THE COPYWRITER'S LIBRARY

25 Snackable Copywriting Lessons from 5 of the Greatest Books on Writing Ever Written

@WillHoekenga

There is no satisfactory explanation of style, no infallible guide to good writing, no assurance that a person who thinks clearly will be able to write clearly, no key that unlocks the door, no inflexible rule by which writers may shape their course. Writers will often find themselves steering by stars that are disturbingly in motion.

– E.B. White, *The Elements of Style*

I'd like to echo the esteemed Elwyn Brooks White's introduction to his classic book *The Elements of Style* with a similar claim of my own: I give you no guarantee that you won't *completely hate this book and learn nothing of value whatsoever*.

How to Read This Ebook

This ebook is broken into five easy-to-digest sections. Each section contains five foundational copywriting tips I learned from a particular book about copywriting or writing in general. The books/sections are:

- *Advertising Secrets of the Written Word* by Joseph Sugarman, one of the most famous and successful copywriters of all time.
- *On Writing* by Stephen King, best-selling horror novelist who probably ruined your childhood with that clown from *It*.
- *Ogilvy on Advertising* by David Ogilvy, the original mad man (this book partially inspired the television series *Mad Men*).
- *The Elements of Style* by E.B. White, hero of writing nerds everywhere and author of the childhood classic *Charlotte's Web*.
- *Writing Tools* by Roy Peter Clark, legendary journalist and founder of the National Writers Workshop.

Think of this ebook as my personal notes on the most important copywriting tips and techniques I learned from each of these books.

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Joseph
Sugarman

5 Tips from _Advertising Secrets of the Written Word_

1 Why You Should Live Like Anthony Bourdain

> *The best copywriters in the world are those who are curious about life, read a great deal, have many hobbies, like to travel, have a variety of skills, get bored and then look for other skills to master. They hunger for experience and knowledge and find other people interesting. They are very good listeners...*

> *The thirst for knowledge, a tremendous curiosity about life, a wealth of experiences and not being afraid to work are the top credentials for being a good copywriter.*

Wait a sec, those are skills required to be the best at a job that I can actually have? Where the eff do I sign up!?

But seriously, those sound like the prerequisites for being Antony Bourdain or something.

I intentionally led off with this excerpt because I wanted to pique your interest. I want you to read on. And I want you to master these skills so you can join me on my quest to become Anthony Bourdain. So read on already.

2 You: Global Citizen, Renaissance (Wo)Man, Problem Solver

Probably one of the most important keys in copywriting and conceptualizing is the ability to relate totally divergent concepts to create a new concept. Once again, the more data you have to work with from your life experiences and the more your mind can relate this data to a problem, the better you are going to be at coming up with that really great idea.

The thing about Joe Sugarman is he's just totally down for getting out and living life, man. Gaining experience. Having adventures. Meeting different people in new and exciting places—learning what makes us humans tick so that you know what triggers cause them to buy what you're selling.

Really, this paragraph is a testament to the importance of having an awareness of the multitude of perspectives the people of Earth have to offer. The more you see, the more you experience, the more you feel, the better you're going to be at empathizing with your audience and actually communicating a way to *solve their problems*.

3 How to Write Your First Sentence

The sole purpose of the first sentence in an advertisement is to get you to read the second sentence...Now if the first sentence is so important, what can you do to make it so compelling to read, so simple, and so interesting that your readers—every one of them—will read it in its entirety? The answer: Make it short.

When I first started learning about copywriting, I heard the first part of this paragraph over and over and over: The purpose of the first sentence is to get them to read the second sentence. The purpose of the second sentence is to get them to read the third sentence. And so on and so on. But I was always left with the question, "HOW?" For some reason, most people forgot to answer that seemingly unimportant bit of information.

Until I got to Joe Sugarman, who laid it out so incredibly simply—Make it short. Just make it short! Our eyes can't resist reading a short sentence. And if it's short *and* intriguing, well...game over. Check out a few of the examples Sugarman goes on to list from his own ads:

Losing weight is not easy.
It's you against a computer.
It's easy.
It had to happen.
Hats off to IBM.

The longest one is 28 characters. Take that, Twitter.

This is the beginning of Sugarman's "slippery slide" concept—the idea that your copy should be so compelling that the reader must get to the end. The slippery slide starts with an easy sentence. It's so easy to read a short sentence that it's practically impossible not to do it. And if that sentence is interesting enough, the reader just might read the next one.

4 The *Seinfeld* Method

> *Once you've done [your first draft], do something that may seem strange to you at first. Stop. That's right, stop. Go on and do something else. Forget about the project. Do something pleasurable—a stroll in the park, a walk down the street or lunch with a good friend. Whatever you do, let it be a total diversion from what you are currently working on, and please don't even think of the copy project...*
>
> *...This entire subconscious activity is called the incubation process, and the time you are giving to it is called the incubation period. Your subconscious is processing millions of bits of data like a computer in your brain running a very important program in the background. Then, while you're taking a walk or standing in the shower or even daydreaming, suddenly that big idea will flash across your mind. Eureka. Then go to your desk and start writing down some of that good stuff your mind has created and organized for you.*

Let me explain the first draft, Sugarman style. The first draft is a brain dump. It can be disorderly. You can slap grammar right in its smug face. Twice. That's right, double slap that SOB.

All you have to do in the first draft is get every idea, every potential headline, every concept, every angle down on paper. (And by paper I mean screen cause, c'mon, who writes on paper, right?)

You've probably heard this before, because it's fairly common advice for all kinds of writing. But the important part is what he describes as the next step in the excerpt you just read. I'm dubbing this Joe Sugarman's *Seinfeld* Method. He didn't call it that, but I'm going to. Why? Because his advice is to basically do nothing right after you've just gotten going!

What was *Seinfeld's* concept? It was a show about nothing. Pretty much 90% of the episodes were just Jerry, George, Elaine, and Kramer hanging out in Jerry's apartment, eating lunch at the coffee shop, going to the movies, or waiting for a table at a Chinese restaurant.

Those are the exact types of things you should go do after your first draft. Anything to take your mind off the copy.

This idea is gold, Jerry! Gold!

5 A Little Trick for Bypassing B.S. Detectors

Consumers are very smart—smarter than you think and smarter collectively than any single one of us. With all the experience I have in marketing products and with all the product knowledge I've gained over the past 35 years, you can take my word for it, the consumer is quite sharp.

The consumer can also tell whether people are truthful in what they are trying to communicate. And the more truthful you are in your advertising, the more effectively your message will be accepted by your prospects.

Try to lie in your copy and you are only deceiving yourself. Your copy will say what you think you wanted it to say, but it will also say what you thought you covered up. Even a reader who hurries over your copy can feel the difference.

A few weeks before writing this, I was part of a team that was launching a limited edition typographic print (a fancy poster) to an email list. One hundred of the prints were signed and numbered. After the first couple of days of sales, almost half of them were gone. We were about to send out a second sales email when I started to consider the idea of sticking a little banner on the picture of the signed and number print that would say, "Only a few left!"

There's no getting around it—referring to approximately 60 out of 100 as "only a few" is a flat out lie. At best it can be described as dishonest.

As I sat there listening to the angel and devil on my respective shoulders, I forecasted what might happen if I used this deceitful (but powerful) line of copy. I couldn't

see a scenario where this email sold every last signed and numbered print we had left. If things went really well, given the list it was going out to and past conversion rates, we might sell half of the remaining signed and numbered prints. And then what? What if it took another month to sell the remaining ones? It would become pretty clear to the people on the list that "Only a few left!" had really been a big ole pile of B.S.

So instead, I opted for a much more honest sense-of-urgency claim that the signed and numbered prints were selling faster than anticipated (which they were). You know what happened? Within a week, we were down to 27 prints remaining. At that point, we were able to begin using real numbers to create a sense of urgency on social media. Every time we posted, "Only [X AMOUNT] of signed and numbered prints remaining!" several more would sell.

A couple weeks later, we were down to zero.

The moral of the story? The risk (and inherent immorality) of lying or bending the truth in your copy far outweighs the reward, which is always attainable with the truth as long as the product is truly good.

If you wanna bypass the consumer's B.S. detector, the solution is simple—tell the truth, every time.

Stephen
King

5 Tips from _On Writing_

6 The Root of Most Bad Writing

> *I'm convinced that fear is at the root of most bad writing. If one is writing for one's own pleasure, that fear may be mild—timidity is the word I've used here. If, however, one is working under deadline—a school paper, a newspaper article, the SAT writing sample—that fear may be intense.*

If you're writing copy, odds are that you're working under a deadline. You're definitely working under the pressure to deliver something—clicks, conversions, cash. Don't feed that stuff. Don't ask yourself the wrong questions that feed into that fear like, *Will this headline get me more clicks?* Any questions that enter your mind should be about the customer and the customer only.

When fear starts creeping in—and it will—focus on the enjoyable aspects of copywriting. Remind yourself why you're doing it in the first place. You do it because you believe in the product or service you're writing about. You do it to make customers' lives less painful. And you do it because people will pay you damn good money for damn good copy.

Writing copy from a place of fear is stupid. Here's the worst that can happen if your copy is bad—you find out one more way not to sell something to a particular audience. Basically, *you become smarter*. Look, you can't control how the audience reacts. All you can do is put it out there and hope it works. If it doesn't, you learn something. If it does, you learn something AND you start getting paid more.

So smile. Forget the fear.

7 Write "Dairy Queen" Copy

You can tell without even reading if the book you've chosen is apt to be easy or hard, right? Easy books contain lots of short paragraphs—including dialogue paragraphs which may only be a word or two long—and lots of white space. They're as airy as Dairy Queen ice cream cones. Hard books, full of ideas, narration, or description, have a stouter look. A packed look. Paragraphs are almost as important for how they look as for what they say; they are maps of intent.

Here's a hint: you **never** want any copy you're writing to look like something a "hard" book might contain. "Stout" should not be a word used to describe your copy.

Don't be Faulkner; be Hemingway. Look, I'm from the South—I love Faulkner. But there's a reason why Hemingway ended up being a pitchman, while Faulkner spent his days as a postman. Tight, focused copy sells. To borrow Mr. King's term, you **want** "Dairy Queen" copy.

Here are two random examples I found from searching Amazon for eBooks on garage sales. These excerpts are from the book description areas of two different self-published books on how to have a successful garage sale. (Don't actually try to read them—just focus on the difference in spacing/layout.)

Example 1

Book Description
Publication Date: **December 26, 2012**

Would you like to Double or Triple your Garage Sale or Yard Sale profits, without spending any money?

Have you heard stories about **people making over $1000 at garage sales**, and wished for similar success?

Have you ever wondered how to **effectively price your items** that you will be selling at your garage sale?

How would you like to be able to **design a free garage sale advertisement that will pull garage sale shoppers in to your sale from other cities and counties?**

Would you like to know **what types of belongings sell for the most money at garage sales**, so that you can round them up from your own home?

Would you like to make the process of **organizing your garage sale easier and more fun?**

Have you ever thought about selling some of your **collectible items** on the internet to make more money, but did not know how to get started?

Garage Sale Superstar provides solutions to all of these questions asked by almost every single garage sale or yard sale host.

In *Superstar*, the second book in the Almost Free Money series, detailed instructions are provided for making excellent money by selling your used prop
sales, and tag sales.

As a veteran of visiting over 1,000 garage sales in the last ten years, I can provide specific examples of what works for garage sale hosts, and what doe

Example 2

Book Description
Publication Date: **October 6, 2012**

This book is about how to buy on a Saturday and resell it on a Sunday. Simple enough, in't it? Not only is it simple enough but I have been doing it for years. You could make anywhere from 200 to 400% on what you purchase on a Saturday and resell it on a Sunday.
It is no big secret. A lot of people have been doing this for years. I was doing this for just some extra cash and it became a hobby. You could actually enjoy doing this. You could do this with very little cash from 100 to 200 dollars.
The trick to this is buying. The difficult part is selling. This is what this book is about. It is about buying and selling. I will tell you the secret. The secret is that you buy at yard sales, flea markets, open houses and auctions. You resell it the next day at a flea market.
This book will give you all of my techniques. It will show you how to buy and how to sell. It will show you how to set up your table. It will show you how to attract buyers to your table. It will show you the best time to sell. It will show you the best time to buy. This book is packed with so much and more. I know a lot of people do this for a living. I actually do this as an hobby. I because I enjoy it

Which one looks more appealing to read? It's clearly Example 1, which, oddly enough, appears on the first page of results when you search eBooks for "garage sale" while Example 2 appears on page four. Example 1 also has a lot of great reviews, while Example 2 has none.

This is not to say that ALL of that has to do with the fact that Example 1's book description is way more inviting to read, but it certainly can't be counted out as a factor of its success.

8 Slob Copy

> *It is possible to overuse the well-turned fragment, but frags can also work beautifully to streamline narration, create clear images, and create tension as well as to vary the proseline. A series of grammatically proper sentences can stiffen the line, make it less pliable. Purists hate to hear that and will deny it to their dying breath, but it's true. Language does not always have to wear a tie and lace-up shoes.*

This is the fun part. This is where you get to misbehave. This is where you get rewarded for letting out a long-ass burp at the dinner table.

Spend about two minutes observing copy online and you'll find multiple sentence fragments. Why? Because they sound good. And that's all that matters.

When you're writing copy, focus on what sounds natural, not what is 100 percent grammatically correct. While it's important that you avoid things that make you look stupid (like misspelled words, there/their or your/you're confusion, etc.), your copy doesn't, as ol' Stevie K. puts it, have to "wear a tie and lace-up shoes" (damn, what a line).

So put that *Chicago Manual of Style* back to proper use as a paperweight and get back to writing good old-fashioned natural-sounding copy.

9 Haves, Have-Nots, and a Note on Upward Mobility in the World of Copy

> *While it is impossible to make a competent writer out of a bad writer, and while it is equally impossible to make a great writer out of a good one, it is possible, with lots of hard work, dedication, and timely help, to make a good writer out of a merely competent one.*

In King's world you're either born great like Shakespeare, born good with no hope of ever being great, born competent with the capacity to become good, or born bad with no hope of being competent.

The good news for you and me is that you don't have to be born great like Shakespeare to become a great copywriter. Actually, it's probably better that you're *not* Shakespeare.

Why? Because copywriting isn't always about being the most creative, the most eloquent, or the most likely to inspire tears streaming down your readers' cheeks. It's mainly about knowing when to *shut up and not reinvent the wheel.*

Copywriting is not a field for pseudo-philosophic mustache waxers, pipes stuffed with fine tobacco. You don't need to own many leather-bound books. Your apartment doesn't have to smell of rich mahogany.

Copywriting talent is not some gift bestowed by God upon a select few golden children. It's combining proven principles and psychology with a curious mind that's not afraid of a little creativity. People today are motivated by most of the same things that have motivated us since the beginning of time.

Your job is to arrange words on a page that will tap into those motivations and connect them to the product you know can help them.

And it doesn't take a sonnet to accomplish that.

10 A Fat-Ass Sumo's Weird but Important Lesson

> *Someone—I can't remember who, for the life of me—once wrote that all novels are really letters aimed at one person. As it happens, I believe this. I think that every novelist has a single ideal reader; that at various points during the composition of a story, the writer is thinking, "I wonder what he/she will think when he/she reads this part?" For me that first reader is my wife, Tabitha...*
>
> *...Do all opinions weigh the same? Not for me. In the end I listen most closely to Tabby, because she's the one I write for, the one I want to wow. If you're writing primarily for one person besides yourself, I'd advise you to pay very close attention to that person's opinion...you can't let the whole world into your story, but you can let in the ones that matter most. And you should.*
>
> *...Call that one person you write for your Ideal Reader. He or she is going to be in your writing room all the time.*

This is old school advice. It's proven. When thinking of your audience, you gotta zero in on that one person who is the most audience-y of the whole bunch. You have to picture that one human who most encapsulates the demographic.

Give him a name. Shake his hand. Or hers. Depends on the audience. You guys are old friends. You know every last problem currently getting under his skin. You've stayed up past midnight at the bar with him, listening to his sob stories and far-off dreams. It's just you and him. Or her. Please don't send me any angry emails about pronouns.

Writing to your Ideal Reader is going to make your copy feel more personal. It's going to have the people in your target demographic thinking the piece of copy they're reading was written specifically for them. You're going to sound more honest. You're going to sound real.

For a good example look at [Neville Medhora](#), who has written for AppSumo, a site that's like Groupon for web geeks (but actually way better than Groupon), among many other things. Here's an excerpt from some sales copy he wrote for [Kopywriting Kourse](#), an online course about, you guessed it, copywriting!

Soooo you've read articles online about improving conversion rates by changing headlines and copy.

It's true... it does work. I'll show you:

AppSumo is a web-based company that constantly improves its users lives through strategic discounts on needed products for startups and business users.

-or-

This fat-ass Sumo sends you one MASSIVE money-saving deal on tech stuff for startups (like apps and software)... everyday.

Which one was easier to understand (and possibly more offensive)?

You're right, the second one. That's 'cause it doesn't contain all the bloated "buzzwords" most businesses use. I mean, WHY THE HELL WOULD YOU WRITE LIKE THAT?

In addition to that being a great little lesson in its own right, it's also a perfect example of writing to an Ideal Reader. After you've received five or six AppSumo emails, you'll know exactly what type of person makes up the majority of their email list—younger people, mostly male, of an entrepreneurial persuasion who are interested in geeky web tools and information that can help grow their businesses. The exact kind of people who would giggle at the phrase "fat-ass Sumo" in the middle of a sales pitch. (Wait...actually, doesn't everyone just find that funny?)

When you first sit down to write some copy, take at least a few minutes to think about who will read it. You don't have to type ALL-CAPS and curse like Neville (unless you're sure the occasion calls for that sorta thing), but you can at least sound like a human instead of the T-1000.

Have some fun, why don't ya?

P.S.
Another thing that will help immensely is buying Neville's [Kopywriting Kourse](#). Notice that I didn't just say "one thing that will help is Neville's Kopywriting Kourse." I said "*buying* Neville's Kopywriting Kourse." Not only is the knowledge you'll get from the course invaluable, but so is the act of making a literal investment in yourself.

There's not much else that will make as big an impact on your life for $69 as this. Trust me. It was the first thing that *really* got me interested in copywriting, and even pointed me in the direction of a few of the books I talk about in this ebook. It's worth every penny. And no, those are not affiliate links, so I have no ulterior motive other than wanting you to use the best tools out there to better your craft.

David
Ogilvy

5 Tips from *Ogilvy on Advertising*

11 How to Sell Without Feeling Like a Sleazeball

> *Whenever you can, make the product itself the hero of your advertising. If you think the product too dull, I have news for you: there are no dull products, only dull writers. I never assigned a product to a writer unless I know that he is personally interested in it. Every time I have written a bad campaign, it has been because the product did not interest me.*

One of the biggest humps I had to get over when I first started copywriting was the idea of "selling" something. It seemed sleazy. I'd never imagined myself as a "salesy" person.

But I do like arguing. I do like persuading. Especially if I'm persuading on behalf of something I really like. For example, I might be inclined to persuade someone of the idea that *All the King's Men* is the closest thing we have to the Great American Novel. Or that the San Antonio Spurs are actually exciting, not boring. Or that the Beatles were the greatest band of all time and no one else will ever come close.

Copywriting is all about fighting for something you believe in, whether it's a product, service, person, etc.

But wait, Will, you're thinking, *surely copywriters don't get to write exclusively about their favorite things. So what do you do when you don't even like the thing you writing about?*

Alas, the truth comes out. Copywriting isn't all writing about the things you love. You're often going to end up writing about products or services you would never have any need of purchasing.

So how do you make the product the hero in those cases? Simple—ask yourself this question: Is this product the hero for someone?

If the answer is yes, then start defining who that someone is. If the answer is an honest no, then the product sucks and you shouldn't write copy about it. Never compromise the truth and your personal integrity to sell a product that you know is bad. Which brings me to the next nugget from *Ogilvy on Advertising*...

12 The Best Way to Increase Product Sales (Hint: It Involves Zero Writing)

It is often charged that advertising can persuade people to buy inferior products. So it can—once. But the consumer perceives that the product is inferior and never buys it again. This causes grave financial loss to the manufacturer, whose profits come from repeat purchases.

The best way to increase the sale of a product is to improve the product. This is particularly true of food products; the consumer is amazingly quick to notice an improvement in taste and buy the product more often. I have always been irritated by the lack of interest brand managers take in improving their products. One client warned me, 'You are too prone to criticize our products. We could find it easier to accept criticism of our wives.'

If the product you're writing about truly doesn't pass the "hero test" I described in the previous point, there are three possible scenarios:

1. The person who created it simply created a crappy product and is blind to its crappiness.

2. The person who created it created a crappy product and knows it's a crappy product.

3. It's actually a good product and you have crappy judgment.

In each of these scenarios you still have the opportunity to say yes or no to the project.

In scenario one, if you say yes, a "but…" must immediately follow it. As in, "Yes, I'll write your copy, but…you need to be aware that this product needs some serious improvements. If you don't make these changes, my copy ain't gonna do squat for you."

If the client is receptive and wants to know more, it might be worth sticking around. Hell, you might even be able to get paid (and should) for your thoughts on how to improve the product in addition to any copy you may or may not write about it.

Occasionally, though, you're going to run into people who are, for lack of a better word, dumbasses. They think their crappy product is great and no one, especially a lowly copywriter like you, will ever convince them otherwise. Hint: when you're dealing with a dumbass, always say no.

In scenario two, you should also say no. While these people may or may not fall in the dumbass category, they definitely fall into the sleaze ball category. A yes only sets you up for failure in the long run.

Lastly, if scenario three occurs, you are unlikely to realize it. That's why you really need to be sure something sucks before you turn it down. Study the product. If it's not new, see if current customers are having good experiences with it. Do everything you can to prove yourself wrong. When you've exhausted the possibilities and you still feel the same, you can walk away knowing you made the right call.

13 How to Do Nothing and Find Good Ideas

> *Big ideas come from the unconscious. This is true in art, in science and in advertising. But your unconscious has to be well informed, or your idea will be irrelevant. Stuff your conscious mind with information, then unhook your rational thought process. You can help this process by going for a long walk, or taking a hot bath, or drinking half a pint of claret. Suddenly, if the telephone line from your unconscious is open, a big idea wells up within you.*
>
> *It will help you recognize a big idea if you ask yourself five questions:*
> 1. *Did it make me gasp when I first saw it?*
> 2. *Do I wish I had thought of it myself?*
> 3. *Is it unique?*
> 4. *Does it fit the strategy to perfection?*
> 5. *Could it be used for 30 years?"*

There's an attitude among many entrepreneurs that if you're not going 100 miles an hour 100% of the time you're not really working hard. While I've found that these 100 MPH days do need to happen and can be critically important to actually getting things moving, there also needs to be a balance if you hope to access the part of your brain where good ideas live.

This doesn't mean half of your days should consist of leisurely strolls, art house films, and champagne baths. But it does mean that you'll really benefit from giving your mind time to process things throughout the day by finding a quiet place and slowing down.

The catch, of course, is that the parts of the day when you're not slowing down must be spent feeding your brain a diverse and expansive diet. Read across many different disciplines, work on a variety of projects, and have conversations with people who think differently than you.

Get comfortable working in a state of confusion. If you don't work through it immediately, your brain will do the rest when you give it a moment to catch up.

14 Ogilvy's Step-by-Step Research Process

" *You don't stand a tinker's chance of producing successful advertising unless you start by doing your homework. I have always found this extremely tedious, but there is no substitute for it.*

First, study the product you are going to advertise. The more you know about it, the more likely you are to come up with a big idea for selling it. When I got the Rolls-Royce account, I spent three weeks reading about the car and came across a statement that 'at sixty miles an hour, the loudest noise comes from the electric clock.' This became the headline, and it was followed by 607 words of factual copy.

Later, when I got the Mercedes account, I sent a team to the Daimler-Benz headquarters in Stuttgart. They spent three weeks taping interviews with the engineers. From this came a campaign of long, factual advertisements which increased Mercedes sales in the United States from 10,000 cars a year to 40,000...

Regardless of what you're writing about—it could be a product, service, person, event, etc.—always start with learning everything you can about it. You should be able to answer almost any question a customer might have about it, even though no one will likely ever ask you anything.

As Ogilvy goes on to say, "If you are too lazy to do this kind of homework, you may occasionally *luck* into a successful campaign, but you will run the risk of skidding on what my brother Francis called 'the slippery surface of irrelevant brilliance.'"

Beyond product research, consumer research is important too. Always ask your clients if they have any existing data on their customers. If they don't, there are many ways to get it depending on what you're selling.

If you're writing for an online business, there are tons of free surveying tools available. Give website visitors the opportunity to give their thoughts on the product. Pay close attention to *how* they talk about the product—the words and phrases they use, the features that seem to be important to them.

This is the information that will reveal the motivation behind their decision to buy or not buy. And from that information, you can discover how to sell the product more effectively.

If you're writing for a local business, let's say a juice bar, spend some time in the store. Observe customers. Listen to the questions they ask and the reactions they have upon tasting the juice. Any opportunity to observe and talk to in-the-flesh customers has the potential to be more effective than a survey could ever hope to be.

As Ogilvy says, "Informal conversations with half-a-dozen housewives can sometimes help a copywriter more than formal surveys in which he does not participate."

15 Why Your Competition Is Irrelevant

> *My partner Joel Raphaelson has articulated a feeling which has been growing in my mind for some time:*
>
> *'In the past, just about every advertiser has assumed that in order to sell his goods he has to convince consumers that his product is superior to his competitor's.*
>
> *'This may not be necessary. It may be sufficient to convince consumers that your product is positively good. If the consumer feels certain that your product is good and feels uncertain about your competitor's, he will buy yours.*
>
> *'If you and your competitors all make excellent products, don't try to imply that your product is better. Just say what's good about your product – and do a clearer, more honest, more informative job of saying it.*
>
> *'If this theory is right, sales will swing to the marketer who does the best job of creating confidence that his product is positively good.'*
>
> *This approach to advertising parity products does not insult the intelligence of consumers. Who can blame you for putting your best foot forward?*

There's that "honesty" thing rearing its seemingly out-of-place head again. The more you read from successful advertisers, copywriters, and marketers, the more you begin to see an overwhelming concern and empathy they possess for the consumers.

You will never be able to control how competitors sell their products or the actual quality of said products. So focus on what you can control—the way you write about the product you are selling. Communicate honest information about what the product is and how it can solve specific pains for the consumer.

E.B.
White

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5 Tips from *The Elements of Style*

16 How to Make Your Childhood Teachers Poop Their Pants

> *The habitual use of the active voice, however, makes for forcible writing. This is true not only in narrative principally concerned with action but in writing of any kind. Many a tame sentence of description or exposition can be made lively and emphatic by substituting a transitive in the active voice for some such perfunctory expression as there is or could be heard.*
>
> *There were a great number of dead leaves lying on the ground. | Dead leaves covered the ground.*
>
> *At dawn the crowing of a rooster could be heard. | The cock's crow came with dawn.*
>
> *The reason he left college was that his health became impaired. | Failing health compelled him to leave college.*
>
> *It was not long before he was very sorry that he had said what he had. | She soon repented her words.*

Now is the time to accept that E.B. White, though dead, will forever be overlord of the English language. All you and I can hope to do is merely try to get on his level and offer him a shoeshine when we meet him in the afterlife.

He actually had the balls to use the passive voice in that first paragraph about why it's OK to use passive voice sometimes ("Many a tame...by substituting" as opposed to "Substituting a transitive...can make many a tame sentence of description or exposition lively").

Not only that, he didn't even point out the fact that he'd just broken the rule your ninth grade English teacher told you was unbreakable. He dunked in that English teacher's face and then got back on defense without even cracking a smile.

And he made the right call. Because his sentence sounds better than that crappy active voice one I just put in parentheses.

17 The Surest Way to Arouse Your Reader.........'s Attention

> *Use definite, specific, concrete language. Prefer the specific to the general, the definite to the vague, the concrete to the abstract.*
>
> *A period of unfavorable weather set in. ∷ It rained every day for a week.*
>
> *He shows satisfaction as he took possession of his well-earned reward. ∷ He grinned as he pocketed the coin.*
>
> *If those who have studied the art of writing are in accord on any one point, it is this: the surest way to arouse and hold the reader's attention is by being specific, definite, and concrete. The greatest writers—Homer, Dante, Shakespeare—are effective largely because they deal in particulars and report the details that matter. Their words call up pictures.*

When E.B. starts talking about the surest way to arouse your reader's attention, you better listen up.

Always. Be. Clear. Repeat this in your head, especially while revising. It's not important to be 100% clear when you're doing the first draft—at that point you're just trying to get ideas on the page—but it should be a top priority when you do the second.

Here's what's funny about White's last paragraph: he traces the roots of greatness in Homer, Dante, and Shakespeare to their ability to "deal in particulars and report the details that matter." Most copywriters will repeatedly tell you that copywriting is not the place to try being the next Shakespeare. Copywriting isn't about being an artist—it's about utilizing what's proven to work. Yet, according to White, it isn't Shakespeare's use of flowery language that has made his writing stand the test of time; it's his ability to cover the specific details that matter.

Clarity is king.

18 Punch Yourself in the Face Next Time You Use These Expressions

" *Omit needless words.*

Vigorous writing is concise. A sentence should contain no unnecessary words, a paragraph no unnecessary sentences, for the same reason that a drawing should have no unnecessary lines and a machine no unnecessary parts. This requires not that the writer make all sentences short, or avoid all detail and treat subjects only in outline, but that every word tell.

E.B. goes on to list out some of this rule's main offenders—common expressions that all of us are suspect to throw in our copy when we're feeling lazy. There are 16 examples in his list, but here are the three that I find most relevant now:

- The fact that (White writes, "'The fact that' is an especially debilitating expression. It should be revised out of every sentence in which it occurs.")

   Here's an example of how you can trim this unnecessary expression: Given the fact that Steve forgot the light bulb, Joan resolved to leave the dark room :: Since Steve forgot the light bulb, Joan resolved to leave the dark room.

- That

   You can remove at least 50% of the "that's" you write (see, I could have written "of the 'that's that you write," but I removed the extra "that"). Whenever you write "that," repeat the sentence in your head with "that" removed. If it sounds OK, "that" should be deleted with extreme prejudice.

- Who is/which was

  Expressions like this can often be deleted as well. For example: My book, which is about copywriting, is complete. :: My book about copywriting is complete... or...My copywriting book is complete.

  My cousin, who is from Spain, is visiting. :: My cousin, a Spaniard, is visiting...or...My Spanish cousin is visiting.

Don't waste space with needless words. Every unnecessary word takes unnecessary time from your reader.

19 One Word You Should Almost Always Avoid

Put statements in positive form.

Make definite assertions. Avoid tame, colorless, hesitating, noncommittal language. Use the word "not" as a means of denial or in antithesis, never as a means of evasion.

There is nothing wrong with negativity. It can be a powerful motivator, a psychological mechanism that belongs in every writer's toolbox. But if you're going to be negative, avoid weak words like "not."

Here are two potential blog post titles. Which one do you think would connect more with readers and attract more clicks?

10 Reasons Why Your Blog Isn't Getting Traffic
10 Reasons Why Your Blog's Traffic Sucks

See what I mean? The second title is better. Another angle might be "10 Traffic Mistakes That Are Killing Your Blog."

"Not" is a weak but easily replaced word. Check it out:
- not boring :: fascinating
- not modern :: outdated
- She didn't arrive on time. :: She was late.

Ol' Elwyn Brooks knows, however, that there are exceptions to every rule. One of those exceptions being when a negative word like "not" is propped up by a positive contrasting phrase. He uses the classic JFK quote as an example: "Ask not what your country can do for you—ask what you can do for your country."

"Not" on its own will not stand. Wait. Damn it...let me rephrase that. "Not" on its own is weak. Like White says, "Consciously, or unconsciously, the reader is dissatisfied with being told only what is not; the reader wishes to be told what is."

Copywriting is selling. And when you're selling, you don't want to sound dubious; you want to sound certain.

20 Good Artists ~~Steal~~ Reflect

> *Write in a way that comes naturally.*
>
> *Write in a way that comes easily and naturally to you, using words and phrases that come readily to hand. But do not assume that because you have acted naturally your product is without flaw.*
>
> *The use of language begins with imitation. The infant imitates the sounds made by its parents: the child imitates first the spoken language, then the stuff of books. The imitative life continues long after the writer is secure in the language, for it is almost impossible to avoid imitating what one admires. Never imitate consciously, but do not worry about being an imitator; take pains instead to admire what is good. Then when you write in a way that comes naturally, you will echo the halloos that bear repeating.*

I saved this excerpt for last because there is much to be considered in those two paragraphs. If you take the time to sift through it more than once, you'll see that the keys are in the first two sentences and the last two sentences.

- Point 1: Write naturally. Never sound stiff and rehearsed; sound confident and genuine.
- Point 2: Reflect greatness. Read so much good stuff that when you unavoidably imitate, you imitate quality writers. Natural only equals good if what comes naturally sounds good.

If you want to write good copy, immerse yourself in good copy. If you're writing sales emails, subscribe to every list you can that sends sales emails. Learn what's good and what's bad and then study the good stuff.

If you're writing a bio for a musician, read all the musician bios you can find. Make a "good" pile and a "sucky" pile. File accordingly. Read the good ones over and over. Then write.

"Good artists steal" is a common expression. But is it really stealing if the work is merely a reflection of what the artist has thoroughly admired?

If it comes naturally, it ain't stealing. So keep reading, my friend.

Roy Peter Clark

5 Tips from *Writing Tools*

21 Always Get the Name of the Dog

> *Before the execution of a serial killer, reporter Christopher Scanlan flew to Utah to visit the family of one of the murderer's presumed victims. Eleven years earlier, a young woman left her house and never returned. Scanlan found the detail that told the story of the family's enduring grief. He noticed a piece of tape over the light switch next to the front door:*
>
> *BOUNTIFUL, Utah – Belva Kent always left the front porch light on when her children went out at night. Whoever came home last turned it off, until one day in 1974 when Mrs. Kent told her family: 'I'm going to leave the light on until Deb comes home and she can turn it off.'*
>
> *The Kents' porch light still burns today, night and day. Just inside the front door, a strip of tape covers the switch.*
>
> *Deb never came home.*
>
> *"Here's the key: Scanlan saw the taped-over switch and asked about it. His curiosity, not his imagination, captured the great detail.*

Just as one little detail gave the reporter's story the punch it needed, so it goes with your copy.

In *Advertising Secrets of the Written Word*, Joseph Sugarman describes how one innocent question he asked while researching a new digital watch gave him the angle he needed to make it sell like crazy. This particular watch took advantage of new technology that allowed the display to illuminate constantly thanks to a radioactive substance placed behind the display.

"Why didn't somebody think of this radioactive material before?" he asked the company's engineer.

"We haven't had the technology to seal the radioactive material in a transparent capsule without it leaking out until somebody developed a technique with a laser," the engineer responded.

Since the catalog the watch would appear in was read by an audience obsessed with "space age" features, Sugarman now had the perfect headline—Laser Beam Digital Watch.

It led to millions in sales. All because he got the name of the dog, that seemingly insignificant detail that makes all the difference.

22 When to Write Like Michael Scott

> *Most writers have at least two modes. One says, 'Pay no attention to the writer behind the curtain. Look only at the world.' The other says, without inhibition, 'Watch me dance. Aren't I a clever fellow?' In rhetoric, these two models have names. The first is called understatement. The second is called overstatement or hyperbole.*
>
> *"Here's a rule of thumb that works for me: The more serious or dramatic the subject, the more the writer backs off, creating the effect that the story tells itself. The more playful or inconsequential the topic, the more the writer can show off. Back off or show off.*

Every copywriter fights the serious vs. playful battle at some point. When is it OK to be funny and show some personality and when should you hold back that inner Michael Scott who is desperately searching for a way to integrate a "that's what she said" into the copy?

First things first—let's look at some real life examples. Here's a chunk of copy from a Groupon for a "sexy boudoir" photo shoot that, uh, *somehow* found its way into my inbox:

Sending a sensual message to someone is easier today than it was in the past, when such messages had to be read aloud to the recipients by their fathers or what used to pass for a doctor. You won't have to spell out your intentions with this Groupon.

It's funny, possibly a little too clever, but no one would argue it doesn't fit in with the context. Contrast that example with this chunk of copy from Mint.com's home page:

It's easy to understand what's going on with your money. Get a handle on your finances the free and fast way. Mint does all the work of organizing and categorizing your spending for you. See where every dime goes and make money decisions you feel good about.

Again, an example of copy that perfectly fits the context. Obviously, when you run a site that is going to ask users to give up their bank account numbers like Mint, you don't want to go for laughs with your copy.

But Will, you're thinking, *obviously I know which way to lean in clear-cut situations like those. What about something with a little more gray area...like a local coffee shop that offers ethically sourced coffee, for example?*

First of all, I hear you. Second, thank you for the curiously specific example.

Here's what I do when the answer between serious and playful or more personality-driven copy isn't so simple—ask what ideal mood your customer needs to be in to buy. Make a simple list of the top three or five factors, pick a few, and then write copy that reflects them.

Using the local coffee shop example, if you're writing copy for their website you might list out these buying motivations:

- Taste
- Desire to belong
- Source

Those factors translate to buyers who are motivated by the way the coffee tastes, the desire to be the kind of person who buys coffee at this particular shop, and the process that is used to get the coffee beans (Fair Trade and then locally roasted, for example).

OK, so now we've got a pretty good picture of the customer—young, hipster-ish, they value their community. These aren't the people rushing into Starbucks at 6 A.M. on their daily commute from the suburbs to corporate jobs downtown.

So, if that's whom the copy is written toward, how should it sound? Conversational with some personality or serious with authority? The answer is obvious. You might even want to write it from the owner's perspective or include an inviting "From the Owner" note on the home page detailing all the steps the shop takes to bring the customer ethically sourced, tasty coffee.

Try this exercise every time you sit down to write copy. It's much easier to know how your copy should sound when you understand the person who will be reading it.

23 How to Create a Never-Ending Source of Ideas and Inspiration

"Here's how it works for me: I will be struck by a theme or issue in politics or culture. Right now, for example, I am fascinated by the plight of boys. As the father of three daughters, I've watched many young women succeed in education and flourish in careers, while young men lag behind. I lack the time and knowledge to write about this topic now, but maybe I will someday. My chances will improve if I begin to save string.

To save string, I need a simple file box. I prefer the plastic ones that look like milk crates...

...Weeks and weeks pass, sometimes months and months, and one day I'll look over at my box and hear it whisper, 'It's time.' I'm amazed at its fullness, and even more astonished at how much I've learned just by saving string.

If you're able to overlook Roy Peter Clark's claim that his milk crates whisper to him, you're left with a habit that every copywriter needs to have—saving string. Just as RPC has developed the habit of filing away info that he hopes will be useful one day, so all great copywriters do with examples of copy they hope to steal one day. Most will refer to this as their "swipe file."

What goes in a swipe file? Anything that makes your eyes widen a little bit—a great subject line, a killer call-to-action, a sales page that actually convinced you to buy something. Anytime you see something that causes you to look twice, stick it in the swipe file. That way, when you need a new idea you can bust it out and find instant inspiration.

Personally, I have a folder in my email app where I save a copy of every email I like. For web pages, I either use [Evernote](#) or snap a quick screen shot and file it away in a folder on my desktop.

Develop this habit now and you'll thank yourself again and again in the future.

24 Mediocrity Is Your Friend

If you aspire to improve as a writer, begin with your self-interest: if your story is well edited, accompanied by a powerful photograph, on a page that is well designed, it will look more important and more people will read it. You would be foolish to ignore or belittle that power.
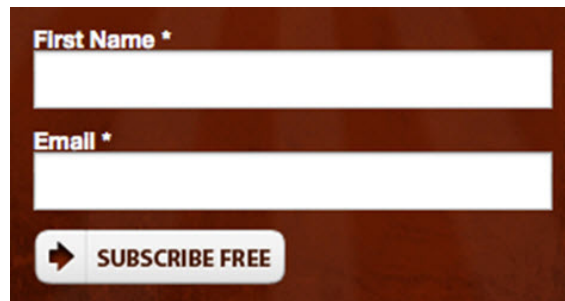
In fact, you will never reach your potential as a writer unless you take an interest in all of the associated literary crafts. Cultivate this habit: ask questions about the crafts of copyediting, photography, illustration, graphics, design, and Web site production. You need not become an expert in these fields, but it's your duty to be curious and engaged. One day, you will talk about these crafts without an accent.

I struggled with including this one. I kept telling myself, *It's not really about copywriting!* But then I realized... that's precisely the damn point!

If you want to become a great copywriter, don't just learn about copywriting. Learn about design. Learn about typography. Learn about psychology. Learn about coding. You should *at least* be mediocre in a couple of outside fields.
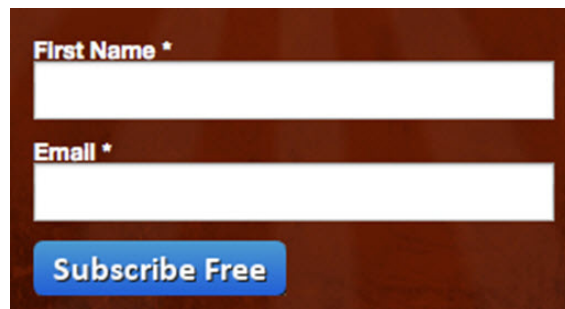
Especially when writing copy for online use (which you will most likely be doing the majority of the time), it pays to have an understanding of the context in which your copy will reside. Designers will appreciate that you considered their site designs when writing. Coders will appreciate your ability to speak their language better than the layperson.

Recently, I wrote copy for an author's email opt-in box that offered visitors a free eBook when they signed up for the email list. When the designer created the opt-in box, the signup button looked like this:

Since I have some knowledge of design, I knew that a signup button that stood out a little bit more might lead to a higher conversion rate for people who sign up for the list. I used Visual Website Optimizer to create an A/B test that tested the following signup button against the original the designer created:

The result? Conversions improved by over nine percent. The blue button, with the same copy, converted 198 out of 2,399 visitors, while the original only converted 180 out of 2,392.

The best part? Now that we know the blue converts better, we can begin testing other little changes to improve the conversion rate even more. For example, changing "Subscribe Free" to "Get My Free eBook" might raise the rate even more. Or maybe putting an arrow pointing to the button, like in the original.

The possibilities are endless. By learning a bit about other disciplines (like design), you'll open your eyes to so much more of these possibilities than a copywriter who focuses only on copy and never context.

25 How to Survive as a Professional Writer

> *Now that we have dismantled the disabling myth of authorship as a lonely craft, you can free yourself of the need to rent a loft overlooking the ocean, your only companions a portable typewriter, a bottle of gin, and a kitty named Hemingway.*
>
> *In the real world, writing is more like line dancing, a social function with many partners. As we've seen, some of those partners—a writing teacher, a workshop group, a Web producer, a copyeditor— may be assigned to us. Other helpers can and should be of our choosing.*
>
> *You must create a system of support both wide and deep. If you limit yourself to one classroom teacher or one editor, you will not get the help you need. You must create a network of friends, colleagues, editors, and coaches who can offer feedback—and maybe an occasional feedbag.*

In your quest to become the best copywriter you can possibly be, this might be the most valuable nugget of truth you find. Nothing will speed up your copy education like putting yourself around other people who are committed to learning a new skill for many reasons:

- You can encourage each other
- You can create accountability
- You can swap advice and feedback
- You can point each other to new sources of knowledge
- You won't have to drink away your sorrows and frustrations alone anymore

That's one of the main ideas behind Copygrad—creating a place where bright people can learn about copy together.

The goal is to get you guys talking, provide you with high-value content, and bring in outside experts who are way smarter than me so we can **both** learn exciting new things.

Hopefully, you've learned at least a couple of valuable lessons from this ebook. I know I did while putting it together. Here's what I propose—you and I keep learning together. We work hard so we can work on our own terms. Then, somewhere in the not-so-distant future, we see each other on a beach or some other exotic locale we've always wanted to explore, and we share a drink and tell stories.

I'm looking forward to that day. Until then, let's keep working. You can find me regularly updating Copygrad.com with new content, or feel free to shoot me an email anytime at Will@Copygrad.com.

Don't be a stranger.