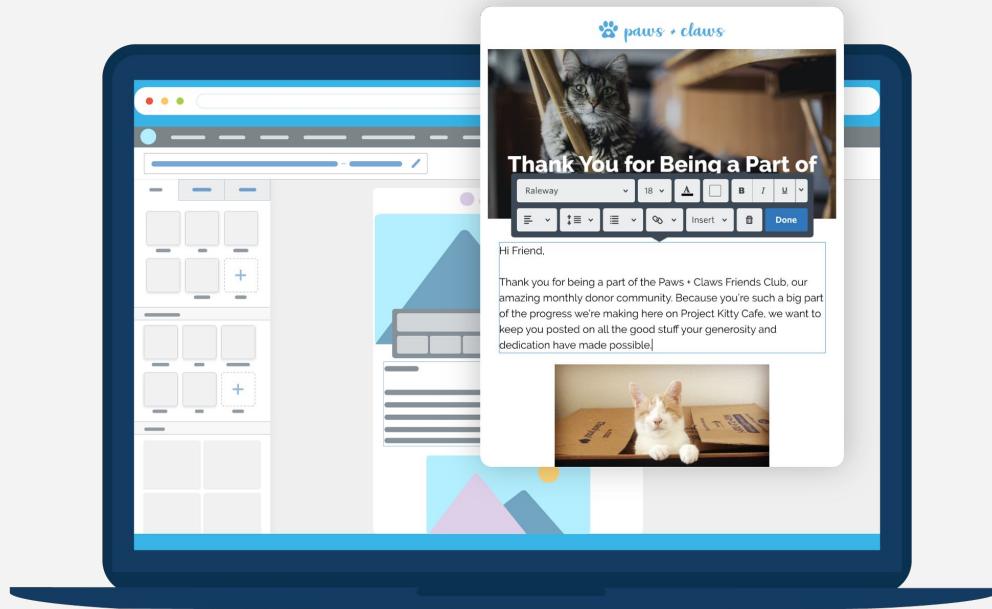
Why does this matter?

73% of nonprofits
regularly send email fundraising appeals

21% increase
in email revenue per subscriber, 2024-25

53% of emails
are opened on a mobile device

- Sustain attention
- Earn trust
- Inspire action





Understanding the Fundraising Email

What do we mean by **genre**?

In the narrative sense...

- A recognizable type of **story** with **shared narrative conventions**
- Creates **expectations** about what will happen and how the audience should feel about it



Mystery/thriller
Romance
Fantasy
Adventure

What do we mean by **genre**?

In the rhetorical sense...

- A recognizable type of **communication** with **shared conventions**
- Performs or prompts a specific **action**



A genre is defined by **what it looks like** and **what it's trying to do**.

Conventions:

- Subject line
- Sender
- Recipient
- Opening
- Body
- Evidence
- Call to action
- Postscript

Purpose:

~~To persuade the recipient to give~~

To move the recipient from attention
to identification to action

Story

What you're telling

- Beneficiary's experience
- Observation from a volunteer
- Program spotlight

Narrative

How you're telling it

- Character
- Perspective
- Tension
- Momentum
- Next step

A fundraising email is a **container for a story** and a **narrative form of its own**.

Component	Practical function	Narrative function
Subject line	Earn the open	Create curiosity or tension
Sender	Establish identity	Define the narrator
Recipient	Identify the audience	Give the reader a role
Opening	Begin the message	Enter the narrative world
Body	Explain the situation	Develop stakes and possibility
Evidence	Establish credibility	Make the story believable
CTA	Ask for action	Offer the next narrative decision
Closing / P.S.	Reinforce the ask	Leave the final narrative impression

Setting the Roles and Characters

Meet the characters



- **Sender** – narrator or speaker
- **Recipient** – reader, witness, decision-maker
- **Organization** – guide, facilitator, convener, supporting character
- **Beneficiary** – agent, expert, leader, central character

Who is the narrator?

From:

A

The Helping Hands Team

B

Maria at Helping Hands

C

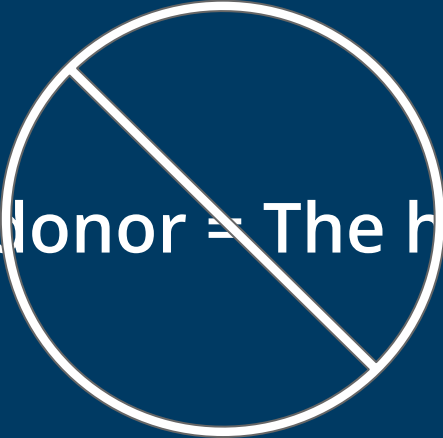
Dr. Elena Ruiz, Executive Director

D

James, Volunteer Coordinator

Which sender would you choose?

What tone would you expect from that email?

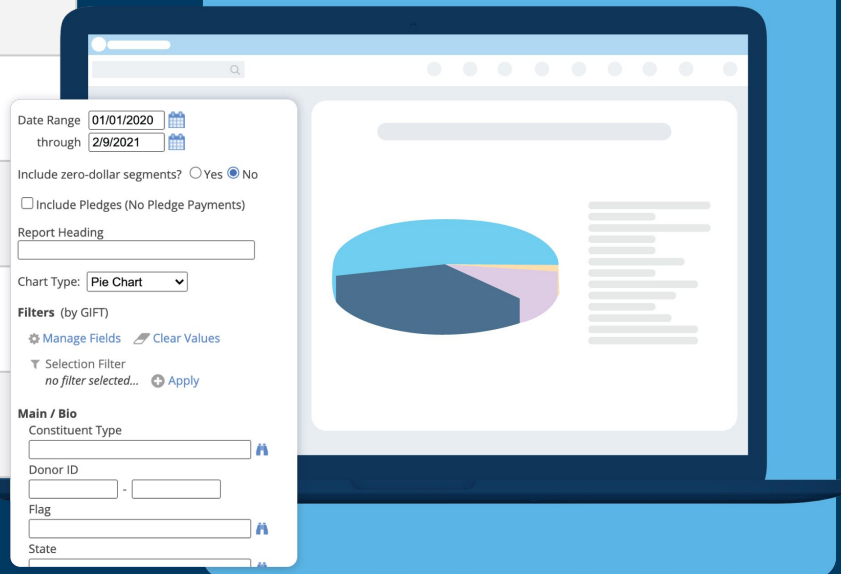


The donor = The hero

Give the donor **agency**,
not ownership.

Build character with donor segmentation

Segment	Narrative role
First-time donor	Newcomer / new participant
Monthly donor	Reliable sustainer
Major donor	Capacity builder
Volunteer	Eyewitness
Lapsed donor	Former participant invited back
Event attendee	Interested observer



Build character with donor segmentation

Generic

Your support helps keep our mobile library on the road.

First-time donor

Your first gift helped put new books into children's hands this spring.

Monthly donor

Because you give every month, the bookmobile can start each route with fuel, books, and a plan.

Volunteer

You've seen what happens when children step onto the bookmobile and choose a book of their own.

Lapsed donor

You've been a part of this route before—and today, there's a new opportunity to help it continue.

Fundraising CRM ↔ Email Marketing



Build audiences from **donor data**



Keep segments **up-to-date** as relationships change



Use **dynamic content** to tailor the story to each segment



Track engagement alongside giving history

A

Children like Elena depend on the generosity of supporters like you to give them a future.

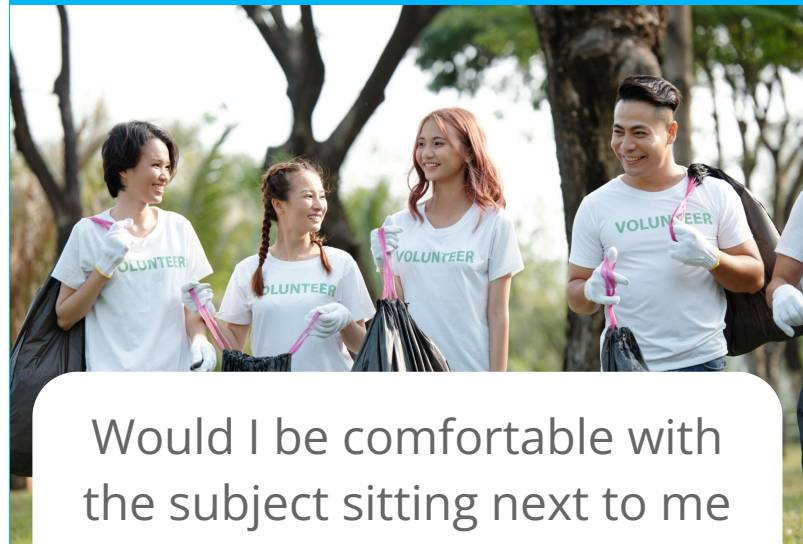
B

Elena has already decided what she wants to do next: finish school and become a nurse. Reliable transportation is one of the barriers still standing in her way.

A note on ethical storytelling

A compelling story is never worth someone's loss of dignity or control.

- Obtain informed and specific consent.
- Explain where and how the story may appear.
- Offer choices around names, images, and details.
- Avoid asking people to relive traumatic events solely for emotional impact.
- Confirm facts and quotations.
- Consider whether consent may be revisited.
- Do not define someone by the hardest moment of their life.
- Check for harmful stereotypes or power dynamics.



Would I be comfortable with the subject sitting next to me while I'm telling this story?

Creating the Narrative Movement

A familiar story . . .

Disruption

Want / Need

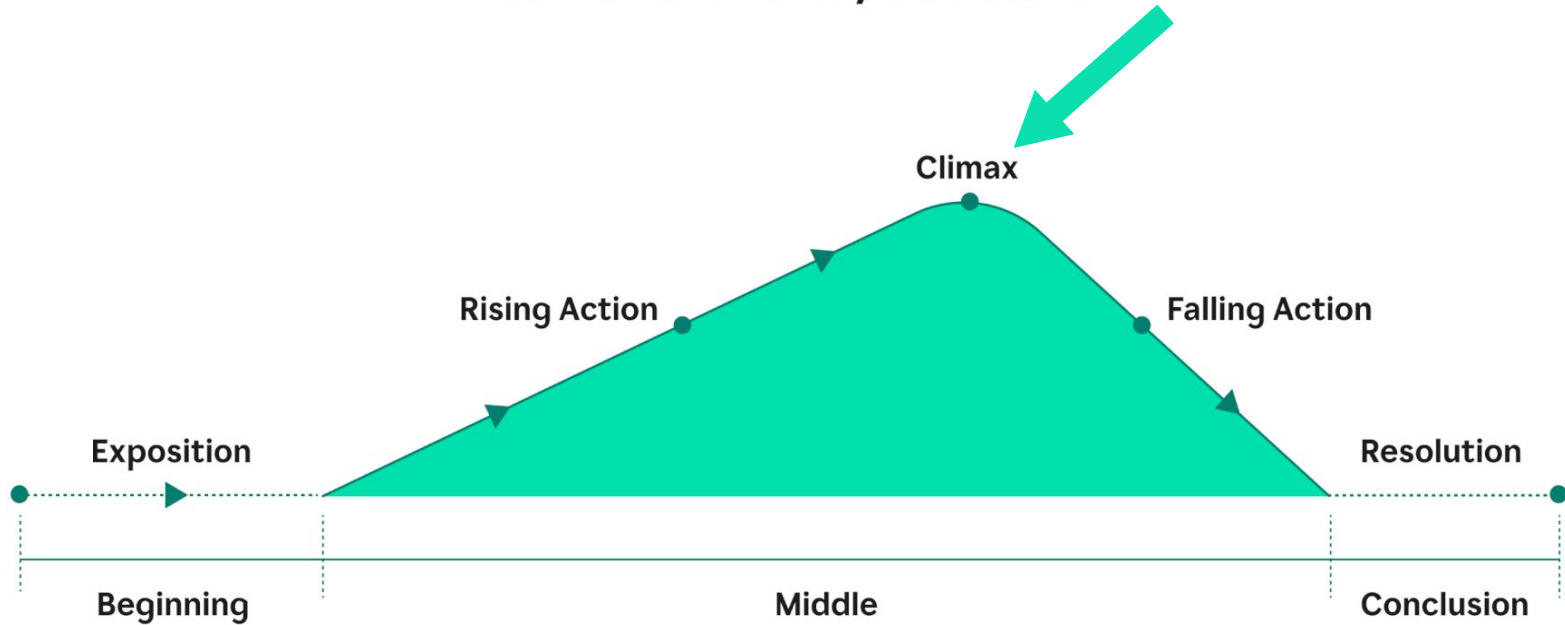
Barrier

Help / Possibility

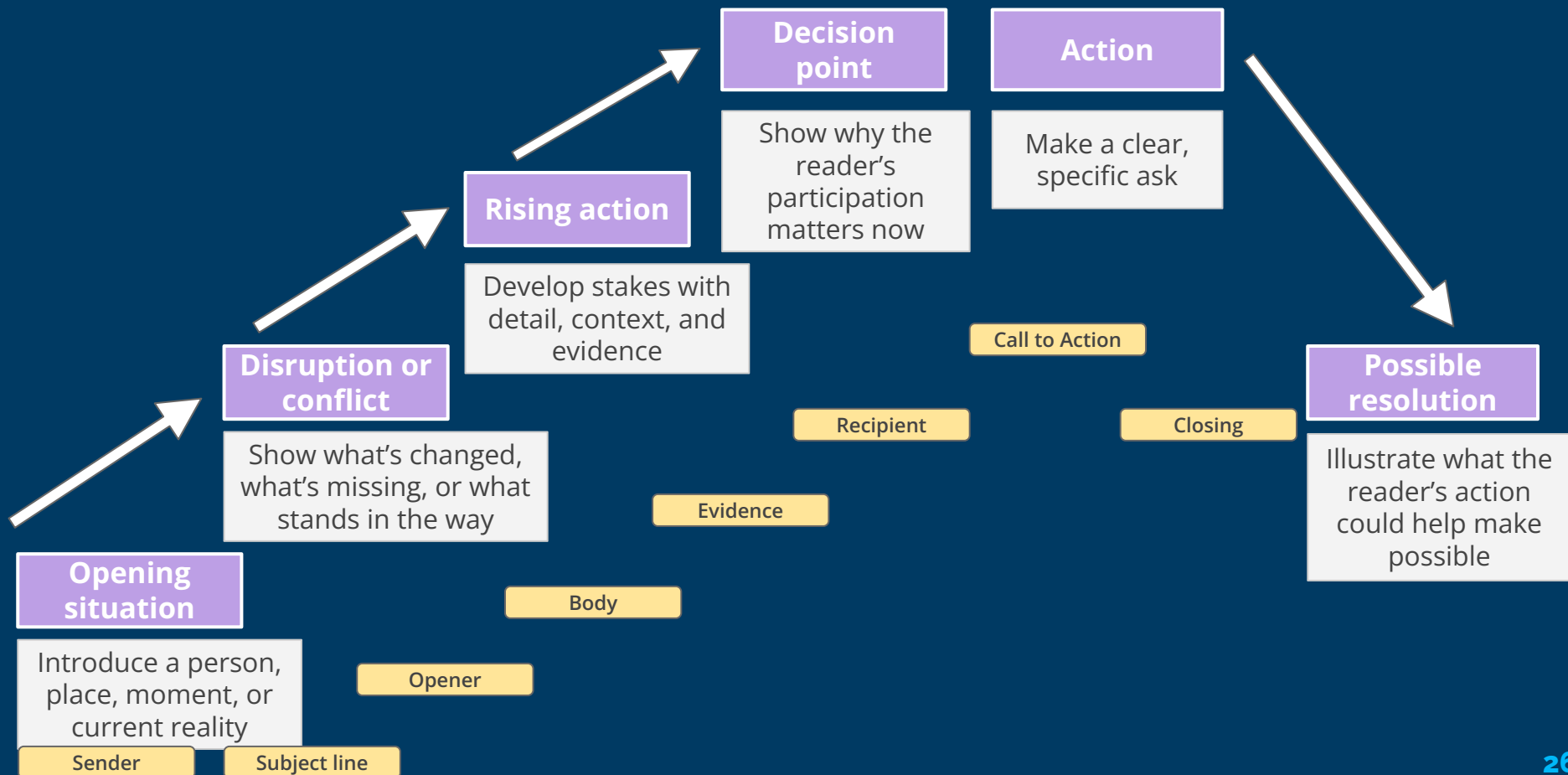
Decision / Action

World changes

Elements Of Story Structure



From story arc to fundraising email



Establish a narrative gap

Create a reason for the reader to enter the story.

- Introduce unresolved situation
- Name specific moment or detail
- Signal a change
- Create contrast between what *is* and what *could be*

Establish a narrative gap

Create a reason for the reader to enter the story.

Support our school library



The classroom is ready. The books are not.

Help us reach our campaign goal



We are 47 meals away

Begin “in medias res”

Start as close as possible to the moment when something changes.

For more than 25 years, City Animal Rescue has provided essential care to animals across the region.



When Luna arrived Monday morning, every kennel was full—and another carrier was waiting outside.

Build stakes with style

Expand on what you've established in the opening.

Scene

Sensory
Detail

Contrast

Repetition

Evidence

Build stakes with style

Expand on what you've established in the opening.

Scene

By 9:15, the last carton of milk had left the pantry fridge.

Sensory Detail

The pantry hallway still smells faintly of fresh paint, but the shelves sit in silence.

Contrast

Our volunteers are ready—but our inventory is not.

Repetition

One call became three. Three became seven pantry requests.

Evidence

We need to fill three pantry shelves to meet current need.

Make the data do the narrative work

Use numbers to change what the reader understands.

Scale the moment

This is not an isolated scene. Requests have increased **28%** since January.

Validate stakes

Across **five** rural counties, **2,400** children rely on the bookmobile.

Make action tangible

A **\$50** gift can provide a **week** of groceries for **one** family.

Build character with donor segmentation

Generic

Your support helps keep our shelter running.

First-time donor

Your first gift helped provide care during one of our busiest months.

Monthly donor

Your monthly support helps the team respond without waiting for the next emergency appeal.

Volunteer

You've seen firsthand how quickly the kennels can fill—and the level of care some animals desperately need.

Lapsed donor

You've been a part of this critical work before, and the need has only continued to grow.

Invite the reader to participate in the story

Turn need into a decision that can move the narrative forward.

1. Why this reader?
2. Why this action?
3. Why now?

Invite the reader to participate in the story

Turn need into a decision that can move the narrative forward.

~~Please donate today.~~

You can help the shelter prepare for the next animal who comes through the door.



A gift of \$50 can provide food and basic medical care for one new arrival.



Will you join us?

Contextualize the next step

Make the action clear and the meaning visible.

Help make room for the next arrival

GIVE \$50

Help open the final classroom

FUND A DESK

Keep the pantry stocked through Friday

PROVIDE A MEAL

Underline the narrative transformation

Reinforce the need, opportunity for change, and where the donor fits in.

- Return to the opening image
- Reinforce a real deadline
- Restate the donor's choice
- Echo the stakes

Underline the narrative transformation

Reinforce the need, opportunity for change, and where the donor fits in.

P.S. Another animal could arrive at any time. **Your gift of \$50 today** can help ensure the shelter is ready to take them in.

“You never want to give your reader a second thing to consider doing before they have fully committed to doing the first thing.”

– Steven Screen, [The Better Fundraising Co.](#)

Seeing Narrative in Action

From: City Animal Rescue

Subject: Please support our important work

Hi lana,

For more than 25 years, City Animal Rescue has provided shelter, medical care, and adoption services to animals in need throughout our region.

Last year, we helped more than 5,000 animals. This important work would not be possible without the generosity of supporters like you.

Unfortunately, the need for our services continues to grow. Our shelter is currently operating at 96% capacity, and the cost of food, medicine, supplies, and daily care has increased significantly.

Your donation can help us continue providing essential programs and services to animals in our community. Every gift makes a difference and helps ensure that we can be there for the animals who need us most.

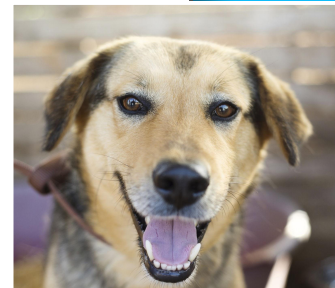
Please consider making a generous contribution today.

DONATE NOW

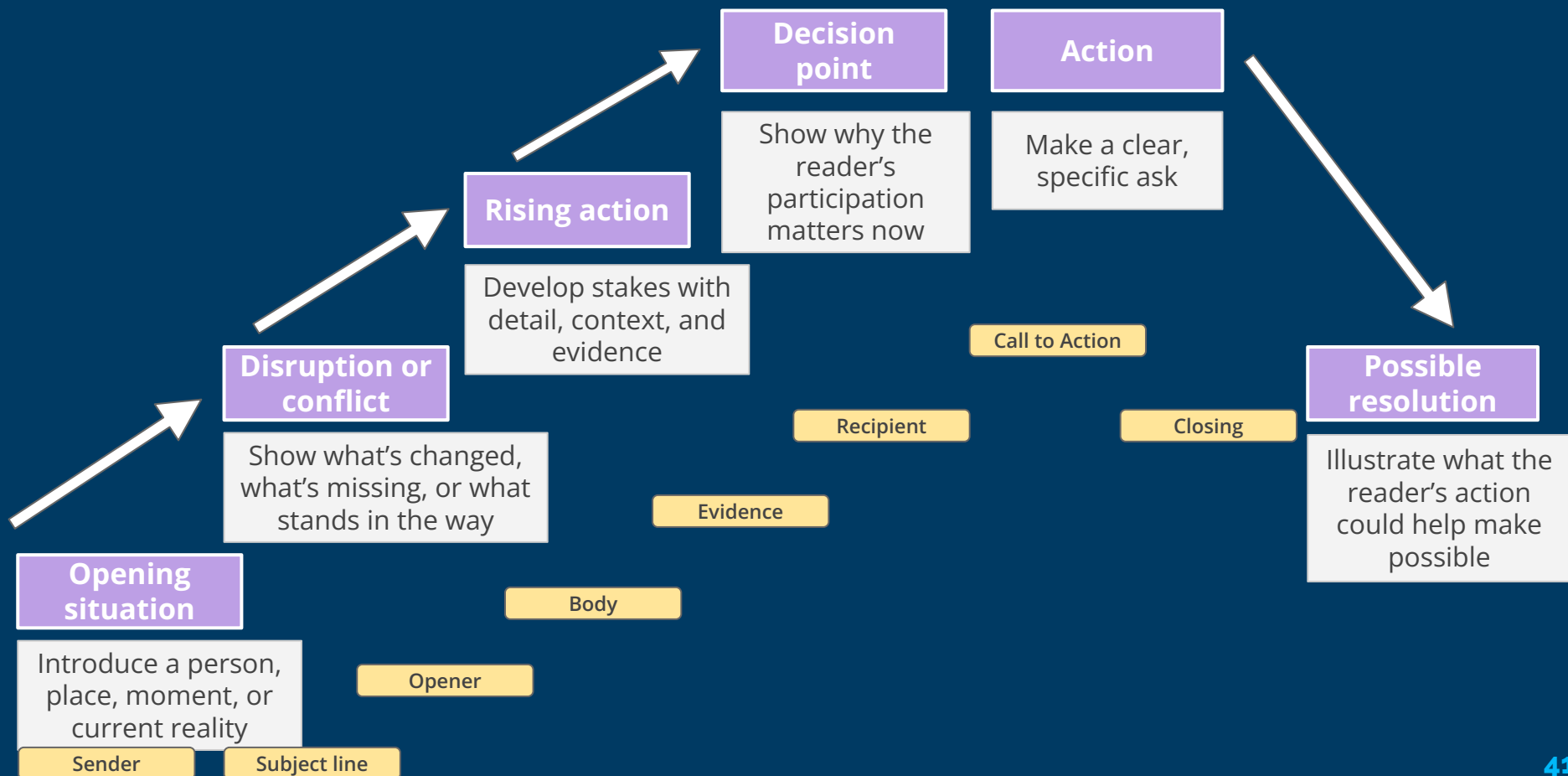
Thank you for supporting our mission.

Sincerely,
The City Animal Rescue Team

P.S. Your tax-deductible gift will help us continue caring for thousands of animals each year. Please donate today.



From story arc to fundraising email



From: Maria at City Animal Rescue

Subject: Another carrier was waiting outside

Hi Iana,

When Luna arrived Monday morning, every kennel was full—and another carrier was already waiting outside the door.

The team quickly prepared a temporary space, found clean bedding, and began Luna's medical assessment. But with the shelter operating at 96% capacity, every new arrival puts more pressure on the food, medicine, and space available for the animals already in our care.

Luna's arrival is not an isolated moment. Last year, City Animal Rescue provided shelter, veterinary care, and adoption services to more than 5,000 animals across our region.

As someone who cares about animals in our community, you can help the shelter stay ready for whoever arrives next.

A gift of \$50 can provide food and basic medical care for an animal entering the shelter this week.

Help make room for the next arrival

GIVE \$50

Thank you for helping ensure that every animal who comes through our doors is met with safety and care.

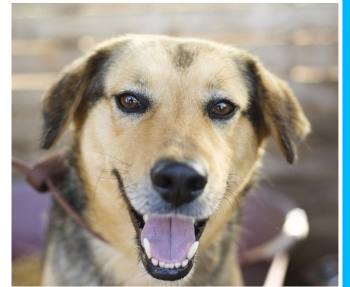
With gratitude,

Maria Smith

Shelter Director

City Animal Rescue

P.S. The next call could come at any time. Your gift of \$50 today can help make sure the team is ready to answer it.



When you write your next fundraising email...

The screenshot shows the DonorPerfect 'Email Templates' editor. The interface includes a top navigation bar with links like Home, Add New, Receipts, Mailings, Reports, Tasks, Utilities, and Apps. The main content area is titled 'Email Templates' and features a 'Back to Template List' link. The editor is divided into several sections: 'Your Email Template' with fields for 'Template Name' (containing 'Winter Appeal with PDF Receipt'), 'From' (containing 'mpeterson@gmail.com'), and 'Subject' (containing 'Thank you for your gift to XYZ - your receipt is attached'); a 'Thank-You Code Association' field; a 'PDF Attachment' section with a 'PDF attached: test.pdf' status and a 'Share template with all users' checkbox; and a rich text editor at the bottom with a preview image of a child and the text 'A NEW HOPE'. A 'Walk Me Through' button is visible in the bottom right corner of the editor.

- Begin where **something changes**
- Give every reader a **recognizable role**
- Use details and evidence to **build stakes**
- Make the ask the next **logical action**
- Point toward a **possible resolution**



My #1 tip

**Start your next email
one paragraph later.**

**A fundraising
email is an
unfinished story .**



The Nonprofit Email Marketing Checklist



- Writing and design tips
- Time-saving CRM tools and technology
- Best practices for effective segmentation
- Key metrics for optimizing performance and boosting engagement





Thanks!

Any questions?

✉ You can find me at irobotaille@software.com.