

Adoption Ads That Really Work

Questions and Answers with Elizabeth Doyle

Transcript Excerpts from a No More Homeless Pets Online Forum

Turning a bio around to accentuate the positive

Question from Deb: This is definitely one of our toughest cases. We've had Bailey for going on three years now. She fosters with me six months and another girl six months in an effort to keep her out of our shelter. Aside from her other issues, she will beat on other cats if they get "in her face." She REALLY can be a nice cat, BUT ... it takes a long time to win her trust and she can be very violent until that happens. She cannot be picked up, pilled, etc., without a fight. This bio, from our website, was written by her other foster mom. It really does say it all, but could you make it better?



Reduced adoption fee: Bailey is a sweet kitty who needs a LOT of patience. She reacts violently when she is scared by lashing out, growling, hissing and sometimes even swatting. Bailey MUST be left alone when she gives warning signals. She has developed close loving relations with both of her foster mothers after several months of patient care. Bailey needs a patient owner who does not have children, who will give her the time and space she needs to feel secure. Bailey's new owner will need to invest several months of time and energy before seeing any response. Once you reach that point, Bailey is a true love. She sits on her foster mom's lap and "kneads." She really is a nice kitty, you just HAVE to be patient!!!

Response from Elizabeth Doyle: Thank you so much for writing! Let's see what we can do for Bailey. For starters, I have to tell you – I don't think you're going to get a lot of calls about Bailey. Not unless we give this adoption blurb a facelift and fast!

Here's the problem. Look at this blurb and tell me five bad things about Bailey. That's easy, right? Her bad qualities are everywhere: violent, growling, hissing, swatting, needs LOTS of patience. I could probably keep going!

Now tell me five of the nicest things about Bailey. Whew! Not so easy. I *really* have to search. If I keep reading, I get to "close loving relations with her foster mothers." That sounds good, but then it's qualified with "after several months." So if I keep looking for good qualities, wade past "no children," "needs time and space," "invest several months," I eventually get down to "Once you reach that point, Bailey is a true love." Hmm. So why do we have all the bad stuff at the top, emphasized with capital letters, while all the good stuff is hard to find and at the bottom? Shouldn't we go the other way around?

Now, the first thing we have to do is sit down and really think about Bailey... who she is as a person (er ... cat). Without putting in any qualifiers, what are three nice things we can say about her? Just straightforward compliments with no "buts."

I'm going to try that, using this blurb for my information. One nice thing I would like to say about Bailey, reading this, is that she is a comedy figure of a cat! She isn't one of those wimpy cats with no personality. She's the kind of cat my ornery grandmother might like to have so that she

can sic Bailey on guests who stay too long and then giggle about how they were chased away by a little old lady and her cat.

I would also like to say that Bailey is somebody who loves *you*. Not everybody! Just *you*. And it feels so special to be loved by somebody who's fussy. I mean, who wants a guy to flirt with you when you know he flirts with *everybody*? Isn't it more special when you know you're the only one? I like that about Bailey. She's *my special friend*. She doesn't like just everybody.

Another thing I like about Bailey is that I really like having my own personal space, too. I hate it when people are in my face when I'm trying to write or read or daydream. Bailey sounds like a cat who can respect that. She's the same way! Maybe we would understand each other, this old girl and me.

Can you see how we're now tapping into reasons that somebody might actually want her? Turning her negatives into interesting personality traits – that might be right for you.

Also, I suspect there are more things we could have said if we'd been focusing more on the positives when we wrote the original draft. For example, is she pretty? That would be a nice thing to say. If not, then does her fur have a nice texture when you touch it? Like lamb's wool or like feathers? More good things about Bailey!

But using what we've got, here's a new blurb for Bailey:

Now, here's a comedy figure of a cat! The character who takes this one – we'll even give you a discount on your adoption fee! Don't get us wrong; she's great. But Bailey is ... Bailey. And we will be having a cake the day somebody takes this funny old lady home.

Bailey loves just one person – the person who takes her home and finds, over time, that they are soul mates. To that person, Bailey will be the most devoted friend ever. She will sit in your lap and knead you. She will look in your eyes and know what you're thinking, because she'll be thinking it, too. There's something very special about this cat, to the person who becomes her own.

She's going to come to love one individual. But everyone else? Oh, it's safe to say that she pretty much hates them! It's true; she's a fluffy terror. She swats, growls, hisses – you name it. Probably best not to have children within say ... oh ... 25 miles of her. What a little monster she is! And yet, she will be your cat, once she comes to know you as a soul mate.

We know it's a long shot, but we really have to ask ... is there a character out there who wants Bailey? Or at least to learn more?

This blurb will not appeal to everyone. But then again, we don't want everyone to adopt Bailey. The person who will find this appealing is someone with a sense of humor, someone who wants to be called a character and wants a character for a cat. And that's probably a very good fit for an adopter for Bailey.

Good luck! And thank you for giving us such a great cat for a demonstration challenge.

Comment from Louise: Our goal when writing about an animal is to always accentuate the positive and downplay the negative. That doesn't mean not to disclose the animal's faults (which of us is perfect anyway?), but to not spotlight those problem areas.

Also, when writing about an animal, I always try to find something to grab someone's attention and make them think they can't live without this animal, and then let them know about the areas

that need attention. Sometimes we disclose too much in a bio. Keep it short and sweet, and then when you grab them and they are interested in the animal, give more details.

Comment from Varda: I now have a name and a face to the reason why I love Best Friends so much: Elizabeth Doyle. After being attacked by stories from other animal organizations (e.g., "... and then Fluffy had an eyeball gouged out before being set on fire"), after a truly horrific day at work, after a miserable rush hour, I turn to Best Friends to turn around my day. You re-affirm my faith in goodness. Thanks so much for being a haven in a world of injustice!

Every animal has a selling point

Question from Donna: I manage a feral cat colony. One of my females gave birth to four kittens last year before she was trapped. I've socialized them and need to find homes (or a home) for the last two. My landlord won't let me keep the cats and I'm afraid of losing my apartment.

I have posted on www.petfinder.com and distributed posters to local veterinarians' offices. The phone calls I get are for "cuddly" kittens. Most of the callers want a "friendly" cat. They are both female tabbies. Neither one likes to be picked up much and they are definitely going to have to go to a home where patience exists. No small children or dogs either. As you can see, I'm in the negative and that may be why I'm not adopting them out.

They love each other and other "nice" cats. They're both very pretty and will sleep on the bed with us. They're negative for feline leukemia (FeLV) and FIV. They're approximately 8 months old. They've been taken off www.petfinder.com at this point until I come up with a better ad. What advice can you give me?

Response from Elizabeth Doyle: Have you considered posting a flyer right near your landlord's house? One with an adorable picture that reads, "Help! These precious cats have been evicted from their home. The landlord is a wonderful, beautiful man, but he says these lonely little orphans have to go. Please – if you're reading this – save their furry little lives and call ... before it's too late!"

You might put a second copy someplace where his wife is sure to see it. Just kidding! Don't do that. Definitely don't. I just couldn't resist. It's out of my system now, I promise. So ...

First things first. It's very unlikely anyone is going to call you and ask specifically for a cat who can't be picked up and held. So, we can't use that as the primary selling point. Yet, that's the thing you're describing which stands out most about them. If there's something else about him/her that someone might actively be seeking, we have to think of what it is. Does nothing come to mind? Not a purebred this or that? Not little tiny baby kittens? Not more astoundingly gorgeous than any cat we could ever conjure in our imaginations? Never saved any babies from burning buildings? OK, then.

There is one selling point beyond all others buried in your message. Can you guess what that is? Need. That's their strongest argument for a home right now ... need!

There is a segment of the adopting population out there that specifically wants the animal in the most need. Your best bet may be to plead their case as being the perfect cat for such a person. That means talk about the eviction. Argue that these cats "need you the most."

Here's an example:

Help! We're just babies, and we've been evicted! We've got nobody and nowhere to go. Please help. We know we're not the prettiest cats you've ever seen before, and we know we're not little baby kittens. But we're only 8 months old! And we're scared. All we have is each other and our excellent health. And the hope that somebody might read this and call!

We're tabbies, disease-tested, spayed, a little skittish, scared of dogs and kids. But we love cats and grown-ups, and we promise to love you, too, once we get over our shyness! Please help us find someplace to call home. Mom asks only a tiny adoption fee, and to be able to meet you first for our safety. She hopes so much someone will call.

(Notice that I slip in the part about being skittish and wanting no dogs or kids into the second paragraph ... after we've already got their attention.)

This plea may sound desperate. But then again, you're about to lose your apartment!

What you must never do, no matter how desperate, of course, is threaten. (And I know you wouldn't.) But just as a general reminder to the world: Never say, "If somebody doesn't come, such-and-such terrible, specific, gory thing will happen to these animals." That makes people feel like you're blackmailing them.

But you can say the situation is desperate: "They've been evicted, and they've got nowhere else to go." That's just telling folks the truth about the predicament. We can do that without going into gory specifics of exactly what might happen to these gals if nobody adopts them.

So, rewrite this any way you like. But for these particular cats, the strongest selling point you have is this: "Are you looking for a cat who really, really needs you? Here we are!"

Now, as for being "in the negative," as you say – don't worry about that. Sometimes a little sadness on behalf of an animal is exactly what we need to effectively bring them some help.

Comment from Erin: It's nice to remember that adopters don't always think like we do. For example, although I am not in the market for any more cats, I would love a cat that is independent and doesn't want to be picked up. I already have two cats who want constant affection and time. An independent cat personality may very well appeal to someone who would love to have a pet (or another pet), but doesn't necessarily want the cuddling.

I just had a foster dog who drove me nuts trying to get adopted. Then I remembered Elizabeth's points in this article in the Best Friends resource library:

<http://www.bestfriends.com/nomorehomelesspets/pdf/adoptionblurbs.pdf>

I said to myself that the very thing that was making me insane could really be a selling point. Just because I am not crazy about "Velcro" dogs doesn't mean that there aren't people out there who are. She didn't get a lot of hits, but the point is that of the few hits she did get, we got a relatively large ratio of inquiries. I'd rather have a dog get 10 hits with one good fit than 1,000 hits with poor quality inquiries. That Lab's new family absolutely adores her.

Best Friends' Sherry Woodard says that there is someone for every pet. That has also helped me when I am dealing with an animal I find difficult to market. Hats off to Elizabeth's fantastic marketing style!

Don't be blue ... find that black pet a home instead

Question from Rachelle: What are some good ways to describe the typical black animal who is very similar to the hundreds of others in shelters across the country? Any tips would be greatly appreciated!

Response from Elizabeth Doyle: Thanks to all of you for your questions! I want to mention how flattered I am by the number of folks who have written in.

OK – boring-looking dogs and cats. To start with, the general rule is not to dwell on the least interesting features of an animal. For example, if a dog has unusually silly ears, then make a lot of fun comments about that! But if he has the most ordinary ears you've ever seen, then why are you talking about it?

Remember, too, that when people are looking at a photo, they will see what you tell them to see, as long as what you point out is real. If I stick up a photo of a black shepherd mix and write, "Jojo is a black dog with brown eyes," you'll look at the picture and say, "Yeah, that's true" and move on. But if I stick up his photo and say, "What is going on with those crazy ears! He's like a bunny rabbit! Hey, Jojo, can you hear what they're talking about all the way in China? I bet you can hear everything with those satellite dishes on your head, you silly-looking cutie pie." You'll say, "Oh my gosh, that's so funny, she's right! And what a great photo!"

This is a very important skill when you've got a photo of an "ordinary looking" animal. Point out something really cute that you notice about the picture. Then other people's eyes will actually see the photo a whole new way.

So make sure that you're noticing something unique about his looks, so that other people will see more than just a color as well. But when you get to the part about color, take a good look at him and see whether any of these apply:

"The color of that crushed velvet coat your mom used to wear to dinner parties"

"The color of the midnight sky, with eyes like golden stars"

"The color of a knight in dark armor"

Or, if you can get away with it, remember what folks used to tell Anne of Green Gables when she was moaning dramatically over her carrot-red hair. "It's auburn in the sunlight, dear, really quite auburn."

A side note: Some folks recommend showcasing black animals on red velvet during adoption events. And adorning black adoptables with bling – like sparkling rhinestone collars. Remember, black is actually a gorgeous color! They say "beauty is in the eye of the beholder," but if you've ever noticed you're more beautiful in one country than you are in another, then you know that beauty is actually determined by how the beholder has been instructed to see it! So do everything you can, with words or with red velvet, to instruct people's eyes to see the beauty that's already there in the color black.

Comment from Mickey: We have found that placing a brightly colored bandana around dogs' necks brings out their features. Black dogs' faces seem to blend into their bodies if they are not made distinguishable. When you place something around their necks, it is amazing how their eyes and facial features come to life.

No limp attempts at home finding

Question from Gayle: Little Girl is a dog whom we have just about decided will need to be here forever. She spent five years tied to a garage until someone took her to a pound where she was taken into the local prison program. She was rescued out of the prison program where she was being abused. At the home of the humane officer, she snapped at the 24-year-old son when he physically pushed her off a bed. The humane officer was going to take her to the pound to be killed as a result of that. That is when we were contacted and took her.

Strangely, after everything she has experienced, she still wants to be with people and is very gratefully affectionate. After the initial period of fearfulness here, she became aggressive with other dogs, even smaller and elderly ones. (It seems almost a jealousy reaction to fear of being "ousted.") She seems to simply ignore cats, although if ever considered for adoption I think being an only pet in the household would be wisest. She panics on a leash and is desperate to get back inside.

She so deserves a quiet, peaceful sense of home where she can have gentleness and affection filling her life. We are willing to have her remain here, but think she would be happier with a home of her own. Little Girl is a smallish tricolor smooth-coated collie mix.

Response from Elizabeth Doyle: My first suggestion, and this is an important one for lots of folks, is don't say in the adoption blurb, "We're willing to have her remain here, but she'd be happier in a home of her own." We can't halfway ask for a home. Either we *really* want one and we mean it, or we're not sure we do ... in which case, our limp attempts to reach out are going to be ineffective.

Here are some of the types of sentences I have seen folks use that would make me, as an adopter, not want to reply:

"Dolores can go only to a very prepared home – otherwise, she's happy to stay here."

"This is really Davey's home, but if somebody really desperately wanted him, we would consider an outstanding adoption candidate."

People who want to adopt an animal want to save an animal. They don't want to steal a dog away from someone who sounds like she wants to keep her.

It doesn't mean adopters won't be screened to make sure they have a good home and are prepared to adopt. It just means that when we go "fishing" for adopters, we have to throw the whole line in. If we don't like what comes up, we can throw it back. But don't just barely dip the bait into the surface of the water, because then you don't catch anything, either good or bad.

So whatever we do, we don't want to mention that we'd be happy for her to stay right here! Next, what you've really got going here in your favor is a terrific background story. So let's use that for our first sentence:

After five years of being tied up in a garage, the first time Little Girl was taken off her chain, it wasn't to come inside. It was to go off to the pound.

Now, you didn't tell me that. But by putting myself in Little Girl's place, I was able to surmise this detail from the human's version of the story: She's tied up; somebody finally comes to untie her. Yippee! And then what? She's not brought inside with the family ... but off to the pound. Heartbreaking, isn't it? By putting ourselves in Little Girl's place for a moment, we can make the story even more compelling, and realize details that were previously unspoken.

This background story is serving two purposes. One, it's compelling and makes people remember and feel sympathy for Little Girl. And two, it's going to explain some of the negatives we have to mention. We have to make sure that by the time we say that she's bad with other dogs, etc., people are prepared to think, "Well, no wonder! The poor baby!" In some ways, this is all a buildup for that.

So let's finish the blurb:

After five years of being tied up in a garage, the first time Little Girl was taken off her chain, it wasn't to come inside. It was to go off to the pound. In a new program, prisoners were in charge of taking care of her, but when someone caught Little Girl being abused, the trembling girl was pulled from that program. A traumatized Little Girl behaved badly at her new foster home and got expelled. (Since this is a "he said, she said" story, let's wait till someone calls to go into exactly what happened.)

Today, she's with us, where this sad girl doesn't want any dogs to come near her ever. She tells them to just go away! When you put a leash on her, she panics and doesn't want to come. But there's a sweetness to her, too. She may warn away the other dogs, but the slightest pet from a person – any person – and she melts into affection, like she wants to tell someone her story. Won't you come meet her?

That should help! Keep up the great work, and blessings to that darling dog.

Going from "good" to "gotcha"

Question from Jana: I write the pet bios for our dogs and cats at our no-kill shelter, which also provides a low-cost vet clinic and spay/neuter clinic for the public. In order to serve the people and pets who need our clinic services most, we're located in a poorer section of our metro area. We have a lovely facility but our location does pose a problem in bringing qualified adopters to our shelter and getting our animals into good homes. (Hopefully someday we'll be able to afford to move our adoption center to another location.)

Also, because we are no-kill and we network with many wonderful rescue groups who are able to take many of our more adoptable pets into their foster homes and find them good homes, we are left with many dogs at our shelter who are a bit more challenging to place. A good share of the dogs who take a long time for us to place are the large active dogs. Our most difficult are those larger dogs who are dog-aggressive but love people. Also difficult to place are those who are initially timid with strangers, whom we work hard to further socialize, but they do need a more patient person to adopt them.

Petfinder has been our #1 tool for finding good homes for our shelter pets, so I'm looking forward to any advice you have about writing more successful bios. Below is a bio for Mosley who is currently on our website. He's a very active dog who absolutely loves people, but we don't trust him with cats and he can be dog-aggressive, depending on the dog. After reading your article today on the Best Friends website, I rewrote his bio and have also included it.

This is what is currently on our website:

Mosley is a 2-year old Australian Cattle Dog mix male. He's very friendly, silly, playful and one-of-a-kind as far as looks go! He loves attention and being with people, and he is housetrained. Mosley has a gorgeous shorthair tri-color coat with some very unique markings and he has a very cute face. He's medium-large at 45 lbs. and he's been vaccinated, neutered, microchipped and tested for heartworms. Mosley needs to be in a home without cats because he plays too rough with them.

Australian Cattle Dogs are herding dogs and therefore have lots of energy and are very bright. Mosley will need someone to provide him with playtime and exercise and he'd do very well with obedience training. He's eager to please and already knows some commands. He likes some, but not all dogs, so if you have another dog we'd ask you to bring him or her in to meet him.

We'd like to find Mosley his wonderful new home as soon as possible. He began acting depressed after we'd had him for a while. Some dogs have a hard time living in a kennel situation and Mosley is one of them. We moved him out of the kennels and he's been living in a meeting room, which is also a staff members' work area. He's been much peppier and happier there. He gets playtime out in the yard, but what he really needs is a home. So if Mosley sounds like the dog for you, please come out and meet him! He'll be a wonderful dog for someone who wants a loving, playful and very smart companion!

Here's my attempt at a rewrite:

Mosley is a fun-loving guy who thinks that humans are just the best thing ever! He's super affectionate and just lights up whenever someone comes in the room. He greets everyone with a big hug. (OK, we probably shouldn't allow that, but it's so hard to refuse!) Mosley is a 2-year-old Australian Cattle Dog mix male. He's medium-large at 45 lbs., and he's been vaccinated, neutered, microchipped and tested for heartworms. Mosley's very silly and playful and one-of-a-kind as far as looks go. He has a gorgeous shorthair tri-color coat and such an expressive face. And he's already housetrained.

Mosley is very bright and a real people pleaser. He's an energetic guy who loves to go for walks and play fetch. He'd enjoy just about anything that included some activity and spending time with his new person. He plays a bit too rough with the feline species so needs to be in a home without cats. And he likes some but not all dogs, so if you have another dog we'd ask you to bring him or her in with you for a visit, to see if they're compatible.

We've had Mosley for over a year and would like to find him his wonderful new home soon. He was brought to us by a Chihuahua rescue person who found him and thought he was a wonderful dog, but definitely not a Chihuahua! Our happy boy began feeling depressed in the kennel several months ago so we moved him into our meeting room, where he has lots of interaction with staff and volunteers. He's been much peppier and happier there. But what he really needs is a home. We can't even imagine how devoted and appreciative he'll be to the person who takes him home and gives him the companionship he craves!

I'd love to get your feedback on his bios. Thanks for this opportunity, Elizabeth!

Response from Elizabeth Doyle: First of all, you have a natural talent for this. So you're going to give me the chance to make some nice, nitpicky points. Because what we're starting with is basically good. You write conversationally, you're welcoming, and you describe his flaws in an easygoing way that doesn't make them the center of attention.

So how do we go from "good" to "gotcha"? It's all about the first sentence. Your text is good, so our goal is to get people's attention so they really read it! The first sentence is what will make them decide to read on. You made a serious improvement from the first draft to the second. "Mosley is a 2-year-old Australian Cattle Dog mix male" is just terrible (smile), and you realized it. "Mosley is a fun-loving guy who thinks that humans are just the best thing ever" is much closer. A big difference!

But let's go a step further. Here's a tip for writing a good first sentence: Look at the photo. From the expression on the dog's face, what do you think he is saying to us? I can't see the photo, so I'm going to make something up. Look at the photo, and see whether any of these apply:

"I wish I could be somebody's dog."
"Wait! Where ya going? We haven't even met."
"May I follow you home?"
"I love you already!"
"Sometimes I get so lonely."

Write your own sentence, and make sure it matches the expression on Mosley's face so people halfway believe he's saying it. Then, put it right at the top, all by itself with a space after it to separate it from the rest of the text.

Next, you need a transition. We need to go from the attention getter of Mosley's phrase to your voice, explaining that you're about to tell us some intricate details about the dog. We're switching from broad brush strokes to careful drawing. Think of the blurb as a pyramid:

LOOK AT THIS!
Keep looking, please.
Now here's what I needed you to look at.

Mosley's blurb might go like this:

(LOOK AT THIS!) "I wish I could be somebody's dog."

(Keep looking, please.) This is Mosley, and he can't thank you enough for stopping to look at him. May we tell you a thing or two?

(Now here's what I needed you to look at.) Mosley is a fun-loving guy who thinks that humans are just the best thing ever! He's super affectionate and just lights up ...
(Add the rest of your text.)

Do you see how we gave this a "grab"? We took a perfectly well-written description of Mosley, and gave it the one thing extra it needed. The opening sentence grabs us because it matches the expression on the dog's face ... and it's a heart-touching sentiment right up front.

P.S. Regarding your question on describing shy dogs: Try "scared" instead of "shy." People want to comfort someone who's scared, but sometimes they think someone who's shy secretly doesn't like them.

Look into my eyes ...

Question from Paula: Here's a tough one! We have had Scotch for at least a year and a half! He is in desperate need of finding a permanent home. Here's his adoption blurb:

SCOTCH: Approx. 3 year old Shar-pei/Husky mix

PLEASE GIVE THIS BIG LUG A CHANCE TO WIN YOUR HEART!! Poor Scotch has been in foster care for OVER a YEAR! He is confused as to why all his little playmates have gotten adopted and he hasn't :(Everyone loves Scotch! Look at this big ham on the couch. Scotch is very friendly and fun loving. He gets along with all dogs and even cats. Scotch is house-trained and crate-trained, he is smart and knows simple commands. Scotch was originally saved by a good Samaritan in Cass County who said Scotch was "living" in a highway ditch, apparently after being dumped. Scotch is full grown at 65 lbs. He does need a high fence or wooden privacy fence as he has been known to jump a 4 ft. fence, when his foster parents are in the

front yard. He's not a runner but desires the attention and affection of humans. If you would like more information on Scotch PLEASE call his foster mom, Paula, at 123-456-7890 or BETTER YET e-mail her at Angels@wings.com. Scotch is fully vetted, neutered, heartworm negative and is on monthly heartworm preventative. His adoption fee is negotiable. AND HE IS READY TO WIN YOUR HEART!

Response from Elizabeth Doyle: Thank you for sending us Scotch! OK, let's start with his photo. You see how he's not looking at us? Eye contact is very important for stealing hearts. When you're at a party, and someone avoids your eyes during a handshake, there's a tendency not to like him. He seems aloof. (Does he think he's too good to look right at me?) On the other hand, when someone looks right at you, you feel like you've made a friend. We humans value eye contact more than we realize! So try getting a photo, if possible, in which Scotch is looking right at the camera.

But animals can be adopted off the web even without any photo at all. So we can still work with what we have! There are a lot of nice things about your blurb, but let's look at the overall structure of it. Do you see how all the sentences are squooshed together? It looks at first glance like it will take a long time to read all those words. Without more paragraph breaks, a reader is inclined to skim. Let me demonstrate:

Sentences squooshed together:

Today, I was walking to the store when the most incredible thing occurred! A giant asteroid fell from the sky, and I was nearly squashed. Can you believe that? Thank goodness it did, too, because one of the items I needed to buy at the store was Altoids, and I hadn't written it on my list. Fortunately, the word "asteroid" is similar enough to the word "Altoid" that this most unusual circumstance reminded me to take my list from my purse and add this most essential item. Talk about providence!

Compared to:

Today, I was walking to the store when the most incredible thing occurred!

A giant asteroid fell from the sky, and I was nearly squashed. Can you believe that?

Thank goodness it did, too, because one of the items I needed to buy at the store was Altoids, and I hadn't written it on my list. Fortunately, the word "asteroid" is similar enough to the word "Altoid" that this most unusual circumstance reminded me to take my list from my purse and add this most essential item.

Talk about providence!

Do you see how, by separating the sentences, the entire appearance of the blurb looks more inviting and easier to read?

Next, let's get rid of abbreviations, and anything else that makes his biography sound technical. Remember to write the way you speak! That way people can "hear" you in their heads as they read. So no "Approx.," OK?

If you can "hear" my voice when I write, then I have your attention. You think I'm talking to you, and you feel like you should respond. And response is what we're going for! So let's take the wonderful information you've given us here, and write it as we would say it out loud, adding paragraph breaks to make it easier on the reader's eyes.

Example:

He's our unwanted teddy bear!

Nobody ever seems to pick Scotch. But please, let us tell you about him. He's a snuggly couch potato when you want him to be, and full of fun when you're ready to play. He promises to love your other dogs, be nice to your cats, and smart? Oh, he's like a little doggie version of Einstein! Honestly. He's housetrained (No problem!); he knows "sit" and "shake" (Oh, please – not even a challenge).

This mocha snuggle-bear started life in a ditch, all alone on a highway. We took him in to our foster program, and promised that from now on, there will always be somebody who cares about him and knows where he is. But the clock has really been ticking, and we're afraid he's getting discouraged! Please come meet our friendly "big nose."

He's in perfect health, three years old, neutered, and great with every living creature on the face of the earth as far as we can tell! We're even willing to negotiate his adoption fee at this point. Just please have a high fence and time to give him lots of love, then call his foster mom Paula at 123-456-7890 or e-mail her at Angels@wings.com. She will be so happy to talk to you.

Don't you feel like calling yourself right now? Put something like that with a photo in which he's looking at us, and you're golden! Good luck to Scotch! And please let us know if it works.

Are bios in the third or first person more effective?

Question from Teresa: Can you give me some input on this write-up? Thanks!

I was left in the woods to fend for myself. I'm enjoying the nice safe inside now and I'm ready for my forever home. I've been to the vet and I'm about 3 years young and have a good life ahead of me. I hope it's with you. If you think you might want to snuggle up with me, write my foster mom at sassycat@alltel.net. The adoption fee is \$50, to help cover my vetting so this rescue can help the next abandoned kitty. Purrs, Leo

Response from Elizabeth Doyle: Ah, animals writing about themselves in the first person. It can be so good, and it can be so bad! And the difference is so subtle. The tricky thing about using first-person narrative is that we have to keep two contradictory ideas in mind:

1. How would the animal really talk?
2. Let's not get carried away in pretending that the animal is talking.

Kind of a challenge! Let me demonstrate what I mean. Since we don't know how animals would talk if they could, people sometimes simply tell the human version of the story, replacing "he is" with "I am," etc. When we do this, we have a cat saying things like this: "I was born in 1986 with a chronic upper respiratory infection, a disease which is generally non-contagious, yet it caused me to be determined unadoptable. I was sent to a group called XYZ Rescue in Portland, Oregon, where I've been for several months...." In a case like this, we aren't really seeing the story through the cat's eyes, and readers know that. Therefore, the appeal of telling the story in the first person is lost.

At the other extreme, we can get carried away with pretending that the animal is talking. We might then have a cat say, "I'm looking for something called a home! I don't know what that is, but it sure sounds nice." This makes you wonder why the cat understood all the other words, but

not the word "home." Which then leads you to think, "Oh, for heaven's sake, we know the cat isn't talking, so can you please just get to the point and tell us about the cat! This is just silly."

So, what's the solution? Imagine what the animal's perspective is and try to tell the story from that perspective, without pretending that the animal has comprehension problems, speech impediments, or anything else that it just doesn't make sense for him to have (given that he's remarkable enough to be a talking cat!).

Let's take a look at your first sentence: "I was left in the woods to fend for myself."

OK, that's pretty good. You allow our "talking cat character" to comprehend and clearly explain basic facts about his situation. Which is critical, because we simply need to communicate those things to the audience. And I could be wrong, but I'm guessing that if a cat really were telling a story, he would not even tell it chronologically. I have no way of knowing for sure, but my guess is that a cat doesn't think on a linear timeline, and wouldn't explain things in relation to where they fell in time. Imagine how confusing that would be to a reader! But, unless we want to try the Faulkner version (Hmmm ... now that might actually be appealing to the truly literate adopter), let's have our imaginary talking cat basically think and speak like a human.

But let's also remember that the things that most concern our cat character are not what is going on with the humans, but what is happening to him. That's the strength of the first-person narrative.

So when he was left in the woods, I would say that if he were attached to the person leaving him, his focus would be "Where are you going?" And that if he barely knew the person leaving him, his focus would be "I guess I live in the woods now." What would never occur to him, I don't think, is "That person was an irresponsible loser who had no respect for cats' lives and probably also beats his girlfriend." So when we're doing first-person narrative for the cat, we don't dwell on what the humans might dwell on because that makes the narrative less convincing, and we lose the cat's voice.

Let's push your narrative a little bit more into the cat's perspective. Your next sentence is this: "I'm enjoying the nice safe inside now and I'm ready for my forever home." But I'm not sure that's how the cat sees it. Let me imagine that I'm the cat for a moment.

As the cat, I'm thinking that I used to be so hungry – and now it feels so good to have food! But I'm not my mom's "real" cat. It's like she's just playing hostess, like she wants me to go. There's a distance between us. I wish someone would hold me and say, "I'll never let you go! I love you; wherever we're together is home." She won't say that; I can feel that she won't say that. I'm an extra cat. I don't want to be an extra cat. I want to be like that one, Charlie over there, who isn't her foster – but is the one she keeps forever as all the fosters come and go. I can tell the difference between how she looks at him and how she looks at me. I want to be that cat. I want to belong.

Now, you know that when I make these remarks, I'm not in any way criticizing you as a foster mom! I'm sure you're the best foster mom a cat ever had, and that you love every critter who comes to you. But by thinking how it would feel to be a foster cat, I feel like I might notice a difference between how my foster mom – any foster mom – feels about me versus how she feels about her permanent cats.

So, do you see how by putting ourselves in the cat's place, we're able to think of details that might not have occurred to us before? At the same time, we don't have to get hung up on what the cat could really know versus what he probably doesn't really know. (I mean, surely he doesn't exactly know he's looking for a home! But we have to pretend he does or nobody will understand what on earth we're talking about.)

Let's try to use some more details about the cat's viewpoint – the story as it relates only to himself – to make the first-person narrative more compelling.

Original draft:

I was left in the woods to fend for myself. I'm enjoying the nice safe inside now and I'm ready for my forever home. I've been to the vet and I'm about 3 years young and have a good life ahead of me. I hope it's with you. If you think you might want to snuggle up with me, write my foster mom at sassycat@alltel.net. The adoption fee is \$50, to help cover my vetting so this rescue can help the next abandoned kitty. Purrs, Leo

An alternate version:

I used to be so hungry! I lived in the woods all by myself and I didn't know how to find any food. It's the worst feeling when your belly's all hollow and no matter how far you walk, you can't find anybody.

I can't believe I got saved! Somebody stumbled on me in those woods – at last! I'm full and warm now, but I'm lonely. It's like I'm a visitor. And I want to be somebody's real cat – like the one they hold at night and promise never to let go. The lady who saved me said I can't be that to her – she already has so many special cats. I look at them and think that will never be me. Everybody in the world already has a cat. Nobody needs an "extra." I wish I weren't an extra.

I love to snuggle, I'm a beautiful Siamese, and I'm three years old. My mom asks \$50 so she can save the lives of more kitties who are lost in the woods, or just have nowhere to go.

Please call.

I hope that helps! And thanks for giving me an excuse to talk about first-person narrative from an animal's perspective.

Does Jenny Craig want to adopt a bunny?

Question from Michelle: Here's a bio from San Diego House Rabbit Society:

Luke is a young New Zealand male, just under 2 years old. He is shy, but loves attention, and will snuggle into your neck when held. Before coming to HRS, he was kept in a cage for over a year, where the only attention he got was having food shoved at him. Consequently, he is overweight and needs to slim down.

This boy needs a patient, loving home where he can have a gentle bunny girlfriend, and lots of time to run and play. Given the room to run, he is quite the dancer! Do you have room in your heart and your home for Luke?

Response from Elizabeth Doyle: Oh, I'm so glad somebody sent in a bunny adoption blurb! I love bunnies. I notice from the photo that Luke is white. For folks who don't know this, according to Best Friends' Bunny House manager, the hardest color of rabbit to find a home for is white. For some reason, it seems people like cats to be white, but not bunnies. How silly is that? So for all those worried about finding homes for black dogs and cats, remember that if the animal were a rabbit, it's white you'd be worried about. This says to me that these color preferences must not be very deep if they change so easily from species to species – and that should encourage us that they can be overcome with a little writing finesse.

On to Luke the bunny! The first thing I see is that Luke is out of focus in his photo. I can see the teddy bear better than I can see him. Also, his eyes are red from the flash, and he doesn't look like a "somebody." (Eyes help us be a somebody.) He has space alien eyes!

He's competing with all those other adorable rabbits on the same page, and if I were going to take an interest in one of those white rabbits, I think I would ask about Angel. She looks just like him, but is easier to see, and her first words are "Poor Angel," which really grabs my attention. (Of course, with that adorable Vito on the page, I'm not sure how anyone else has a prayer! <smile>)

The point being – and this is just a general point – that when an animal is sharing his "big opportunity" moment with several others on the same page, which is very common, then it's important that he doesn't lose out by comparison.

Getting a better photo won't completely solve the problem. After all, no matter how good the photo is, the fact remains that you have more than one bunny available who looks kind of like Luke. There's no getting around that! So we need to make them equal not only by making sure they're all equally in focus in their pictures, but we need to give each of those bunnies a fair shot by making their bios completely individual.

So let's look at the bio. If I could impress upon people one thing, it would be to not start bios off with the animal's statistics. "New Zealand male, just under two years old" is not an attention-grabbing first sentence. Important information, yes, but not very personal. So let's save the statistics (ones he shares with so many other rabbits around the world) for later.

What's personal? The interesting story of how he became a chubby-wubbs is personal – and quite endearing! It's a great image. He's locked in a cage. The only time anybody ever notices him is when they toss some food at him. So what happens? He associates food with love and becomes a chub monster! Very personal, very endearing, and if we do it right ... kind of cute.

Now, this is the kind of thing that will separate him from the other white rabbits on the page. They will have their personal things to tell (whether it's a history or very sensitive details about their personality), and he will have his personal things to tell. And so they'll all get an equal shot, because there's no direct comparison, as in "They're a lot alike, but one is cuter." Instead, they're each individuals. And there's no way to compare individuals. You can't compare two individuals who have had different lives and are different people, and who are each one of a kind in the universe.

So, instead of having the most impersonal facts (age, rank and serial number) at the beginning, which make Luke seem less individual, start with what's most personal. And put the boring but necessary facts toward the end.

Let's try it:

Oh no! It's a chubby-wubby pudgy monster rabbit! Oh no, Luke! You're gonna squoosh the poor teddy bear – watch out!

How did Luke get to be such a butterball? It's very interesting. He lived in a tiny cage all by himself where the only time he ever saw anybody was when somebody gave him food. So now he thinks food is the only way anyone will ever say "I love you" to him. You take what you can get when you're living in a little cage!

How he'd love to hear "I love you" in a different way! To have a hug or a snuggle – somebody who says "I'll keep you forever" and gives him a bunny friend, room to stretch his legs, and a healthy bunny diet. To know that love means more than having a snack thrown in your cage.

Please give a butterball a chance. Luke is a two-year-old New Zealand rabbit.

You see how terribly uninteresting that last sentence is, compared to the rest? That's why we want to talk about the things that make him an *individual* first. And the stats can wait.

Good luck to all of your adorable bunnies! The rabbits on your page are just cute as buttons. Thank you so much for giving us one for demonstration.

Go ahead: make them read and weep

Question from Kim: Help! We've had this guy for almost a year now and we have had no takers. He's a black DSH male, about 18 months old, neutered. We can't get any interest in him.

Frankie's blurb:

Frankie doesn't sing like his namesake, or have blue eyes, but he is talkative! Make his dream come true and adopt him today. He's very playful and friendly and is great with everyone. Already neutered, he is just a real charmer.

Response from Elizabeth Doyle: Thank you for sending this blurb about Frankie! First things first: Don't feel despair. You might not, but let me use your wonderfully honest plea to make the general point that often when an animal just can't seem to find any takers, we start to believe he's a "long shot" for a home, and forget that he's a brand new face to each person who walks through the shelter door.

It's a little like gambling, if I may make an irreverent analogy! Despite our best efforts to be rational, we start to believe the cat is having a losing streak. In truth, each roll of the dice (each new adopter coming through the door) is a brand-new fresh chance, completely unrelated to the last roll of the dice.

The reason it's important to remember that Frankie might meet his family today – in an hour, in five minutes – is that we have to write his description with this attitude: "This is going to work. Someone is going to read this and call. I know it." So we have to believe it ourselves.

Now, let's get down to tactics. A good tip for everyone is not to use "technical" terms or acronyms like DSH. In the rescue world, we know it means "domestic short hair." The average American family might think he has a condition called DSH, and they hope it isn't contagious. <smile>

Also, when mentioning gender, let's not call him a "male"; let's make him a boy. "Boys" are what I call the male pets I love. "Males" sounds too clinical – used for pet statistics, as in "the number of male cats put down at shelters each year is ..." (If we're talking about an older pet, we might say "old man" rather than "boy." But he still feels more alive that way.)

Next, I can tell you what Frankie's biggest obstacle is, just by looking at what you've written. He's all black. I didn't know before I entered the rescue world that black is an unpopular color for dogs and cats. I always thought black had that sort of majestic, knightly quality, like Darth Vader commanding attention as he walks through the door. But as it turns out, all-black animals get adopted less frequently than animals of other colors.

Next, what's his greatest selling point? He has two. One is that there's nothing wrong with him ... he's healthy, etc. And the other may surprise you: It's that nobody wants him. Surprised that's a selling point? Among certain folks who want to adopt a needy animal, it is! There's a type of person who comes into a shelter asking, "Which are the ones who are going to be put down?" They're adopting because they want to be heroes. (Which is wonderful!) Since Frankie's having such a hard time finding a home, we can make it clear that anyone who adopts him can have that special feeling of being a hero.

Now, let's give it a try. Because Frankie is a bit of an emergency, I'm going to be a little heavy-handed in my approach. Please take this and rewrite it to suit your comfort level and style.

Yours:

Frankie doesn't sing like his namesake, or have blue eyes, but he is talkative! Make his dream come true and adopt him today. He's very playful and friendly and is great with everyone. Already neutered, he is just a real charmer.

A possible rewrite:

Won't you give Frankie a second look? He knows he doesn't stand out among the other cats. His color is plain and he's not a kitten ... he knows. Every day he sees other cats go home while he's happy to settle for a scratch behind the ears. If only we could tell him that homes aren't just for other cats! That he could get picked, too.

Frankie is a year and a half, completely healthy, adores every single person he meets, and is already neutered for his new home. Please give us a call and ask about Frankie. You would make his day! No one's ever called for him before.

Kind of makes you want to cry, right? And yet it's truthful. As I envision it, this is what's going on: Frankie has been in the shelter for a year, great with everyone who comes in ... and then they pick other cats. Very heart-wrenching when you look at it that way! Please take it as a draft suggestion, and play with it as you will. But in terms of effectiveness ... well, I'm hoping this will get him a phone call. Good luck. And send my love to that wonderful cat!

Underscoring the benefits of senior pets

Question from Sue: First, let me say that I am fascinated with how you are able to create such interesting descriptions from fairly negative-sounding animals. It really has me looking at some of the fosters in a different frame of mind.

My question is more of a general one. Being a Pomeranian and Pekingese rescue, we tend to get a lot of seniors into rescue, as these little guys can be quite long-lived. As it is more difficult to adopt out older dogs, would you have any suggestions on how to present them so they have more appeal to a greater variety of people?

Response from Elizabeth Doyle: First, thank you for your positive feedback. Now, about older animals: This is an area where I often think I'd like to see less "salesmanship" and more heartfelt truth. I see a lot of adoption ads for older animals in which they're described as "young at heart," "may be older, but you wouldn't know it," and "10 years young" and that sort of thing. The problem with these is that you're not going to fool someone who wants a puppy. Somebody whose mind is set on a puppy or kitten is not going to switch to a 10-year-old because you said he was "young at heart."

Yet, to someone who is open-minded about having an older pet and who might really adopt him, you're running the risk of sounding like a used car salesperson. "This baby might look old, but her engine's still going strong!" It makes the dog sound like a slightly worse version of a puppy. Older dogs have lots of advantages over puppies ... actual, real benefits! For example, older dogs often make better couch companions, and often have less nervous energy. They can make better pets for people who are less active and want more cuddle time.

And there's something else, too. I hate to say it, but you know what it is, don't you? You said yourself that Pekingeses can live a very long time. So what's the advantage of getting an older one? A shorter commitment. I know, it's a very sad thing to say! Yet, for some people, making a promise to take care of a pet for four or five years is easier and more comfortable than a commitment of 15 or 16 years.

Sometimes, by being completely truthful, we can be more effective with people than by using the hard sell. Consider a rescue website (I'm making this up, but I like the idea!) that has an article about the realistic benefits of older dogs, followed by a link that reads "Convinced? Click here to see some of the animals who need you." You click the link, and at the top, there is a heading: "These dogs ask only that you make their last years their best."

The heading is just a tad melancholy, but so very truthful. It appeals to the piece of me that wants to reach out in the most honest way. And it alludes to one of the sad, but truthful, benefits of an older dog – the shorter commitment.

Compare that to a heading that reads: "These dogs are young at heart and all of them are going to have long lives ahead of them still!" That doesn't feel quite as honest on a gut level, does it? Plus, if "young" and "long lives ahead" is what I really care about, then I'm not going to choose one of them anyway. Why make them sound like somebody they're not? What they are is wonderful – older, calmer, easier pets.

So don't treat older pets like used cars! We don't have to make them sound like puppies to make them sound appealing. It's OK to be honest, even when it's a little sad. Put it right out there. Here's an example:

Ruff-Ruff knows that he's old, and that's not what everyone wants. But is there someone out there who might just like a gentle, kind couch potato, mellow with age, who'll snuggle with them till the end of his days? He wants his latter years to be the ones where he finally learns about love.

Be honest and you'll touch them! Sound like a salesperson, and their hearts will tune out as they read. I really do think older pets have a lot to recommend them. Thanks so much for writing!

Comment from Deborah: As the director of the Sanctuary for Senior Dogs, I would like to offer my heartfelt thanks for your answer about describing older pets. People often tell me that I should "play down" their age. One person went so far as to tell me that I should remove the word "senior" from our name because "no one wants an older pet." But, as you say, that is far from the truth.

To describe older pets as "young at heart," or to use other phrases that emphasize youth over reality, simply buys into a culture that does not respect age. We handle dogs over seven, and we have a very healthy adoption rate. The people who want to give a home to older dogs are among the greatest animal lovers on earth; they do not need euphemisms or empty claims. They know that there is nothing like the love and gratitude of an old dog in a loving retirement home.

Introducing shelter dogs with weather-proof kennel bios

Question from Jonna: I am a volunteer at the Haven, a no-kill animal shelter in Lubbock, Texas. We currently have over 200 dogs and 100 cats. All dogs are housed outside, with the exception of some special-needs dogs. The cages that house the dogs are marked only with the animal's name, no description, nothing. This leads to a lot of potential adopters walking around looking at dogs and becoming overwhelmed, because they know nothing about them. They subsequently leave empty-handed and feeling overwhelmed. I want to help with writing descriptions for the animals, but I do not know where to begin. Most of these dogs came as strays, so we know very little about them, other than how they are in the shelter environment (and I know this is different from how they would be otherwise).

Also, what is the best way to display the descriptions, since the animals are outside? They must be placed in a weatherproof, windproof container. The only option I have found for this is real-estate boxes, but the cheapest I have come across cost \$15 per box. Any suggestions would be so appreciated!

Response from Elizabeth Doyle: In your case, the descriptions of these animals are going to serve a double purpose. One, they will tell something about the dogs and make them sound good. But just as important, they will make the adopters feel welcome and greeted in a situation where it sounds like there's a lot of commotion.

So, warmth and friendliness are extra important here. Start each blurb with *Welcome!* Next: *Thank you for looking at Augustus!* That way, I feel like somebody is glad I'm here ... that even though they're busy, they really do care.

Next, we write Augustus' blurb just as we would for the web. Remember not to start with his age and vaccination status, but with *who he is as a dog*. You don't want people walking along the rows of dogs and comparing "stats." You want them looking at the dogs as individuals. For example, Augustus' blurb could start with this:

Augustus is a majestic German shepherd with a sense of honor and dignity. Yet, he doesn't have anyone to love and protect!

Leave the most uninteresting facts for the bottom: *He's a five-year-old stray*. And what might be very important in your situation is to finish with this: *If you are interested in Augustus, please ring the bell (or come to the front desk, or whatever it is you'd like them to do)*. You want to make sure people know how to learn more about an animal who's caught their eye.

If there is more than one dog in a run, and you need to let folks know which one is Joey and which one is Mikey, give each dog his own separate page. If you can't include photos of the dogs, remember to let people know, in each blurb, whom you're talking about. You could say "Joey is the black one who looks like a panther" or "Mikey is the one with speckled fur." But don't say "Mikey is the cattle dog mix" because folks might not know breeds. The average family coming in might have no idea what a cattle dog is.

Now, don't go spending \$15 per dog on real-estate boxes! You'll put yourself into debt. Just print out each page on your computer, and have the pages laminated to protect them from the rain. Punch a hole in each one and tie it to the dog's gate with a garbage bag tie or something. Voila!

It sounds like a very important project. You volunteer at a no-kill, but this would also be a great project for people volunteering at shelters trying to become no-kill, but that aren't there yet.