

copyblogger

Copywriting 101

How to Craft Compelling Copy



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Copywriting is one of the most essential elements of effective online marketing.

The art and science of direct-response copywriting involves strategically delivering words (whether written or spoken) which get people to take some form of action.

Copywriters are some of the highest-paid writers in the world, but to become a truly proficient and profitable copy expert, you'll need to invest time and energy in studying the craft.

To truly excel as a copywriter, you may even want to consider investing in a copywriting course that can provide you [more comprehensive training](#). If you'd prefer to get started with a free resource, this ebook is designed to get you up and running with the basics of writing great copy.

Ready to get started?

Let take a peek behind the curtain, and discover the real "secrets" to Improving your copywriting skills as a content marketer.

Don't Read This, or the Kitty Gets It

by Brian Clark

Poor Fluffy. I asked you not to do this, and you've gone and broken the rules.

Things don't look good for this cute little kitten I've taken hostage in case my demands were not met. She is *awfully* sweet, though.

We'll just have to wait until later on in the chapter to decide the fate of Fluffy. But first, we really do need to discuss the ultimate goal of good copywriting.

Stick with me and I'll go easy on the cat. Deal?

Let's get started. What is the primary purpose of any piece of writing that you put out online — whether a blog post, a networking email, a sales letter or a tutorial?

For starters, to get what you've written read, right?

Makes sense.

So, what's the primary purpose of your headline, your graphics, your fonts, and every other part of the content?

The simple, surprising answer is...

To get the first sentence read.

This may seem somewhat simplistic to you, or maybe even confusing. I came across this way of looking at copywriting later in my studies. I had spent plenty of time trying to master the art of writing a perfect headline, or properly conveying product benefits, or learning how to craft a compelling call to action.

But it all came together for me when legendary copywriter and direct marketer Joe Sugarman shared his secret for becoming a great copywriter:

Every element of copy has just one purpose — to get the first sentence read.

In his seminars, Sugarman would quiz his students on the purpose of various copy elements: the headline, the graphics, the sub-headlines, etc. Why are they important?

“What is the purpose of a headline?” Sugarman would ask.

Every time the student started with some complicated, jargon-filled explanation, he would cut them off.

“The purpose is to get the first sentence read,” he would counter.

“And the purpose of the first sentence is to get the second sentence read,” he continued.

And so on, down a slippery slide that leads to your offer and the sale.

This is an extremely valuable way to go about structuring *any* writing, and it’s crucial to writing intended to persuade or sell. Many times we find ourselves so eager to arrive at our conclusion that we forget that the essence of making a persuasive point (or causing any action) is *how we get there*.

Step by step.

Now ... how do we get there?

With this simple framework in mind, the stage is set for drilling down deeper into the nitty gritty of the “step by step.” We’re now in a better position to more fully appreciate the specific techniques that apply to all of the various elements of strong copy.

For example, we can now see:

- Why a strong, compelling headline is critical
- Why immediately focusing on the benefit to the reader is so crucial
- Why you must make a promise to the reader that you later fulfill, and
- Why you must back up everything you’ve said with very specific proof.

If no one reads, all is lost.

And the key to getting someone to read is one sentence at a time, so compelled by that sentence that they want to read the next. In other words, *how you say it is* how you get there.

And while I did get you to read this entire chapter, I wouldn't exactly recommend the strategy employed here. It worked, but pulling cheap stunts like this won't help you in the long run.

Besides ... my four year old daughter staged a daring rescue of the kitten when I wasn't looking.

Kids!

To Be, or Not to Be

Now *that's* a question.

The first six words of Hamlet's Act III, Scene 1 soliloquy are without doubt the most famous line William Shakespeare ever wrote. It's also one of the most recognizable quotes in the English-speaking world.

And not a single word over three letters long.

The lesson? Keep it simple. Good copy is written in clear, concise, simple words that get your point across. It's conversational.

You can also fracture the occasional rule of grammar, if it helps to make your writing more digestible. Sentence fragments, one-sentence paragraphs, beginning with conjunctions and ending in prepositions are all fine, even desirable.

And don't forget to use plenty of bullets and numbered lists. Think your audience is too sophisticated for this? Don't be so sure.

A recent study shows that more than 50 percent of students at four-year schools and more than 75 percent at two-year colleges in the United States could not:

- Interpret a table about exercise and blood pressure;
- Understand the arguments of newspaper editorials; or
- Compare credit card offers with different interest rates and annual fees.

The *bad news* is that these kids are more literate than the average US adult, which is not that surprising considering that the vast majority of US adults have less education.

So ... keep it simple and clear. No one will ever complain that your writing is too easy to understand.

How to Write Headlines That Work

Your headline is the first (and perhaps only) impression you make on a prospective reader. Without a headline or post title that turns a skimmer into a reader, the rest of your words may as well not even exist.

But a headline can do more than simply grab attention. A *great* headline can also communicate a full message to its intended audience, and it absolutely must lure the reader into your body text.

At its essence, a compelling headline must promise some kind of benefit or reward for the reader, in trade for the valuable time it takes to read more.

In [The Copywriter's Handbook](#), copywriter [Bob Bly](#) sets forth eight time-tested headline categories that compel action and rake in sales:

- *Direct Headlines* go straight to the heart of the matter, without any attempt at cleverness. Bly gives the example of **Pure Silk Blouses – 30 Percent Off** as a headline that states the selling proposition directly. A direct blog post title might read **Free SEO E-book**.

- An *Indirect Headline* takes a more subtle approach. It uses curiosity to raise a question in the reader's mind, which the body copy answers. Often a double meaning is utilized, which is useful online. An article might have the headline **Fresh Bait Works Best** and yet have nothing to do with fishing, because it's actually about writing timely content that acts as **link bait**.
- A *News Headline* is pretty self-explanatory, as long as the news itself is actually, well ... news. A product announcement, an improved version, or even a content scoop can be the basis of a compelling news headline. **Think Introducing Flickr 2.0** or **My Exclusive Interview With Steve Jobs**.
- The *How-to Headline* is everywhere, online and off, for one reason only – it works like a charm. Bly says, "Many advertising writers claim if you begin with the words *how to*, you can't write a bad headline." An example would be, umm... oh yes... the title of this section of the book.
- A *Question Headline* must do more than simply ask a question, it must be a question that, according to Bly, the reader can empathize with or would like to see answered. He gives this example from *Psychology Today*: **Do You**

Close the Bathroom Door Even When You're the Only One Home? Another example used in Internet marketing guru-ville is **Who Else Wants to Get Rich Online?**

- The *Command Headline* boldly tells the prospect what he needs to do, such as Exxon's old **Put a Tiger in Your Tank** campaign. Bly indicates that the first word should be a strong verb demanding action, such as **Subscribe to Copyblogger Today!**
- Another effective technique is called the *Reason Why Headline*. Your body text consists of a numbered list of product features or tips, which you then incorporate into the headline, such as **Two Hundred Reasons Why Open Source Software Beats Microsoft**. It's not even necessary to include the words "reasons why." This technique is actually the underlying strategy behind the ubiquitous blogger "list" posts, such as **8 Ways to Build Blog Traffic**.

- Finally, we have the *Testimonial Headline*, which is highly effective because it presents outside proof that you offer great value. This entails taking what someone else has said about you, your product or service, and using their actual words in your headline. Quotation marks let the reader know that they are reading a testimonial, which will continue in the body copy. An example might be **“I Read Copyblogger First Thing Each Morning,” admits Angelina Jolie.**

Hey, we can dream, can't we?

Next, let's take a look at why headlines are so important (with some surprising statistics and stories) and get more tips on how to improve your headlinewriting skills.

Writing Headlines That Get Results

It's no surprise to discover that one of the most popular blog posts Brian Clark ever wrote for Copyblogger was [How to Write Headlines That Work](#).

Every copywriter and every journalist knows the importance of a powerful headline, and that awareness has spilled into the business blogosphere, where everyone is a bit of a copywriter and a bit of a journalist.

Despite that, many still underestimate just how important headlines are. So here are some anecdotes, facts, and guidelines that can help you write even better headlines (and also let you know how much you should focus on them).

The 50/50 Rule of Headlines

According to some of the best copywriters of all time, you should spend **half** of the entire time it takes to write a piece of persuasive content on the headline. So if you have a blog post that is really important to you or your business, one that you *really* want people to read, you should downright *obsess* over your post title.

Advertising legend David Ogilvy knew the power of headlines, and how the headline literally determined whether the advertisement would get read. He rewrote this famous headline for an automobile advertisement **104** times:

At 60 miles an hour, the only thing you hear in the new Rolls Royce is the ticking of the dashboard clock ...

Master copywriter Gene Schwartz often spent an entire week on the first 50 words of a sales piece — the headline and the opening paragraph. Those 50 words are the most important part of any persuasive writing, and writing them well takes time.

Even for the masters.

The 80/20 Rule of Headlines

Here are some interesting statistics.

On average, 8 out of 10 people will read headline copy, but only 2 out of 10 will read the rest. This is the secret to the power of the headline, and why it so highly determines the effectiveness of the entire piece.

The better the headline, the better your odds of beating the averages and getting what you've written read by a larger percentage of people.

Writing a great headline doesn't guarantee the success of your writing. The benefit conveyed in the headline still needs to be properly satisfied in the body copy, either with your content or your offer.

But great body content with a bad or even marginal headline is doomed to go unread.

How to Write a Great Headline

In the last section of this ebook, we looked at the different categories of headlines that work. Now we'll look at analytical techniques for producing great headlines.

The copywriting trainers at [American Writers & Artists](#) teach **The Four U's** approach to writing headlines.

Headlines, subheads and bullets should:

- Be **USEFUL** to the reader,
- Provide him with a sense of **URGENCY**,
- Convey the idea that the main benefit is somehow **UNIQUE**;
and
- Do all of the above in an **ULTRA-SPECIFIC** way.

Copywriter [Clayton Makepeace](#) says to ask yourself six questions before you start to write your headline:

- Does your headline offer the reader a reward for reading?
- What specifics could you add to make your headline more intriguing and believable?
- Does your headline trigger a strong, actionable emotion the reader already has about the subject at hand?
- Does your headline present a proposition that will instantly get your prospect nodding his or her head?
- Could your headline benefit from the inclusion of a proposed transaction?

- Could you add an element of intrigue to drive the prospect into your opening copy?

Makepeace's six questions combined with the basic structure of The Four U's provide an excellent framework for writing spectacular headlines. Note that just about any headline which satisfies the framework will fall into one of the eight categories you learned in the last section.

It takes work and focus, but the effort will make you a more popular blogger and a more profitable businessperson.

The Structure of Persuasive Copy

We've seen that the purpose of each element of copy is designed to get the first sentence read, then from there keep the reader engaged step by step to the conclusion. We know to keep things clear, concise and simple so that our writing communicates with ease.

And we definitely understand the make-or-break importance of an attentiongrabbing headline.

So ... how do we then structure our content to be persuasive?

Good content structure is never written in stone, but persuasive copy will do certain things and contain certain elements time and time again. Whether you're writing a sales page, long blog post, or promotional ebook, the flow will determine effectiveness.

Here are some guidelines:

- First of all, focus on the reader – make an important promise early on (with your headline and opening paragraphs) that tells the reader what's in it for her. Never allow readers to question why they are bothering to pay attention.

- Each separate part of your narrative should have a main idea (something compelling) and a main purpose (to rile up the reader, to counter an opposing view, etc) which supports your bigger point and promise. Don't digress, and don't ramble. Stay laser focused.
- Be ultra-specific in your assertions, and always make sure to give "reasons why." General statements which are unsupported by specific facts cause a reader's BS detector to go on high alert.
- Demonstrate large amounts of credibility, using statistics, expert references, and testimonials as appropriate. You must be authoritative – if you're not an existing expert on a subject, you'd better have done your research.
- After building your credibility and authority, make sure you get back to the most important person – the reader. What's STILL in it for him? Restate the hook and the promise that got readers engaged in the first place.

- Make an offer. Whether you're selling a product or selling an idea, you've got to explicitly present it for acceptance by the reader. Be bold and firm when you present your offer, and relieve the reader's risk of acceptance by standing behind what you say.
- Sum everything up, returning full circle to your original promise and demonstrate how you've fulfilled it.
- These are some of the key elements of persuasive copy. Use them to provide a "roadmap" to your writing, and you'll achieve better results.

Now that you know the basics of creating persuasive copy, let's dig into one particular element of copywriting that often trips up beginners -- features and benefits.

Now Featuring Benefits

One of the most repeated rules of compelling copy is to stress *benefits*, not features. In other words, identify the underlying benefit that each feature of a product or service provides to the prospect, because that's what will prompt the purchase.

This is one rule that *always* applies, except when it doesn't. We'll look at the exceptions in a bit.

Fake Benefits

The idea of highlighting benefits over features seems simple. But it's often tough to do in practice.

Writers often end up with *fake benefits* instead.

Top copywriter Clayton Makepeace asserts that fake benefits will kill sales copy, so you have to be on the lookout for them in your writing. He uses this headline as an example:

"Balance Blood Sugar Levels Naturally!"

That sounds pretty beneficial, doesn't it? In reality, there's not a single real benefit in the headline.

True Benefits

Makepeace advises to apply his patented “forehead slap” test to see if your copy truly contains a benefit to the reader. In other words, have you ever woken up from a deep sleep, slapped yourself in the forehead, and exclaimed “Man... I need to balance my blood sugar levels naturally!”

It doesn't happen. So getting someone to pull out their wallet to buy that so-called “benefit” will be difficult at best.

Here's how Makepeace identifies the *real* benefit hidden in that headline:

Nobody really wants to balance their blood sugar levels. But anyone in his or her right mind DOES want to avoid the misery of blindness ... cold, numb, painful limbs ... amputation ... and premature death that go along with diabetes.

A high risk person will want to avoid the terrible effects of diabetes. That is the *true* benefit that the example product offers.

How to Extract True Benefits

So, how do you successfully extract true benefits from features?
Here's a four-step process that works:

- First, make a list of every feature of your product or service.
- Second, ask yourself why each feature is included in the first place.
- Third, take the "why" and ask "how" does this connect with the prospect's desires?
- Fourth, get to the absolute root of what's in it for the prospect at an emotional level.

Let's look at a product feature for a fictional News Feed Reader app:

Feature:

"Contains an artificial intelligence algorithm."

Why it's there:

"Adds greater utility by adapting and customizing the user's information experience."

What's in it for them:

"Keeps the things you read the most at the forefront when you're in a hurry."

Emotional Root:

"Stay up to date on the things that add value to your life and career, without getting stressed out from information overload."

Getting to the emotional root is crucial for effective consumer sales. But what about business prospects?

When Features Work

When selling to business or highly technical people, features alone can sometimes do the trick. Pandering to emotions will only annoy them. Besides, unlike consumers (who mostly "want" things rather than "need" them), business and tech buyers often truly *need* a solution to a problem or a tool to complete a task. When a feature is fairly well known and expected from your audience, you don't need to sell it.

However, with innovative features, you still need to move the prospect down the four-step path. While the phrase "contains an artificial intelligence algorithm" may be enough to get the [Slashdot](#)

reader salivating, he'll still want to know how it works and what it does for him. The *What's in it for me?* aspect remains crucial.

For business buyers, you're stressing "bottom line" benefits from innovative features. If you can demonstrate that the prospect will be a hero because your CRM product will save her company \$120,000 a year compared to the current customer relationship management choice, you've got a good shot.

While that may seem like a no-brainer purchase *to you*, you'll still need to strongly support the promised benefit with a detailed explanation of how the features actually deliver. Remember, change scares the business buyer, because it's their job or small business on the line if the product disappoints.

Sell With Benefits, Support With Features

We're not as logical as we'd like to think we are. Most of our decisions are based on deep-rooted emotional motivations, which we then justify with logical processes. So, first help the right brain create desire, then satisfy the left brain with features and hard data so that the wallet actually emerges.

Persuading your reader with features and benefits is important -- but you also need to know how to craft a truly compelling offer. Let's look at some guidelines for creating offers in our next section.

“Kids Eat Free” and Other Irresistible Offers

The sign says it all — “Kids Eat Free Every Monday and Tuesday.” It's out in front of a Mexican food restaurant on my way home.

That's called an offer. It's not the restaurant's main offering (which is trading Mexican food for money). As far as that goes, this is probably the third best (out of four) Mexican food joints in my hometown.

But every Monday and Tuesday night, the place is packed. They've made an appealing offer that caused people to take action.

“Offer” is a contractual term. It's an invitation to enter into an economic relationship, or any relationship really.

The relationship is based on mutual promises. *I'll do this for you if you give me money or attention or sex or friendship...*

If there's no acceptance of the invitation, there's no contract and no relationship.

Uber-marketer Mark Joyner devotes [an entire book](#) to the subject of offers. He demonstrates that hugely successful businesses are built upon an *Irresistible Offer*.

Joyner's work makes great companion reading to Seth Godin's [All Marketers Are Liars](#), because both books say the same thing in different ways.

Formulating an irresistible offer means telling a story that people want to hear, so they naturally respond.

You must then *live* the story and fulfill the offer.

It's helpful to think about offers as coming in two varieties – primary and promotional. I'll highlight a couple of Joyner's favorite irresistible offers to demonstrate one of each type.

Primary Offers: Federal Express

FedEx is a billion dollar company so essential that corporate commerce might grind to a halt if they and their progeny ceased business. The company originated with an idea expressed in a Yale undergraduate term paper authored by founder Fred Smith, which according to popular lore received a C from his skeptical professor.

The company filled a huge need at the time, because the monopolistic United States Postal Service provided unacceptable results to really important people, mainly on Wall Street. So Fred took Wall Street's money and became essential by providing an offer that couldn't be refused – guaranteed overnight delivery.

When it absolutely, positively has to be there overnight.

About the only thing this offer doesn't communicate is price. If the price wasn't right, FedEx would not have blasted off; but in the early days, price wasn't the first question you asked if it *really, absolutely, positively* had to be there the next morning.

Promotional Offers: Domino's Pizza

Tom Monaghan entered the world of pizza with a single location he bought in 1960. Pizza is a tough business – it's the only food item that has its own category in the *Yellow Pages*, and there are always several shops to choose from in any reasonably populated area.

While trying to expand the business, Monaghan faced near bankruptcy and franchise disputes that almost buried Domino's. But one single promotional idea changed everything and put Domino's in an overwhelmingly dominant position in this ultra-competitive field:

30 minutes or less... or it's free.

That simple guarantee was explosive. The secret to the offer's success resides in the nature of your average tired, hungry, time-strapped citizen. What seems like the safer bet – the tastiest pizza in town with unpredictable timing, or the pizza that arrives in a half an hour or else ends up a free meal?

The irony is, back before Domino's had to discontinue the offer in 1993 due to an auto injury lawsuit, *the pizza sucked*. Some think it still does.

Each day, millions of people in more than 60 countries eat Domino's.

Make an Offer

It's troubling to see so many entities trying to gain business online, yet without ever making a compelling offer. There's no apparent reason why someone should select you from the overcrowded field, because often you've made no express offer *at all*.

So many websites assume that a visitor will *get* the obvious value that the owner knows he provides. Value is communicated through offers, however, and those offers must be communicated quickly

and explicitly. Consider your own surfing habits for a second, and ask yourself – why would my target audience be any different?

In the lingo of direct-response copywriting, an offer is a *call to action*. For bloggers, desired actions include having a reader subscribe, bookmark you, make comments, respond to surveys, share your post on social networking sites, and utilize your information resources that double as sales tools.

Start making offers if you want some action.

This Ebook Rocks ... I Guarantee It!

There you have it. You just can't go wrong reading this ebook.

We've guaranteed your satisfaction. Those are powerful words, right?

But what does our guarantee really mean? What if you think this ebook is actually marginal at best? There's no money to return. And we can't give you back your valuable time if you feel it was wasted.

Boy... we'd better make this good.

No Power Without Proof

Advertisements proclaiming "satisfaction guaranteed" are fairly common – and that's the problem: the statement can come across as just another hollow promise, because it often is.

Every promise you make to a prospect should be both fulfilled and guaranteed. When you sell something in exchange for someone's hardearned money, the *promise* is that the product or service will meet, or exceed, expectations. The *guarantee* means you will give the money back if the buyer feels that's not actually the case.

The word guarantee *is* extremely powerful, but only coupled with evidence of substance. The *proof* behind the guarantee accomplishes two things – it demonstrates confidence in your offering, and relieves the risk to the buyer.

Confidence and Risk

Every contemplated purchase carries risk to the buyer. Before consumer protection laws, the rule was *caveat emptor* (let the buyer beware), and these days buyers are still cautious, even leery – especially of unknown vendors.

Even when already emotionally and logically committed to what you have to offer, buyers don't want to make a mistake. It's up to you to help them get over the hump.

The way to get past the buyer's uncertainty is to first demonstrate confidence in your offering. Not through boasts or sales prattle, but with a good old-fashioned, no-questions-asked, "money-where-my-mouth-is" cash-back guarantee.

Return periods of 30, 60 or 90 days work great. Some direct marketers go as far as 6 months, a year, or even a lifetime money back guarantee. The longer the better.

Other techniques involve a “return premium.” The seller allows you to keep all or part of the materials delivered even after the refund, or promises to pay you double your money back (or some other multiple).

Now *that’s* confidence, and it speaks directly to the buyer’s lingering reservations.

You’ve now created a risk-free buying environment. Your conversion of prospects to customers will skyrocket compared to the same offer, sans guarantee.

Guaranteed Higher Profits

“Whoa there,” many of you are saying, “I can’t do that kind of thing. It’s way too risky **for me.**”

Our first response might be to ask you how much faith you have in your offering. If your faith is lacking, improve your product or service. As we’ve seen with Domino’s Pizza and Federal Express (see previous section), the guarantee was the key that made the offers irresistible.

But you've spotted the essence of the technique – you're taking the buyer's risk and shifting it over to yourself. Assuming the faith in your offering is there, here's why you shouldn't be concerned:

First of all, you *will* get some returns, no matter how much value you deliver. The reason is that your guarantee will generate a much higher number of sales. By taking the risk away from the buyer, invariably you'll sell to someone who the product wasn't suited for. That's okay; the numbers are working for you.

Your returns will be lower than you think, even among those who experience buyer's remorse. We like to remain *consistent* on a psychological basis, and our brains work hard to validate our earlier decisions. Couple that with the *ambivalence* people experience when faced with initiating the return process (especially for physical products), and the sale remains in place.

When it comes to information products, some people **will** rip you off. They'll happily consume the knowledge you offer, and still demand a refund. If your product is digital, some will share your hard work with other people, and you won't make a dime. *Don't worry about it*. Believe it or not, most people are honest. Don't lose sleep over those that are not. Your sales (and profits) are up, perhaps dramatically, because of your guarantee. That was the goal, right?

There are certainly other methods to keep customers happy and minimize returns, but the general rule is to always make a strong, substantive guarantee that actually transfers the reader's risk back over to you.

Now that you're comfortable with the basics of offers, guarantees, and writing about features vs. benefits, let's take a look at some unique ways to write persuasive copy.

7 Scientifically-Backed Copywriting Tips

by Gregory Ciotti

Writing persuasive copy is a necessity if you want to sell products, services, or ideas online.

While great writing is truly an art, those looking to improve their craft as a copywriter can find a lot of help from behavioral psychology and neuroscience studies.

The only problem is that good writers are often busy people, and they don't have time to slog through dry research papers to find an interesting nugget or two.

Fortunately, we've done the heavy lifting for you, and today you'll get to look at 7 fascinating studies on the mind ... and see how you can apply their findings to produce more persuasive copy.

Sound good? Let's jump in!

1. Make em' feel something

Imagine with us, if you will ...

You're watching football, and your team's quarterback gets *slammed* with a bone-crunching tackle, snapping a rib.

Ooh ...

Can't you just feel yourself cringing at the thought?

That's the power of [mirror neurons](#) and how they affect the human mind.

According to research on the subject, these neurons activate when you observe something happening, and then transfer some of the feeling (if it's powerful enough) on to you.

It's likely that they're biologically useful for necessary evolutionary traits, such as empathy, or "walking in someone else's shoes."

Although a majority of the current research on mirror neurons focuses on literal observation, great writers know that [strong emotions](#) can be conveyed through words as well.

Think about the first example ... if you *did* cringe at the thought of a man breaking his ribs, you're already experiencing this effect in action!

When crafting compelling copy, you have to understand what keeps your potential reader up at night.

It's easy for us to write out, "Envision this ...," but it's not as easy to get people to care.

You have to speak to a feeling that's already there -- not try to force one on your reader.

If you're selling software that takes the hassle out of content optimization, you need to speak to the frustrated entrepreneur who's tired of nitpicking and game-playing for Google, and who wants to get back to writing.

If you're selling beer, you need to invoke memories of good times spent with friends over an ice-cold beverage.

Using this information on *mirror neurons* to transfer a desired feeling onto readers is effective, but it's only going to work if you know what makes those readers tick.

2. Be wary of “selling” savings

Here’s something you should know — if you’re using precious real estate to chest thump about your low prices, you’re doing it wrong.

Not only has [research](#) shown us that asking customers to directly compare prices is a bad idea, but [a study](#) from Stanford University has revealed that that selling “time” is far more effective (for most businesses) than selling money.

Jennifer Aaker, the lead researcher in the Stanford study, sought to explain why companies like Miller would use a slogan such as ...

It’s Miller Time!

As an inexpensive beer, shouldn’t they be promoting their reasonable prices instead?

It turns out, *no*.

A person’s experience with a product tends to foster feelings of personal connection with it, referring to time typically leads to more favorable attitudes — and to more purchases.

What does this have to do with writing great copy?

Writing compelling copy helps you speak to what really matters to your buyer — and that's their time, troubles, and objectives.

We [know](#) that customers are willing to pay more for [exceptional service](#), but you also need to understand that they're willing to pay *your* prices if you speak to them in a way that shows you value what they hope to achieve. Your efforts will be perceived as far more genuine (and effective) than trying to sell them on bottom-dollar prices.

Or, as Professor Mogliner would [put it](#):

Ultimately, time is a more scarce resource — once it's gone, it's gone — and therefore it's more meaningful to us.

3. Sweat the small stuff

This is an incredibly important study for copywriters and conversion experts.

A fascinating piece of research from Carnegie Mellon University was able to show that the devil really *is* in the details, especially when it comes to creating copy which converts.

In the study, researchers tested how changing a *single* phrase would affect conversions over the long haul.

They did this by setting up a free DVD trial program that customers could sign up for, and testing it between two different phrases ...

- “A \$5 fee”
- “A small \$5 fee”

Here’s the best part:

They found that the second phrase was able to increase signup rates by over 20%.

The [science behind it](#) is actually pretty interesting: researchers found that this emphasis on the “small” fee made it far easier to deal with for conservative spenders, also known as [“tightwad” customers](#).

When it comes to great copywriting, however, the lesson is more in the art of great writing rather than in the “science.”

You must take the time to measure, improve, and track the success of your craft. Great writers today have no excuses for not testing their work, so make sure you’re sweating the small stuff and keeping tabs on how it performs.

4. Embrace your devilish side

A big mistake that many copywriters make is making little effort to be authentic.

Everything is high-level: they promise the world, and since many consumers are hesitant to believe crazy claims, they're more likely to glaze over your copy, rather than get swept up by it.

The answer?

Create strong copy that addresses their objections head-on.

You might be familiar with the term ["devil's advocate,"](#) which is when someone takes a position they don't inherently agree with in order to prove a point.

What you might not know is that the Catholic church used to use a person called the "devil's advocate" when they canonized someone into sainthood. Their job was to find flaws with the person so the debate around them was impartial.

They ended the practice ... and with good cause, because you'll soon see that playing the devil's advocate actually *enhances* the persuasiveness of the original argument!

A [study by social psychologist Charlan Nemeth](#) was able to show that arguments framed in the “devil’s advocate” style were more likely to persuade listeners to *support* the original argument, rather than to disagree with it.

Nemeth (and a few other researchers) have concluded that this occurs because potential flaws and concerns are brought up (and subsequently addressed) when engaging in the devil’s advocate style, either by the speaker, or — subliminally — by the listener.

When you’re listening to a persuasive argument and you think to yourself:

But will that address _____?

... you’re much more likely to be persuaded if the speaker says something like:

Many of you are probably worried about _____ right now.

... because your concerns are put in the spotlight, instead of being ignored or swept under the rug.

So instead of trying to paint a picture of an infallible offer, point out common concerns that customers may have — then assure them with facts and evidence that they have nothing to worry about.

5. Don't rely on adjectives alone

Some writers might not agree with this, but college kids will tell you: an admissions letter is one of the most stressful pieces of persuasive copy you can write.

And believe me, it is very much a piece of selling copy — you're selling *you* to some person who decides the fate of your future.

Interestingly enough, [in this analysis of persuasive admission letters](#) — as discussed by the Harvard MBA admissions director who read them — verbs beat out adjectives more often than not.

Verbs get specific and are harder to ignore, especially in a vain world where everybody describes themselves with the same trite adjectives.

How about this example ...

We know this guy Brian who is intelligent, hard-working, and really insightful.

Big whoop.

Now what if we told you that he *founded* a successful company, he *created* a popular blog, and he *leads* a talented team.

Much more impressive, right?

Verbs get in your face, and since your competitors will be fluffing up their copy with adjectives they found in a thesaurus, you can win people over by describing what you actually *do*.

6. Include “power” words

Smart copywriters know that there are certain [persuasive words](#) that hold more sway than others.

The top 5 persuasive words are as follows:

- “You” (in actuality, someone’s name, such as when sending an email newsletter)
- Free

- Because
- Instantly
- New

Here's the breakdown ...

"You" – According to [research](#) examining brain activation, few things light us up quite like seeing our own names in print or on the screen. Our names are intrinsically tied to our self-perception, and we become more engaged, and even more trusting of a message when our name appears in it.

Free – Dan Ariely, in his book *Predictably Irrational*, revealed a study with chocolate truffles and Hershey's Kisses that was quite startling: when the Kisses were advertised as free, people chose them over the truffles by 38% ... despite the fact that most people had chosen the truffles when the Kisses were just a penny!

Because – In a classic study [from Robert Cialdini](#), the research found that people were more willing to heed to a request (in this case, to cut in line) when people used the word "because"... even if the request was nonsensical (for example, "Can I use the copy machine first *because* I need to make a copy?").

Instantly – We all want things yesterday. According to certain [MRI studies](#), few words light up our mid-brain quite like those that invoke a sense of fast reward. Let people know you'll solve their problems quickly, and they'll be more prone to buy.

New – Novelty plays an incredibly important role in activating our brain's reward center and in keeping us happy with our purchases. The [research](#) shows that perceived "newness" is important for a product, but can actually be damaging for a brand (people trust brands that have been around for a long time).

7. Use transportation for persuasion

Why do good stories consume us so completely?

No other form of writing can keep you up into the wee hours of the night (willingly!) quite like stories.

According to [research](#) from social psychologists Melanie Green and Timothy Brock, there's a very simple reason why stories are so persuasive:

Transportation leads to persuasion.

People can block out sales pitches, but *everybody* loves listening to stories.

Their research shows that stories have a tendency to get in “under the radar” and transport us to another place; in this place we may embrace things we’d likely scoff at in the harsh “real world.”

This is great news for those adept at telling an enchanting tale, but how can the rest of us write more persuasive stories?

According to additional research by the duo, the following tactics work well:

Detailed imagery: Imagery paints the picture for story. It’s hard to understand how scary Mordor is without Tolkien giving you detailed descriptions of the barren landscapes, the looming presence of Mt. Doom, and the horrifying screams of the Nazgul.

Suspense: How do you get people to finish a story? Leave them begging to know the end in the very beginning. It’s hard for us to [not finish things](#) that catch our attention, so lead with something exciting first — not later.

Metaphors and irony: The reason that stories like *Animal Farm* are so popular is because they tell a hidden tale through metaphor (such

as depicting the [rise of Stalin](#)). Many good stories include these elements so that readers will have

“Aha!” moments, allowing them to truly grasp the author’s message.

Modeling: If you’re looking to have someone change a behavior (or take a desired action), you can “model” the action via a story. When we listen to transformation tales, we re-imagine *ourselves* as the main character, and according to the research, it makes the action easier to understand.

Do you have a better understanding of how to improve your persuasive copy using these techniques? Then let’s address one of the biggest questions beginning copywriters ask.

The Long and the Short of Copywriting

by Brian Clark

They're some of the most often-asked questions about copywriting.

Long or short copy, which works best? What about headlines — how long should they be?

The correct answer usually drives people crazy, which is...

Whatever *works*.

Before you start throwing things at us, we'll elaborate.

Headlines: 8 Words or Less, Except ...

The traditional wisdom about headlines is that they should be short. There are plenty of exceptions to this rule (including a big one we'll discuss below).

However, reviewing [The 100 Greatest Advertisements](#) by Julian Lewis Watkins shows that 95% of the most effective headlines from

the early years of magazine copywriting were less than eight words. But magazine copywriters had to worry about brevity due to space concerns.

Studies done from the direct mail industry show that about 50% to 60% of the most effective headlines are eight words or less, leaving ample indication that longer headlines work, too.

Now, here's an exception that applies online. Perhaps you've seen web sales letters or landing pages which have a headline that looks like a short paragraph. These long headlines can't possibly be working, right?

Well, according to the [eye-tracking study](#) released by user-interface expert [Jakob Nielsen](#), webpage visitors read in an "F" pattern, scrolling intently across the top of the page where the headline should be, then making their way back again across the first subhead, then down the left hand side of the page to see if anything else is of interest.

This study verifies the 80/20 rules of headlines (see above). But it also demonstrates that you might want to include more information in your headline than 8 words can usually get across in an effort to get the rest of the page read.

All in all though, short headlines are easier to scan and cannot be missed.

My general rule of thumb is to write the shortest headline possible that convincingly conveys a unique benefit to the reader so they'll read the body.

It's not always easy, but it's extremely important.

Long Copy vs. Short Copy

Does anyone read those long sales letters that go on and on?

Yes they do, and for many products, **long copy outsells short copy by a large margin**. The basic rule of copy length is the same as headlines – as long as necessary, but no longer.

The key is writing copy that's interesting and informative to someone who actually cares. But beyond that, there are some guidelines that can help, so let's see what the experts say.

[Bob Bly](#) says that the length of your copy will depend on three things:

- **The Product:** the more features and benefits a product has, the longer the copy.
- **The Audience:** Certain people want as much information as they can get before making a purchase. This is especially true of people on the Internet, and especially true with information products.
- **The Purpose:** What's the goal? Generating a lead for a service business requires less detail, but an ad that aims to make a sale must overcome every objection the potential buyer may have.

[Joe Sugarman](#) says two factors increase the need for more copy:

- **Price point:** The higher the price, the more copy required to justify or create the need.
- **Unusual Item:** The more unusual the product, the more you need to relate that product to the user by clearly demonstrating the benefits.

[Michel Fortin](#) sets forth four categories of products, with each successive category requiring longer copy:

- **Convenience products:** Fills an immediate need, low price, low thought, short copy.
- **Shopping products:** A little higher priced, more thought and opportunity to “shop around,” a little longer copy.
- **Specialty products:** With exotic goods, luxury cars, expensive jewelry, art, etcetera, longer copy is definitely needed.
- **Unsought products:** When people have never realized that their lives were incomplete without your product, get ready to write some lengthy copy.

Read Michel’s [blog post here](#) for an elaboration of his ideas about the long copy vs. short copy debate. Great stuff.

Whatever Works

So, we come full circle. The guidelines set forth by these copywriting pros can help, but the answer remains the same:

The length of your headline and your copy will depend on *whatever works* for whatever you are selling.

And the only way to know what works is to test different approaches. Test various headlines to see which works best at capturing attention and communicating a benefit. Test the amount of information you provide. Does more or less work better at producing the desired action?

Ultimately, that's the only answer that matters to you.

A Short Guide to Writing Good Copy

by Kelton Reid

The term “style” is thrown around a lot by writers, but it’s a misnomer for copywriters because “style” doesn’t work in the extremely short attention economy of the internet.

Good copy isn’t necessarily “stylish,” but copy that establishes trust, authority, builds relationships, and gets people talking, sharing, and buying [is in high demand](#). *A lack of style* is what makes it work, so writers who master this “style” are sought after and revered.

Legendary ad man David Ogilvy was one of those sought-after writers, and he said, “A good advertisement is one which sells the product without drawing attention to itself.”

It sounds counterintuitive, but it holds up under pressure, and I’ll explain why great content marketing is built on that exact premise.

Clear communication is the key to effective copy

Your best copy needs to be “display window clear,” and you need to be out there every morning with your Windex to make sure it doesn’t distract from the product or service you provide for your clients and customers.

Every writer eventually reaches for a style guide to help them craft clear copy, and there are countless helpful rulebooks and list posts that offer writers advice about proper usage and consistent language.

Copyblogger actually has its own internal style guide, and members of the editorial crew often squabble about usage over (virtual) martinis.

We are also big fans of the classic English guidebook, [The Elements of Style](#) by Strunk & White.

In it, William Strunk advises writers,

"A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts. This requires not that the writer make all his sentences short, or that he avoid all detail and treat his subjects only in outline, but that every word tell."

This is very solid advice for online publishers ... that was written in 1918!

A copywriter comes to the rescue

It was actually [famed writer E. B. White](#) who updated professor Strunk's "little" 43 page English rulebook in 1959. White revived it from scholastic obscurity to become what *Time* magazine has called "one of the 100 best and most influential books written in English since 1923."

E. B. White was more than a revered journalist (contributor to the *New Yorker* for 60 years), and award-winning children's author (*Charlotte's Web*).

He honed his writing style as a *copywriter* in the 1920s, and contributed what he learned to *The Elements of Style* re-issue in chapter V, "An Approach to Style."

It's no secret why this revered text is so short, and so effective.

Mr. White edited the style guide with some reluctance, and was quoted years later as saying,

"My role in the revival of Strunk's book was a fluke — just something I took on because I was not doing anything else at the time. It cost me a year out of my life, so little did I know about grammar."

Make every word tell

White's lack of grammatical knowledge did not prevent the guide from becoming a bestseller for the better part of the last 50 years.

In interviews, White wanted to remind writers that rules are meant to be broken, and that every writer has their own [unique point of view](#) and voice.

Style results more from what a person *is* than from what he *knows*.

Every writer can memorize rules — but how you get people’s attention requires some creativity.

Don’t get too hung up on the rules, or your copy might end up sucking, and that would break the [first rule of Copyblogger](#).

What we present to you next is an annotated guide to effective online copywriting “style.” This list is only a sampling of the vast amount of knowledge available to online publishers and content marketers, but it contains a few things that have helped us most along the way.

1. Use common spelling

Flourishes and variations of common words distract your readers and pull them out of the story you’re telling (unless your demographic is girls aged 7-13).

Avoid:

- Pleez for please
- Thru for through
- Nite for night

- 2moro for tomorrow
- @ for at

Tweets and text messages require some brevity, slang, and LOL acronyms, but connecting with your audience in longer copy requires fewer distractions.

2. Avoid hyperbole and fancy words

Sometimes, you will need to tone down your language.

Good copy cuts like a knife. When it's action you're after, avoid big words that make you sound like you're trying too hard to sound smart or important.

E. B. White said it best,

"Do not be tempted by a twenty-dollar word, when there is a ten-center handy."

3. Put the reader first

It is our job as copywriters to tap into the hopes, dreams, and fears of our audience. This requires research, and the magic of the word “you.”

Proven to be one of the English language’s most powerful words, *you* is a word that can’t lose.

4. Write in a natural way

You must speak the language of your audience, and do it in a way that conveys you are a real person, with genuine interest in offering your help and expertise.

How else are your prospects going to get to know, like, and trust you? How else are search engines going to recognize that you have the answers to people’s questions?

Research, research, research. Know your audience inside and out, and understand the language they use when they speak about your topic. Then use that language in your copy.

5. Work from an outline

Outlines work! If you don't have the energy or time to sketch out a [simple AIDA outline](#), give yourself some idea of the goals you'd like to accomplish.

Even something as simple as a post-it-note with a few bullet points works. Successful writers use outlines — they're helpful in reminding you to stick to the point.

6. Write with nouns and verbs

Precise language convinces; flowery language distracts.

Concise and specific copy moves the prospect along, but adjectives and adverbs are (often) just filler. The more descriptors you throw in there, the higher the chances are that someone with the attention span of a hummingbird will click away (unless you are describing the features of something technical).

7. Revise and rewrite

World-class copywriter and advertising executive David Ogilvy is quoted as saying,

"I am a lousy copywriter, but I am a good editor."

He would edit his first draft four or five times before showing it to a client, who would inevitably change it again.

8. Do not overwrite

Without clarity, your copy doesn't stand a chance. Overwriting is a symptom of underthinking. Good copy is damn hard to write.

"If you can't explain it simply, you don't understand it well enough." – Albert Einstein

9. Do not overstate

Superlatives have the power to wreck your copy.

When you overstate or exaggerate your claims (with things like trumped-up testimonials), you risk losing the trust of your audience.

An understated promise often does a better job of capturing reader attention than screaming hype does.

10. Don't mix metaphors

If a product *sings* when used correctly, but *sinks* if used improperly, then it is guilty of being both a songstress and an anchor, and this is very distracting.

Stick to one metaphor or the other, but not both in one sentence.

11. Simplify your language

Make every word tell.

Delete the words that are just window dressing.

Need Some Examples?

If you need some examples of how to create good copy (that follows the rules above), read on for 10 killer samples.

10 Ways to Write Damn Good Copy

by *Demian Farnworth*

Writing effective copy is both an art *and* a science.

It's an art because it requires creativity, a sense of beauty and style — a certain aptitude, mastery, and special knowledge. Artistic advertising allows you to create content marketing that's not just practical and persuasive, but aweinspiring and breathtaking.

Writing effective copy is also a science, because it exists in the world of tests, trial and failure, improvement, breakthroughs, education, and predictability.

Scientific advertising allows you to develop an idea, then *test* that idea. It's how you know if your content marketing is working.

In bad copy, one (or both) of these elements are missing. In good copy, they are both abundant.

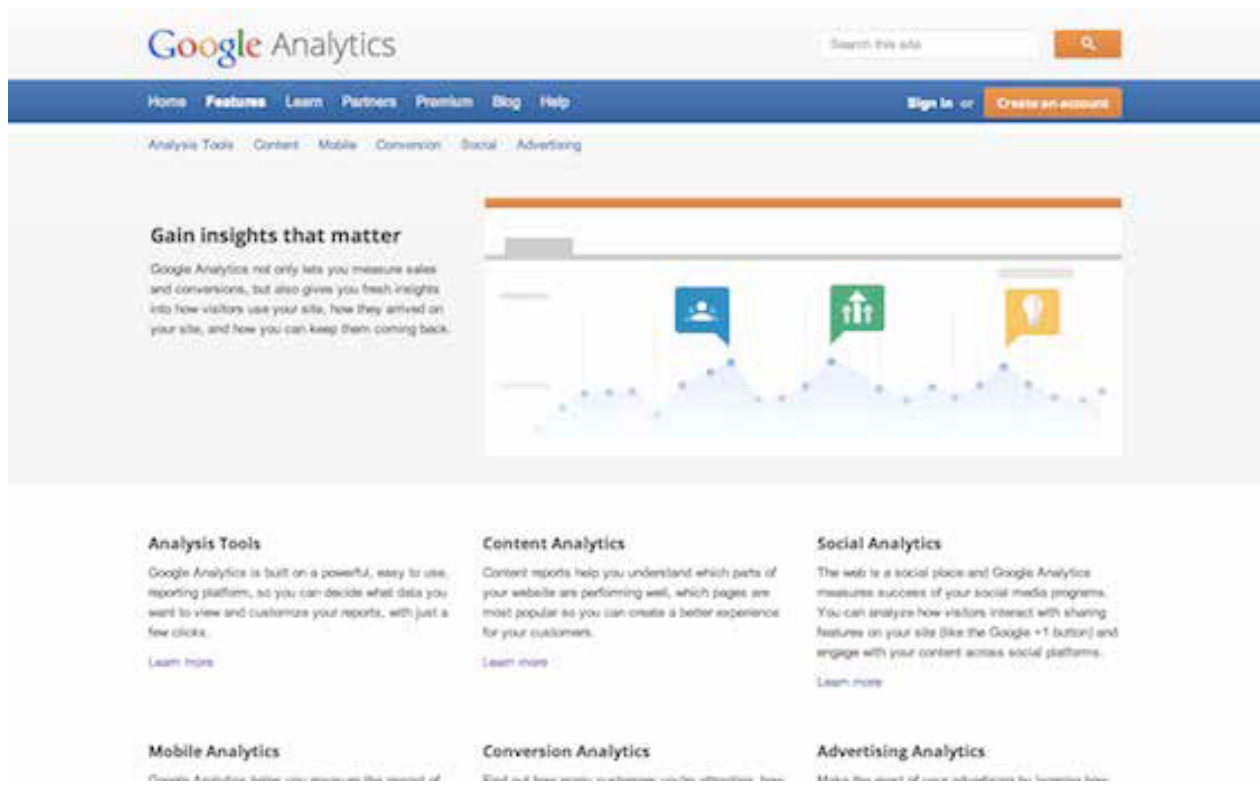
Read on, and we'll explore ten examples of good copy living (and selling) out in the wild ...

1. Plain copy

The most basic approach to writing effective copy is to simply introduce the product without gimmick or style. It's a simple presentation of the facts and benefits.

There is no story. There is no conversation. There is no "sizzle" and no superlative claims.

[Think Google Analytics.](#)



Google's copy isn't going to win any literary awards, but it will get the job done.

It will give a prospect the information she needs to make an informed decision about the product.

2. Storytelling copy

As we've talked about before — everyone loves a good story.

We like hearing about people (especially interesting people). We want to know more about people who've suffered challenges we can relate to, who can tell us how they overcame those challenges.

And the moral of the story, coincidentally, is that your product was the catalyst to overcoming those odds.

You might find this storytelling technique in an email series, a landing page, or a short video. Whatever the format, you'll get four basic traits in the story:

- **Opening:** Introduce the pain. Show how the character of the story had a normal life, then how that life was shattered by a change of events.

- **Conflict:** How is the life of the main character threatened if he or she does not respond to the problem? What does her journey look like as she tackles this challenge?
- **Dialogue:** People are drawn to conversations in a story. It's human interest at its root: two people talking to each other. We are also drawn to dialogue because it's easy to read.
- **Solution:** Finally, your product is introduced as the cure for your character's problem. You increase the credibility of your product by sharing specific results (347% increase in conversion, for example).

Your story doesn't have to be dramatic — it just has to be interesting to your target audience. And this is where [good research comes in](#).

3. Conversational copy

John Caples calls conversational copy "You and Me."

Write this style of copy like a conversation between two people: the copywriter and the prospect.

The language here would be no different than a salesman sitting down for lunch with a customer and talking through a sales presentation. It's a straightforward approach that tries to identify with the reader:

"I know how you feel. I felt the same way. That all changed when I found x, y and z."

Keep in mind that you don't have to be a polished copywriter to create effective conversational copy. Often your passion for the product will come to life on the page.

In fact, you can record a conversation about the product, transcribe that conversation, and use it as a rough draft. It's an easy way to create natural, conversational copy.

4. John Lennon copy

When John Lennon asked us to imagine there was no heaven or hell, no countries, religion, or war, he was using an effective tool of persuasion: imaginative copy.

As an advertiser, you can ask your target audience to imagine a painless way to lose weight, or what it would feel like to be a successful travel writer.

Imaginative copy typically begins with words like *imagine*, *close your eyes*, *pretend for a moment*, *discover*, or *picture this* in the first paragraph of the text.

This is the concept behind [AWAI's Barefoot Writer presentation](#).



In this example, you are asked to imagine your life in a certain way — to picture what it would be like to live your dream, whatever that dream might be.

Then the copywriter paints a picture of achieving that ideal life through your product.

5. Long copy

The fundamental premise behind long copy is, “The more you tell, the more you sell.” Ads that are long on facts and benefits will convert well.

Unlike a face-to-face conversation with a salesperson, a written ad has only one chance to convert a reader. If you get in front of the reader, you’ve got to lay it all out on the table.

Take the Google Analytics example above.

Page after page of facts and benefits are presented because the [proposition isn't simple](#) — typical prospects are going to be asking a lot of questions.

Better to anticipate those questions, and answer them in the copy.

But when you're following the basic rules of content marketing that works, remember that you don't have to present all the facts and benefits up front.

You can leak the presentation over a period of weeks through an email autoresponder (like our [Content series](#)), or a registration-based content library (like [MyCopyblogger](#)).

In this way, you're turning long copy into short, easily-digestible snippets.

6. Killer poet copy

Here at Copyblogger, we love Ernest Hemingway and David Sedaris, but we aren't so enamored by their writing abilities that we try to imitate their styles at the expense of teaching and selling.

Our goal isn't to convince our audience that we're smart — it's *educating* and *selling* with our copy.

As David Ogilvy once said, "We sell, or else." But we try to sell with style. We try to balance the [killer with the poet](#).

Killer poet copy sees writing as a means to an end (making a sale), and the ad as an end in itself (beautiful design and moving story).

In other words, the killer poet combines style with selling. Creativity with marketing. Story with solution.

7. Direct-from-CEO copy

It's a known fact — third-party endorsements can help you sell products.

But it's equally effective to position your selling argument as a direct communication between the company founder and his or her customer.

This down-to-earth approach levels the playing field. It telegraphs to the customer, "See, the CEO isn't some cold and remote figurehead interested in profit only. He's approachable and friendly. He cares about us."

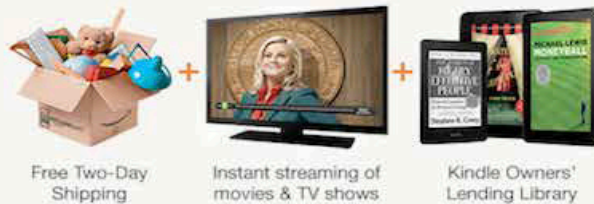
Jeff Bezos of Amazon is a superb example:



Dear Customers,

We launched Amazon Prime seven years ago with unlimited free two-day shipping on over a million different products.

Today, Prime includes instant streaming of over 30,000 movies and TV episodes, nearly 200,000 books in the Kindle Owners' Lending Library, and expanded free two-day shipping – now on over 15 million items.



Despite all of these changes, one thing remains the same – Prime is still just \$79 a year. We think this makes Prime the best bargain in the history of shopping.

This holiday season, avoid the lines and enjoy free two-day shipping, even for last-minute gifts. And when you're not shopping, choose a book from the *New York Times* bestseller list, or sit back and watch a movie in stunning HD on one of our affordable [new Kindle devices](#) (starting at \$159 for the Fire and \$199 for the Fire HD).

If you haven't tried Amazon Prime, [sign up for a one-month free trial](#) today, and join the millions of members who have already discovered the convenience and improved speed that Prime delivers.

Happy shopping, happy reading, and happy watching,

Jeff Bezos
Founder & CEO

Notice this letter is conversational as well as plain: it's a simple statement of the facts and benefits between two people: Jeff and you.

8. Frank copy

Some copy will explain the ugly truth about the product.

This approach doesn't start with the jewels of your goods — it starts with the warts.

When selling a car, you might point out the endless repairs that need to be done — thin brake pads, leaky transmission, busted sway bar, and inoperable dashboard — before you introduce the leather seats, Monsoon stereo system, sun roof, brand-new tires, and supercharged engine.

What you're saying is this car will need a lot of TLC. You might even go as far as to say, "Make no mistake here — there's much work to be done here."

And here's a curious thing: when you are honest and transparent about product weaknesses, [the customer trusts you](#).

When the reader trusts you, they will be considerably more likely to believe you when you point out the good qualities of your product.

9. Superlative copy

There are also times when you *can* make outlandish claims.

Claims like (these are actual ads):

- A revolutionary material from this Nevada mine could make investors a fortune in 2013
- “Stores across U.S. selling out of what some call a new ‘miracle’ diet fighter”
- Obey this one weird loophole to get car insurance as low as \$9

But you can only make extraordinary claims when you have the proof to back it up. The evidence can be in statistics, testimonials, or research — or preferably all three.

The problem with superlative copy is that it’s often hard to make outlandish claims and *not* sound like you are hyping it up — so use this type of copy sparingly.

Generally, it's good to follow the "Remove All Hype" policy.

10. Rejection copy

Rejection copy turns conventional wisdom on its head and tries to *discourage* people from being interested in your product.

This type of copy is a direct challenge to the reader that leverages the velvet rope approach — the idea that only an exclusive set of people are invited to use a product.

The American Express Black Card is a good example here — this card is reserved for the world's wealthiest and most elite. The only way you can get your hands on one is if you are invited.

Similarly, consider the dating site Beautiful People. If you want to be part of this exclusive dating club made up of "beautiful" people, then you have to be voted in by existing members:



Potential rejection startles readers — they don't expect to be turned down, especially not from an advertiser.

This approach also keys into our sense of wanting to belong. It generates that curiosity itch, and activates our pride. We think, "How dare they say I might not be good enough to get into their club? I'll show them."

Conclusion

In the end, great copy often combines several of these techniques into one ad.

The CEO of a company writes a conversational sales letter built around a story about his passion for his product (whether it is peaches or water pumps).

A copywriter writes a long rejection ad that explains why certain people are excluded from receiving an invitation to dine at an exclusive restaurant.

Or a Savile Row tailor writes a plain but elegant sales letter about his suits, which have been worn by kings and presidents.

This is the art *and* science of copywriting.

Now that we've seen examples of great copywriting, let's look at the flip side — what does really bad copywriting look like?

7 Ways to Write Damn Bad Copy

by *Demian Farnworth*

It's obvious that creativity is an essential part of being a remarkable writer.

But when a *results-oriented* writer and an *image-oriented* writer each say the word "creative," they are talking about two completely different things.

The results-oriented writer emphasizes problem solving with clear, concise, and compelling copy (for example: How do I demonstrate that our product will solve our target customer's problem?).

The image-oriented writer puts an emphasis on artistic, clever, or humorous copy (for example: How can I demonstrate how entertaining and crafty I am?).

With that in mind, here are seven kinds of copy you need to avoid (with a little help from legendary copywriter [John Caples](#)).

Copywriters beware ...

1. Lyrical

This is the type of copy that you see from [someone who loves words](#) – long words in particular.

Words like jentacular (pertaining to breakfast), slubberdegullion (a filthy slobbering person), and recumbentitbus (a knockdown blow).

This is the person whose grandmother squeezed her cheeks and said, “You are our little wordsmith.” Whose English Literature cronies would stroke their chins and say, “I think you’re on to something. Not sure what, but you’re on to it.”

Let’s imagine this wordsmith works for Black & Decker. She is asked to write sales copy for a cordless drill. It might look like this:

Wanted: a hollow place in a solid mass of hard, fibrous substance.

Carpenters, with one little boring unit made from the 22nd element of the periodic table you can create a precise aperture in any piece of wood. And, behold, with the ergonomic grip zone constraining is done with amenity and gratification. Visit any one of our facilities if you are predisposed to acquiring a unit.

The only problem is this is a painful piece to read. Nobody knows what you are talking about. It is a guessing game — and your audience doesn't have the patience to guess.

2. Sentimental

Sentimental copy sounds like it was written by a college student who enjoys sunsets, foreign films, incense, and long bubble baths.

He is a copywriter with a single and solitary goal: to make you “feel” the copy. If you don't feel the copy, then he's failed.

He stands in the door way — a tear hangs like a sapphire from his eyelash, ready to plunge into the depths of his lonely and loveless heart. You are drinking from the cup of the dark night, confused by the decaying shadow of his love, dazed by the breath of a broken promise. When he lowers the veil on your heart, you will fling yourself into the depths of hunger and death.

Know what he's trying to sell? Me neither.

That might work for a Nicholas Sparks novel, but never in advertising. Shoot for the straight and the simple.

3. Outlandish

This is your garden variety snake-oil salesman.

- The product that will eliminate \$45,000 in debt in less than 45 days!
- The DVD that swears you can look like a Russian body builder with nothing more than a chair and four minutes a day!
- The stock that will make Google's stock price look like a steal.

It's the [world of yellow highlight markers](#), images of jaw-dropping tax returns and promises of endless freedom to indulge in every whim.

But it's also a world of broken dreams where you might make a mint in the short term, but over time, your reputation will sour.

This type of advertising betrays confidence. It does harm. It stings, and leaves a bad taste in our mouths. Sonia calls this *the troll under the bridge* — and it's a [sure fire way to kill conversions](#).

It appears when we are young and suckered into the *milk-can con job* at the traveling carnival. Or the *Sea-Monkey hoax* where you are lead to believe you will spawn little people in an aquarium — but what you end up with is just cheap fish food.

You feel stupid for falling for such tricks. You vow never to fall again. You grow a thick skin to advertising. And every honest salesman and every sincere sales page that crosses your path is viewed as a fraud.

There is a limit to credibility. A limit to what people will believe. If you cross that invisible line in your sales copy, people will shut you down.

Better to make a promise that you know your audience will believe without having to stretch their judgment. Better yet, tell the ugly truth. What you say after that will be easier to swallow.

4. Humorous

The problem with humorous copy is that humor is fickle. It's a minefield. For every person who laughs at a blonde joke, you have one person who hates you for it.

Some people like deadpan humor. Others like dark humor. Some like slapstick.

Still others like sarcasm. Many like bathroom humor while others want the highbrow sort.

Unless you are absolutely certain that a majority of your paying customers like dark humor, then don't use it.

What you find funny is likely insulting to others — and that will damage the effectiveness of your copy. That's not a risk you should be willing to take.

Of course, there are the rare exceptions. There are writers who occasionally go down the absurd, clever, humorous route — and it pays off.

Your chances, however, are much better if you stick to clear, concise, and compelling copy. Or at the very least, avoid humor until you're *certain* you are actually funny.

5. Short

Short copy — so brief that the entire advertisement could fit on the back of a business card — is bliss for those who use it.

Think cologne producers or financial institutions. Sometimes an entire page in a magazine is devoted to the name of the product, plus an alluring slogan:

“Seduction is essential,” or “Your money is your money.”

Nobody knows what those slogans mean, not even the marketing director. But it’s that mystery we love.

“Unfortunately, mysterious copy does not pay the bills.”

It goes against the grain of tested advertising methods that have proven [longer copy will virtually always outsell short copy](#).

6. Clever

Clever is what you get when you have a writer who thinks he is smart — smarter than the average reader — and he’s out to prove how smart he is.

So he writes the clever ad.

Clever is also what you get when you don’t have a marketing clue. Let’s say you’re an architect selling the benefits of your firm, and you write this headline:

"We will make sure that your house is not square."

You meant "not cool" but, hey, look at you — you said it in a clever way! Word play! Everyone in your firm thinks you are a genius! Unfortunately, everyone else will think you are a moron for trying to sell them a house that will one day flop over.

Few people actually read clever advertisements. They are confused by the headline, and the few who do read recognize what you are trying (and failing) to do.

If your job rides upon effective advertising, then make sure it [accomplishes these four things](#):

- Promises to solve a meaningful problem.
- Paints a picture of what your life will be like if that problem is solved.
- Proves that you will deliver on your promise.
- Pushes the prospect to subscribe, download, donate, share or buy.

Effective content marketing builds upon the *self-interest* of your customer.

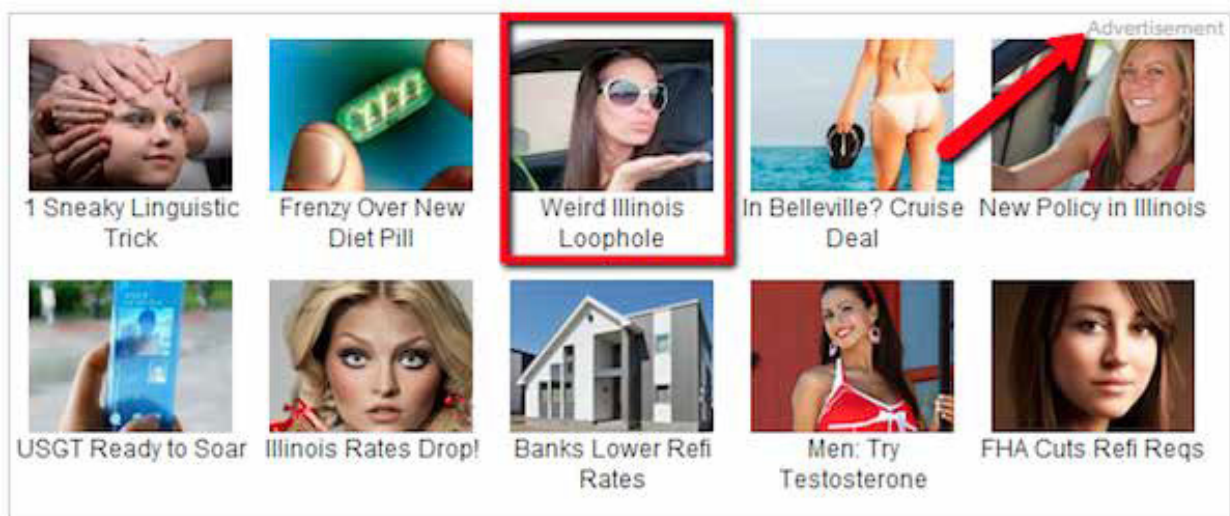
And when you give them the kind of content they don't want to delete—you won't need *clever copywriting*.

7. Advertorial

Once a popular and effective approach — used by some of the best copywriters in the land — the advertorial is now overused (possibly even flatout abused).

What exactly is an advertorial? It's nothing more than an advertisement dressed up to look like a piece of news.

Here's what we see at the bottom of an article on one of our local news websites:



In a box clearly marked “Advertisement” there is a handful of ads that are supposed to be “news”: “Weird Illinois Loophole” or “New Policy in Illinois.”

The screenshot shows the Consumer Finance Daily website. At the top, there is a search bar with the placeholder text "Enter ticker symbol, company or fund". Below the search bar is a navigation menu with links for Home, Insurance, Credit, Mortgage, Investing, Retirement, Taxes, Budget, and Career. The main article is titled "Agents Hate This: Insider Trick Allows Safe Drivers to Slash Rates By 45%" in red text. The date is "December 26, 2012". The lead paragraph reads: "(Illinois) - Are you being scammed by your current insurance agent? New policies are indicating that for years many drivers have been overpaying on their car insurance." To the right of the text is a photograph of a woman with long dark hair wearing sunglasses and a white jacket, sitting in the driver's seat of a car. Below the photo, the text continues: "When Illinois drivers enter their zip code at [Provide-Insurance.com](#) many are shocked at the results they find. Most just can't believe that the available rates are in fact real, but the". On the right side of the page, there are three promotional ads: "SHOCKING: Apple iF TODAY ONLY: Auction for \$24.87", "Penny Stock Soarin Sign up today to find stock winner is!", and "\$27/month Auto Ins Enter your zip code insurance quotes to". At the bottom right, there is a "SHARE" section with a "Like" button and a notification that "482 people friends".

In the lede, you have loaded language like “scammed” and “overpaying,” to hit those hot buttons—so even if you miss the word **ADVERTISEMENT**, readers will sense this is not really meant to inform, but to persuade.

This approach is misleading — almost sleazy — and not unlike the *outlandish approach*.

But here's the thing — these ads have been running for a very long time. That tells us two things:

- They are getting great clickthroughs
- They are making money

The question becomes: is there a better way to be profitable? We think there is. It's called [content marketing](#).

Focus on your audience ...

There's one thing that all of the examples above share — a complete lack of concern for the audience they intend to reach. In each example the spotlight is put on the writer:

"Look at me, I am a poet. I am funny. Clever. Mysterious!"

Good copywriters, good advertising copy, and good content marketing, however, put the focus on the audience, the prospective customer. If you truly take care of your audience, they will eventually take care of you.

Nearly done!

We're nearly done with our Copywriting 101 lessons — we've just got one more for you. As a successful copywriter, there's a practice you will want to turn into a steady habit, and that's learning from other writers. You'll find out how to draw inspiration from your peers, teachers, compatriots and mentors.

The #1 Secret to Writing Great Copy Is ...

Using words that work with the people you're trying to persuade.

Don't reinvent the wheel. Study and draw inspiration from great copy *that works*.

I'm not talking about copy that you *personally* think is great. It's a mistake to judge advertising like regular people do – as entertainment. Madison Avenue has a great gig producing short entertainment pieces called commercials that often don't sell much of anything.

I'm talking about drawing inspiration from advertising copy that has demonstrated its effectiveness by actually *working* as intended. Like a direct mail piece that has raked in millions and millions of dollars in sales.

Why Professional Copywriters Use Swipe Files

A copywriting “swipe file” is a collection of winning ads. Sales letters, space ads, headline collections, plus bits and pieces of copy that have been marketplace proven to make big money. A carefully-collected swipe file is the essential starting point for most new copywriting campaigns.

It’s a bit like why lawyers begin with a basic form when drafting a new legal document, or why web designers start with a basic code structure. Start with something solid, and customize from there.

The problem with the swipe file approach is *context*. Many new and inexperienced writers (and often many pros) will miss the mark when trying to adapt past copy to a new situation.

Yep . . . the winning formula becomes a bust when inappropriately applied.

The Art of Listening

Luckily, we've got an impressive set of new tools that will let us uncover the context, right down to the very language our prospects are using.

Most marketers make the mistake of thinking social media is a tool for *talking*. They believe it's for distributing a message far and wide, and measuring the response that comes back.

It's true that the internet is a direct response playground. Marketers haven't had this clear a picture of their buyers since the days of the bazaar. But the social web is also the most powerful *market research* tool you'll ever use.

Sites like Twitter and Facebook can tell you the exact words your prospects are using to describe their wishes, hopes, fears, worries, and dissatisfactions.

And the words people use when searching for information makes [keyword research](#) a goldmine that goes way beyond SEO.

Email marketing and blogs allow your prospects to engage you in a conversation, to tell you what they want and how they want it, and just as important, to *demonstrate* what they respond to.

The Right Words, in the Right Context

The swipe file still has a place, and smart copywriters still maintain them. (Though they may have more headlines from Google Adwords than from direct mail these days.)

But the most effective copywriters also remember that classic piece of wisdom from Grandma:

"You have two ears and one mouth. Listen twice as much as you talk."

Where You Can Go From Here

As content marketers, we need a veritable arsenal of skills.

- We need to know how to perform effective research.
- We have to be world-class experts in our industries.
- We must know how to connect with our readers.

But of all our skills, copywriting may just be the most important. Because as content marketers, we're in the business of selling something. It might be high-end consulting services, or could be a fantastic line of t-shirts and sweatshirts. No matter what we're selling, we must be able to persuade people to *buy*.

Copywriting skills truly separate the wheat from the chaff in the land of content marketers, and hopefully we've given you a good crash course on how to hone and perfect your persuasive writing methods.