

MANTRA

The art of creation: a copywriting bible*

*Not a real Bible. We just borrowed the idea. And some of the chapter headings. From some of the books. In kind of a random order.

In the beginning...

We have the word. Not, to be clear, **The Word** that brought all life into being. Although that's some pretty impressive vocabulary right there. Just **the word** – the basic unit of writing. That's where it all begins.

Sounds obvious, doesn't it? But oh, if we had a pound (or currency equivalent) for every time we see bad word choices, none of us would have to earn a living ever again.

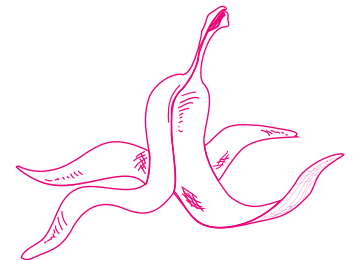
Think about it this way. **Good word choices** mean minimal effort for your reader – there are, metaphorically speaking, no obstacles in their path. Bad word choices are the unexpected banana peel beneath the feet of the subconscious.

So what are good word choices? The simplest definition is: words you would use in everyday conversation. Like this:

Good word	→	Bad word
Want		Require
Ask		Query
Buy		Purchase
Own		Possess
Use		Utilise

Yes, you can use simple word choices in everything you write. Yes, we really mean it. No, it doesn't matter if it's a client letter or an official report – use the same words as you would for an internal email about the office bake sale. The difference is a matter of tone, not vocabulary. We'll get to that later.

Right. Now we've got that straightened out, let's get to the jelly.



Book of Genesis

Lesson the first: *Good* use of language and *correct* use of language are not the same thing.

Throw away everything you've ever learned about the English language. Copywriting isn't about nouns and verbs and clauses and declensions and punctuation. It doesn't care about the Oxford comma. It's not impressed by your educational qualifications. Copywriting is there to do a job. It wants to get that job done and go home.

Think of it this way: pick a favourite song. Now pick a lyric. Is it grammatically correct? Unlikely. Would the song be better if it were? Even more unlikely.¹ Now try to imagine Yoda without his idiosyncratic way of speaking. That's not just unlikely, it's unthinkable.

(If you don't know who Yoda is, you've got bigger problems. Go watch the first three Star Wars movies immediately.

Bottom line? Keep everything simple. Use natural vocabulary, and try to stick with simple punctuation like commas, dashes and full stops. We promise, no-one's going to phone you up and say: 'Excuse me, I think you'll find that should have been a semi-colon.' Because if you get it right, they won't even notice. They'll just get what you're trying to tell them. job done.

¹Unless we're talking about 'Live and Let Die'. Because "this ever-changing world **in which we live in**" is unpardonable. Hey, there's an exception to every rule.

Book of Chronicles

All copywriting comes down to telling a story. That story might be about you. Or your services. Or your clients. Or your office dog. The subject doesn't really matter.

Here — in no particular order — is what *does* matter:

WHO

Who are you talking to? How well do they know you? How well do they understand your business? Just because *you* know what you're on about doesn't mean they will.

WHAT

What's the main message? If there's more than one, prioritise. Seriously, pick one. Don't bombard your reader with everything at once.

WHERE

Where is your message going to be seen? In print? Phone? Laptop? Tablet or PC? It matters. You can read War and Peace on a mobile phone but it's hella hard going and you miss a whole lot.²

WHY

This is a big one. First of all, why are you writing? What do you want your reader to do? Secondly, and even more importantly, why should they? What's in it for them?

WHEN

When will your message arrive? Will your reader be on a train? At their desk? Watching *Line of Duty*? How are you going to get their attention — especially if watching *Line of Duty*?

There are lots of ways to tell a story. And there are lots of other hints and tips and guidelines that will help you find an approach that works for you. But hey, no spoilers. Get in touch and we'll tell you more.

²We actually know someone who tried this. True story.

Book of Proverbs

Well, sometimes it's said. Maybe not on a daily basis, but it's definitely a saying. Anyway, it makes sense to us. It reflects an essential part of our world view — that it doesn't matter how much noise you throw at something if there's no real message behind it.


We spend a lot of time cutting out noise. We also spend a lot of time making it more harmonious. It's not just about economy of language. It's about tone, too.

Time for an example from the Bank of Incomprehensibility³:

We are simplifying, optimising & evolving our Accounts Payable Invoice processing.

Our ultimate goal is right first time processing enabling swifter payments to our suppliers.

As with all aspects of our business we can't afford to stand still in Accounts Payable either so we are implementing technological advancements to improve our invoice processing efficiencies.

Er... what? 

Leaving aside the lack of punctuation, gratuitous ampersand use and horrifying Random Caps, what is this message trying to say? Here's the translation:

We want to pay our suppliers more quickly. So we're introducing a new system that makes processing invoices simpler and faster.

So simple. So clear. So why didn't they just say that in the first place?

Now put the meaning aside. How does the original text make you feel? Is it warm? Is it friendly? Is it appealing? No. No it is not. But the translation leads with a benefit. It's simple. It's natural. It's conversational. It's *human*.

Everyone has their own tone of voice. Finding yours is about the things that matter to you. It's about how you want to be perceived and the connection you want to make with your audience. It's an extension of your brand. So it's important to get it right.

³Name changed to protect the guilty

Book of Numbers

Get your copy right, and you're in a world of engagement, affinity, loyalty and loads of other good branding and marketing waffle. There's also actual science that backs this up. Seriously — it's called behavioural economics and it tells us how people make decisions.

It's a massive field of study. We're not even going to begin talking about influencers and biases and priming and — oh, wait. We said we weren't going to begin. Instead, here's a (heavily abridged) snippet about the way our brains work:

- We think on two levels — **System 1** and (unsurprisingly) **System 2**
- **System 1** is fast, subconscious and emotionally driven
- **System 2** is methodical, conscious and driven by rationality
- We make most of our decisions more or less automatically through **System 1**
- Decisions that need a bit more thought are made through **System 2**

So what does that tell us? Basically, we make choices in two ways. Something like picking a toothpaste is a **System 1** process. You might be influenced by flavour, colour, function and price. But you're not likely to ponder your decision over several days.

Choosing a mortgage product, on the other hand, needs more thought. You'll weigh up all the pros and cons, and take time to absorb every bit of information you're given. So that's a **System 2** process.

BUT — and this is crucial — whichever System your audience is likely to use, you still need to make your message as clear as possible. The *amount* of information you're providing isn't important. The way you provide it is. If your audience can't understand your message, **System 1** and **System 2** will gang up on you and go off to find someone who makes more sense to them.

If you can't see the role copywriting has to play here, you really, really need to get in touch.

mantracontent.com

Book of Judges

Most people have to do a fair amount of writing on a daily basis, so most people feel like they can write just fine. In most cases, that might be true.

Could do better!

But.

Fine? Is that what you want to settle for? And is it fine? Could it be better? The answer is yes. **It could always be better.**

Think about it this way. If you want a really great haircut, you go to a professional. If you want your car serviced, you go to a professional. If you need brain surgery, you go to a professional. If want something designed beautifully — you get where we're going here. So when you want to make sure your words are the best they can be...?

We won't judge you.⁴ We couldn't do your job. You have specialist skills and knowledge that we don't. Here's the thing, though — the reverse is also true. So if you're wondering why you should come to us, it's because we're specialists. Oh, and professionals.

Short version: **we'll make your life easier.** We can teach you writing skills that will help with day-to-day stuff. You're not likely to need our input for an email about the office charity football match — but we can help you make that email a real cracker.

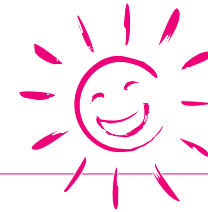
And the big stuff? We can help with that too. There are simple tips and tricks that'll make your website, comms campaign, advertising, marketing and/or presentations really shine. So you can crack on with the other stuff on your to-do list. Like that football match.

⁴We'll totally judge you. But we won't let on.

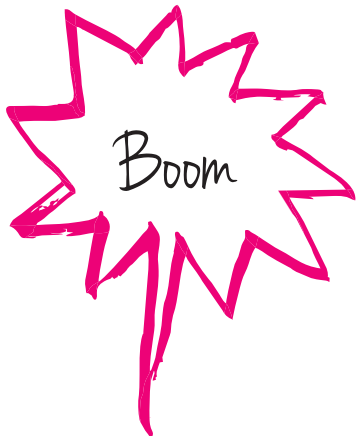
Book of Wisdom

There are times you'll want a professional to take over. That's fine. Working with a copywriter is (in theory) really simple. You create a brief, they do their job, boom.

Alas, theory and practice are not the same thing. Here's what we mean:



<u>Ideal world</u>	<u>Reality</u>
Brief created with plenty of time until deadline. Copywriter trots off to start on first draft.	800-page policy document must be rewritten by yesterday. Copywriter makes very large pot of coffee.
Initial sample of copy received. Everyone who looks it over and feeds back. Copywriter proceeds with initial draft.	45 people need want to have a say. All of them use track changes. Copywriter assumes foetal position and whimpers.
First draft sent for checking. Amends collated and sent in one go. Copywriter proceeds to second draft.	First draft sent just as someone else pops up and questions all the changes that have been made. 45 people respond. They're still using track changes. Copywriter loses all sense of what's going on, along with will to live.
Second draft goes to client, same approval group checks over, any further final tweaks briefed in.	Internal pandemonium during struggle for consensus. Project leader goes on holiday for a fortnight. Copywriter catatonic.
Final version of copy sent for approval, signed off, everyone happy.	Internal struggle resolved. 800-page track changes doc arrives. Deadline hasn't changed. Copywriter is a twitching, giggling combination of caffeine, nervous tics and occasional outbursts of incoherent yelling.



What we're saying is we know this isn't an ideal world. But copywriters are there to help. They'll work as an extension to your team. They'll work as part of your team, if you need them too. You'll never achieve the ideal (at least, we've never seen it done) but, working together, you can avoid the worst pitfalls and get your projects over the line.

Book of Lamentations

Most of the time, copywriters are mild-mannered, easy-going creatures. They might shake a little bit now and then, but that's probably just the coffee.

Sometimes, though, they're like mamma grizzlies. It's all cute and fuzzy and gambolling cubs and 'awwwwww' until someone steps on the wrong dry branch. Then it's half a tonne of metaphorical teeth, claws and muscle coming straight for your throat.

Stay safe when dealing with your copywriter. Here are our top ten triggers to avoid.

1. Exclamation marks.



You hardly ever need exclamation marks. Seriously. Get rid of them. They don't add emphasis, or humour, or friendliness. They do make you sound a bit mad, especially if you use more than one in close proximity. Need proof? Replace all the full stops here with exclamation marks. See? Mad.

2. 'Sentences shouldn't start with a conjunction.'

OK. That's what you were taught at school. But there's no actual rule. Anywhere. Also — copywriters do know what we're doing, you know. They do actually understand grammar. They just choose to ignore it sometimes. Remember all that stuff about sounding like a person? That.

3. Whilst, therefore, furthermore, hitherto, etc...

Guys. This is not the 17th century, and you are not William Shakespeare. Nor are you practising law⁵. You're trying to speak to people. You're not declaiming, arms out-thrust, to an audience of gruntlings.

4. Random Caps

Why, dear Lord, why? Why have you put a capital letter on that word? It's not a proper noun. It's not someone's job title. It's not even the name of a specific product or service you provide. It's just a random capital letter that you've added in because... well, that brings us back to 'why?' Seriously, ask what purpose it serves. If there isn't a purpose, it doesn't need a capital letter.

⁵Unless you are practicing law. But hey, there are times when even you need to be comprehensible.

5. As such in place of as a result

Look, it's simple. 'As such' refers back to a specific thing that you mentioned earlier, so you don't have to say it all over again. Like this:

- That's a hairy dog. As such, it must take a lot of grooming.

Instead of

- That's a hairy dog. As a really hairy dog, it must take a lot of grooming.

'As a result' is about something being because of something else. Like this:

- I don't have a passport. As a result, I can't go abroad.

Instead of

- I don't have a passport. Because I don't have a passport, I can't go abroad.

You wouldn't say 'as I don't have a passport, I can't go abroad.' See? There. We fixed it.



6. 'My clients are educated/have money, we need to be more formal.'

No. You don't. You really, really don't. What you need to be, for all your clients, is a reassuring presence. If you sound like a stern BBC announcer from the 1950s, that's not going to happen. No matter who your clients are.

7. Title case.

It's not a thing. Seriously. It's really not. People will tell you it is. But it's a Microsoft invention. Yes, titles are usually capitalised, apart from the conjunctions, but that's just called a title. Don't take grammar lessons from your computer. Just... don't.

8. 'Don't use but – it's too negative.'

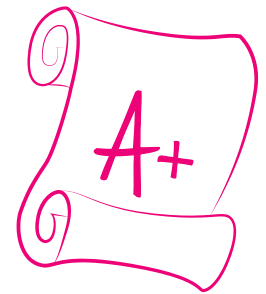
'But' gets a hard rap. It's like there's some kind of internal zoom, all people can see is the 'but', and nothing else around it. Read the sentence. Is it presenting a contrast? Then 'but' is fine. If it's something like 'we'd like to help you, but we can't be bothered,' on the other hand, that's a negative. You should probably think that one through again.

9. Asking for an extra 200 words when there's only room for five

If your copywriter is working to a word limit, there's generally a reason for that. It's not like they just can't be bothered writing more. Like, there's no point in a 3,000-word web page, because no-one will read it. So when you're sent something to check, and you're asked to note the word count – please, please note the word count.

10. 'I've got a degree in English'

You guys. Massive props on the achievement. You're super smart and you must have worked really hard. But it doesn't make you a copywriter. It really doesn't. Remember the bit about forgetting everything you've ever learned? There we go...



Revelation



OK. End times. Where does all this preaching leave you? Hopefully, with more understanding. But if you're still struggling to get the full vision, we're here to help.

We'll break out the four horsemen of Information, Education, Entertainment and Lunch. You choose your spreaders of the word, and bring them to us for some training. Or we'll come to you. We promise not to sermonise. A little theory, a little practice, a few laughs and – if you're really lucky – some sarnies from Marks and Spencer. We predict a good day.

We giveth, and we taketh away...

That is, we giveth this voucher, which taketh away **15%** from your first training session.

Come learn the Gospel according to Mantra. You'll have a great day – we give you our Word.

Just quote ref **WORD** when you get in touch on mantracontent.com/contact.

Valid until: the end of days.



MANTRA

