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The 5 P Approach to Copy that Crushes It



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Things have gone terribly wrong.

In a flash you've lost your job or your business, and you're teetering on the brink of bankruptcy and family scorn. The creditors are circling and your spouse is losing faith.

It can happen to anyone.

So what's the one skill that will get you back everything you've lost, and more? The one ability that gives you the confidence to escape the sharks, calm the significant other, and start building something better?

(It's also a skill that makes having a job completely optional).

Some would say it's *sales*. People who can sell stuff can always make money. That's close, but it's not exactly right.

Better to be able to sell stuff by being able to *write*.

Copywriting skills mean you're always okay

Being able to sell with words alone, regardless of where you're physically located, is the most powerful skill you can have. And remember, this is coming from a guy who quit practicing law to do this. So I don't make this claim lightly.

Copywriting skills plus an Internet connection mean you can succeed from anywhere. And I don't mean just as a freelancer for hire, although that's always an attractive option.

As an entrepreneur, you don't even need to do the writing yourself. But understanding the art and science of effective copy is the thing that allows you to direct your content, copy, marketing strategy, and even your product and service development.

When you know why and how people *buy*, you've got more power than you know. As long as you never lose focus on the *buyer*, that is.

Copywriting isn't that mysterious. We've got over 100 years of data on tested and true tactics that always work when you want more people to buy or take some form of action.

If every business on the planet actually used these basic copywriting tactics to focus on the buyer instead of the seller, sales would increase across the board, thereby lifting the world out of global recession, saving the whales, and decreasing checkout lane impatience by 37%.

Just don't quote me on all of that.

All jokes aside, the fundamentals of good copy simply work, even if powered by uninspired writing. Using better headlines and clear and specific language, highlighting benefits over features, offering proof, having a clear call to action, and reversing buyer risk with a guarantee can boost your conversions significantly.

Of course, not everyone does these basic things. Often it's simply because they don't know how or just plain forget.

The basics are what I call "better than nothing" copy. So what's the difference between basic copywriting fundamentals and the blow-out brilliant promotions that change lives and catapult businesses to insane success?

What makes the difference?

It's amazing how tweaking little things can boost conversion. Headlines, button colors, word choice — all of these can be tested to see what works better.

But that comes later. It's how you begin that makes the most impact on the effectiveness of any piece of copy or promotional piece, whether text, audio, or video.

This is exactly what I didn't "get" when I was first learning copywriting. I would read a book or two, and it all made sense to me (in fact, I found it fascinating).

But when it came to actually writing copy, I had no clue what I was actually trying to achieve. The big picture was completely lost to me.

So, that's what this document is intended to do — help you understand from a big picture standpoint *what you must do* to write effective copy, how to come up with the critical concept that drives a successful promotion, and how to execute on it.

So, here's the most important thing you need to know:

The most important aspect of copy that works is *how well your message matches up with the way your prospective customer views things*. You've got to understand their motivations and desires. You've got to match their basic expectations and then exceed them.

Roy Williams summed it up best this way:

"Show me what a person admires, and I'll tell you everything about them that matters.

And then you'll know how to connect with them.

You'll know how to cheer up your new neighbor when you understand what she admires.

You'll know how to sell the man looking into your face when you understand what he admires.

You'll know how to attract future customers through your ads when you understand what they admire."

This is where you begin.

This is how you find a winning premise.

It's all about the premise

As a term in formal logic, the *premise* is a proposition supporting a certain conclusion. Applied to copywriting, I use the word premise to mean the emotional concept that not only attracts attention, but maintains engagement throughout every element of your landing page copy and imagery.

In other words, the premise is the concept that weaves itself from headline to call to action, tying everything together into a compelling, cohesive, and persuasive narrative with one simple and inevitable conclusion — your desired action.

The premise connects you to the emotional center of your prospect's brain, stimulates desire, maintains credibility, and results in the opening of the wallet. It's the unification of the prospect's worldview + the market + the benefits + the proof + a call to action into one simple, compelling message.

This happens when you understand how to frame your message and overall offer to mesh so tightly with your prospect's worldview that the "I want" trigger is pulled subconsciously.

Let's dig in deeper. But first things first.

Does anyone want your product or service?

Meet Ian.

Ian is a smart, creative, and talented guy. He's come up with an idea for a software product that every small business owner should use to improve their business.

He decides to create a web-based application and charge a monthly subscription fee. He can hardly contain his excitement as he throws himself into it.

Ian hires a top-notch programmer who can give him a functional web app for only \$30,000 (ouch). Ian then comes up with a full marketing plan, and spends three days writing the site copy that explains all the benefits his software service has to offer.

The site launches.

And nothing happens.

For the first week, Ian hears nothing but crickets chirping, despite all his hard work on pre-marketing and publicity.

He manages to snag a joint venture with a prominent small business blogger, but the conversion rate is terrible and the blogger is disappointed.

Since the product is obviously great (in his mind), Ian thinks the problem must be his marketing approach. It's got to be a matter of getting the word out to more people. So he puts together a Google AdWords campaign, and puts his last \$4,000 of credit on his card.

Nothing.

Ian never recoups his investment. After he brings in a professional copywriter to rework the offer, he gets the bad news about his real problem.

No one wants what Ian is selling.

Start with the prospect, not the product

So where did Ian go wrong?

There's an old saying in direct marketing circles ... start with the prospect, not the product.

In other words, what does your market want? And related to that, can you reach that market and is it big enough to be worth your time?

Ian went wrong because his idea was something he thought every small business owner should embrace. But it wasn't something they *wanted* to embrace.

It's like trying to sell asparagus to kids because it's good for them. If you're competing against the jingle of the ice cream truck down the street, you're probably not going to get the results you want.

And here's a tip for you freelance copywriters. The key to becoming a superstar in your field is to never take on a dog project like this (no matter how much you need the money). Only stake your reputation on products and services that satisfy some sort of existing market desire, and you'll look like a genius and never be short of work.

Next, fix the offer

Plenty of great products and services are ignored despite existing market desire. Often that's because they receive insufficient exposure, but just as often it's because the offer is not attractive.

Getting people to buy something online requires you to do three fundamental things:

1. Make an offer.
2. Provide information to help people accept your offer.
3. Make it easy to respond to your offer.

The offer is why your landing page exists. The action you're trying to prompt is the acceptance of your offer, whether it be a purchase, the exchange of an email address for information, or an invitation to call.

When you mention offers, people naturally think about price, and that's an important component. But offers go well beyond pricing to address things like risk reversal for the buyer, increasing urgency, providing attractive terms, adding incentives, and many other things that make a deal a win-win for both buyer and seller.

Check out [58 of the World's Greatest Offers](#) for ideas. Sometimes the secret to better conversions and higher profits is simply a better offer.

How do you know what people want?

The battle is won or lost, right here. Put me up against the greatest writer in the world, and if I understand the audience better, I will kick his or her ass every time when it comes to connection, engagement, and conversion.

What do you need to know? Think back to that quote from Roy Williams.

You need to know the kind of people they *admire*, and what they aspire to, despise, fear, and cherish.

Instead of sitting around dreaming up stuff you *guess* people might react favorably to, tell an educated story based on one or more archetypal individuals who represent the whole.

Understanding your audience at such an intimate level makes [creating buyer personas](#) important. It also helps to be a part of the market you're speaking to, which results in a more authentic story and easier leadership of the tribe you form.

It's all about *research*.

Research doesn't sound sexy, but it's the foundation of any smart marketing plan, online or off. The more time you spend understanding the people you're talking to, the better story you'll tell them.

With the combination of Google and social media, we've never had this much access to more information about our prospective audiences. And it's all free and incredibly valuable, if you know how to focus on the right things.

Worldviews, frames, and stories that make people want to buy

"Marketing succeeds when enough people with similar worldviews come together in a way that allows marketers to reach them cost-effectively." –Seth Godin

When you know your audience well, what you're really tuning in to is the way your people view the world. And when you understand the worldview your prospects share – the things they believe – you can frame your story in a way that resonates so strongly with them that you enjoy an "unfair" advantage over your competition.

Consider these competing worldviews, framed differently by simple word choice:

- Fitness Enthusiast vs. Gym Rat
- Progressive vs. Moonbat
- Businessman vs. The Man

These are extreme examples, and you can cater to audience beliefs and worldviews without resorting to name-calling. For example, the simple word “green” can provoke visceral reactions at the far sides of the environmental worldview spectrum, while also prompting less-intense emotions in the vast middle.

Framing your story against a polar opposite, by definition, will make some love you and others ignore or even despise you. That’s not only okay, it’s necessary. You’ll likely never convert those at the other end of the spectrum, but your core base will share your content and help you penetrate the vast group in the middle – and that’s where growth comes from.

The premise is the way you choose to tell the story so that you get the conclusion you desire.

It's the delivery of the framed message with [dramatic tension](#) and one or more [relatable heroes](#) so that your goals are achieved.

It's important to understand the difference between the beliefs or worldview of your audience (the frame), and the *expression* of that belief or worldview back to them. Think about your favorite novel or film ... the same information could have been transmitted another way, but just not as well. In fact, stories have been retold over and over throughout the ages – some are just better told than others.

The premise is essentially the difference between success and failure (or good and great) when it comes to copywriting and storytelling. As we're about to see, copywriting and storytelling are essentially the same thing when it comes down to it.

Is the premise the same as the USP?

You probably already know about the USP, or unique selling proposition. It's an advertising concept that dates back many decades, but if you're not familiar with it, here's a quick explanation.

An advertising guy named Rosser Reeves published a book called *Reality in Advertising* back in 1961. It was in that book that he introduced his concept of the *unique selling proposition*.

Reeves said a USP has three components:

1. Each advertisement must make a proposition to the prospect. Each must say, "Buy this product, and you will get this specific benefit."
2. The proposition must be one that the competition either cannot, or does not, offer.
3. The proposition must be so strong that it can pull over new customers to your offer.

Another way to think of the USP is as a "remarkable benefit." This is the modern spin Seth Godin put on the bedrock USP concept in his book *Purple Cow*. Another must-read book on modern positioning (even though they never use that term or mention the USP) is *Made to Stick* by Chip and Dan Heath.

In this day and age of hyper-competition, it's difficult to offer features that no other competitor can. So now the modern practice of positioning is all about the space your messages occupy *in the* mind of your prospective customer and how well you match up with their worldviews.

This is what finding a strong premise is all about. Often, it simply comes down to telling a different story.

The pure, refreshing taste of Schlitz Beer

Back in the 1920s, Schlitz Beer was the number five brand in the American beer market. The company hired now-legendary copywriter Claude Hopkins to do something about that unenviable position.

The first thing Claude did was tour the facility where the beer was brewed.

They showed him how the beer was cooled in a fashion that eliminated impurities. He saw the expensive white-wood pulp filters.

His hosts told him that every pump and pipe was cleaned twice for purity, and each bottle sterilized four times before being trusted to hold Schlitz beer. He saw the 4,000 foot well that supplied the water, despite the fact that nearby Lake Michigan would have provided an otherwise acceptable source.

When Hopkins asked why Schlitz didn't tell their customers about all of this rigorous attention to purity and quality, the response was "Every beer company does this."

"But others have never told this story," Hopkins replied.

Within months of the "new" story, Schlitz went from 5th place to a tie for first in the market.

Who wants fruit cake?

Let's face it ... it's hard to get excited about fruit cake. So when copywriter Gary Hennerberg had to help boost sales of the seasonal treat for the Collin Street Bakery of Corsicana, Texas, he discovered that taste tests proved that people enjoyed the product, but despised both the name and *the very idea* of fruit cake.

Time for a new premise.

So Gary did some digging, and discovered that Collin Street had some bragging rights in the ingredient department. The bakery used native Texas pecans in their cakes, from trees that grow next to a river or stream on small farms, instead of commercially-grown pecans.

Gary knew he had a story, and he wanted to see if it would help Collin Street Bakery increase their sales. He keyed in on how rare the pecans are to tell a compelling tale:

“From majestic pecan trees native only to a handful of Texas rivers and streams, soaring up to 150 feet in height and canopy, planted by mother nature as long ago as the Civil War.”

Sales increased by 60%, and tired old fruit cake became *Native Texas Pecan Cakes* — at least when delivered by the Collin Street Bakery.

So, is the premise a USP or not?

As seen in the last two examples, modern positioning is all about story, and every story has a premise. So in this case, your USP is also a premise.

But from a copywriting/promotional campaign standpoint, a premise is a specific story or concept that supports and flows from the top-line positioning. Here's a famous example.

Nike has one of the most powerful positioning statements on the planet, expressed in three little words — *just do it*. Beyond selling shoes, this is life philosophy boiled down to its essence, and that's why it's so powerful.

Now, think back to Nike's Instant Karma commercial. Better yet, [watch it again here](#). So what's the premise?

First, notice how you don't see a logo or company name until the very end. In fact, the camera barely shows the shoes of the athletes. It's all about the lyrics married to the visuals.

The first lyrical tie-in hits with "Join the human race." Then things really kick in with "Who do you think you are, a superstar? Well right you are!"

And then the unifying chorus paired with images of athletic adversity punctuated with triumph, as John Lennon repeats "As we all shine on"

This individual promotion supports Nike's overall brand positioning of *Just do it* in a powerful, unique way. Did it sell shoes, or only expose John Lennon to a new generation?

I'm not sure, but Nike is one of the best at using emotionally-charged premises in its messages. And this is the skill you need to get good at to create great copy.

In essence, every promotional premise is an aspect of positioning, but it's not the whole thing. It's a new chapter in the story that a particular company, product, or service is telling the marketplace, and it further shapes and defines the role in the marketplace and in the minds of prospects.

When you get right down to the fact that as a copywriter you're a *storyteller*, you know that story is all about *how you tell it*. It's not just an idea or a benefit, it's the way you communicate that idea or benefit in each and every message.

But first, we need to come up with that killer premise.

Premise Step One: Create the Concept

Great ideas are unique. There's no formula for innovative ideas, and anyone who tries to tell you otherwise is selling the slickest of snake oil.

That said, a great *premise* always has certain elements in common. It took me many years to understand that, beyond all the tactics, it's the premise of the message that matters first and foremost.

These days, they come naturally to me once I understand the market and the audience. The same will happen to you the more you work at it.

But first, let's understand the essential elements.

1. Be unpredictable

The first thing you absolutely must have is attention. Without initial attention, nothing else you've done matters.

And nothing kills attention faster than if your prospective reader, listener, or viewer thinks they already know where you're going. Beyond curiosity, a great premise delivers an unpredictable and unexpected element that makes it irresistible.

It all comes back to knowing at an intimate level who you're talking to and what are they used to seeing in the market. What messages are they getting from your competition? This is what you must use as the benchmark to create your own unique and unexpected angle that forms the foundation of your premise.

Think back on the classic Schlitz story from earlier. It wasn't that clean-filtered water was unique in the industry. It was that the marketplace wasn't *expecting* to hear that particular story.

In this day and age, you might have to dig deeper for a new and unexpected message that startles or downright fascinates people. A creative imagination combined with solid research skills help you see the nugget of gold no one else sees.

Part of why people tune things out is a lack of novelty, which makes even previously desirable subject matter mundane. So taking an approach that differs from the crowd can help you stand out, and that's why unpredictability is crucial for a strong premise.

Beyond attention, *credibility* is also critical to a great premise. And when you take the same old tired approach as everyone in your niche or industry, you come across as manufactured and insincere.

Just remember as a final point, things change. What was once unpredictable can become not only predictable, but trite. This is why being able to come up with a fresh premise is a valuable skill for anyone who writes copy or markets anything.

2. Be simple

One of the fundamental rules of [Copywriting 101](#) is to be clear and simple. Because a premise by definition is an unprecedented and grand idea, sometimes boiling it down to its essence is difficult, or worse, neglected.

Now don't get me wrong. I'm not saying to water down your big idea to the point of stupidity.

That defeats the purpose.

What I'm saying is you've got to make it so simple and clear that it travels directly into the mind of your prospect, so he begins to tell himself the story. Your copy must guide them and inspire them, not beat them over the head.

So, you've got a grand premise that's unpredictable and destined to shake up your market. Reduce it to a paragraph.

Now, take it down to two sentences.

Get it even shorter.

Just do it.

At this point, you may find yourself with a great tagline. At minimum, you've now got the substance for the bold promise contained in your primary headline (more on that in a bit).

3. Be real

You've heard that in this day of social media, you've got to keep it real. Speak with a human voice. Be authentic.

Be *you*.

You also hopefully know that social media hasn't changed the fact that it's about *them*, not you. In fact, it's more about them than ever.

How do you make that work? What makes a premise *real* to the right people?

First of all, your premise must be highly relevant to your intended audience. Without relevance, you can't inspire *meaning*. And it's meaningful messages that inspire action.

Meaning is a function of what people *believe* before you find them. As we discussed earlier, what people believe is how they view the world, and your premise has to frame that view appropriately to be effective.

As a function of belief, meaning is derived from the context in which your desired audience perceives your message. From there, your premise has to provoke a desirable *reaction* before inspiring action.

Even with relevant meaning, many messages still don't create the kind of instant understanding that a great premise seeks to create. That's why they don't convert at a high rate.

What's missing?

Your message must communicate meaningful benefits that are also tangible.

This is the second important aspect of an authentic premise, because it's so critical to understanding.

In this sense, tangible means real or actual, rather than imaginary or visionary. This is the aspect of your premise that is *express*, meaning the part where you tell the story in a way that concretely injects certain information into the prospects mind in a specific way.

Copywriter Clayton Makepeace is one of the best at expressing *tangible* benefits. He uses the example of the Total cereal ad from the late 80s to teach tangible benefits. Remember that one?

"How many bowls of YOUR cereal to equal one bowl of Total?" they asked.

Then they showed you stacks of cereal bowls with various competing brands, in one case reaching 28 bowls high.

Instead of saying something pedestrian like "Total has 25 times the nutrition of the leading brand," they showed you a tangible expression of benefit. But it doesn't need to be done with actual visuals to work. Words are plenty powerful.

The book *Made to Stick* gives us another example with the case of Art Silverman, a guy with a vendetta against popcorn. Silverman wanted to educate the public about the fact that a typical bag of movie popcorn has 37 grams of saturated fat, while the USDA recommends you have no more than 20 grams in an entire day.

Instead of simply citing that surprising, if dry, statistic, Silverman made the message more tangible. He said:

A medium-sized 'butter' popcorn contains more artery-clogging fat than a bacon-and-eggs breakfast, a Big Mac and fries for lunch, and a steak dinner with all the trimmings — combined!

You'll note that both examples contain the element of unpredictability and simplicity. But it's the relevant and tangible *expression* of the premise that creates instant understanding.

Make your messages as *real* to people as possible, and you'll create the kind of instant understanding that all truly great premises contain.

But there's one more critical element to a premise that works.

4. Be credible

If you're writing to persuade, you have to hit the gut before you get anywhere near the brain. The part that decides "*I want that*" is emotional and often subconscious. If your premise doesn't work emotionally, logic will never get a chance to weigh in.

If you flip that emotional switch, the sale (or other action) is yours to lose. And I mean that literally. Because our logical minds do eventually step in (usually in a way that makes us *think* we're actually driven by logic in the first place). If your premise is not credible (as in it's *too good* to be true) you fail. That doesn't mean hyperbole never works, as long as the prospect wants to believe you bad enough.

That's how some desperate people in certain markets are taken advantage of.

But *belief* is critical in any market, with any promotion. And that's why credibility is the final key to a winning premise — *people must believe you just as your premise must match their beliefs.*

Remember, the more innovative your idea or exceptional your offer, the more you're going to have to prove it. This brings us right back to an unexpected, simple, and tangible expression of benefit in a way that's *credible*.

Every box of Total cereal contains the cold hard data about the nutritional content. Art Silverman's popcorn claims were backed up by solid scientific facts about saturated fat.

The kind of proof any particular premise requires will vary, but the more credibility that can be baked into the premise itself, the better. More on proof in a bit.

Premise Step Two: Execute with the 5 P Approach

Now you've got to execute. You've got to tell the story in a way that works, and with a structure that succeeds.

A popular copywriting structure is AIDA (attention, interest, desire, action), which dates back to the early days of mass media advertising. AIDA is a useful framework, but it leaves too little room for a true understanding of what each element is intended to include.

The 4 P structure, on the other hand, consists of promise, picture, proof, and push in place of the four elements of attention, interest, desire, and action. The 4 Ps provide more expansive elements than AIDA, which is why it's a favorite of many top copywriters.

But there was still something missing. Luckily, the missing element also started with a P:

The premise.

1. Premise

When it comes to getting people to take action now, as opposed to “thinking about it” (and often never returning), it all begins with the *premise*. Your copy needs an exceptional premise that allows you to make a resulting bold promise that attracts attention and compels your ideal prospect to read, watch, or listen to the rest of your message.

As we've seen, it's tempting to think of the premise as being the same as your positioning or USP. And when selling information, it's pretty close. But it's more helpful to think of the big idea as *resulting from* your USP, which leaves you room to test other promotional ideas in the future.

For example, here's an idea for a book or online education program:

The Benjamin Franklin Guide to Small Business Success

Okay, so the wisdom and habits of successful entrepreneur and statesman Ben Franklin are your positioning, but what are you really selling? Most likely it's a small business marketing and management system, right?

So, perhaps you key in on this particular Ben Franklin quote as the premise for your promotional copy:

"Drive thy business or it will drive thee."

The premise in this case would be that the key to business success — even back in the days of ol' Ben — is to have systems in place that allow you to work on your business, not *in* your business. This is just a random example, but hopefully you get the idea behind your premise compared to your overall positioning.

2. Promise

Next, we need to make a bold promise.

Here, it may be tempting to think of the promise as being the same as your offer, but in reality, your offer is simply a component of the larger promise.

Many copywriters swear that your promise in the headline must contain a tangible, valued benefit directed at the prospect. In other words, the ultimate benefit that comes from taking the action you want them to.



There will be numerous benefits to identify, and you should strive to find as many as humanly possible. But it's the *ultimate benefit* you discover by working through the benefits pyramid (see graphic) that equates to *your promise*.

So, returning to the Ben Franklin example, the *premise* of creating systems to have a more successful business is a nice hook, but it's not the *promise*.

After all, how many people sit around thinking "You know, what I really need are some systems for my business?"

Some do, and those will be your easiest sales.

But most businesspeople are thinking about how to make more money, become more productive, spend more time with family and generally *have more of a life*.

All of those are benefits of having systems in place, but what's the ultimate benefit your customer is looking for?

Freedom.

Now you know the story your prospect wants to hear, and the general way it should be told.

Another school of thought on the promise in your headline is that it does not have to directly address the prospects ultimate benefit, because those headlines are too easily dismissed as advertisements. For example, copywriter

John Carlton wrote a famous headline about a one-legged golfer and his secret to huge drives and a 10-stroke improvement in his golf game.

The secret, of course, is all about better balance and body positioning, which is the true way to get better at golf, but not exactly sexy. So the premise of the one-legged golfer (which was a true story Carlton discovered in his research, and as with Schlitz and the Collin Street Bakery, the business owner knew about but dismissed) was the key to the hugely bold promise.

In this case, making the story about someone other than the prospect — someone so counterintuitive to “common sense” — made the premise downright fascinating. But that’s not all.

The one-legged golfer story was unpredictable, simple, real, and credible, hitting all of our four conceptual criteria for a great premise.

This made the promotion incredibly effective at achieving the intended goal, because the prospect came to the intended conclusion by *telling themselves* a story:

If a one-legged guy can do it, surely I can do it.

The important lesson here is that the promise is an attention-grabbing expression of your premise. Choosing the right way to tell the story is also vitally important, and that brings us to the next element — the picture.

3. Picture

Instead of the vague notion of “interest” in the AIDA formula, here we segue into painting a vivid picture for the reader. You’re fleshing out the premise, promise, and setting up the benefits of taking action *now* by using vibrant language that sticks in the mind.

The picture phase is all about using images, storytelling, and tangible language as a way to hold the reader’s emotional interest while you nudge them down the path to acceptance. It also keeps you focused on communicating the benefits associated with the features or facts that you need to get across.

The same general premise is used today by Dos Equis with their *Most Interesting Man in the World* campaign.

In this case, the story begins with that fascinating photo, and continues with Ogilvy's words. The picture and headline got people to read, which then kicked in their own imaginations. The prospects then told themselves their own version of the story, powered by a desire for association with this fascinating character.

This is a crucial point, so let me repeat. *The prospect has to tell themselves their own story* based on the picture you create in their head with the elements of your landing page.

In his book *True and False*, celebrated playwright and screenwriter David Mamet gives an example from the world of film editing. When editing is done correctly, stories are told not by the director or actors, but in the mind of the viewer. It's a great way to understand the picture phase of copywriting.

Shot A, a teakettle whistling; shot B, a young woman raises her head from a desk. The viewer is thus given the idea "rising to renewed labors."

If shot A is a black-robed judge being handed an envelope, he opens it, and clears his throat; and shot B is the same as before—a woman raising her head from a desk—the audience creates the idea “hearing the verdict.”

The action of the woman is the same in each case, her snippet of film is the same. Nothing has changed except the juxtaposition of images, but that juxtaposition gives the audience a completely new idea.

Mamet is describing the theory of a guy named Eisenstein. The theory states that any technique that allows the viewer to tell themselves the story is vastly stronger and more effective than other approaches.

It's the same with great copy. Here's a classic example.

The following is an excerpt from the direct-mail piece that generated an estimated \$2 billion in revenue for *The Wall Street Journal*. I've seen adaptations and straight rip-offs dozens of times. Here's how it starts:

Dear Reader:

On a beautiful late spring afternoon, twenty-five years ago, two young men graduated from the same college. They were very much alike, these two young men. Both had been better than average students, both were personable and both – as young college graduates are – were filled with ambitious dreams for the future.

Recently, these two men returned to college for their 25th reunion.

They were still very much alike. Both were happily married. Both had three children. And both, it turned out, had gone to work for the same Midwestern manufacturing company after graduation, and were still there.

But there was a difference. One of the men was manager of a small department of that company. The other was its president.

What Made The Difference

Have you ever wondered, as I have, what makes this kind of difference in people's lives? It isn't always a native intelligence or talent or dedication. It isn't that one person wants success and the other doesn't.

The difference lies in what each person knows and how he or she makes use of that knowledge.

And that is why I am writing to you and to people like you about The Wall Street Journal. For that is the whole purpose of The Journal: To give its readers knowledge – knowledge that they can use in business.

...

Two billion dollars from a simple story told on a piece of paper. This is the power of copy that begins with the right premise, and lets prospects imagine themselves as the hero (with the help of your offer, naturally).

Just remember, the goal is to get the prospect to persuade themselves through their own understanding, experiences, and desires. The emotional picture triggers a subconscious decision to buy, at which point the sale is yours to lose or retain as the prospects logical mind takes over.

4. Proof

You've communicated the foundational information you want readers to accept in an emotional and brain-friendly manner. Now you've got to back it up with supporting proof.

Statistics, studies, graphs, charts, third-party facts, testimonials, a demonstration that the features of your product deliver the benefits you've promised—these are all part of the Proof section of your piece. Now's the time to play it straight and appeal to the reader's logical mind to support the emotional triggers you pulled with the promise and picture.

Rhetorical arguments and promotional pieces fail when proof is missing, skimpy, or lacking in credibility. While your relationship with the reader hopefully carries trust and authority, asking people to accept your assertions without supporting evidence is an easy way for your writing to fail.

Remember, a great premise has credibility baked in, so the entire time, your premise is still winding its way throughout your copy. It's the glue that holds everything together, or as copywriter Michael Masterson says, it's the *golden thread* that connects initial attention all the way through to action.

So, even the proof you offer is premise-driven. Following proof, it's during the fifth and final step that action takes place — the push.

5. Push

Now we come to the all-important action phase of the piece, which incorporates and expands desire. While “push” can carry a negative connotation, here we're using it as a more expansive persuasive element that makes action more likely.

The push phase is more than just a call to action. It's about communicating an outstanding offer in a clear, credible, and compelling fashion, and then asking for action. It's the grand finale where the premise and the purchase make as much sense to the reader as they do to you.

Persuasive writing begins with the end in mind, so during the push you're tying the beneficial promise and the vivid picture to solid acceptance and concrete action. Don't be shy about “telling them what you've told them” as a way to connect the dots. Assuming your prospect already “gets it” is a great way to kill your sale.

Persuasion is about understanding.

Understanding leads to acceptance when the product is relevant and high-quality, the offer is attractive, and perhaps most important, when the message is sound and well-targeted.

Don't assume people understand on their own. It's a noisy world out there, so you've got to educate people with an instantly tangible and meaningful premise.

Good copy simply educates the reader in a way that the brain finds appealing. And a big part of brain-friendly language is the compelling structure that people need to see things your way.

Is this all I need?

If you've been writing copy for a while, but struggling, I hope this overview of "how to begin" has helped. As I said, it wasn't until I got the importance of the premise as it relates to the prospect that I started to understand what I was doing, and my copy improved drastically.

If you're just beginning to study copywriting, hopefully what you've read will save you time and frustration. Learning the tried-and-true tactics isn't that tough — it's knowing how to apply them in the context of the big picture.

That being said, no, this is not all you need.

I'm still learning how to write better copy all the time. So is everyone who takes this craft seriously, because you can always get better.

I've read just about every copywriting book, course, and manual I could get my hands on. And so should you.

Excited about learning more? Get started by checking out my favorite [books on copywriting](#), which are in addition to the books I've mentioned in this ebook.

Here's to you writing better copy!