

Ten top tips for creative copywriting

Gyles Lingwood

Copywriting is the discipline of creating effective and engaging written communication for clients. Sounds pretty straightforward, so what's the big deal? A quick dive into the ocean of self-published, un-edited business communications quickly reveals the very reason why the skills and techniques of copywriting are more essential than ever before. A friend recently described the situation as *'We've all got Maths GCSE but we wouldn't do the company accounts, so just because we've got English GCSE why do we think we can write great copy?'*

Too often, copywriting projects are left to managers who may know the product inside out but rarely know how to prioritize a message, shape it for a target audience and instil the values of the organization into the text. These are my ten top tips for more effective creative copywriting:

#1. It's not about you

The most important person in copywriting is the reader (the audience), not the author or the client. Copywriting is all about communicating a message on behalf of your client to the agreed, defined audience. Copywriting isn't a self-defined, creative writing project or taking some time out to write things because you want to. It's not about wordy self-expression or creative vanity projects. It's all about the audience.

#2. Communicate, or fail

If a copywriter can't effectively communicate the message that has been agreed with the client, then they have failed. Too harsh? Not at all. If a copywriter is being paid to speak on behalf of a client, they need to ensure they are doing what is required of them.

#3. Get the right balance

Successful copywriting must achieve the right balance between 'creative and original but potentially confusing' and 'functional and effective, but dull and forgettable'. Strike the right balance.

#4. Truly understand the subject

Throughout any project, and particularly at the start, the copywriter needs to truly understand what it is they are writing about. This research takes time but is always necessary because (1) the process of developing and understanding the subject is where ideas, insights, and fresh approaches come from; and (2) to ensure that their clients' messages sound authentic and believable to their audience, the copywriter needs to know what they are writing about. Customers can smell bullshit and assumptions a mile off.

#5. Know and understand the audience

The copywriter needs to truly understand their intended audience. Not the category description of who they are ('middle-income, urban dwelling males, aged 30-40') – that's just lazy marketing-speak – but who they *really* are, what they do, why they do these things, what they don't do, their hopes, their dreams, their worries, their fears, hates, loves, habits, interests, and so on. To effectively communicate with an audience, the copywriter needs to properly understand them.

#6. Focus on benefits, not features

Whilst this is one of the oldest principles in copywriting, it is still one of the most important: tell the reader what's in it for them. Many wise and venerable sayings have emerged in the world of marketing that make this very point, from Elmer Wheeler's *'Sell the sizzle, not the steak,'* to John Caples's advice about emphasizing *'The world's best lawn'* and not *'The world's best lawn seed.'* Direct-mail expert Victor Schwab even went as far as composing a little ditty on this very subject that ends:

*'So tell me quick and tell me true,
(Or else, my love, to hell with you!)
Less: how this product came to be
More: what the damn thing does for me!'*

#7. Say it in an interesting way

Communicate your message in an unexpected way and it will be more memorable, noticeable, and therefore, effective. The creative, surprising, and expressive use of language is central to the copywriter's trade: words are there to be enjoyed and exploited, and when used well, messages become more noticeable and successful. So instead of saying *'The car's brakes are excellent in wet conditions...'* a 1987 Range Rover ad said, *'We brake for fish.'*

#8. Write the way that people speak (but speak well)

If you understand your audience, you will know how they speak. Your audience must feel that the client is talking directly to them. And the key word here is 'talking'. Using language, structure and syntax that feels as natural as speaking, will always be easier for the audience to read. At the same time, it's important for the copywriter to pay attention to the form of their words. When we speak, we unconsciously vary the length of our sentences, and when we write we should aim to do the same. Always use the language of the reader, *not the client*. And that can often involve using words, sentence structures and techniques often considered 'improper' by GCSE English teachers. (Soz Mr Moffat.)

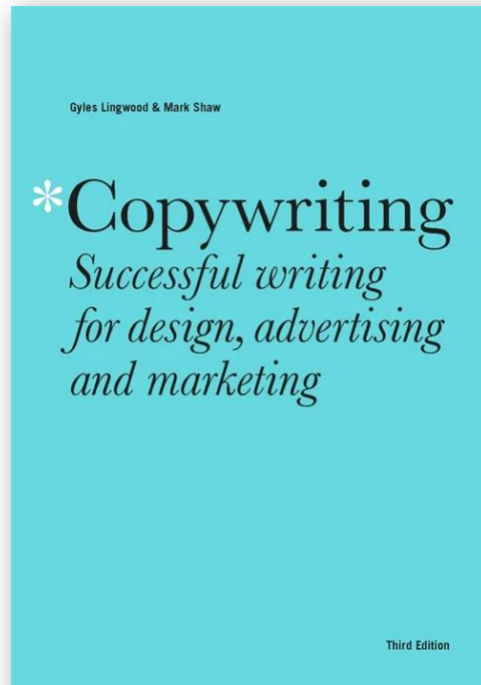
#9. Tell stories

From a copywriting perspective, stories matter because they're fun and functional at the same time. Fun because they're naturally appealing and we're primed from birth to accept information presented in narrative form; functional because they're powerful explaining tools that enable us to describe the who, what, where, when, why and how of a subject without seeming to. In this context 'story' refers to anything from a short anecdote to a lengthy tale. It probably doesn't begin 'Once upon a time,' although brand stories often include features we associate with literary stories. What matters is the effect, not the word count or format. Storytelling is about creating engagement.

#10. Be different

The reader's eye is more likely to be caught by the surprising, the never-seen-before. That can often mean creating work that challenges the norm and takes risks. If the copywriter's work is to stand out from all the other business communications out there, they must strive for difference. To produce work that is unexpected often requires bravery. As Bill Bernbach said, *'Playing it safe can be the most dangerous thing in the world.'*

Gyles Lingwood is Professor of Business Creativity at the University of Lincoln. His new book, the third edition of 'Copywriting – Successful writing for design, advertising and marketing' co-authored with Mark Shaw, was published in October 2022 by Laurence King, London.



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