

Getting to grips with copywriting

Fresh and original writing oils the wheels of every aspect of commercial activity, and language is a key element of many forms of modern design. Copywriting is not about copying – it's about communicating in an original way. You can put a sentence together, and your imagination is alive and well, so you have everything it takes to be a creative writer. All you need are some guidelines to help you figure out when your writing is good, and a little inspiration from some practitioners in the field.

“If you are a writer of novels, or plays, or poetry, you can write and take your own time, generally speaking. But in advertising, you've got deadlines, you've got to have the idea, and it's got to be a great one, and you've got to have it Tuesday morning.”

David Ogilvy

Why do I need to know about copy?

Creative writing for business is challenging and rewarding in equal measures, and when it all comes together with great design to create innovative communications it can feel like the best job in the world. Copywriting is an essential part of the design communications mix, and those of us who do it for a living will tell you that crafting messages and telling stories is a rewarding mental process, even in the business context. You'll find that being able to generate a response from your audience is a valuable and highly sought-after skill.

Copy (or text, or words) used in design is a very particular type of creative writing that requires the inspiration of an artist and the control of a craftsman or craftswoman. In comparison to the rails on which the copywriter runs, the novelist or poet has no limitations. Poetry and storytelling are flights of the imagination, with no client or news editor to bear in mind. Whether the personality of the writer shines through directly or indirectly, this is the purest creative writing – it can take off in any direction, be as fictional as it wants to be and go wherever it pleases. Writing copy, however, is all about sticking to a brief, while paying homage to the creativity and style of the poet and storyteller.

Journalists and copywriters are commercial writers, but the essence of their roles is completely different. In most cases journalists have to create the story from scratch, usually by following leads. They will have to research the facts to get to the heart of the matter, discover the different viewpoints and opinions and bring this material together accurately and coherently. Articles are often written to a tightly defined structure, while features can allow more room for individual expression and the interweaving of the writer's viewpoint. The message has to be factually correct, balanced and fair, but the writer is allowed to take a stance, which could reflect that of the newspaper or, in the case of a regular column, the writer's own opinion.

Copywriting borrows from all other fields of writing in its quest for creative expression, but there is no room for your personality in the copy that you write; you are simply a scribe, a hired mouthpiece for your client, and it is the brand's voice that must come through, loudly and clearly. The starting point, whether you're working on a one-off project or are writing copy every day, is to set aside your ego, forget all ideas about expressing your own thoughts and put on the company overalls. You'll be surprised how well they fit and how good you look in them.

Good writing makes things happen

In Mesopotamia, the earliest cuneiform writing was developed to record ownership of animals and goods. Writing was at the heart of trading, and its invention was the catalyst for the dawning of modern civilization. It is now one of our greatest forms of expression, and, whatever the brief, is a powerful tool for all types of business. The techniques of creative copywriting are really about finding the most natural way to communicate well with others.

Business has one aim: to deliver a profit. Everyone in every sort of commercial enterprise is trying to sell a product or service for more than it costs them to produce it, and make an honest profit to live off. Selling – which is what you're doing when you're writing copy – used to be a case of steering customer demand by pointing people in the direction of the leading brands.

Before the competitive nature of the global marketplace really hotted up, all you needed to do to have a viable business was to identify and satisfy a customer need. Our abundant times have created a huge amount of choice, and with choice comes competition: it is no longer enough to hold up your hand and tell your customers where you are; you now have to tell them why you are

better, why they should bother to knock on your door and why they should keep coming back to you.

There has been an enormous increase in the different media that can be used to reach customers, from blogs and microsites to talking retail displays and email campaigns. Customers now have even greater control over which of these messages they will give the time of day to, which means the results we can achieve through traditional advertising and marketing are increasingly less predictable. The reality is that we as customers consciously select and deselect the promotional and advertising messages that we wish to listen to.

Innovative graphic design is a powerful way to catch and hold the attention, but we're becoming a bit blasé about stunning visuals, amazing concepts and slick photography, and they no longer have the power to make us sit up and think as they used to. The messages they carry and the way those messages are expressed are the essence of effective communication.

It is not enough to splash out on expensive media campaigns and expect high-profile visibility alone to deliver results. If the customer isn't watching, or doesn't like the message, you won't attract a response. The starting point has to be to select the best way to reach people, whether this means sticking posters at the top of ski-lifts or sending specific text messages to shoppers as they pass your store. Then you must make sure the overall message you're communicating is targeted, relevant and inspiring. For this you need great copy.

The attitudes and principles that apply to copywriting for external customers apply equally to any written or verbal communication. The clearer and more accurate your communication, the more successful you will be.

What's stopping you writing great copy?

Your essential objective as a copywriter is to create clear, easily understood messages that target a defined audience and encourage them to do something for your client. If you get to know the basic processes and avoid the common pitfalls, you'll find that this is not as difficult to achieve as you might think.

Being a natural creative writer will give you a headstart, but it is not enough in itself, and you do not need to be a natural writer to be a good copywriter. Some agency writers have got by on their natural talent for decades, and actually have little idea about process or technique.

"I'm sure that everything a man does is grist for his copy mill. I'm sure of that – what you've done and what you've experienced – if you can put more thinking and more interesting things into your copy, you're that much more provocative."

Bill Bernbach

One of the latest executions from a long-running and consistently award-winning campaign, this uses a few simple words to speak volumes to an intelligent target audience.

Great minds
like a think.

The Economist

The best way to write copy is to focus completely on the true nature of the target audience so that your messages are crafted with them in mind. This will produce compelling copy and your reader will feel at home with your writing. Using a clever play on words, a pun or a quick witticism is becoming less important than being able to craft a well-constructed, stimulating message.

Understand the heart beating at the core of your message, consider the make-up of your quirky audience and their particular habits, such as their buying patterns, and make sure your copy plays to these at all times. Most of the copy that you will be working with will require clear, uncomplicated writing about what you are selling that clearly presents the benefits, not just the features. A creative or conceptual idea should always underpin your approach – you can establish this by giving careful consideration to your overriding message or call to action and explaining how the audience can respond.

Too much analysis can hamper creativity. There's no right or wrong way to go about writing copy, yet there are several patterns that you can follow. Every writer will do this slightly differently – you should find the best way of developing your own unique approach that blends proven techniques with your own preferred way of tackling a brief.

Take aim, you're targeting your audience

Whatever the brief, you will have a message to communicate to a specific audience. Build up a profile of this audience, develop an understanding of what they're like and what their situation is, and decide on a style of language that they will relate to. A good word for this process is "profiling", and anyone can do it.

The most comprehensive briefs can give you an in-depth picture of your audience based on economic profile, geographical location and even the type of street they live on, the papers they read and cars they drive. If you haven't been given this sort of information, you can compile it yourself without having to leave your desk or search Google, simply by using your common sense and experience to determine the characteristics of the people in your audience.

You'll be surprised how much you already know about your profiled audience. For example, if you're writing toiletries product copy for women aged between 25 and 40 you may be given the insight that they're professionals, with a reasonable disposable income, and are regular shoppers with the client. An image – a stereotype – will come to mind immediately.

What can your profiling add to this? Well, think it through. It's likely that our 25 to 40-year-old women are busy looking after a family, or juggling home responsibilities with work, or pursuing a career that takes up all of their time. Being this busy will mean that they are living with stress. At the point when they read your copy they are likely to be tired and not have much time. When they stand in the store with your product in their hand, they have their kids with them, or have sore feet, or are being jostled by other customers. How do you cut through all of this?

Now you're building up a picture of a real human being and are writing for someone who is bright, and enjoying life, but who's being distracted and has a lot on her mind. You need to make sure that your messages focus on helping to reduce her stress (and don't expect her to study the text for very long). You need to catch her eye with a strong product name and description, the tone of voice you use should be friendly and on her level, and you'd better have something good to say – a clear benefit or an inspiring proposition – otherwise you're wasting her time.

By contrast, if you're writing advertising for the business customers of a computer supplier your profiling will again tell you how to develop this tone of

"A writer should be joyous, an optimist ... Anything that implies rejection of life is wrong for a writer, and cynicism is rejection of life. I would say participate, participate, participate."

George Gribbin

NHS
National Patient Safety Agency

a whole world
in your hands

Germs cover territory fast. There could be up to 4.6 million
of the little blighters colonising your hands right now.

Wipe them out.
Clean your hands.

cleanyourhands[®]
campaign

Taking an ugly subject and turning it into an imaginative concept, this poster works very hard by keeping the message short, sweet and benefit-led.

“If you’re trying to persuade people to do something, or buy something, it seems to me you should use their language, the language they use every day, the language in which they think.”

David Ogilvy

voice. Your readers are IT-procurement managers of large corporations, who will be sourcing computers for 50 to 200 people at a time. They control company expenditure, and as well as getting good value for money they require excellent service and support and unbeatable quality. They are also career professionals looking for their next big promotion. The tone of voice you adopt must be confident, reassuring and extremely credible. Deliver clear benefits without over-promising or trivializing the purchase with quirky headlines. You still need to present the whole message with a powerful idea and a clear call to action, but this needs to be backed up with evidence – in the form of facts and figures to justify any claims you are making – because these people want hard facts.

Sell the benefits, not the features

When you are selling something you don’t tell your customers what it does, you tell them how or why it will improve their lives. This takes the “so-what?” factor into account: assume your customers say “so what?” to every claim that you make, and then give them the answer before they’ve even thought about the question.

The point of this is simple. Your readers are not all paying full attention – some of them are just browsing, others have the radio on in the background, some are about to go out, others are lazy. They don’t all have the time or inclination to work out that the features you’re listing will provide them with really good benefits. You’re the copywriter, so do the hard work for them. If you work out the benefits and present them appealingly, far more of your audience will respond.

Every feature has an associated benefit, it’s just that some are easier to spot and some more compelling than others. The core benefits often lead into peripheral benefits, and you’ll need to decide which one to focus on. There are the classics – for example, when people buy a new home security system they are not buying an alarm, they are buying peace of mind. Working out the benefits is a logical process, as long as you always focus on your audience. It is also important to remember that the benefits of a product or service for one audience will not necessarily be the same as the benefits for another.

Take any product, for example a vacuum cleaner. There are two main types of benefit: those associated with the product as a type (an immaculately clean, dust-free house), and those that distinguish your product or service from the competition (how your vacuum cleaner out-performs others). Be sure to focus on the benefits that set you apart from the pack. If you’re not careful, you could do a great job of selling the idea of a vacuum cleaner without leaving your reader with the impression that your brand is the best choice.

It’s your role to determine which benefits are the most compelling and which benefits and features are not essential to the brief. Less is often more, and by highlighting one clear benefit you will capture the readers’ attention and persuade them to look into what you are offering, so don’t be afraid to describe only one benefit in your overall statement.

How to improve the odds in the numbers game

No matter how good a writer you are, you can’t achieve the impossible, so focus on what you can achieve. You won’t get every member of your target audience to respond in the desired way – some just won’t allow you in. Conversely, there will be some people who will buy into your message even if it is unclear and badly written. Both of these sections of your target readership

have already made up their minds – they will definitely buy – or not – and there is little you can do to make any difference.

Concentrate instead on your “floating voters” – those members of the audience who may be tempted to buy but need a little nudge, an extra reason, before they commit. This is where you can work some magic. Target those who are predisposed to buying, who have some interest in your product, and you will be reaching the most receptive people in your audience.

Hold their attention by promising, delivering and reminding

Your finished copy should follow a consistent thread from start to finish so that your readers will stay with you to the end. Fire their interest by explaining what they are about to discover, and why this will be interesting. Giving your copy a hidden structure will ensure that you don't just ramble on, listing facts and features. It also gives you a means of keeping the message fresh and stimulating.

The readers expect you to deliver, and if you don't let them down (either by over-promising or under-delivering) you'll have established the start of a good relationship with them. Don't make these promises too overt. You're not standing there with a loudhailer trying to force people to come into your store; you're welcoming your guests on to your premises and letting them know that they will have an enjoyable time. Your tone should be inviting and warm, and your promises should be subtle and measured.

Intrigue keeps interest alive

It is much better for people to want to buy from you than for you to have to sell to them. Being sold to is an invasion of privacy and it's annoying, yet we all like to shop for our favourite things. Warm up your audience to want to buy from you and you won't have to sell at them. Hard-selling is much more difficult and generates less response.

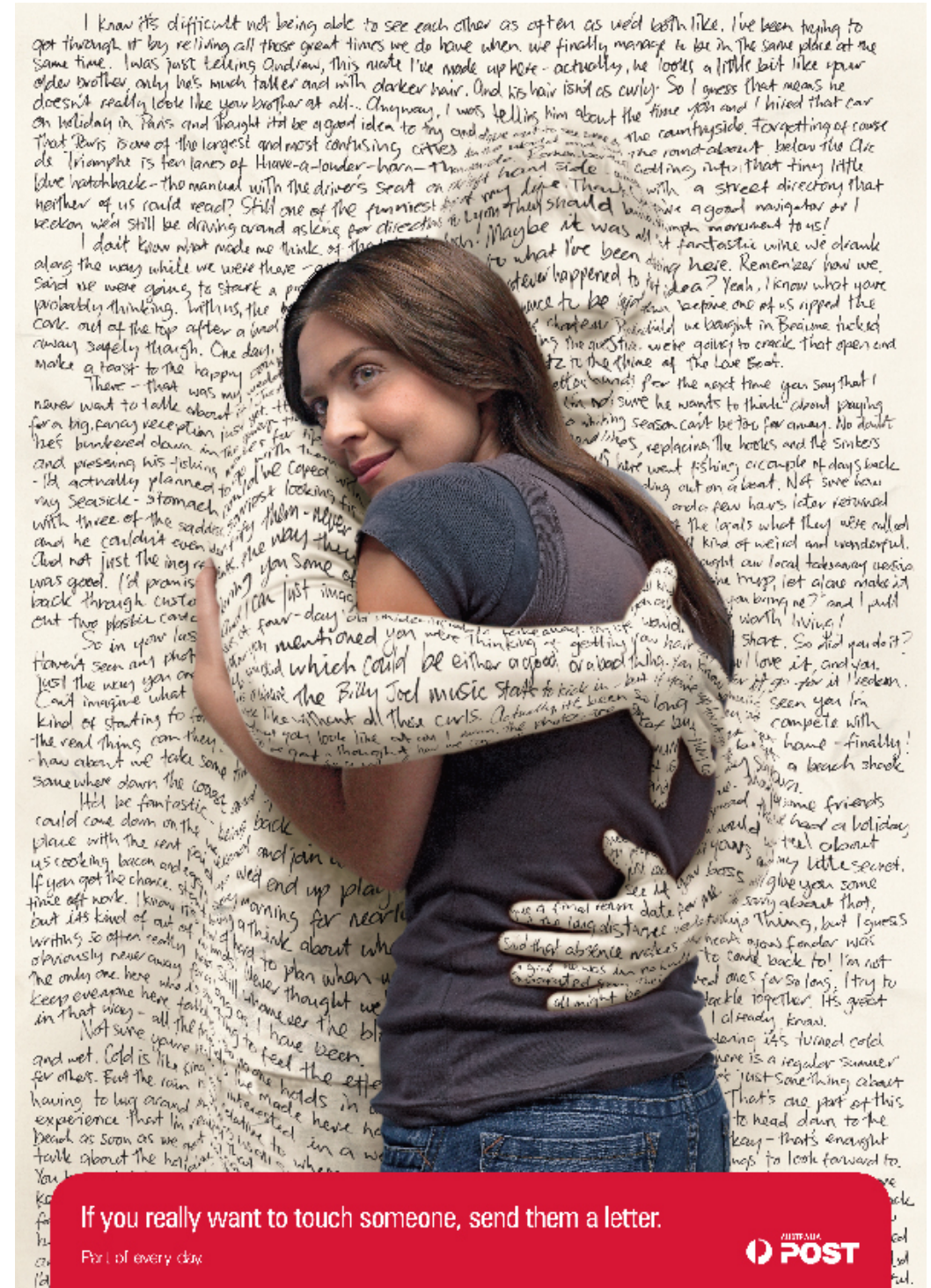
Make use of intrigue. It's hard to resist finding out about something that we think we really want to know about, especially when it's right there in front of us. Adding intrigue is as simple as asking people if they'd like to find out a bit more about the product.

There's an old chestnut about how to sell a kitten. You don't talk about the joy of owning a pet, the companionship and fun, or how cute and playful the kitten is. You say nothing, put it in the customer's hands and stand back. It sells itself. There are times when a few choice words achieve more than paragraphs of text. Don't oversell when your customers already want to buy. Invite them in, intrigue them to make sure they remain interested, and let them make up their own minds. Just make it as easy as possible for them to respond.

Get the tone of voice right

As well as creating the right structure for holding your reader's interest, you must select the correct tone of voice, making sure that it is both appropriate for the client's brand and is totally relevant to your audience.

In many cases a clear, informed and interested tone of voice is the best approach, and you will be able to draw on this same voice for a number of different clients. This should be your baseline, and any copy that you write must achieve this standard at least. Ask yourself: Am I involving the reader? Is the message interesting? Have I included a clear call to action?



The copy literally bursts out of the page and hugs you – well almost. The perfect way to show the warmth and intimacy of a handwritten letter to a loved

one. This is a great concept, making the most of digital applications to achieve things that were previously impossible.