

# Taglines that Tell Create a Memorable Message for Your Nonprofit

## INTRODUCTION

A pitch-perfect tagline can be the foundation for all messages you create about your organization or program.

A tagline is a punchy phrase consistently linked with your organization. It enhances your name by clarifying your work and making it relevant to your audience. It's a powerful way to signify the brand promise your organization makes to the public.

## Requirements of Great Taglines

### Be memorable.

A tagline that's easy to remember will help people connect with your mission. Make it bold and brief; it should pack an emotional punch.

### Engage the reader.

Make it clear that the reader is part of the equation. Avoid appearing as if you're already solving the problem; instead, emphasize how much the reader means to your ability to solve it.

### Communicate a key benefit.

Don't write a tagline that's all about you. Yes, it should help the reader understand your mission, but make sure it conveys a benefit to your reader—something meaningful from their point of view.

### Capture the personality of the organization.

Your organization has a personality. If it's a good one, people will want to associate with you. Is your organization serious or relaxed? Casual or formal? Make sure the tagline reflects the best of your organization's personality.

### Distinguish your organization from others.

What do you do better than other organizations? Are you the most effective? What makes you unique? Highlight this in your tagline. Remember, too, that you're trying to differentiate yourself not just from similar organizations, but from all organizations. You want to be the reader's charity of choice.

### Reinforce your broader goals.

Your organization is probably working from a strategic plan, even if it isn't written down. Be sure your tagline reflects your larger goals. Avoid being so clever or creative that the tagline contradicts what you're really trying to accomplish.

## What to Do



### **Do** Use or Imply the “Word” You

Other than “free,” there’s no better word than “you” to get someone’s attention. Direct address (“you” or an implied “you”) is a vivid call to action. Roping in the audience can be very effective.



### **Do** Use Active Verbs

Active verbs involve the reader and reflect work in progress, rather than suggesting the mission has already been achieved.



Protect the rights of Californians in need

### **Do** Reference the Problem Your Organization Exists to Solve

Don’t assume your audience understands the problem you’re working to address. Tell them the problem or get them thinking about a problem they might not have considered. Be explicit and visual.



### **Do** Keep it Simple

Taglines that are simple are usually easier to remember. Focus on one idea and keep it short.

*“All of our staff—and our entire board—now understand how they need to represent the wonderful work that we do. We’ve always known who we are, and know we know how to talk about it.”*

**Julia Wilson**  
Chief Executive Officer  
OneJustice

## What Not to Do

### Don't Leave the Reader Asking "So What?"

Providing Help. Creating Hope.  
*(Catholic Charities USA)*

Engage the reader. Make your tagline active. Make your tagline urgent. Don't just flatly state what you do, and don't leave the reader out of the story.

### Don't Be Vague

Building a Better New York  
*(Lawyers Alliance for New York and New York State Builders Association)*

A vague tagline is meaningless to the reader. If your tagline could just as easily be used by another organization, write a new one.

### Don't Just Summarize Your Mission

Committed to ending the pandemic and human suffering caused by HIV  
*(Former tagline of San Francisco AIDS Foundation)*

Your mission statement has a place, but it's not in your tagline. Mission statements are usually quite factual, making them boring, long, and un-enticing.

### Don't Just Rephrase Your Name

Working Together to Keep Coral Reefs Alive  
*(Coral Reef Alliance®)*

Your tagline is precious real estate. Use it to enhance your name, not repeat the obvious. Even a short tagline should flesh out your goals.

### Don't Risk a Misunderstanding

Pass on the gift  
*(Heifer® International)*

Study your tagline objectively. Could one or more words be taken the wrong way? You know what you mean, but the audience may not.

### Don't Use Verbs with "-ing"

Protecting Ancient Redwoods Since 1918.  
*(Save the Redwoods)*

An "-ing" tagline leaves the reader out of the equation. It implies you are already accomplishing the task and don't need support.

### Don't Change Your Tagline More Than Once a Decade

Help Can't Wait  
We'll be there.

Celebrating 125 years of service  
*(All from American Red Cross)*

Avoid the temptation to change your tagline. Remember, only YOU will tire of it; your audience, who only hears from you occasionally, never will. Build equity in your tagline. It will pay dividends in the form of familiarity and a closer relationship between you and your audiences. (There's **one** exception to this rule. If a major change to strategy or programs invalidates your current tagline, change it to reflect the new direction.)

### Don't Write by Committee

Negotiating about language for your tagline (or mission statement or anything else) with a big group is a deadly mistake. Good ideas get watered down and strong communication gets lost. Be clear about your expectation and then assign the task of creating the new tagline to one or two people. Have them present their top three best ideas to the whole group for a vote—not an edit, a vote—on the final tagline.

# Approaches that Work



## Answer The Question “Why?”

Answering the question “Why?” helps you articulate the benefit your organization provides. It identifies the problem your organization exists to solve, engages the reader, references your organization’s broader goals, reinforces your organization’s leadership position on an issue, and creates a compelling statement that can appeal to multiple stakeholders.



Deliver on the promise of a quality education

## Command Action

There’s nothing worse than learning about a problem and being left with the question, “But what could I possibly do to help?” Let the reader know the problem and their role in the solution through one simple message.



## Single Words

A single word—or two or three single words—can be a great way to get attention and quickly create an image in the reader’s mind. This is a good tagline because it’s short, memorable, aspirational, clear (because it obviously relates to the college)—and it involves the reader.



## Tagline Tied to the Logo Icon

If you can redesign your logo at the time you write your tagline, let a picture paint a thousand words.



*Everyone should have a chance at college.*

## Aspirational Statements

Aspirational statements (just like answers to the unspoken “Why?”) help the reader envision how the world could be if they helped you solve the problem. It also establishes your leadership position on the issue.

# Tricks of the Trade

## The Un-cliché

American Heart Association took “Live and Learn” and changed it to “Learn and Live.” A successful twist on a cliché.

## Alliteration

Alliteration uses words that have the same consonant sound. That’s what made “Put a Tiger in your Tank” (the old Esso gasoline slogan) so memorable.

## Rhyme

Our brains love rhymes, which is why the old Timex slogan, “Takes a licking and keeps on ticking,” remains with us forever.

## Rhythm

Bounty paper towels’ “the quicker picker-upper” is fun to say. Not only does it rhyme, it has a great rhythm.

## Repetition

“The mission with a heart. In the heart of the city.” Central Union Mission, Washington, D.C. The repetition of the word “heart” helps it stick in our brains.

## Humor

“We answer to a higher authority.” Hebrew National kosher hot dogs makes us smile—and thus remember their tagline.

## Wordplay

A.C.T.’s “In good company” plays on the double meaning of having a good audience and also being a theater driven by a core company of actors.

## Imagery

“A mind is a terrible thing to waste.”  
“From Harm to Home.”

The taglines of the United Negro College Fund and the International Rescue Committee are memorable because of the images they evoke.

# The Writing Process

## Know your audience.

Picture a real person. What would motivate them to act?

## Review your organization’s goals.

Write with your highest-level goals in mind. A good tagline reinforces them and gets the public to help you reach them.

## Establish your voice.

Like you, your organization has a personality. Determine how you want to come across. Friendly? Confident? Carefree? A tagline should reflect that personality.

## Start writing.

Just get started. It’s easier once you have pen to paper or fingers to keyboard. Start writing now.

## Keep writing.

So you have a few good ideas. Great. But don’t stop, because you’re just getting warmed up. You need 5 to 10 great taglines to choose from. Keep writing.

## Test your taglines.

The best testers of your potential new taglines are people in your target audience. Ask them how well the tagline represents your organization.

## Listen.

Be willing to hear that the tagline you loved didn’t work, and try to understand why. Hear the feedback, and consider creating a better tagline.

## Refine.

Wordsmithing the tagline is usually not effective. Listen to the feedback and then start fresh.

With these helpful hints in mind, you’re ready to give it a shot on your own. Good luck, and happy writing!

## Learn More

Mission Minded is a branding firm that works exclusively with nonprofits, independent schools, and foundations. We believe you only reach your highest potential if people understand the importance of your work—not just what you do, but why it matters.

Every day we partner with clients like San Francisco Opera, Yale Center for Emotional Intelligence, and the Denver Art Museum to help them determine the brand—or reputation—for which they want to be known. Then we help them bring that brand to life through key messages, logo design, web design, and more.

As a result, our clients successfully raise more money and attract the support they need to achieve their goals. To find out how Mission Minded can help your organization, call us today at 415.990.9360.