

HOW TO **COPYWRITE** RIGHT



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Understanding Copywriting

To embark on a career as a copywriter, you first need to understand exactly how it differs from regular writing. It doesn't help that the word "copy" is sometimes applied to writing of any kind that is intended for publication. A newspaper journalist may be congratulated by his editor for producing "great copy"; a draft novel will be scrutinized by a copy editor before being sent for printing.

In a way, newspapers and novels *are* copy in that the desired result is that they are purchased. However, the content of that copy does not directly advertise the publication, and this is where it cannot be considered copywriting in the sense that this book is using the term i.e. producing words that sell.

Copywriting is the use of words as promotional tools. They can promote a person, a business, a product, an opinion or idea, and they can appear on TV, radio, websites, in direct mailings, brochures, press releases, catalogues, on flyers, billboards or via any other kind of advertising material.

A copywriter's job is to persuade the reader, listener or viewer to take action, which usually means parting with some money in exchange for a product or service. Alternatively, it may be used to promote a certain opinion, or to dissuade people from subscribing to a certain point of view.

One huge area for copywriters to plunder these days is Search Engine Optimization (SEO), which is content written for websites with keywords tactically dropped in at given intervals. This is designed to rank the website more highly on the various search engines so that more potential buyers will find it on a related search.

You can learn the skill-set for copywriting. The only real proviso is that you possess a reasonable grasp of the English language so that you can express your thoughts in a way that will not cause anyone to double-take. Copy that causes confusion or that looks or sounds unintelligent will be distracting. This should not be a problem for most people because copywriting is not about using complex language. The most powerful advertising messages are often the most simple.

The Art & Science of Copywriting

Whilst creative writing is more art than science, informed opinion is that copywriting is far more science than art. This is, by and large, an accurate assessment, although it would be a serious mistake to dismiss the importance of creative flair in copywriting.

Comparing the two, a novelist will use artistry to produce a great piece of work, but this cannot happen without a formulaic plot structure. The science is used to give an order to the artistic prose. A copywriter will use science to optimally trigger buying impulses. Marketing strategies have been around for long enough that there is little guesswork involved in what does or doesn't work.

You can argue about the percentages – which will vary depending on what exactly you are promoting – but creative writing is more art, and copywriting is more science.

Despite that, it is not true to say that creative writing goes for the heart and copywriting goes for the brain. The seat of our emotions is not in the heart, even if we romantically attribute it to that place and often physically feel it there. Our emotions happen in our brains as chemical reactions that are then fired around our systems and experienced all over the body.

Copywriters should not forget that humans are emotional creatures. The paradox is that to trigger these emotional responses requires a scientific approach by the copywriter; an observance of certain rules proven to have worked time and time again.

This is great news for you, the budding copywriter. There is no need to sit down and ponder some dazzling new approach. You don't need to sign up to any creative writing course to be a

successful copywriter. In fact, as a copywriter, you can shoot yourself in the foot by trying to be too creative, as this can interfere with the elements that have been proven over time to work effectively in promoting interest and sales.

If you're not sure about this, consider how much attention you pay to a billboard as you are driving by. For one thing, you can't physically pay it much heed without getting distracted and causing a car wreck. Its message therefore needs to be highly succinct, which leaves little room for flowing creativity. It is the headline that counts. However, there is certainly an art to creating a memorable slogan that will stick in the mind after one brief glance.

The vast majority of advertising that ends up in front of you is unsolicited. You didn't ask to be shown it, therefore if it is to work effectively it has to grab your attention almost instantly or you will dismiss it. A good copywriter appreciates this fact, and gears their copy to press the right buttons in their audience as quickly as possible. This is the science. Perhaps some people may term it an art form, but even the word "form" suggests that there is an accepted structure that must exist for it to work.

The Client Brief

This may further define the copywriter's job as more of a science than an art. If a car company wants you to promote their latest model and the selling point is its hybrid engine, then your brief is defined. Waxing lyrical about its upholstery is not going to cut it. That may be a requirement once the hook is in, but companies usually have their own ideas about where the focus of an ad campaign should be, thus copywriters generally do not have the freedom to play around and experiment as a true artist might.

A good copywriter will listen to the brief and know exactly what it is that the client wishes to convey. As a copywriter, it is your

job to express those points powerfully, according to the methods that you know have traditionally worked best.

Of course, this is also where the art comes in because you must be able to give life to whatever words you use. Writing about a new sleeping pill, there is no doubt that the most junior employee of the pharmaceutical company could come up with the line: “Makes you go to sleep when you couldn’t before”. A copywriter will be called upon because the client automatically and rightly assumes that a good copywriter will combine a competent level of writing skills with intelligence, common sense, creativity and imagination. The intelligence and common sense to take on board the brief and know how to apply tried and trusted marketing rules to it, and the creativity and imagination to perhaps add that special sparkle to the finished message.

Ultimately, defining copywriting is a semantic exercise, and it doesn’t much matter what you call it so long as you remember that there are rules that must be obeyed. When an artist mixes colors on a palette, it is both art and science. Science dictates how the colors mix together – you can never mix red and yellow and not get orange – whilst the art is in tweaking the proportions to achieve the subtleties.

As a copywriter, being able to grasp both is obviously beneficial as it gives you the flexibility to adapt to all briefs, but you should not be overly concerned with subtleties. Subtleties are often lost on people, especially those people who don’t have the time or inclination to uncover them.

Remember always that your average audience needs bold colors, and those you can easily learn to produce.

The Fundamental Rules

Identify the Unique Selling Point (USP)

The Unique Selling Point (or Proposition) is a well-known marketing ploy, although there is really nothing spectacularly clever about it. In fact, the need to establish a USP is common sense. Would you go for a job interview without any planned response to the question of why the company should employ you over the next candidate? That's your USP. In truth, it may not be that unique, but you should still be able to define a special talent for yourself.

Similarly, copywriters shouldn't beat themselves up over their inability to find a truly unique selling point for a product, especially if it leads to a bending of the truth. In the world of marketing, there really is very little new under the sun. Most times, a new ad campaign is simply a redux of one already used to good effect in the past.

When the brief does not directly indicate the USP it wants to push, you as a copywriter must try to locate one. The idea is to set the product apart from, and above, the competition. What is it that your product does better than the rest? Whatever the client tells you about this, research it some more. Find out all you can about the market so that you can write your copy with confidence.

Make an Offer

When products are on special offer, public interest is piqued. People love to think they are grabbing a bargain, or even just saving themselves a few cents over a different brand or on the previous price of the offer product.

This is perhaps the most important way to close any deal in the advertising world. The offer taps into the greedy streak that we all possess. It is so powerful that it is frequently able to bypass the rational brain and straight away trigger the physical reaction of hand-in-pocket.

It has been shown that certain unscrupulous supermarkets can increase their profits by placing display stands near the doors advertising special offers. In itself, this is not unscrupulous. Until you consider that the product advertised can be found in larger containers for less money further inside the store. Customers wind up walking out with a product they didn't intend to buy at an inflated price, all because the word "offer" appeared above it.

Your copy can make people buy when it grabs their attention with a special offer.

The Headline

Many people scan a newspaper deciding on the basis of the headline alone whether or not they will read any given article. A headline is there to sum up the content of the article, and if you are a copywriter you must be able to hit your audience smack between the eyes the moment they see it.

Which is most interesting as a magazine article headline? "My dog ran away", "Aliens stole my dog", or "Martians ate my Chihuahua"? The story itself may be the same – some nutty individual loses their pet and blames an ET – but the headlines say very different things. (The difference between the latter two is the level of detail in the third, which adds color and interest to the headline.)

Remember that unsolicited advertising material is normally only of interest when you are confined to one place with nothing better to do. In all other circumstances, it has to be very enticing

to draw people in and get them to read it. A strong and attractive headline can make all the difference, and make or break an ad campaign.

Keep it Simple and Direct

Your copy will obviously be different if geared towards surgeons rather than schoolchildren, but whoever you are trying to reach, your message should be simple and direct. Cater to the short attention span and say what you need to say clearly and without going round the houses.

Even in a long piece of copy, the overall message should be contained in the opening gambit. You can go into detail later on, but many people will not have the time or patience to wait for the punch line.

Bear in mind also that – unless you are catering to an audience of rocket scientists – there will be a diverse group of people potentially in receipt of your message. You don't need to talk down to people, as though you're talking to five year-olds, but you should say what you mean very clearly. Language that is difficult to understand may be a deal-breaker for some.

Imagine a school teacher addressing a class after a heavy fall of snow, and consider which message is most effective: “There shall be no gratuitous redistribution of nature's benevolence” or “Don't throw snowballs”. They both mean the same, but the message of the first will be lost on the majority of school-age kids, if not most adults. (This is a genuine quote, by the way!)

Remember that flowery or “clever” language can alienate a large part of your audience, either because they won't understand what you're saying or because they'll think you're being unnecessarily elitist. Don't try to impress anyone, just write in a conversational tone that will reach your target audience.

Fire up Your Copy

Use words that fire the imagination, and please don't think that this contradicts the point just made. You can make a powerful announcement without sounding verbose. Which of these following sentences sounds best?

“You will be happy you did this because you will make a lot of money.” Or, “Relaxing on your luxury yacht in years to come, you will know you made a truly life-changing decision.”

There are no fancy words in the second one – nothing anyone would struggle to understand or find irritating – but it swaps a dead statement for one that engages the imagination and lends a momentous note to the occasion.

And Your Point Is?

Have you ever been faced with a salesperson who lists all the technical specifications of a product without telling you how any of the features will *benefit you*?

Selling a product is not about describing its features; it is about explaining how those features will make your life better. It is about *benefits* that are *personal* to the individual.

Effective copywriting should speak of the personal gains the product or service will offer. Let's say you are asked to write copy for a company that sells running shoes. The new product has a revolutionary shock-absorbing sole (its USP). Would the customer want to know the chemical composition of the sole? Or would they want to know that it can reduce damage to joints and cartilage so that more frequent exercise can be taken so that more weight can be lost so that long-term health will improve so that longevity increases so that more time can be spent with the grandkids in later life?

Of course you wouldn't go that far with it, but the principle is sound; your intention is to alert your audience to the many benefits they will enjoy by choosing your client's product over a rival's.

Appeal to the Emotions

This is where your artistry as a writer can come into its own. Although copywriting rules should be followed in a scientific manner because they have been proven to work, an ability to appeal to the customer's emotions is a precious talent, and it can reap great financial rewards for yourself and your client.

The literary skills of the copywriter will dictate how effective this will be, and it is certainly not necessary to write tear-jerking prose to achieve the desired result. In fact, one of the best ways to trigger the emotions is to do what was discussed in the point above: simply describe the positive benefits for the customer. People like to imagine themselves being happy and healthy so most of the hard work is already done; you just need to show them the way. Describe a scene that links the product with a happy outcome for the customer.

Know the Obstacles and Destroy Them

Great salespeople enter a sales pitch knowing every conceivable objection that can head their way. Not only that, but they have answers prepared to defuse them. Not only that, but they positively welcome these customer objections because they know that as each one is removed, making the sale is a step closer.

Similarly, clever copywriters do not sidestep the possible objections customers may have to purchasing; instead, they plainly identify them in their copy and deal with them. Although it may seem a risky strategy to point out the reasons why a

person might not buy, you can rest assured these objections will not just pass by unnoticed for the lack of you mentioning them.

Besides which, you don't have to overtly label them as customer objections; rather, you can just name the benefits that smash them to pieces. The main objections are:

- I don't have the time – You can see this objection answered in copy written for exercise apparatus with such comments as “Abs to be proud of in only five minutes a day!” This doesn't overtly identify the objection, although one approach is to do just that: “Think you don't have time to build great abs? Think again! Five minutes a day is all you need!”
- I don't have the money – This is the initial standard defensive response from even the very wealthy, and it can be a tough one to overcome. It is usually best answered by creating such a list of benefits that the price seems fully justified.
- It won't work for me – Without knowing the circumstances of each customer, you can't really cover all the bases here, but you can certainly identify the main reasons why someone might logically arrive at such a conclusion. Then you need to identify why they are mistaken.
- I don't believe you – The canny consumer has seen every trick in the book. Cynicism is a copywriter's arch-enemy, but also their *raison d'être*. If customers did not need persuading, copywriters would be out of work. The best way to get around this one is by providing credible benefits, customer testimonials, and a money-back guarantee.
- I don't need it – This is probably the easiest objection to overcome because a customer thinking this is clinging on

with their fingertips to the final objection. Very likely the customer won't actually *need* the product. Your thought must be: *No, but you WANT it*, and your copy must be so attractive that it makes them realize this.

Long Copy Sells

This may seem like a contradiction given the previous advice to keep things simple and direct, but different briefs call for different tactics and varying amounts of content.

Products or services that are expensive will not be easily sold with a 100-word pitch. Equally, it may take more effort to explain the benefits of certain tech-based products or to create an adequate level of credibility, especially when it's something that naturally breeds skepticism. Weight-loss programs would fall into this category.

Providing you've managed to initially hook the audience with a strong headline and an attractive offer, long copy may be the order of the day. This approach can be seen in web copy where a long pitch is interspersed by numerous clickable "Buy" buttons. The copy continues beyond each button as it adds more and more reasons why the person reading should respond positively. These are often a reiteration of points already made, or perhaps more personal testimonials.

Copy of this kind can carry on for many pages, and you should not think that this repetition is overkill. People who are interested will continue reading as they slowly convince themselves that their parting with money is justified. It is a clever way of trying to pre-empt that fateful buyer's remorse. A purchase based on a gut reaction may be quickly cancelled. The longer a customer takes to arrive at a decision to buy, the happier they will be that all the salient points have been addressed, and their objections overcome.

Devil in the Detail

For copywriters, the devil is actually in the generality. Details are interesting and draw the reader in (remember the Martians who ate that poor Chihuahua?). They lend some authority to the information contained in your copy, and this helps to relax the reader into feeling it's safe to take action and buy.

Be Interesting, Get Excited

Someone, somewhere in the world, wants to buy what your copy is attempting to promote. You may find it impossible to believe, but if you want to write interesting copy then you'd better accept it's true. Your task as a copywriter is to understand the mindset of the target audience, even where this is a niche crowd, and to get excited on their behalf. Enthusiasm sells.

Offer Testimonials

It doesn't take a genius to work out that testimonials can be fabricated. Short of getting the phone numbers of satisfied customers for prospective new customers to call up, testimonials have to work on the basis of trust. Nevertheless, a sales page without testimonials looks decidedly unconvincing.

Offer a Guarantee

In conjunction with an impressive list of testimonials, a money-back guarantee is a powerful sales tool to add to your copy. This may not be up to you, of course, but you should certainly have the confidence of knowing that making this suggestion to a client shows you have a sound understanding of what does and doesn't work. In cases where guarantees are given, less than 2% of customers ever claim their money back

Go for the Close

There is not much point writing scintillating copy if you don't ask for the order. It is not distasteful to do this, but a lot of copy avoids doing so. People know pretty quickly when they are reading an advert, however cunningly disguised as help and advice at the outset, and they expect it to end with a bid for their cash. Ask for the order, make it simple for the customer to buy, and close the sale. It's the whole point of direct response copy.

Weave your Spell

More precisely, weave a sprinkling of magic words into your copy and see how they work wonders. Certain words have, over time, proven to be powerful influencers when strategically dropped into promotional copy.

Powerful, amazing, astonishing, exciting, fantastic, fascinating, phenomenal, revolutionary, wonderful, special, unique, super, exclusive, incredible ... and other similar superlatives.

And don't forget offer-related words, and words that suggest an event to take notice of: guaranteed, urgent, announcing, new, introducing, first, free, improved, initial, limited offer, time-sensitive, time-limited, revealing, successful, breakthrough ...

Finally, keep in mind the personal connection you make when you talk to your audience in the second person singular: YOU.

Be Truthful

This means be truthful with your audience and with yourself. Sincerity sells. Copy that lies or bends the truth passes straight into the bad copy category, despite any sales it might elicit. Bad reps are too easily spread around these days via the internet. Also be aware that "time-sensitive" offers that actually never end are highly disingenuous and can insult the customer's intelligence. In this down economy, you don't really need to explain why a discount is being offered.

Be Honest With Yourself

For your own part, face up to the truth of your own work. Ask yourself if what you've written would cause you to buy. If not, what is lacking that can be added, or weak that can be strengthened?

Review and Rewrite

You will answer the above question about the quality of your own work far more easily by carrying out a serious and repeated review of it before you submit it. It is a very rare copywriter who can write a perfect piece of copy straight off. If you think you can do this, you are either amazing or deluded.

It is perfectly normal to finish your copy and then want to rewrite parts of it, and to go through this many times until you finally read through and have no corrections you wish to make. That process does not make you an amateur; it's what makes you a professional.

Naturally, this extra work will effectively reduce your hourly rate of pay, but it should make for a very happy client, and that will mean repeat business and often referred business.

Understand the Power of Words

This is the most fundamental point, but covers more than the overall message you are conveying. You need to be aware of the connotations of each word and phrase you use, and be happy that you are giving out the right message.

Ice to an Eskimo, Sand to an Arab

We all know the clichés about the amazing feats of the best salespeople, likened to being able to sell ice to Eskimos and sand to Arabs. As a copywriter, you are, whether you like it or not, a salesperson.

Some people may not like the implications of that. After all, doesn't your heart sink when a salesperson appears on your doorstep? Don't you perform a quick detour like a pro footballer avoiding a tackle whenever a salesperson heads your way in the mall?

Copywriters need to feel comfortable with what they are doing. This is crucial if you are to produce your best copy. Remember that selling is just about the oldest profession on the planet (there is one supposedly older, also vaguely sales-related). Get rid of all the salespeople and everything stops. Stores close down and trade disappears, locally, nationally, globally.

Copywriters are part of a noble profession without which the world could not operate.

You need to want to sell ice to Eskimos to be a copywriter. You can't judge the rights or wrongs of the issue. It is not your job to decide whether anyone truly *needs* what you are promoting; you just need to promote it when asked to do so. Look around your home and count the items you truly need to have in there to survive. There won't be much.

To write effective copy, you must be passionate about selling, not just writing. Passion is the key that unlocks the door through to that VIP lounge where only the top copywriters get to chill out after a job well done (and well paid).

You must have met a salesperson who made you feel enthusiastic about a product you never knew you wanted. That's

the effect your writing must have. Equally, you will have no doubt encountered the opposite type who approaches you with the sale already lost in their mind. It's in their expression, their gait, their voice. Be mindful that it is possible to inject all those negative elements into the written word. If you sit down to a copywriting project feeling bored by the whole prospect, then you are doing your client and your talent a huge disservice.

The brief may not be terribly exciting for you personally, but you can overcome this in various ways:

- See it as a professional challenge, and derive your excitement from that.
- Embrace the subject without prejudice. You may find that what you thought would be boring may turn out to be quite fascinating. It happens more than you might think.
- Enjoy learning about something new. This is a joy in itself.
- Gain satisfaction in knowing your client will be happy.
- Know you are doing your personal best, and enjoy the feeling that gives.

As much as you should strive for this ultimate passion in your copywriting, you must always remember that the ice-to-Eskimo analogy defines a mythical pinnacle of success that actually doesn't stand up to scrutiny. Supposing you did sell an Eskimo some ice, once his friends and relatives had roundly called him a moron and pointed out all the white stuff in his environs, that would put paid to any repeat business.

The point is not to get too caught up in the big money talk too soon. It's easy that way to become dissatisfied with your own achievements, which may in reality be pretty substantial.

Every Day in Every Way ...

Yes, you will get better, provided you take the time and make the effort. Writing of any sort improves with practice – that's the time element. The effort you make is your seeking out the best advice to ensure that you practice the right way.

Practice alone means very little, especially if it is just a repetition of previous mistakes that you don't even know are mistakes. Copywriting rules (the science) can be learned by anyone. A ten year-old could learn by heart the rules already detailed in the third chapter; that's not the same as putting them into practice and making them work.

The rules are just the foundation. The foundations of a house cannot be seen from a distance because they are below ground. You can't live comfortably on concrete foundations. Similarly, you don't get paid as a copywriter just for knowing the rules; your client wants to see you build a wonderful house. That's where the money is. Remember it is perfectly possible to build a horrible house on very strong foundations, and you may have no clue this is happening if you stay on the inside looking out.

Your education as a copywriter really kicks off when you start taking notice of how other people have built their houses. You watch what they've done, you watch what they do, and you learn from them. The best copywriters have spent years honing their skills to win the top jobs and earn the respect of their clients and their fellow copywriters. These are the people you need to seek out, and the internet provides an easy way to do this.

The Close

The close in marketing is when the salesperson goes for the kill – the sale. In closing this ebook down, a final piece of advice must be offered to you, the budding copywriter.

Be prepared to work extremely hard. It would be wrong to have talked about the importance of writing honest copy and then leave you with the idea that you will join the millionaire copywriters' club in six months. Even many of the copywriters mentioned above who are at the top of their game are not in that earnings bracket. And they are still, after years in the business, putting in just as many hours as the guy working construction.

If you are prepared to learn the rules, absorb the science, hone your art, and practice, practice, practice, then you are ready to step up onto the first rung of the ladder.

This is where your education begins and the hard work starts. Copywriting requires an immense amount of dedication. In the early days there will be setbacks and lean times. It is a competitive industry that is unregulated and therefore open to anyone who fancies their chances.

You must be committed to staying the course. If you can do that, you will steadily build your client list and establish yourself as a professional to be taken seriously.

At this point, it is traditional to wish you good luck.

So good luck!

Just remember that the harder you work, the luckier you will be.