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helping you to help others

Writing for Impact

Alan Barker
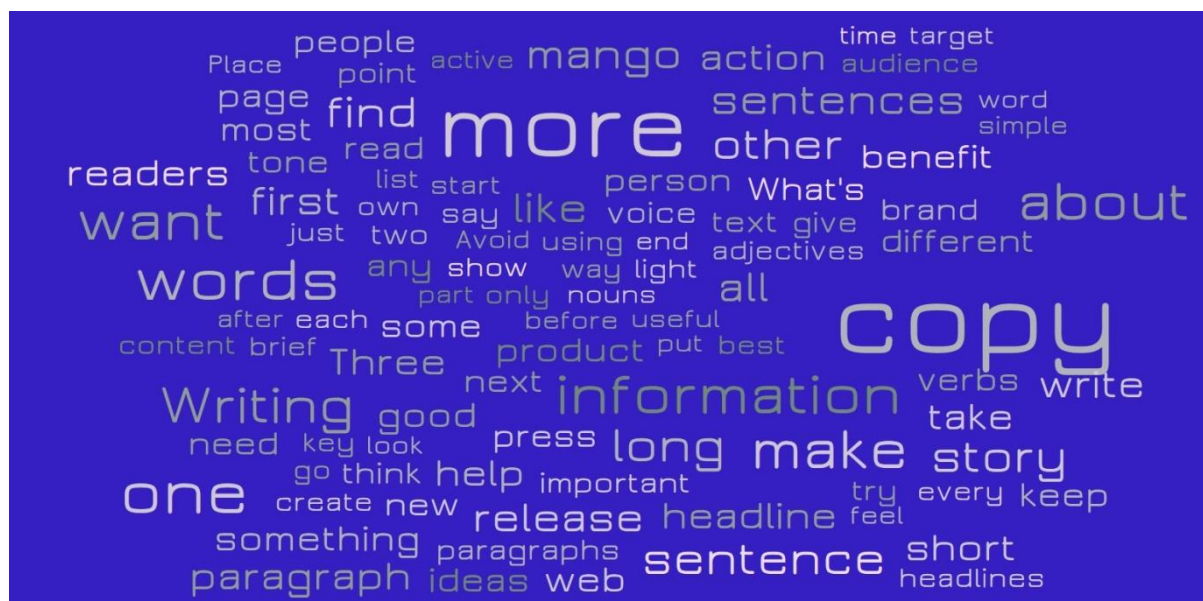
Writing for Impact

The words we use have a huge impact on our effectiveness, both as individuals and for our organisations. Charities have a unique opportunity to harness inspiring stories and values in order to bring their issues to life. But if you feel inhibited or overwhelmed, your copy can turn out dull and lifeless.

Discover insiders' secrets of writing copy that makes your audience sit up and take notice, to bring out the best in you and your organisation.

Aims

This course will help you develop the confidence and skills to write effective copy with the minimum fuss, whether you need to influence, inspire or inform. You will find out how to use examples and human interest to bring your organisation's work to life for the reader, and overcome common challenges such as writers block. Exercises focus on a personal writing project, enabling you to immediately apply your new skills to your working life.

Learning Outcomes

By the end of the course, you will be able to:
• identify the right questions to ask before you start writing
• plan your content
• adapt your tone and voice to different audiences
• tailor your writing to the format
• bring information to life with stories and case studies
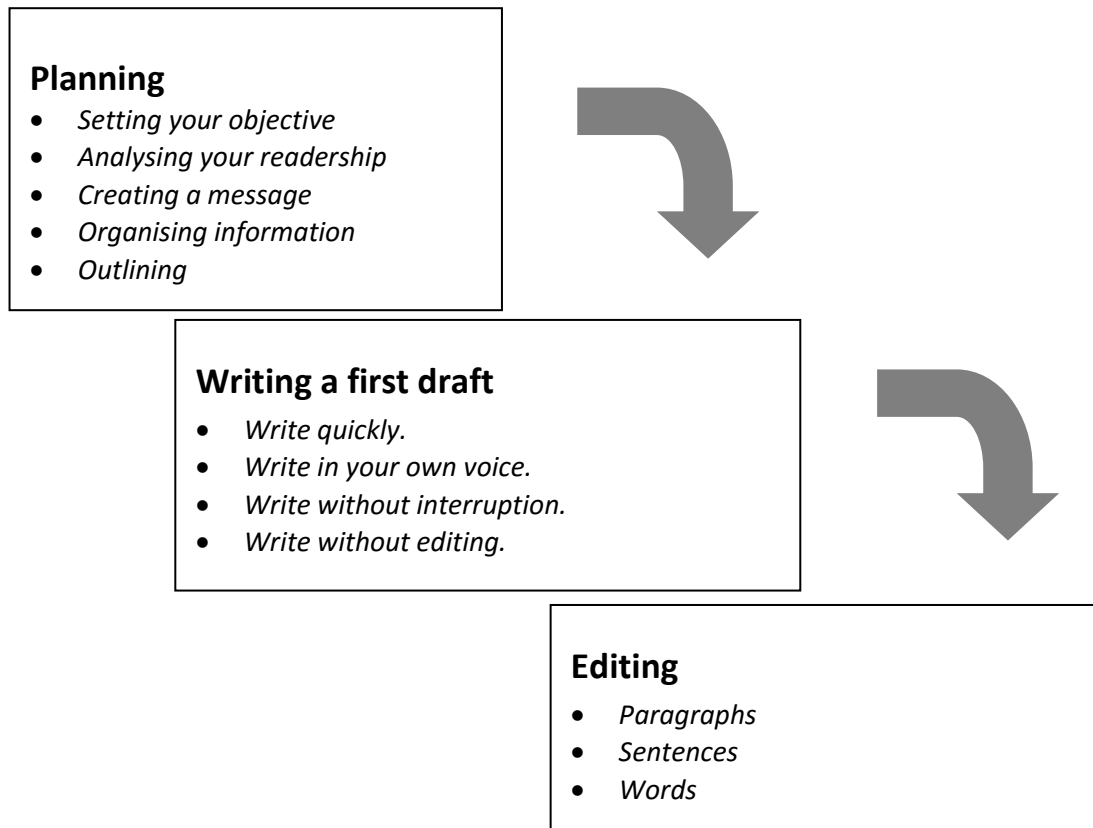• polish your copy until it shines.

Content

• Developing a brief
• Facing a blank page: getting started
• Planning and structuring your words
• Choosing the right tone and voice
• Using stories and case studies
• Design and format
• Editing, proofreading, and working with feedback.

My objectives

How to:

Writing step by step

Planning
- *Setting your objective*
- *Analysing your readership*
- *Creating a message*
- *Organising information*
- *Outlining*

Writing a first draft
- *Write quickly.*
- *Write in your own voice.*
- *Write without interruption.*
- *Write without editing.*

Editing
- *Paragraphs*
- *Sentences*
- *Words*

Try to keep the stages separate. If you are writing a tricky email, take breaks between stages. It can also be useful to ask a colleague for help at each stage.

How long do you spend on each stage of the process?

Planning   ***Drafting***   ***Editing***

How long should we spend on each stage?

Planning   ***Drafting***   ***Editing***

The three key planning questions

...and the other three:

What is your reader most interested in?

Questions to ask about our readers

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The reader contract

Writing copy: uncovering my reader's motivations

My reader is: **so they want to avoid**   **and they're looking for**

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Writing copy: instant copywriting

Write up to 100 words of copy selling the object to your chosen reader.

Reader

Object

Writing: the basics

<table>
<tr><td>

What works

Establishing rapport

Staying focused on the reader

Brevity

Long copy (if it's interesting)

Telling stories

Asking questions

</td><td>

What doesn't work

Showy writing

Jargon (and that is...?)

Long-windedness

Talking about yourself

Using boilerplate (cut-and-paste)

Over-excitement

Humour

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Four ways to make your copy zing

Use power words
Single-syllable words
Human words
Action words
Feeling words
Concrete words
Onomatopoeic words (chop, fizz, crash, scrape)
Words that stimulate the senses

Use personal words
Aim for a ratio of 3:1: three times as many instances of 'you' as of 'I' or 'we'.

Use verbs
Avoid nominalisation (see p36).

Be positive
Always express an idea as a positive, not as a negative. Don't write about what the reader won't do, or can't do, or shouldn't do; but about what they will, can or should do.

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Writing copy: your personal project

Use this checklist to draw up the brief for your personal project.

Your notes

Who's the reader(ship)?

What are their needs, challenges, reservations,

prior knowledge, location, age?

What's your purpose in writing?

What do you want to say, in one sentence?

'So what?': the key benefit for your reader?

What should they do as a result of reading your copy?

Format and visual appearance

Length (number of words)

Internal politics or sensitivities

AID[C]A

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Attention: how to write a headline

Writing a headline is probably the hardest part of copywriting. But 80% of your readers will read your headline, and only 20% will go on to read the copy, so it pays to spend at least four times as much time on your headlines as on the rest of the copy.

- **Begin with the benefit**

Write an initial headline to help focus your thinking. Don't worry about how good it is; just create a working headline.

Start with the benefit that the copy is promising. For instance:

3 Techniques to Instantly Boost Search Engine Rankings in the Property Industry

- **Make your benefit specific**

What will the benefit deliver for your reader, specifically? Maybe our example becomes:

How to Write for Social Media and Double Your Click-Through Rates in Two Weeks

- **Think about your reader's pain**

It's all about them. You need to find the benefit that speaks directly to the reader. Find the place where it's hurting for them, and incorporate that into the headline. Identify the objection that they will voice, and answer it in the headline.

Transform Sales Disasters Into Click-through Bonanzas – For Free!

- **Suggest a story**

Stories include characters and actions. How could you transform the benefit in your headline in a story?

How One London Property Firm Doubled its Click-Throughs in Just Two Weeks

If your story can include some evidence or proof, so much the better.

How Brixmorter Doubled its Click-Throughs in Just Two Weeks

- **Tug on the heart strings**

Buyers are driven by emotional cues. The logical proof just helps back up what their guts are telling them to do. These emotional motivations are pretty simple: health, love, money, fear, greed, hope.

How Brixmorter Used Social Media to Double Its Monthly Profit

Writing copy: producing a headline

Find some simple answers to these questions.

- What are you really selling?
- What's your audience profile?
- What emotional trigger will help them make the buying or conversion decision?
- What's your company and product's story?
- What would your company perceive as the major benefit of anything it sells?
- Is there something unusual about the product, company, or manufacturing process?
- What's the call to action?
- What would overcome a perceived objection?

Try to create ten headlines. Then try to create 25, or even 50. Brainstorming lots of headlines is great practice, and it forces you to choose the best ones ruthlessly.

Pick three or four. How cold you improve them? Can you use fewer words, stronger words, better verbs, more punchy or evocative nouns?

You may be able to test which headlines work better. If you're sending out an email to your entire newsletter list, for example, send two versions with two different headlines – and measure which one gets opened more.

If you're stuck for ideas...

Try starting your headline with 'how' or 'now'

How to survive the daily commute

Now, outsize shoes that are the height of fashion

How to study for a degree and enjoy the best of Singapore

Now, luxury marketing goes viral

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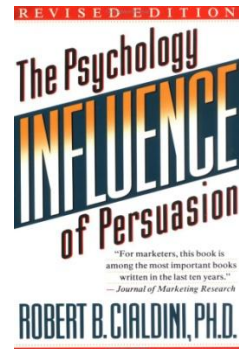
My headlines

Desire

How do we make the reader feel that they both want *and* need what we're selling?

Try Cialdini's six patterns of influence.

Reciprocity: the old give and take (and take)
We feel a strong urge to repay a favour. Do something for the customer and they may do something for you.

Concessions are favours. If you are negotiating, start high, then offer a concession.

Authority: directed deference
We are extraordinarily compliant to the requests of people we see as authority figures. What can you do to increase your authority with the person you are seeking to influence?

Scarcity: offer ends Monday
The scarcer a resource, the more value we attach to it. We are also more motivated by the prospect of losing something than by the hope of gaining something. Emphasize the dangers of *not* doing something.

Consistency: I Am What I Say
We want our behaviour and views to be consistent with what we have presented in the past. This is more than making a show of consistency; we actually want to *be* consistent with our past self-image. It's in our own self-interest to be seen to be reliable and consistent.

Making a public statement of commitment to action – either spoken or in writing (even if only we read it) – increases the chances that we do it. Get the person to say more than 'yes'; get them to say specifically what they will do, and when.

Alignment: Truths Are Us
We are strongly influenced to feel and do what we see others feeling and doing. (Think of canned laughter on the television.) Gaining commitment to action from others will strongly influence someone to make a similar commitment.

Liking: I Like You, You're Like Me
'If I'm like you, you'll like me.' We would all prefer to say 'yes' to someone we know and like. Exploit your similarity to your reader. Show that you understand them. Be likeable.

Writing copy: Influencing under the radar

Think of a few examples where you could use these patterns in your own copy. Write a sentence or two for each.

Reciprocity

Authority

Scarcity

Consistency

**Alignment
(aka social proof)**

**Likeability
(I'm like you; please like me)**

Generating conviction

How and where can you use testimonials in your copy to generate conviction in your reader's mind?

The Call to Action

Where can you put your call to action?

Everywhere! In the headline, scattered through the copy, as hyperlinks, in a prominent position on every webpage…

Make it as easy as possible for the reader to act whenever they feel like doing so.

Three things to avoid

Ambiguity: make sure the reader knows exactly what they're buying, and what they are not buying.

Wordiness: no essays or diversions. Get to the point.

Vagueness: don't leave the reader wondering what you'd like them to do.

And three things to do

- Offer different ways to take action.
- If you are using a form, make it clear and easy to complete.
- Use commands. Don't say: 'if you are interested in buying…'

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Finding your brand's voice #1

Why does your brand exist?
[Vision, long-term aspirations]

What's your brand's mission?
[Based on: the products or services you provide; your customers; your unique proposition; the benefits your brand promises]

What values does your brand embody?
[Focus on no more than six]

How would satisfied customers describe you?
[single adjectives, no more than six]

If my brand were a: **it would be:**

Finding your brand's voice #2

Place dots wherever your brand sits on each spectrum. Don't think too hard about this, and think about where you want the brand to be rather than where it currently sits.

Individual	Corporate
Friendly	Professional
Spontaneous	Careful
High energy	Measured
Modern	Heritage
High tech	Traditional
Cutting edge	Established
Fun	Serious
Accessible	Upmarket

If your brand were a person, how would you describe their personality? Find up to six adjectives. (There's a rather long list on the next page, which might help.)

Accurate	Eloquent	Modern	Resourceful
Adaptable	Empowered	Modest	Results-driven
Adventurous	Encouraging	Moral	Results-oriented
Affectionate	Energetic	Motivated	Savvy
Ambitious	Energized	Multilingual	Sensitive
Amenable	Enterprising	Nerdy	Sharp
Analytical	Enthusiastic	Objective	Skilled
Artful	Entrepreneurial	Observant	Skilful
Artistic	Ethical	Opportunistic	Sociable
Assertive	Experienced	Oratorical	Scientific
Believable	Expert	Orderly	Sophisticated
Big-hearted	Expressive	Organized	Spirited
Bold	Extrovert	Participative	Strategic
Charismatic	Forward-	Perfectionist	Strong
Communicative	thinking	Performance-	Successful
Competent	Geeky	driven	Sympathetic
Competitive	Gregarious	Persevering	Tactful
Conceptual	Hardworking	Persistent	Talented
Confident	Helpful	Personable	Talkative
Conscientious	Heroic	Persuasive	Technical
Conservative	High-impact	Philosophical	Tenacious
Cool	High-potential	Photogenic	Thorough
Cooperative	Honest	Pioneering	Traditional
Courageous	Honourable	Poised	Trustworthy
Creative	Humanitarian	Polished	Truthful
Credible	Humorous	Popular	Unrelenting
Culturally	Impulsive	Positive	Understanding
sensitive	Individualistic	Practical	Upbeat
Customer-driven	Industrious	Pragmatic	Venturesome
Decisive	Independent	Precise	Verbal
Dedicated	Ingenious	Preeminent	Victorious
Dependable	Innovative	Prepared	Vigorous
Determined	Insightful	Proactive	Visionary
Devoted	Intelligent	Productive	Vital
Diligent	Intense	Professional	Vivacious
Diplomatic	Intuitive	Proficient	Well-balanced
Direct	Joyful	Progressive	Winning
Dramatic	Judicious	Prudent	Wise
Driven	Keen	Punctual	Worldly
Dynamic	Loyal	Quality-driven	Youthful
Eager	Masterful	Radical	Zealous
Earnest	Mature	Reliable	Zestful
Effective	Methodical	Reputable	
Efficient		Resilient	

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List of oppositions

My brand is   **but not**

Adapting your tone

A brand's voice should sound consistent. But its tone can adapt to the reader's situation and feelings. The tone you choose should:

- *enact* the value your reader is looking for;
- *engage* your reader by making the copy more enjoyable to read and by awakening their imagination; and
- *stimulate* positive feelings that the reader will then associate with your brand

Tricky situations	Tricky copy
health and medicine	bad news
religion	contact details or calls to action
politics	FAQs
money, banking, debt	forms, disclosure of personal information
privacy	privacy policies, terms of use
fundraising	failure messages, alerts

A few more tips on tone

- If it feels forced, rewrite.

- Don't try to be funny. Let funniness happen, but then check that your reader will find it funny. If in doubt, don't try to be funny.

- Focus the tone on headlines, prominent copy – topic sentences, single isolated sentences. Don't try to put tone into every word.

- Look at the competition and be different. If they are being really tonal, back off. Go for straightforward and simple.

- Usability comes before tone. It should be easy to read, not clunky and thick.

- Be consistent. That's hard. But sudden lurches into a new, unexpected tone of voice are as disconcerting in copy as they would be in conversation.

- Aim for likeability above all.

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Writing copy: finding the right tone

Pick a piece of copy or a webpage, and assume that you need to write or rewrite the copy.

What's the reader's situation as they come to the copy?

How is the reader feeling as a result of this situation?

What situation will the copy put the reader into?

How do you want the reader to feel after reading the copy?

What tone do you need to adopt to create that feeling and put the reader in that situation? [You'll find some ideas on the next page.]

Write up to 100 words of copy to do the job.

Choose your tone

adventurous
approachable
authoritative
casual
cheeky
clear
commiserating
congenial
dependable
eager
elegant
flirty
friendly
fun
gentle
helpful
hip
informative
irreverent
nerdy
professional
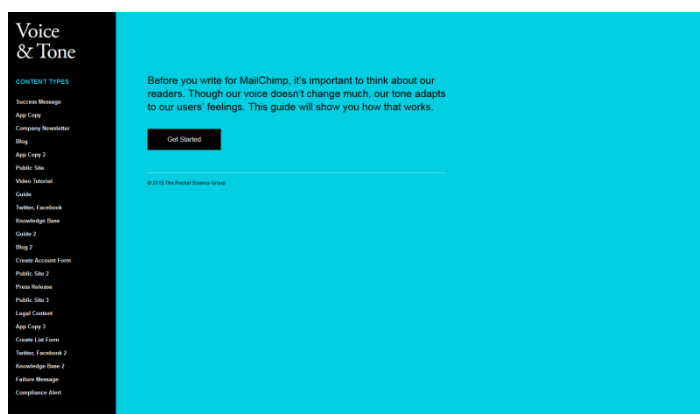respectful
romantic
shocking
techie
whimsical
witty

Voice and tone guides

http://bit.ly/1KMmc72

http://bit.ly/1AerIhs

voiceandtone.com

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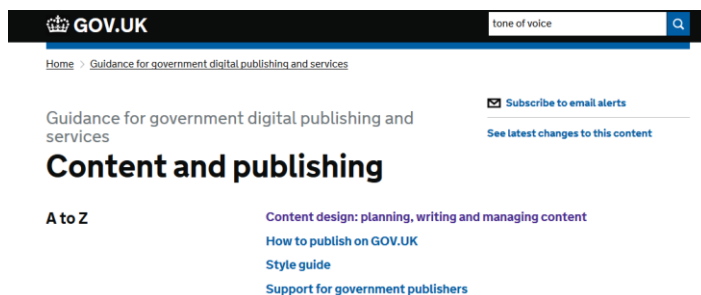
Stories and case studies

Stories allow your reader to relate to your ideas more directly by locating the ideas in a context they recognize.

We create a simulation of the stories we hear. When we hear a story, our minds move from scene to scene: we are *inside* the story.

Stories also stimulate the emotions. 'Mirror neurons' are said to fire when we imagine, hear about or read about someone doing something; these mirror neurons create the same mental sensation as if we were performing the action ourselves.

SPQR is a simple narrative structure that you can use to shape your stories.

Situation
"Once upon a time…" What is the first thing you can say about the matter that you and your audience will agree is true? The starting point is completely uncontroversial.

Problem
What happened to alter the situation? Perhaps something went wrong. Maybe improvements are necessary. Often the problem is that the audience is ignorant of something.

Question
What question does the problem trigger in the audience's mind?

Response
The answer to that question should be the same as the point you are making.

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Stories: three basic plots

The Challenge Plot: a protagonist overcomes a formidable challenge and succeeds.

The Connection Plot: people develop a relationship that bridges a gap,

racial, class, ethnic, religious, demographic, or otherwise.

The Creativity Plot: someone makes a mental breakthrough, solves a long-standing puzzle, or attacks a problem in an innovative way.

For more on dramatic structure, go to:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Dramatic_structure

Ideas for stories in your copy (writing copy #6):

Thinking about design and format

Why focus on design up front?
Because the design of the document will dictate some aspects of the way you write the copy.
Because the design will offer you new ideas for how you write the copy.
And because the design and the copy need to work together.

Tailoring your copy to the format
Think about the elements of the design that you can't alter.
Think also about how to introduce new elements into the design.
Think about how the design can help you deliver your core message.

Bullets
Don't overuse them.
Remember that most readers will probably focus on the first line and then skip the rest.
What tone do your bullet points imply?

Boxed out information
A great way to split up your material for easy browsing.
Use boxes for key information, bold statistics, evidence that supports your case.

Graphics and photos
Yes, a picture can be worth a thousand words.
But that sentence wasn't a picture.
Use graphics and pictures to support your key messages – which the reader must be able to *read* somewhere.
Lots of graphics to choose from: graphs, tables, pie charts, flow charts, bar charts, maps…

Topping and tailing, summary boxes
Standfirsts and variants on the same theme are great for hooking your reader and reinforcing your message.

Human interest: pull quotations and case studies
We're not good at interpreting statistics. But we believe stories, however unusual or fantastical.
And we believe quotations, even if they're made up.

For a good piece on design and copy (from the designer's side):
http://bit.ly/1GgTwEg

Editing your text: the strategy

When Neil Simon, the great Broadway playwright, was asked for his philosophy of life, he answered in one word.

"Rewrite."

Good copywriters write good copy. Brilliant copywriters write good copy and then edit it relentlessly. Here's how.

Print it out

Always do this. It looks different on paper: more immediate, less glassy. And it's sitting in your *hand*. You're in direct contact with your copy.

Take a break

Even if you're against the deadline, walk away and come back to the copy. Even 30 seconds will make a difference. The longer the better. Walk away and forget it. Do something else. Take a swim. Iron the cat. Anything.

If you can let it simmer overnight, that's best of all.

Read it out loud

The best writing sounds smooth. Listening to your syntax helps you find the places where it jangles and grates.

Better still, ask someone else to read it blind. Mark the spots where they stumble. Then rewrite them.

Pretend you're the intended audience

Or of course, test it on a sample of your target audience. What stands out to them?   Jot down your thoughts, change and check.

Use the readability statistics

They're not subtle, but they are objective. And they can confirm that you're editing in the right direction.

Be ruthless

The final step is to edit your work *down.* Yes, chop some of those words, sentences, and paragraphs. Like crazy.
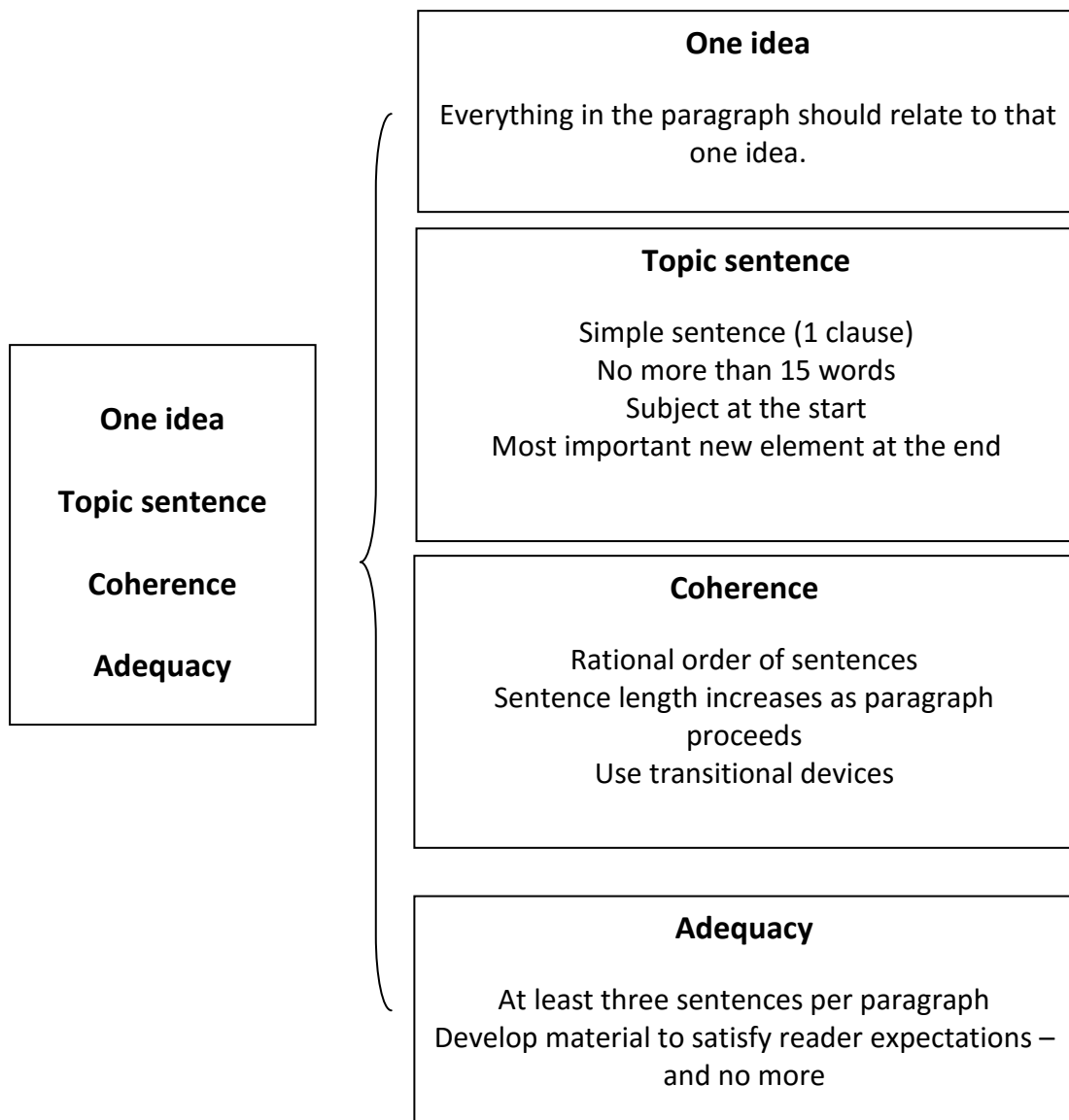
What's left will sparkle like a diamond.

Editing your text: 25 tactics

1. Cut long sentences in two.

2. Make your verbs stronger: avoid *to be*, *to make*, *to do*...

3. Make the subjects of sentences act like characters in a story.

4. Think about which person to use (1st, 2nd, 3rd).

5. Eliminate empty subjects: *it is, it was, there is, there are, there was, there were...*

6. Prefer simple and additive sentences to long, complex sentences.

7. Seek to eliminate passive verbs.

8. Seek out abstract nouns and convert them into adjectives or verbs (*-tion, -ment, -ity, -al, -ance, -ence* ...).

9. Cut all adverbs and adjectives and reinstate only the necessary ones.

10. Remove meaningless, redundant and tautologous words (check out especially *very, really, basically, actually, currently, quite simply...*).

11. Replace negative constructions with affirmative ones.

12. Replace phrases with single words.

13. Reduce prepositions (*to, by, with, from, under, over ...*).

14. Cut *in order to.*

15. Don't use *start to.*

16. Cut *that* – sometimes.

17. Replace *thing* with a more specific word.

18. Refer to people as *who* (not *that*).

19. Construct and write bullet lists properly.

20. Use contractions.

21. Reduce instances of *–ing* (gerunds or *–ing* used as an adjective).

22. Check your commas with *that* and *which.*

23. *Over* and *less* for amounts; *more than* and *fewer* for numbers.

24. Use noun modifiers.

25. Hyphenate noun phrases used as adjectives.

Paragraphs: four key characteristics

One idea

Topic sentence

Coherence

Adequacy

One idea

Everything in the paragraph should relate to that one idea.

Topic sentence

Simple sentence (1 clause)
No more than 15 words
Subject at the start
Most important new element at the end

Coherence

Rational order of sentences
Sentence length increases as paragraph proceeds
Use transitional devices

Adequacy

At least three sentences per paragraph
Develop material to satisfy reader expectations – and no more

Transitional devices
(connecting words and phrases)

To Add:
and, again, and then, besides, equally important, finally, further, furthermore, nor, too, next, lastly, what's more, moreover, in addition, first (second, etc.)

To Compare:
whereas, but, yet, on the other hand, however, nevertheless, on the one hand, on the other hand, on the contrary, by comparison, where, compared to, up against, balanced against, vis à vis, although, conversely, meanwhile, after all, in contrast, although this may be true

To Prove:
because, for, since, for the same reason, obviously, evidently, furthermore, moreover, besides, indeed, in fact, in addition, in any case, that is

To Show Exception:
yet, still, however, nevertheless, in spite of, despite, of course, once in a while, sometimes

To Show Time:
immediately, thereafter, soon, after a few hours, finally, then, later, previously, formerly, first (second, etc.), next

To Repeat:
in brief, as I have said, as I have noted, as has been noted

To Emphasize:
definitely, extremely, obviously, in fact, indeed, in any case, absolutely, positively, naturally, surprisingly, always, forever, perennially, eternally, never, emphatically, unquestionably, without a doubt, certainly, undeniably, without reservation

To Show Sequence:
first, second, third, and so forth, A, B, C, and so forth. next, then, following this, at this time, now, at this point, after, afterward, subsequently, finally, consequently, previously, before this, simultaneously, concurrently, thus, therefore, hence, next, and then, soon

To Give an Example:
for example, for instance, in this case, in another case, on this occasion, in this situation, take the case of, to demonstrate, to illustrate, as an illustration

To Summarize or Conclude:
in brief, on the whole, summing up, to conclude, in conclusion, as I have shown, as I have said, hence, therefore, accordingly, thus, as a result, consequently

Paragraphs: from effective to engaging

1. Begin each paragraph with a topic sentence.

2. Check that topic sentences make sense in order, and summarize the sequence.

3. Identify the function of each paragraph: to persuade or to explain? (Perhaps to narrate; very occasionally to describe)

4. Identify the form of the argument or explanation in the paragraph.

   - **Argument:**
     deductive/inductive

   - **Explanation:**
     - examples
     - categories
     - cause and effect
     - process
     - definition
     - comparison or contrast

5. Topic sentences: make the subject an element from the previous paragraph; place at the end of the sentence the new element or information that you will explore in the paragraph. The new element should be the theme or key element that will bind together the sentences in the paragraph.

6. Within the paragraph: identify the subjects and verbs of all sentences (and other clauses). The best subjects are *characters*; the best verbs express what the characters are *doing.*

7. Remove all references to the fact that you are writing. (Exception: at the end of an introduction, give a guided tour of the chapters to follow.)

8. Consider making the subjects of each sentence elements consistent with the subject or key element of the topic sentence.

   a. [A-B. A-C. A-D.A-E.]
   b. [A-B. B-C. B-D. B-E.]

9. Exploit opportunities to construct sequences of sentences in parallel.

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Sentences: from sensible to stunning

1. **The start of the sentence is the first point of maximum attention.**

   Place at the beginning of a sentence a character, idea or concept that you have mentioned in the previous sentence.

2. **The end of the sentence is the next point of maximum attention.**

   Place at the end of a sentence the new information that you want to introduce.
       [A-B. B-C. C-D.]

   Place the most important new element at the very end of the sentence. (Place new technical terms, for example, at the end of a sentence.)

3. Shift more important information to the right; shift less important information to the left.

4. Use empty subjects to introduce new ideas and to shift important elements to the right.

   It's a slam-dunk no brainer.
   There aren't any more efficient back-projecting widget magnifiers on the market.

   (Use sparingly.)

5. Use transitional devices to connect sentences:

   ▪ to connect ideas: *as a result, in contrast, therefore...*

   ▪ to help the reader evaluate ideas: *interestingly, unfortunately, perhaps, from a practical point of view...*

   ▪ to locate the idea in time or space: *last year, in London, during the month...*

6. Use classifiers to bind elements from one sentence into the next. (Classifiers are normally nominalizations; this is an occasion when nominalizations can be useful.)

   Conventions of this kind are meant to be broken.
   Customers like you know when a service is not up to scratch.

7. Keep the subjects and key elements in a paragraph consistent. They don't need to be the same word, but the reader should be able to see that they fit together.

Strong verbs and nouns

From passive verbs to active verbs

Verbs can be either active or passive. An active verb expresses what its subject does; a passive verb expresses what its subject suffers. Sentences with active verbs are shorter, stronger and more dynamic than those with passive ones.

*A Health Improvement and Protection Bill **has been introduced** by the Government.*

*The Government **has introduced** a Health Improvement and Protection Bill.*

Readers understand sentences in the active voice more quickly and easily because it follows how we think and process information. The passive voice forces readers to take extra mental steps as they convert the passive into the active.

To turn a passive verb into an active one, ask: ***"By whom?"*** or ***"By what?"*** Place the 'actor' at the start of the sentence and build the rest of the sentence on.

From abstract nouns to verbs and adjectives

Nouns name things, people, times, places or qualities.

Concrete nouns name things physically present in the world (*table, woman, pen, car, tree*); **abstract nouns** name ideas, concepts or qualities that cannot be sensed physically (*growth, awareness, training, marketing, possibility*). Many abstract nouns have standard endings.

Termination	*Announcement*	*Authority*
Production	*Management*	*Operability*
Decision	*Arrangement*	*Probability*
Replication	*Development*	*Sustainability*

Turning actions into abstract nouns is called **nominalisation**.

Try to cut down your use of abstract nouns. Replace them, if you can, with verbs or adjectives. If you can only replace an abstract noun with a group of shorter, more concrete words, consider keeping it.

Denominalise wherever you can!

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More on tone of voice

Formal or informal?

Long words or short ones? Passive or active verbs? Long sentences or short ones? Additive constructions or subordinating ones?

> *And God said, Let there be light: and there was light. And God saw the light, that it was good: and God divided the light from the darkness. And God called the light Day, and the darkness he called Night. And the evening and the morning were the first day.*

> *As a result of the order having been given by God that there should be light, light appeared. After having inspected the light, God was convinced that the light was acceptable, and, by dividing the light from the darkness, which he named respectively day and night, there came about the first evening and the first morning, which became hereafter known as the first day.*

How can your language enact your values?

Find the words that evoke actions or images, sensations or emotions. Don't refer to the emotions (don't call things 'exciting' or 'sensational' or 'touching'); enact and evoke the emotion.

Write as if you were speaking – to a single reader.

But use complete sentences (unless you decide deliberately not to).

And edit ruthlessly!

Find the right mood

Mood	Use	Tone
Indicative	Statements of fact	Neutral, helpful
Interrogative	Questions	Interested
Conditional	Bargaining	Looking for a deal
Imperative	Instructing	Authoritative
Subjunctive	Hypothesis	Explorative

Punctuate to reflect both sentence structure and speaking rhythm.

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The formality spectrum

Formal

Informal
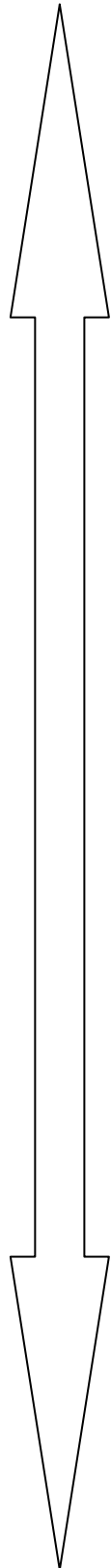
Writing for the web: the short copy

Writing for the web is not very different to writing for any other medium. Everything that applies on paper applies on screen – only more so.

Web copy, more than any other, must *speak.* Use the voice and personality you've worked so hard to construct. But keep cool. Expressions of emotion might not work well.

Planning

- **Chunk your content.** Chunking makes your content more scannable by breaking it into manageable sections.
- **Front-load the important information**. Start with the content that is most important to your audience, and then provide additional details.
- **Use clear headlines and subheads**. Questions, especially those with pronouns, are particularly effective.
- **Use images, diagrams, or multimedia** to visually represent ideas in the content. Videos and images should reinforce the text on your page.
- **Use white space.** Using white space allows you to reduce noise by visually separate information.

Paragraphs and sentences

- **Use short sentences and paragraphs**. The ideal standard is no more than 20 words per sentence, and five sentences per paragraph. Use dashes instead of semi-colons or, better yet, break the sentence into two. It's ok to start a sentence with "and," "but," or "or" if it makes things clear and brief. And it's ok to say "it's" rather than "it is".
- **Use active verbs**. "The agency opened up new possibilities in social media", not "new social media possibilities were opened up by the agency".
- **Use bullets and numbered lists**. Don't limit yourself to using this for long lists. One sentence and two bullets is easier to read than three sentences. But don't overdo the bullets! (As, perhaps, I'm overdoing them here.)

Words

- **Use the words your users use.** By using keywords that your users use, you will help them understand the copy and will help optimize it for search engines.
- **Use pronouns**. The user is "you." The organisation or company is "we." This creates cleaner sentence structure and more approachable content. It creates characters in a story and a more visible relationship.

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Writing for the web: the long copy

Writing for the web is in many ways like writing for any other medium. A number of key features, however, make reading on screen a different experience from reading on paper. Understanding those features will help you produce more useable text for websites and web-based documents.

Key qualities of web text

Research suggests that web users feel happiest when web text is **concise**, **scannable** and **objective**.

- **'Concise'** means that the text says what it needs to say and no more.

- **'Scannable'** means that big ideas are prominent; that paragraphs are not too long; and that key words are easy to pick out.

- **'Objective'** means that the writer tends to remove their own feelings from the text. Readers want information when they are using the web; opinions and feelings tend to get in the way.

Additionally, readers have voted for:

- **clear navigation aids;**
- **evidence of the writer's credibility; and**
- **an informal style.**

Thinking about your readers

The key to effective web writing is to think of your reader as a **visitor**, rather than a long-term associate. Different types of visitors want different things from the web pages they visit.

- **Viewers** stay on the page for no more than a few seconds.
- **Users** want to do something (such as buying a product or registering for a web community) or find practical information.
- **Readers** are willing to browse, linger – and actually read what they find.

Designing and writing web pages is a matter of satisfying as many of these types of visitor as you can. It's worth remembering a slogan invented by one enterprising web-writer: **"shut the door, they're coming over the fence"**. Visitors could be coming from anywhere: a home page, a search engine, or a link from another page in a completely different part of cyberspace.

Chunking and stacking

Chunk and stack your material to satisfy the needs of viewers, users and readers.

- **Chunking means breaking information into manageable, screen-sized pieces.**
- **Stacking means grouping the chunks into categories.**

Additionally, most web pages will benefit from these four features.

- **Create a heading** that tells you where you are at once.
- **Write a message sentence**. We've met messages before – and this message is just like the messages you can create in any other document.
- **Provide supporting information** in fewer than 100 words per paragraph.
- **Create hyperlinks** to other pages. No page should be without a hyperlink to take you somewhere else – even if it's only back to the front page.

Cues for action

Cues for action keep viewers from running away, help users to do what they want to do, and encourage readers to explore the page further.

What action do you want your reader to take? Maybe:

- **search for information;**
- **contribute to a discussion forum; or**
- **buy something;**
- **contact someone; or**
- **move to another page.**

Explain explicitly what action readers can take. Whatever you want them to do, make sure that you keep the action simple: as few clicks as possible, with the most basic instructions.

Always write as if you are talking directly to readers, using the word 'you'. And provide an incentive for taking the action. It doesn't have to be financial! Simply telling readers what information they can expect to find by taking the action may be enough.

Cues for action: a few ideas

Click <u>here </u>to find out more about Malaysian bug creepers.

Fill out <u>this form</u> for regular updates on Paradise Project activities.

For help with elderly or disabled visitors, send us your telephone number and we'll contact you 24 hours before your arrival.

Take part in our northern tundra <u>quiz</u> and play for some great prizes!

You can make a difference. Sign our <u>petition</u> to save the Mexican fly-eating orchid.

Hyperlinks

Hyperlinks are a powerful innovation in web writing. Unlike conventional headings, they perform two functions: helping the reader to find their way around, *and* acting as the transport to get them there. Hyperlinks might be:

- **keywords in the text;**
- **names in the text; or**
- **instructions: "Go to Semi-tropical zone"**

Headings are the most important candidates for hyperlinks. They should act like departure and arrival signs in an airport – telling readers where to go and announcing when they have arrived.

Hyperlinks can often include use blurb to give just a little detail of what the heading is promising – and encouraging the reader to go there.

Hyperlinks: some wording ideas

Plants in myth and folklore
Discover some of the world's strangest tales about trees and flowers.

Eco-engineering
How technology can help and hinder conservation

The making of garden flowers
How breeders created our favourite blooms

Making it look good

Keep the visual elements simple. Use a designer if you can. Make your print readable. Sans serif fonts (such as Arial, Verdana, Tahoma or Univers) are generally easier to read on screen. Use at least 12pt and higher if possible.

Avoid too much highlighting (and **never** use underlining except for links). Don't use too many colours (and **never** use blue, red or purple except for links). And create columns no more than half a screen width. They are easier to scan than text that spreads the full width of the screen.

Transforming conventional documents into web pages

Create a summary at the head of the document – no longer than half a screen long. List the section headings at the head of the document. Create links within the document. Obvious candidates for links are the headings in your list at the top of the document. Another useful link is a permanent link to the top of the document. Make the title and main headings visible within the opening screen – not just on the opening printed page.

Writing a blog post

Blog posts are great for content marketing. A few guidelines will help you produce posts that stand out from the crowd.

Find the unique angle

Before you write your post – and in fact, before you even nail down a specific topic – ask yourself this one simple question:

"What's the unique angle of this post, and how will it help my audience?"

What can I say that's different from what everyone else is saying? What can I bring to the conversation?

How will this post help my reader? What can they take away that will be useful to them?
Great bloggers understand that a good post speaks to its reader's interests, needs, preferences and pain points.

Open well

No, let's say that better.

Open by captivating your reader

It's just like the 'Attention' moment of AID[C]A. You have to hook the reader and stop them surfing on through cyberspace.

The headline matters. So does the first sentence. Keep both of them simple and clear. Don't try to be clever. Use all the skills of headlining and transfer them to the opening paragraph.

Put yourself in the reader's mind. What problem are they trying to solve? What are they looking for as they land on this page? How can you help them?

Have a clear viewpoint

Who'd read a post that sits on the fence? That takes all points of view into consideration and respects each one for its merits? That can't make up its mind?

Be controversial. And if you don't want to be controversial, at least take a position. And then develop it. (We'll look at some interesting ways of doing that a couple of sections further on.)

Find a good image and a caption

Choosing images for your post shouldn't be an afterthought. An irrelevant or poor quality image can undermine everything else in the pose.

The best images convey emotion more than information. Find an image that relates to the feelings you want to evoke as much as, or even more than, the topic or the ideas you are discussing.

Captions are another opportunity to hit your reader with a kind of headline, summarising your point. According to Derek Halpern of Social Triggers, images make us focus our gaze downward; and this means including a caption beneath your photos is a great way to keep your readers' attention longer, and looking down the screen to read the next piece of test.

And remember to attribute the image properly.

Use external information and data

Your reader is likely to be sceptical. Outside information adds credibility to your text. Include:

- customer testimonials
- expert quotes
- industry research or data
- the opinions of influencers in your niche

And link to as many of these as possible. Your reader will appreciate being guided to more of what they're looking for.

Make it easy to read

Nothing new here. Use short paragraphs, headings, subheadings, lists, bolds and italics, and generally anything that makes your content appear less intimidating to read. But that's not all you can do to keep the reader reading.

Connect one paragraph to the next. Put a teaser at the end of one paragraph, and an attention-grabbing remark at the head of the next. Use transitional devices. Use snappy sentence structures. Promise something interesting a few paragraphs ahead. (I tried that a few paragraphs back. Hopefully the technique worked. Well, anyway: you're still here.)

Some ideas for articles and blog posts

In *The Universal Journalist*, David Randall suggests the following categories of feature. Use this list to trigger ideas.

Colour piece
Describing a scene and throw light on its theme(s)

Fly on the wall
Observing an event (without being seen)

Behind the scenes
Similar to the above, but with the journalist a part of events

In disguise
Pretending to be another person

Interview
A transcript of a conversation

Profile
An examination of a particular person; will often include an interview

Factbox / Chronology
A simple list of facts, perhaps in date order

Backgrounder / A history of
An extended factbox

Full texts
Extracts from books or transcripts of interviews

My testimony
A first-person report of some kind

Analysis
An examination of the reasons behind an event

Vox pop / Expert roundup
A selection of views from members of the public or experts

Opinion poll
The results of a survey among the public

Review
An opinion about a new book, article, film, TV show…

Finding a point of entry

Articles and blog posts can be structured in a host of ways. The key to an effective article structure is finding a strong point of entry. That point of entry will govern your approach in the post. It will supply you with ideas for 'hooks': linking elements that will attract the reader's attention and pull them from one paragraph to the next.

- Past, present and future – tell a story. Take three points and contrast events at each point.
- Three decades.
- Three eras.
- Before, during and after. Variation on the time theme.
- Three places: around the world, around the country, around the region.
- Three continents.
- Three points on a journey.
- Three points of view. Owner, worker, customer; government, organisation, client.
- Three functions. Three ways of doing things.
- Three aspects of the issue. Planning, creating, reviewing; the issue according to…
- Three levels. Global, national, regional; broad, specific, in detail.
- Opposites. On the one hand; on the other hand; where is the middle way?
- Benefits. What's in it for the reader?
- Risks. What are the dangers for the reader?
- One person's story.
- Multiply stories and what they tell together.
- Dialogue. Organise the whole article as a dialogue between individuals.
- Letters. Organise the story as a series of letters: either from one person or between people.
- A journal or diary. Break the story into bite-sized diary entries.
- Questions and answers. FAQs. Often put in a box. An increasingly popular way of making information digestible.
- A lesson. An expert explains to a pupil in a dialogue. (Like 'Sophie's World' or the books of Carlos Castaneda)
- Jigsaw chronology. Break up the story and tell it in a broken order.
- Flashback. What's it like now? Now go back a number of years.
- Investigation. Tell the story of how you followed the case, like a crime story.
- Start with a belief. Maybe a well-known belief or a controversial one. Challenge it.
- Use all five senses. What do the different senses tell you about the matter? Imagine the situation from the point of view of a person lacking one sense.
- Film technique: imagine the story as a film script.
- Use the equivalent of camera movements. Pan from one side to another – of the country, the city, the factory, the landscape…
- Zooming. Give the big picture then gradually close in on one revealing detail.
- Outward zooming. Start with a tiny detail and show how it relates to a bigger picture.
- Cutting. Surprise the reader by cutting from one aspect to as seemingly unrelated one – and then show how they fit together.
- Suspense. Present clues but keep the reader wondering how they add up.
- Freeze frame. Show a picture and describe it in detail. Then carefully explain how the situation came to be. (A road accident, for example: describe exactly what you see after the crash has happened, then unpick the sequence of events that led to it…)

- Personal experience. Tell it entirely from your point of view, including your feelings and surprises as you explored the issue.
- Memory. I remember when…
- Play on the negatives. What didn't happen? Who wasn't there? When didn't it happen? Where does it not happen? How did it stop happening? Why doesn't it happen?
- Butterfly wings. A tiny event on one side of the world, through a web of unseen connections, has a consequence on the other side of the globe…
- Conspiracy! Everyone loves a conspiracy theory. Maybe there *is* a conspiracy.

Writing copy: bringing an article to life

How could we make this short article more interesting?

Mango is one of the most famous fruits in Bani. Its taste and nutritional qualities make of this fruit an important element in the nutrition of Dominican people.

Every year, during the month of June, the State Directorate of Agriculture organizes a Mango Fair in Bani. The event usually lasts 4 days. Several mango farmers take part and every night musical groups animate the festival. As part of the event, there are seminars on mango production, dialogues among mangoes farmers, exhibitions of mangoes and of food made with mangoes. The national and international people who take part in the event buy mangoes and other products made with mango. The universities of the Dominican Republic also take part, including students who are specializing in food preparation.

Most importantly, there is a competition among the mango producers and the best mango in term of quality wins the trophy. This year, a variety of mango called "Banilejo" won the first prize.

[158 words]

Here are three ideas, based on themes in our list.

- **Past, present and future**
  Fifteen years ago, Bani saw its first mango fair. It was a modest affair, lasting a couple of days. Today, the festival is four days long and attracts thousands of visitors.

- **Benefits. What's in it for the reader?**
  What's the most nutritious fruit you can buy in a Dominican market? The answer: mango. It's also one of the cheapest. And it's more versatile than you might think. If you want ideas on how to make more of the mango in your shopping basket, look no further than the Bani Mango Fair…

- **One person's story.**
  Domingo Sanchez has been farming mangoes for twenty years. He started with a small farm ten kilometres from Bani. This year, one of his mangoes won the first prize at the Bani Mango Fair.

Take a different theme and rework the article. You can create up to 180 words. Feel free to make up material. (In reality, of course, you would research facts very carefully!)

Bringing an article to life: my version

Bringing an article to life: trainer's version

What's the most nutritious fruit you can buy in a Dominican market?

The answer: mango.

It's also one of the cheapest. And it's more versatile than you might think.

If you want to make more of the mango, look no further than the Bani Mango Fair. For four days every June, Bani becomes the mango capital of the country. You can attend demonstrations of cooking using mango, and ask local farmers about the hundreds of different varieties. Students from Dominican universities are on hand to offer more specialized advice, and companies from home and abroad will offer you tempting products made with mango. If you are inspired to start growing your own, you can even attend seminars on mango production.

And in the evening, musicians transform the fair into a celebration of the Dominican Republic's most important food.

Most importantly, mango producers compete for the coveted title of best mango variety. This year, a variety called *Banilejo* won the trophy. So now, Bani is famous, not only for the mango fair, but for the country's finest mango.

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On long copy

Research suggests that, when it comes to direct mail, long copy beats short copy hands down.

The same seems to be true for web selling.

Strange as it seems, readers who are thinking about buying something will read more – a lot more – than most copywriters think. They want to be convinced. They want to have their conviction reinforced. They want information and they want their objections to be dispelled. They want respect. Long copy – if well written – delivers to all those needs in a way that short copy doesn't.

Not all situations call for long copy. Does your proposition have any of these characteristics? Long copy might be the answer.

1. **Expensive**: When your offer carries a high price tag, you'll sell more with long copy. The long copy increases the reader's commitment to part with more money.
2. **Information-rich:** When selling online education or some other form of knowledge product, the more informative your copy, the more you'll sell. More information: longer copy.
3. **Feature-rich:** When what you're selling has loads of features, you'll need a lot of copy to explain them all, plus the express benefit of each feature.
4. **Controversial**: If your reader has lots of doubts or objections – or if they have heard lots of negative rumours about the product – you need long copy to dispel the doubts and overcome the objections, and to counter the misinformation.
5. **Innovative:** If your product does something new, or satisfies a desire in a brand new way, you'll need to provide your reader with a lot of benefit-oriented information.
6. **Online:** Because your reader can't physically experience what you're offering, long copy may be worth testing when selling just about anything online.

When Short Copy Shines

Long copy is not always the right answer. Short copy may be able to get the job done:

- when readers are already primed to buy;
- when the item is a known commodity;
- where space is limited, as in a catalogue;
- with a low-risk, low-priced purchase or opt-in;
- with non-readers;
- when photos can convey most of the story;
- where the copy serves as a prelude to interaction with a sales representative.

On the other hand, conversations with sales reps *before* producing the copy can trigger lots of useful information to feed in to productive long copy.

Of course not everybody will read long copy. The people who aren't interested in buying will ignore it. But then, they would ignore *any* copy about that product. The reason long copy works is that it responds to the needs of readers who are already considering buying.

How to create
sales letters that *sell*

Advice from the killer who wrote himself free

Imagine you killed a man in 1907 and left his corpse to rot in the Arizona desert.

You got convicted of his murder, and you're now in jail, where you have been sentenced to stay until you die.

What kind of miracle would it take to win you both your freedom and one of the best paid jobs in Adland?

For murderer Louis Victor Eytinge, that miracle was copywriting.

Without leaving his cell, his sales letters netted him an income of thousands of dollars, fame and a stint as a Hollywood scriptwriter.

And every one of the 15 techniques below helped him on his way.

Read them. They are in his own words.

1. Get inside the envelope and seal the flap. Be yourself in your letters. Don't imitate. Create your own style and it will win just as willingly as would you in person.

2. The letter that osculates the Blarney Stone leaves a bad taste in the mouth. It is simply a question of being YOURSELF.

3. Emulate the sand-flea. Find the point of contact by which you can most easily win your prospect and build your letter so it gets through *gently*.

4. Get off the spot so you can see your own shadow from the other man's eyes. The letter must see things from his viewpoint, the YOU angle.

5. The only theme that amounts to a snap is YOU. Dotting your letters with a plentitude of *WE* and *I* is not sprinkling an appetizer before the prospect's checkbook.

6. Before you write one word, plan everything from greeting to get-away. Plan the perspective so that it makes prominent the points the prospect *ought* to perceive.

7. The character of the opening paragraph makes or breaks your letter campaign. It is THE letter. It invites either further study or a sentence to the oblivion of the waste basket.

GET UNDER THE HIDE — AND GET RESULTS!

8. Confidence begets actions and orders. The prospect knows you are working for *your own* interest — it takes the human letter to prove that *his interests are yours*.

9. The way to batter down a guard is to snuggle up inside of it. Contact accomplishes more than impact. Get under the hide and get — results!!!

10. Change your appeals as vaudevillians change their acts. Make them fit your audience.

11. Break up your letter into eye-pleasing, easy-reading paragraphs. Did you ever notice in reading some work of fiction, how the eye almost automatically skips the descriptive matter and searches for those paragraph breaks that indicate the conversation?

12. Be simple in your language. Avoid technicalities. Henry James was a great writer — Robert Louis Stevenson was a greater and his work will live in the heart of the world when the former is forgotten.

13. Clean type in a letter is as vital as clean teeth in your salesman. Your stationery — the printing of the letterhead, the weight and finish of your paper stock, the shape and balance of your letter, the cleanliness of the type, the style of the language used — all

these indicate to the reader of your letter just what you are.

14. Make your letter like your courtship. Your girl, you know likes the lovey-dovey talk — she enjoys the waist-warming — but — when it comes to marriage, if she is at all the sensible sort of girl I'd expect you to have, she'll want to know HOW you can support a wife — she will want to know things before she says "YES".

15. Get your letters experted if you can't get results — that should remedy their ills. The outsider is the one man who brings the unbiased, critical capacity that the producer and seller rarely possess.

GET THE DOTTED LINE SIGNED AND GET AWAY

If you apply just a handful Louis Victor Eytinge's techniques to your letters, they'll help win you sales.

And if you'd like to get your letters 'experted', talk to us. If Eytinge knew about the sales letter techniques that have been tested since his day, he'd have walked to freedom many years earlier...

GET IN TOUCH

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If you're interested in Eytinge, you can find the full story of the murderer-turned-copywriter at www.benlocker.co.uk/eytinge — it's an amazing tale.

Ben Locker & Associates
— *The Copywriting Agency*

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What is news?

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News is:

- anything that involves or affects *people*;
- about people *doing things*;
- involves *special people*: heroes, carers, achievers, victims;
- whatever is happening *now or in the near future*;
- something *unusual*: a crime, an event, an accident, a tragedy;
- about *conflict*;
- an *announcement*: research findings, facts and figures;
- *emotional*: funny, sad, horrific, annoying, arousing;
- *visual*: something you can take a photograph of.

Every journalist wants an angle. And there's no such thing as a new angle. Plagiarism is, unfortunately, the name of the game. If you want to get ideas for angles, look at what's been done. Look at what other people are doing.

One useful technique is to find answers to the questions in your 'finding the news' checklist and juxtapose them with each of the items in this list.

20 irresistible angles

1. Sex and scandal
2. Human interest
3. Children and babies
4. Animals
5. The common touch
6. Surveys and reports
7. The local angle
8. Make 'em laugh
9. Flavour of the month
10. Charity
11. Controversy and conflict
12. Anniversaries and special dates
13. Good heavens!
14. New and novel
15. First ever, last ever
16. Winners and losers
17. Green
18. The figures game
19. Celebrities and royalty
20. A good picture (or good actuality)

Producing press releases

A good press release saves time and effort for the journalist. If you write it well, it will help you keep in control of the message – and the language used to convey it.

A good press release:

- gives new information;
- generates ideas;
- saves the journalist time (by quoting people, giving facts and supplying background);
- is written concisely;
- gives contact names, e-mail addresses and phone numbers, for more information.

A journalist will use a good press release, pretty well word for word. Get it right, and you can write the story yourself!

Overall impression

Make it look good. A logo is a good idea. Use a 'Press Release' heading and consider using coloured paper. Make it businesslike, well laid out, and **short**.

Use double-spaced typing and leave margins wide.

Use A4 paper and use one side only.

Date

Date it at the top. Add:

FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

- or –

NOT TO BE USED BEFORE 1100 HOURS, 5 MAY 2003

- or –

EMBARGOED TILL 0100 HOURS, 12 DECEMBER

Don't embargo unless you have to. Usually, embargoes make sense for the release of financial figures, or for a speech (in which case, add 'Check against delivery'). Otherwise, embargoes are an annoyance to journalists.

Getting the headline right

Don't try to create a witty headline. That's the sub's job. But do keep it short (6-10 words) and interesting. Include the message of your story. Keep it as concrete as you can.

This headline tells you about the subject of the press release, but not what you want to say.

> **CANCER RESEARCH UK ANNOUNCES THE 2003 ANNUAL CATERING SURVEY OF BRITISH COMPANIES**

This headline, on the other hand, delivers the message.

> **LEANER, FITTER STAFF ON THE MENU, CATERING SURVEY SHOWS**

Here's some other advice about headlines.

- Keep punctuation to a minimum.
- Try to use an active verb.
- Ration information.
- No questions.
- Avoid abbreviations unless absolutely essential.
- Don't use stale jargon.

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Planning a press release

A newspaper story is structured like an inverted pyramid.

Headline		Very short summary
First paragraph		0-40 words: the essential facts
Next 2-3 paragraphs		Repeats story in more detail
Final paragraph		Gives background, quotes, general information
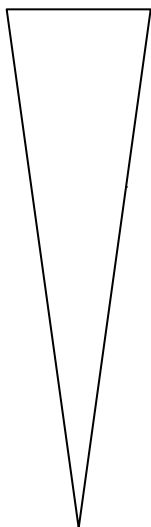
Subs edit from the bottom up. If you cut the last two paragraphs, what would be lost?

Some newspaper stories vary from this essential structure. Your press release should not.

Keep it short and simple

The KISS principle is critically important. One page of A4 is ideal; never use more than two.

Keep your paragraphs to no more than 40-50 words.

If you must go onto a second page, put 'more follows' at the bottom of the first page. At the end, put 'Ends' or 'End'.

Put technical detail, extra quotations, or background information, into a separate sheet with its own heading: 'Further information' or 'Notes to editor'. Cross-reference it in your main release. You could also place a 'boilerplate' at the end of every press release. Typically, it would include company size, annual turnover, number of employees, and locations.

If you find that you are writing a long release, you may be trying to target too many publications or types of publication. Consider writing a number of versions, one for each target publication or type.

Writing copy: Improving a press release part 1

What's wrong with this release?

PROMINENT BUSINESSMAN UNHAPPY ABOUT BUSINESS RATES

At the Newtown Chamber of Commerce yesterday, a spokesman for Gobble Yoghurts gave astounding evidence to 45 fellow businessmen about the dire and disastrous effect of rate increases on small shops, saying 'Many local retail outlets are struggling already in the present downturn of the economic situation. The all too real threat is that another financial burden in the shape of huge rate increases will send them under, and then all of us will find fewer point-of-sale opportunities.'

The MD of Gobble Yoghurts, Mr J. Gantham, further stated that at least 24% of his wholesale customers in the area have already intimated to him that they could foresee closure in the next six months. 'What will come in their place?' asked Mr Gantham. 'What will the local community do when the local food retailers shut?'

He called for concerted and immediate action on the part of the Newtown business community, suggesting that they only pay their rate bill under sufferance, forcing the local authority to threaten legal action. 'If we only pay at the very last moment, this will bring home how unhappy we are, especially if we all write an accompanying letter to explain our actions.'

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Improving a press release part 2

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BUSINESS RATES 1**

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threaten legal action. **10** 'If we only pay at the very last moment,
this will bring home how unhappy we are, especially if we all
write an accompanying letter to explain our actions.'

1. Hardly a gripping headline, though it does give an idea of the story.
2. Unnecessary detail at this stage. in the first paragraph only give the place if it is vital to the story.
3. Who is this spokesman? Give his name and title.
4. Let's hope the evidence is astounding.
5. Don't pile on the adjectives.
6. Most people would use the word 'shop'.
7. The spokesman sounds more pompous by the second.
8. Altogether far too long, too wordy, and lacks focus. We don't yet really know what this story is about. So far it sounds like a pompous speech by some bod or other saying that high business rates are a Bad Thing; to the bin with it!
9. Unnecessary extra bit to the story that doesn't really add to it.
10. Ah, at last we come to some meat. This angle should be right at the beginning, to inject a bit of controversy and action.

Improving a press release

directory of social change
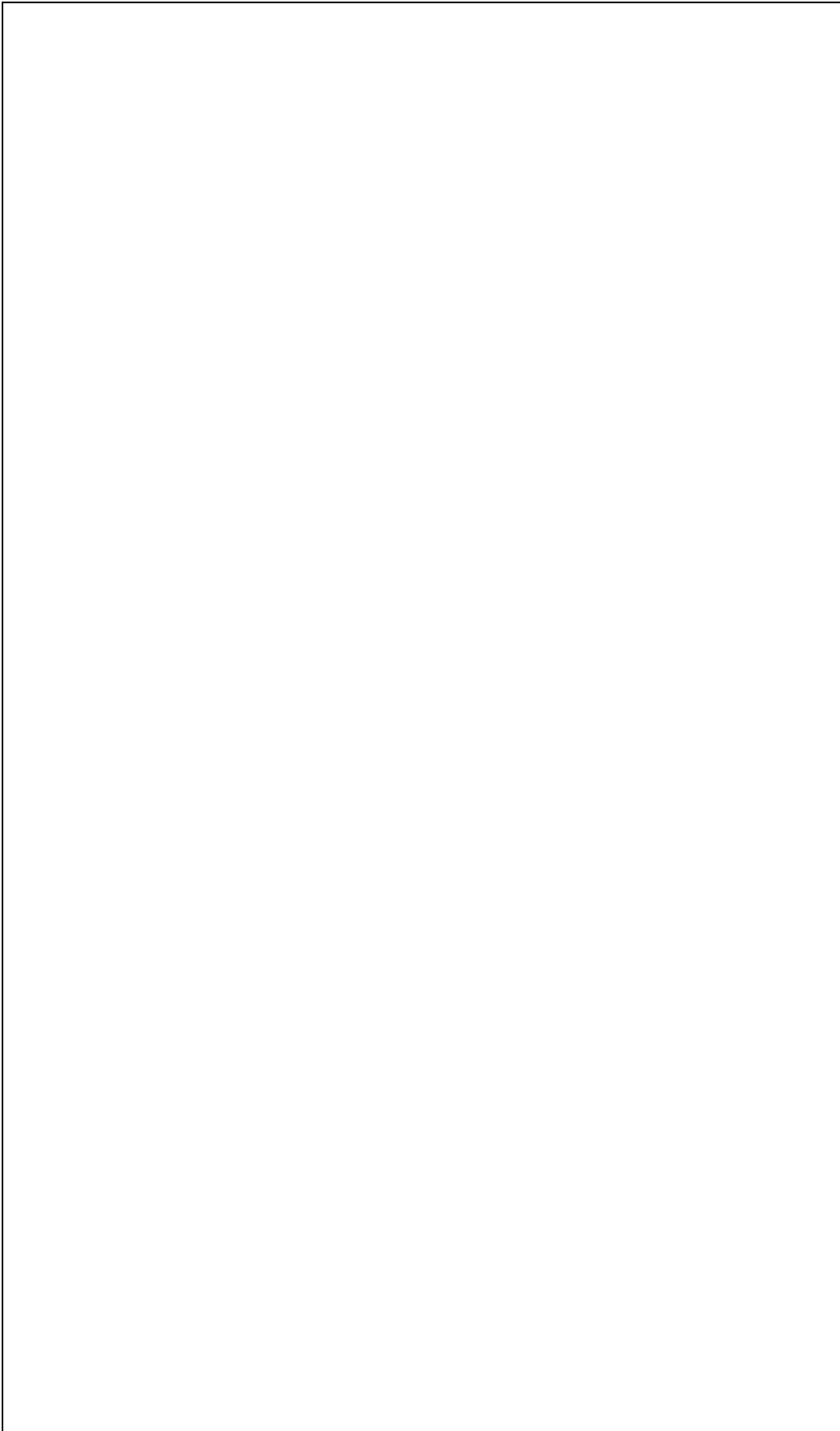
Improving a press release: trainer's version

BUSINESS LEADER CALLS FOR RATES RESISTANCE CAMPAIGN

Jerry Gantham, MD of Gobble Yoghurts, called yesterday for all Newtown businesses to unite against higher business rates by 'paying to rule'.

He told a meeting of the Chamber of Commerce: 'Local shops are going to close and that will affect us all. We can show our disgust by being as slow as possible in paying our rates, and let the authorities know we are doing this for a reason.'

Adopting the 'work to rule' tactic used in industrial disputes, he called it 'pay to rule'. Mr Gantham suggested that all 45 of his listeners should force the local authority to threaten legal action before they pay their bills, and warned the Council to expect lots of hate mail: 'We should all write an accompanying letter to explain our actions.'

Research by Gobble Yoghurts shows that one in four corner shops expect to close in the next six months, unable to cope with the huge increase in business rates on top of the recession.

The first paragraph

The release stands or falls by its first paragraph.

It must attract interest. Reveal the main news or your irresistible angle.

Don't get bogged down in detail. Round up figures, keep titles and descriptions short, deliver your main statement as a punchy summary.

Make it self-explanatory. Your first paragraph should be able to stand on its own.

Keep it short. No more than 40 words and two sentences.

It's a truism that your first paragraph should include the 6 'W's.

- **Who?**   Tracy Marsden, leading authority on corporate catering,
- **What?**   says food at work is becoming healthier,
- **Where?**   in a survey of British corporate catering
- **When?**   published today.
- **How?**   The survey, based on an annual questionnaire,
- **Why?**   supports the view that organisations benefit from healthier, fitter staff. (40 words)

The language of press releases

The best advice comes from Harold Evans, who said: "sentences should be full of bricks, beds, houses, cars, cows, men and women."

Watch the hype. What is amazing or unique to you, will be deadly boring to a cynical ferret.

Avoid jargon. Stick to common language. Explain technical terms.

Use short words and phrases. The guidelines of plain English will help here. Prefer short words to long ones, and one word to a dozen. But avoid tabloid language, in which 'disagreement' becomes 'clash' and 'reduce' becomes 'slash'.

Cut all the adjectives and adverbs. Then see which you really, *really* need.

Beware of initials. If you must use them, explain them first. Avoid more than one set of initials in any one sentence.

Give facts, not generalisations. Don't say 'lots of jobs': give a number. Don't give too many facts. Quote one person, rather than claiming that everybody feels the same way.

Use the conventions of newspapers. These include the following.
- Initials don't have full stops. (BBC, IBM)
- Numbers up to ten should be words ('nine'); 11 and upwards as Arabic numerals. (But use words for 'hundreds' or 'thousands'.)
- Never underline.
- Don't overuse capital letters, or quotation marks, except for direct quotations.

Using quotations

Or 'quotes', as they are inevitably called. Try to encourage someone to say something meaningful, not just a bland puff.

You could manufacture a quotation for someone, but you must show them the quotation and ask them to sanction it before the journalists get to them.

Contacts

After 'ends', give the details of at least one person that the journalist can contact.

Give both office and home numbers, and e-mail addresses. Journalists are usually very good about using only work numbers, but a tight deadline might mean that contacting you at home is the only way to ensure that the story runs.

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Sending your press release

Send it to a named person if you can. Second best is to address it to 'The Health Correspondent' or 'The Business Page'. If it's real news, send it to the News Editor.

Send the release by post or by e-mail. Faxes tend to get lost.

Be ready to follow up on any release you send. Get some more facts at the ready. Have a quotable person on standby. Get ready for photo-calls. Send your release to the relevant people in your own organisation, and if you expect a big response, alert the switchboard.

All of these pieces of advice become doubly important if you are handling a controversial story.

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The copywriting brief

If you're hiring a copywriter, a good brief will help them deliver to your expectations. If you're the copywriter, you can lead by asking your client to fill in a good brief. You may need to help them!

Client:

Subject:

Date:

Briefed by (name and job title/responsibility):

Project description:

Requirement

What do you think you need? Maybe it's a corporate brochure, website, sales literature, sales letter, an ad for print, radio or TV.

(The copywriter might suggest a different or additional approach, based on the information in this form.)

Purpose

Why do you need this? What are your objectives: short-term, long-term? How will you evaluate or measure success?

Target Audience

Describe and quantify. Be as detailed as possible. Use socio-economic classifications if appropriate (ABC1, etc.).

Positioning

Where the brand or product currently sits in the market, and where you want it to be. SWOT analysis (Strengths, Weaknesses, Opportunities, Threats).

Benefits

What single benefit will most appeal to your target audience?

Proposition

Summarise that key benefit in a single sentence.

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Rationale

Why should your target audience believe you? Evidence, arguments. Case studies, examples, stories.

Call to action

What do you want the target audience to do as a result of reading this copy? Specify the action, with all relevant contact details.

Content guidelines

Will the information change often? Do we need to adapt the content for different audiences or media? What other elements will be included: booklets, envelopes, samples, click-throughs...

Voice

What sort of voice do you want the copy to have? Indicate using a short list of adjectives. Examples of existing material would be useful, as well as style guidelines.

Tone

What feelings do you want to stimulate in the reader? How do you want the copy to act in relation to the reader?

Distribution

How will the target audience see this copy? How will they receive it?

Other activity

Will this copy be accompanied by any other promotional activity?

Background

Please supply any information about the company, the product, and the brand, which you think the copywriter might find useful.

Context

How does this project fit into your business strategy? What is the immediate competition? Is this project similar or different from previous projects you have engaged in? How does your target audience feel about this product in relation to competing products?

Content

What do you want the target audience to know? Supply all the information you want to communicate. Information in any form is welcome: draft text, notes, bullet lists, pictures...

If you have any information on keywords for SEO, please supply it.

Attachments

List all documents and objects attached to this brief.

Next action

State the first deliverable, the person responsible and the deadline.

Estimate/budget

Please provide a budget, either specific or estimated. Any estimate given is based on present assumptions of the nature of the item at this stage. These costs may be subject to revision once concepts have been developed, or if the brief changes substantially. Agree Terms and Conditions of working.

Timing

Agree a schedule to show stages and dates for each stage: agree brief, initial concepts, detailed design, draft text, artwork, final revisions, to printer, delivery.

Briefing details

Date ....

Brief given by ....

Brief taken by ....

Brief agreed by ....

April 19, 1955

Dear Mr. Calt:

On March 22nd you wrote to me asking for some notes on my work habits as a copywriter. They are appalling, as you are about to see:

1. I have never written an advertisement in the office. Too many interruptions. I do all my writing at home.

2. I spend a long time studying the precedents. I look at every advertisement which has appeared for competing products during the past 20 years.

3. I am helpless without research material—and the more "motivational" the better.

4. I write out a definition of the problem and a statement of the purpose which I wish the campaign to achieve. Then I go no further until the statement and its principles have been accepted by the client.

5. Before actually writing the copy, I write down every conceivable fact and selling idea. Then I get them organized and relate them to research and the copy platform.

6. Then I write the headline. As a matter of fact I try to write 20 alternative headlines for every advertisement. And I never select the final headline without asking the opinion of other people in the agency. In some cases I seek the help of the research department and get them to do a split-run on a battery of headlines.

7. At this point I can no longer postpone the actual copy. So I go home and sit down at my desk. I find myself entirely without ideas. I get bad-tempered. If my wife comes into the room I growl at her. (This has gotten worse since I gave up smoking.)

8. I am terrified of producing a lousy advertisement. This causes me to throw away the first 20 attempts.

9. If all else fails, I drink half a bottle of rum and play a Handel oratorio on the gramophone. This generally produces an uncontrollable gush of copy.

10. The next morning I get up early and edit the gush.

11. Then I take the train to New York and my secretary types a draft. (I cannot type, which is very inconvenient.)

12. I am a lousy copywriter, but I am a good editor. So I go to work editing my own draft. After four or five editings, it looks good enough to show to the client. If the client changes the copy, I get angry—because I took a lot of trouble writing it, and what I wrote I wrote on purpose.

Altogether it is a slow and laborious business. I understand that some copywriters have much greater facility.

Yours sincerely,

D.O.

(Source: *The Unpublished David Ogilvy: a selection of his writings from the files of his partners*)

Useful resources: online

On copywriting:
http://bit.ly/1cQpEOm

On SEO:
http://onforb.es/1hXOtNs

On writing headlines:
http://bit.ly/1zcXaZ4
http://bit.ly/1zQZpyR

On long copy:
http://bit.ly/1DYd7pV

On writing for the web:
http://bit.ly/1EcDfh6
http://bit.ly/1h6NlCV

This is the best grammar site I've found so far.

http://bit.ly/1AdXDeP

You can find guides to other grammar sites at:

http://bit.ly/1zidLJs

For online guides to style and usage, use:

http://www.economist.com/research/styleguide/

http://www.guardian.co.uk/styleguide

Most public libraries in the UK now offer free access to a wealth of online resources, including the full Oxford English Dictionary. You will need your library card number to access these sites. It's worth joining the public library for this service alone.

Useful resources: in print

Microstyle	Christopher Johnson	W W Norton and Co 2012
Writing at work	Alan Barker	Industrial Society 1999
Improve your communication skills	Alan Barker	Kogan Page 2000
The Plain English Guide	Martin Cutts	Oxford UP 1995
Oxford Learner's Grammar	John Eastwood	Oxford UP 2005
Fowler's Modern English Usage	ed. R W Burchfield	Oxford UP 2004
The Cambridge Encyclopedia of the English Language	David Crystal	Cambridge UP 2003

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