

# No Lame NOTES

BY Judy Anderson

Unfortunately, “lame notes” can actually backfire, and cause a reader to feel as if he or she is nothing more than a number in your database.



COURTNEY HEDGER

**H**ave you ever received a letter from a nonprofit, only to see a handwritten note that leaves you cold? Think about it. Someone made the effort to write you a note, yet it just didn’t connect with you. It felt automated, and you felt like it was insincere. That’s often because people have been trained to write notes but have not thought about the value behind those notes.

In short, what are we trying to do when we write notes?

Basically, we are trying to connect with the recipients of the letter.

We are trying to:

- Make them feel special and appreciated.
- Let them know that we value them as people—not as numbers in our database.
- Inspire them to give generously to an important cause (including our land trust).

- Ensure they feel part of our team and that they are making a real difference.
- Foster a sense of trust and camaraderie.
- Open the door for greater communication and engagement.

Notes that don’t stack up to this standard are generally notes that could have been written to everyone on the list (very generic). This includes phrases like:

- “*Hope you’ll join us.*”
- “*Thanks for your support.*”
- “*Please come!*”
- “*We need your help.*”
- “*It’s a great project; we need your support.*”

Even if they signed their name, it feels to you like they cranked out a zillion of these notes, to a zillion people. This doesn’t leave you feeling like your gift made a difference or even matters.

***But we can change that.***



HOWARD RIMINGTON

## List segmentation.

Your database should be able to easily create at least eight basic sorts:

**New donors:** Constituents who have joined within the last 12–18 months.

**Current donors:** Constituents who have supported you within the last 12–18 months.

**Lapsed donors:** Constituents who supported you one or more times in the past, but not within the last 12–18 months.

**Possible/prospective donors:** These are the people in your database that might share some overlapping values, and therefore might be interested in supporting the work of the land trust.

**Volunteers:** These are people who have given time and/or technical experience. (It's important to keep track of what they did, and when, in your donor database.)

**Major donors:** People who have given, on a cumulative level—both in aggregate or in a given year—at a level that makes them stand out.

**Long-term donors:** People who have given over an extended period of time. Often this is considered five years or more, and people are segmented in 5, 10, 15, and longer patterns for appreciation. Many groups are sorting in three-year increments given donor patterns.

**Conservation landowners:** People who have conserved their land, own conserved land, contributed tradelands (which are lands for resale) and/or purchased tradelands.

## Write notes that resonate to the relationship you have with that person.

The basics:

- If they are a new donor, make sure you thank them for that.
- If they are a long-term donor, thank them for that.

- If they have conserved their land, thank them for that.

**Next step:** Write notes that allow the person to know that you know them, personally. For example:

- If you sent out an Update Letter, you could sort by: “people we know well,” “people we know a little bit,” and “people we want to know better.”
- Start notes out with the person's first name, i.e. “Hi Judy” or “Judy.” Be specific if you can, noting the difference the person has made, e.g. “Judy, Thanks again for helping us with the kiosk design. It's made a huge impact.”
- Write the note at the top of the letter, rather than the bottom. (Research shows that people look at the top of the letter first.) And make sure you fold the letter such that when they take it out, they see the note at the top.

**Engaging notes:** If you know them, write notes like:

- “Judy, Great to see you and Megan over the holidays. Looking forward to chatting with you about where you plan on hiking this summer—give a call when you have a chance.”
- “Hi Judy, great to see you last week. Let's brainstorm about the upcoming fundraiser. I think your ideas will add a lot of value to the event. We are looking forward to learning from your expertise.”

- *“Judy, thanks for all you did to make the XX event possible. You’re terrific, and an important part of the effort.”*
- *“Judy, thanks for all your volunteer work on the XX Trail. This is another great project, with your help. Looking forward to hearing what your kids think when they visit this summer.”*
- *“Judy, when you protected your land—you inspired so many others. Thank you for being a leader in our community. Please call if you’d like to talk about other local conservation projects.”*

If you don’t know them well, then try something like this:

- *“Judy, I’d love to chat with you about what we are doing on the XX preserve to see if you have any ideas. Give me a call when you can.”*
- *“Judy, I’d be interested in your thoughts related to the Town’s work on the XX trail. Call if you can.”*
- *“Judy, I’d love to brainstorm with you about how we can develop additional youth programs in XX town. Give us a call or email anytime.”*

These are called, “engagement” notes where you are offering to chat, connect, brainstorm, and otherwise engage with people. It’s showing folks that you care about them as people, rather than as a source of money or, as donors have called it, an ATM machine.

## Who writes the notes on thank you letters?

Anyone can write the notes, but it’s always better if a person who knows the person signs the note. However, keeping the system simple and streamlined is very important.

Board members can be terrific note writers when they have a clear understanding of the letter recipient’s relationship to the organization and the strategy to respond to that.

Staff, other than the E.D., can also write the notes either as themselves or on behalf of the E.D. It can be very effective to have the letter signer (the E.D.) be different than the than note signer (thus getting two people expressing appreciation).

Sometimes it’s very effective to have a regular team writing notes, and to plan in advance, so that it’s a fun and energizing experience. It’s helpful to have list of agreed-upon notes (engagement-oriented), so that if people don’t know the recipient of the letter they have some scripts from which to work.

Writing thoughtful notes on cards, letters, thank yous, and other forms of outreach can be very effective in conveying how much the organization cares about the individual and wishes to engage with them.



NORWOOD THEMES

Unfortunately, “lame notes” can actually backfire, and cause a reader to feel as if he or she is nothing more than a number in your database.

Therefore, it’s worth it to think carefully about what kinds of messages will resonate, and to find the time (and the team) to make writing these notes possible. It’s also very helpful to sort your data as you enter it—and to keep it current—so as to insure the proper match for the note and the letter.

Writing notes is a skill, rather than a chore, and it’s a skill where board, staff, and key volunteers can really add value.