

— THE —
DIY
GUIDE TO
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**Powerful
Publicity**

Moi Ali

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DSC
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About the Author

Moi Ali runs her own communications consultancy, The Pink Anglia Public Relations Company, which specialises in public relations, communications and marketing services for voluntary organisations and small businesses. She also runs training courses on writing skills. Moi has more than 20 years' experience in public relations and promotional marketing, working in-house for companies and voluntary organisations, as well as in PR/marketing consultancies.

Moi has tackled a wide variety of copywriting assignments, ranging from leaflets and annual reports to websites and books. Although she has no formal training as a copywriter, over the years she has gained considerable experience in writing powerful publicity material. Her aim here is to condense those years of experience into the following pages, passing on to readers the knowledge she has built up over more than two decades.

Foreword

Copywriting is a deceptive skill. After all, how difficult can it be to write a few words of publicity material? We all write, so what is the problem?

I receive a large daily mailbag of letters, e-mails and press releases, most of which attempt to persuade me that an organisation has a 'really good story'. Much of this material sadly falls at the first hurdle for one simple reason: the copy fails to grab my attention.

Whether you are seeking donations for a charity, volunteers for a project or running a marketing campaign, well-constructed prose enhances the chances of reaching your target audience. As Moi Ali writes in this book, 'Good copy is read; bad copy is binned'.

The good news is that you can learn the necessary skills to turn out readable copy. A DIY guide such as this one provides you with the tools to produce copy that demands to be read.

Just as important is choosing the most appropriate form in which to deliver your publicity, and there is sound advice contained in Part 2 to help you decide the most appropriate way to convey your message.

Organisations work to tight budgets and producing your own publicity material is often the only option. That does not mean it cannot be effective. The basic skills for writing already exist in your head. With careful attention to the craft of copywriting, you can enhance your writing abilities and learn how to communicate your message successfully.

For charities, and voluntary and community organisations, a successful publicity campaign is a crucial element in achieving a goal. If your copy is concise, considered and correct, you will maximise the opportunities to reach your objective.

Jeremy Vine
Editor, *Public Agenda*,
The Times

Introduction

It must be hell running a Weight Watchers class, with group upon group of chubbies scrutinising every inch of your body for excess fat. They expect you to practise what you preach: a flabby midriff is effectively an admission that you're no good at what you do. Although it's OK for writers to have a spare tyre (thankfully!), I still have considerable sympathy for diet and fitness gurus and the pressure on them to embody (literally) what they promote. Why? Because it's like that for me too. Here I am setting myself up as an expert, telling *you* how to write. You'll expect me to demonstrate through my own writing all the things I will be urging you to do. I will be judged harshly. You will be on the lookout for my errors and inconsistencies. You will demand writing excellence – and so you should! You will be more critical of my style than if I were writing a book on gardening or chess. Talk about being under the spotlight! But it's OK. You see, one of the best ways of becoming a better writer is to analyse and criticise the work of others. Learn from what they get wrong. Copy what they do well.

Few people have formal copywriting training, yet many are required to write powerful publicity material of one sort or another – letters to customers or donors, information for the website, a contribution to the annual report or supporters' newsletter. Does this sound like you? It used to be me too. I learned copywriting the hard way: by trial and error over a number of years. I'd like you to learn it the easy (or perhaps I should say 'easier') way. This book will give you the training you (and I) never had. It condenses years of experience into a volume that can be read from start to finish in the time it takes to travel from Portsmouth to Edinburgh by train. So if you want to short circuit the learning curve, this book is for you!

Split into two parts, the first covers theory in an accessible and jargon-free way. As well as outlining various dos and don'ts, the section looks at planning, audiences and style, and reveals the copywriter's tricks and techniques. Part 2 examines chapter by chapter the main pieces of publicity material you are likely to have to write – news releases, press ads, fundraising and sales letters and so on – and explains how to produce the very best of each.

This book will not transform you into the William Shakespeare of marketing copy, but it *will* dramatically improve your copywriting skills and it *will* boost your confidence. It will guide, advise and encourage you. It will help you develop and fine tune your writing

ability quickly and efficiently, fast-tracking you towards your ultimate goal of really powerful publicity. That's what's on offer from this book, but the magic ingredient is YOU. The book will provide the tips, but there's more to compelling writing than the mechanical following of a formula. It is up to you to throw in the time, enthusiasm and commitment to improve your copywriting. You put in the effort and together we can be a powerful team. So read on and watch yourself improve.

PART ONE

What are words worth?

In this chapter, find out why good copy is vital and what you risk if you get it wrong. Discover how to overcome the fear and anxiety many people experience when they have to write publicity material. Complete a fun assessment of your own writing ability.

Many organisations put enormous effort into selecting the best mailing list, choosing the right media for their advertising, or the more arresting photographs for a brochure, only to let poor copy spoil their hard work. Well-targeted mailings or attractively designed publicity materials will fail in their purpose if they are badly written. Your entire marketing, awareness-raising or fundraising campaign will be undermined. Much of the time, effort and money invested may be wasted.

Why is good copy a must?

- Good copy is read: bad copy is binned.
- Good copy can persuade, influence, inform and educate.
- It can lead to enhanced donations and sales.
- Good copy can boost the image and reputation of an organisation.
- Good, clear copy is essential for effective communication, averting the kind of misunderstanding that can lead to ill will between a supporter or customer and an organisation/charity.
- Powerful publicity can help distinguish your organisation from competing causes.
- Often the written material an organisation produces is the first or only contact someone will have with it. It will be used as the basis for deciding whether they want further contact: the whole enterprise will be judged on the basis of the copy. Get it wrong and you will lose potential supporters/customers.

- People are more marketing-savvy today than in our parents' generation. While they don't expect to see charities wasting money on expensive gimmicks, neither do they expect the design and content of marketing and fundraising material to be amateurish. The same goes for small businesses – look amateurish and people may conclude that your business is unprofessional.

It's obvious that good copy is essential. So how come so much poor copy makes it into print? There are two possible reasons. First, many people simply underestimate the vital contribution that good copy can make to a marketing or fundraising programme. They are so preoccupied with creative design, clever mailshots or eye-catching exhibitions that they overlook the foundation stone upon which all of these are built: good copy. Sometimes the words are almost an after-thought, with an over-emphasis on the more glamorous and tangible aspects of a campaign, at the expense of good copy.

Another explanation is that many people have difficulty in distinguishing bad copy from good. They do not find it easy to understand what makes some writing powerful and other prose painful. Some are particularly blind when it comes to their own writing. Yes, it may seem rather a damning judgement, but I have come across many people unable to see the shortcomings of their own work.

Then there are the people like you! You are persuaded of the value of good copy and aware that your own skills could be more polished. You want to find out how you can start writing really powerful publicity.

After years at school studying grammar, spelling, and punctuation, in theory all of us should be able to write well. In practice it was probably those English lessons that turned many of us off writing. All that syntax, those complicated rules about sentence construction, verbs, adverbs, and prepositions . . .! If your ability to write, and to enjoy writing, is blighted by distant memories of school compositions and scary grammar lessons, take heart. Some of the seemingly inflexible rules drummed into you in English lessons can be cast aside and together we can make a clean start.

My aim is to liberate you from the stifling influence of your English teacher (apologies to the good English teachers out there!). I want to free the creativity within you and unlock your writing power. So shake off any belief that you can't write. You can! All you need is plenty of practice, a little confidence building, and a liberal helping of trade secrets. Before long you will be writing powerful fundraising or sales letters, persuasive adverts, and really readable promotional material. Just follow the easy steps described, pick up some tips along the way, and overnight (well almost!) you will be writing publicity that packs a punch.

Overcome the fear

Some people do not believe that they can write well. A few are too afraid even to try. Fear prevents most of us from taking up dangerous sports. Jumping off the Forth Roadbridge supported by an elastic band might result in death: having a go at drafting a press advert will not. So set aside any fears and anxieties. There's no harm in having a go.

Begin by recognising any nervousness or apprehension you have when it comes to writing. Be comforted by the fact that you are quite normal. A straw poll of a dozen acquaintances revealed that 11 of them found writing promotional material both difficult and time-consuming. Accept that you are not alone and cast off your anxiety: it's nothing more than a barrier preventing you from fulfilling your potential. Concentrate on boosting your writing skills and you will find that your confidence grows.

Too many people think that good writers are born. It's an easy excuse for them to give up without trying. True, a few people are blessed with a natural ability to write: the rest of us have to learn. But learn we can. So don't write yourself off as a no-hoper. Sure, there's an art to writing great fiction and few of us could hope to be on a par with George Elliot or Leon Tolstoy, but writing for publicity material is a different kettle of fish. In large part it is a skill that can be learned by any reasonably intelligent adult. Yes, even you! Once you have acquired the skill, it's all down to creativity. That's the factor that distinguishes the technically competent from the great. This book will give you the technical competence and it will nurture any innate creativity you have. In short, it will turn you into a better copywriter.

But let's start with where you are now. Begin by assessing your current writing ability as a benchmark. You can reassess it at the end of the book to see if you have gained in skill and confidence. If this book is worth the paper it's written on, you will see an overall improvement.

Work through the following questions. Select only *one* answer for each question – the one that most closely encapsulates how you feel – then tot up your score at the end.

Current writing ability: self-assessment test

1. I would rate my writing ability as:
 - a) Poor.
 - b) Slightly below average.
 - c) Average.
 - d) Slightly above average.
 - e) Good.
 - f) Excellent.

2. I find getting started:
 - a) Impossible.
 - b) Very difficult.
 - c) Fairly hard.
 - d) Not hard, but not easy.
 - e) Fairly easy.
 - f) Very easy.

3. When I am asked to write some marketing or fundraising material I feel:
 - a) A sense of dread and panic.
 - b) Genuinely worried that I will make a mess of it.
 - c) That it will be a struggle and will take time, but I will be able to come up with something, albeit second-rate.
 - d) That I will do an OK job, but not a great one.
 - e) That I will be able to produce a good piece of work in a reasonable timeframe.
 - f) That it will be a doddle and the output will be great.

4. I think that the publicity material I write is:
 - a) Dreadful.
 - b) Poor.
 - c) Average.
 - d) Good but could be improved.
 - e) Above average.
 - f) Excellent.

5. When it comes to words and language:
 - a) I have no interest whatsoever in words and how they work.
 - b) I'm not that interested in words, but very occasionally I will look at a piece of publicity and wonder how the creators came up with the concept.
 - c) I have an average interest in words – no more and no less than an average person.

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