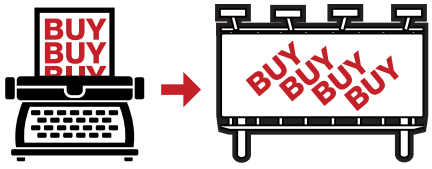
THE COPYWRITING INFOGRAPHIC

Copywriting defined

WHY?

Copywriting is writing with a practical purpose. The copywriter aims to inform the reader, persuade them to change their view or encourage them to take action.

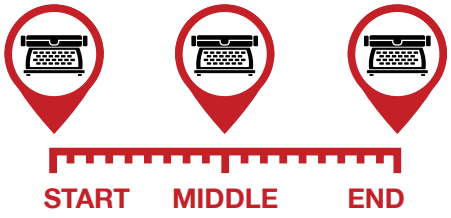
Most copywriters write for commercial purposes – to encourage readers to make a purchase or try a product.



WHAT?

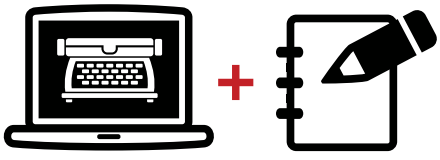
Copywriters provide the content for advertisements (broadcast and print), slogans and taglines, websites, brochures, leaflets, direct mail, marketing emails, articles, user guides, video scripts and more.

Some people use the word 'copywriter' to refer specifically to those who create concepts and content for advertisements.



WHEN?

Because copywriters deal in ideas, they are best involved early on. They can identify the concepts, themes, topics, phrases that form the foundation of a project. However, a copywriter can also add a lot of value by taking a fresh look at content that has already been created.



HOW?

The tools of the copywriter's trade are simple: computer and word-processing software for longer pieces, and perhaps pencil and paper for slogans and ideas.

WHO?

There is no 'official' qualification to be a copywriter. Anyone who can write, and meet the needs of their employer or client, can be a copywriter.

WHERE?

In corporate and agency settings, copywriters work in partnership graphic and web designers, web developers, account executives, marketing managers and others. As

Most copywriters work iteratively, revising their work several times – in response to client comments, and also on their own initiative as they aim to refine and improve their work.

Every copywriter is different. But many good copywriters are literate, creative, reflective and disciplined. They are curious – like detectives, their job is to 'know a little about a lot'.

Some copywriters have a specialisation, based on their experience. Others are happy to write anything.

freelancers, they work directly with clients and also through agencies.

Copywriters naturally congregate in areas with strong creative industries. But, in theory, a copywriter can work from anywhere.

'A professional writer is an amateur who didn't quit.'

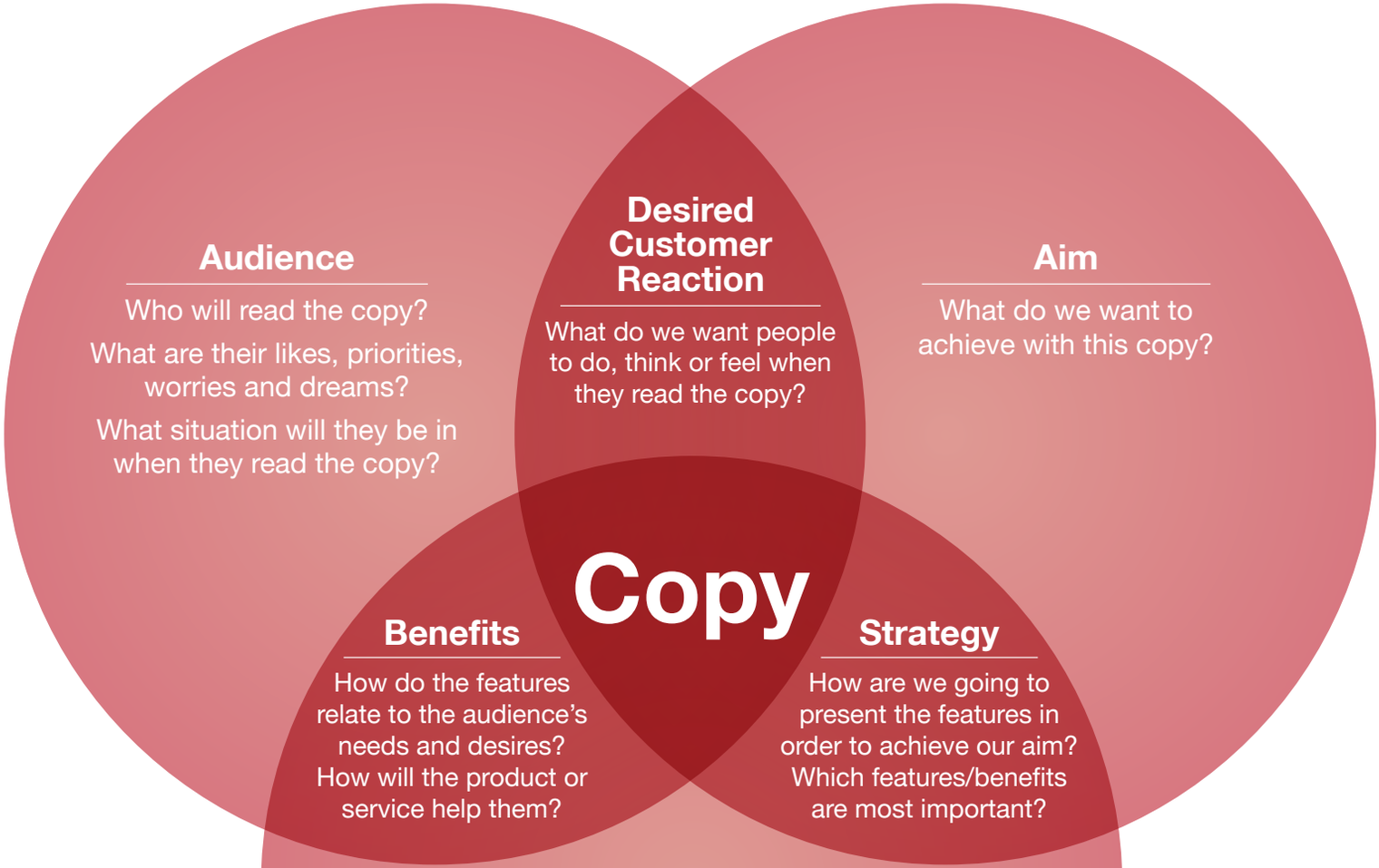
Richard Bach

'Half of my life is an act of revision.'

John Irving

The elements of copywriting

Although every copywriting assignment is different, there are some principles that never change. This diagram shows how they come together. It is always worthwhile considering these elements before starting to write.



Features

What does the product or service do?

How does it work?

What is new, different or unique about it?

‘The secret of becoming a writer is to write, write and keep on writing.’

Ken MacLeod

‘If you can't explain it simply, you don't understand it well enough.’

Richard Feynman (probably)

Slogans

Slogans are one-line promises of value. The value might be boldly stated or subtly shaded, but it has to be both clear and believable.

When used as headlines, slogans should grab attention, establish the theme and set the tone for what follows. When used as signoffs, they should strengthen, confirm or enrich what has gone before. In some advertisements, the slogan may be the only content.

Slogans should ‘talk to’ their visual context. Copy and design should come together to form a sum greater than their parts. Neither should try to say something that would be better said by the other.

The art of writing a great slogan can’t be reduced to a formula, but there are some recognisable types. Here are a few of them.

Concrete benefit

- Direct and forceful.
- Generates strong interest from motivated or interested readers.
- No risk of misunderstanding, but may come across as inelegant.

Personal benefit

- Expresses a concrete benefit, but relates it to the reader.
- Combines reason and emotion.
- Used for many B2C headlines.

Intangible benefit

- No specific concrete benefit expressed.
- States brand value and invites the reader to associate themselves with it.
- Depends on strong emotional resonance (and sheer spending power) for effect.

'No other battery looks like it or lasts like it'
Duracell

'1,000 songs in your pocket'
iPod

'Just do it'
Nike

Literal question

- Can draw the reader in if it talks to their personal concerns.

'Does your memory let you down?'

Rhetorical question

- Can be intriguing or compelling, but risks pretension or irrelevance.

'Who knows the secret of The Black Magic box?'
Black Magic chocolates

Accusatory question

- Can jolt the reader out of their comfort zone if used effectively.

'Would you be more careful if it was you that got pregnant?'

Command

- Powerful if the reader agrees with the advice (in other words, they want the benefit promised).
- Ineffective if the command elicits reactance (the impulse to resist control).

'Don't leave home without it'
American Express

Implicit command

- Poses a question, or makes a statement, that implies a command to the reader – usually, to use the product.
- May constitute an NLP 'embedded command' (i.e. sentence contains a fully formed command).

'What will you send?'
Post Office

Promise

- Offers general reassurance without necessarily stating any specific benefit.
- The use of 'you' is always compelling.

'Always there for you'
Hyundai

Metaphor

- Puts a striking, sensory-rich image in the reader's mind – but only if the metaphor is well chosen.
- Don't fall into the trap of making the reader think about something irrelevant.

'Liquid engineering'
Castrol GTX engine oil

Pun

- Can be memorable, but the reader might remember the joke and forget who told it.
- Use jokes with care. Humour can fall very flat. Don't bend the message to the joke.

'Alarmed? You should be'
Moss Security

Neologism

- 250,000 English words not enough for you? Make up one of your own!
- At their best, neologisms combine the expression of a benefit with a witty and memorable turn of phrase – all in one 'word'.

'Innervigoration'
Gordon's gin

‘The task of a writer consists of being able to make something out of an idea.’

Thomas Mann

‘A writer is someone who can make a riddle out of an answer.’

Karl Kraus

Grab their interest

No interest, no readers! Here are the three main ways of cultivating interest. Benefits are by far the most powerful. News and curiosity may grab interest, but only benefits will sustain it.

Benefits

‘That’s just what I need’

‘I want one of those’

News

‘Never seen that before’

‘That looks different’

Curiosity

‘What’s this all about?’

‘That looks interesting’

‘The words we use are strong. They make reality.’

Wang Chung

‘The joy is in the surprise. It can be as small as a felicitous coupling of noun and adjective.’

Ian McEwan

Know your benefits

Benefits command attention and, ultimately, close sales. Benefits need not be unique, but they must be compelling.

Tangible

Physical, provable or measurable benefits.

Intangible

Emotional or psychological benefits that cannot be measured.

Commercial

Companies buy things that are good for business.

Make them real and vivid in the reader's mind.

Link them to the reader's concerns.

Show why the reader's firm needs the product or service.

Market leader

Price ***Quality***

Value ***Speed***

Convenience,
ease of use

Sensory pleasure
(nice to look at, taste, smell, hear or touch)
Self-esteem
Personal attractiveness
Coolness
Novelty

'Whether or not you write well, write bravely.'

Bill Stout

'Don't tell me the moon is shining; show me the glint of light on broken glass.'

Anton Chekhov

Turn features into benefits

All features of a product or service must be 'turned outwards' and expressed as benefits. Using the word 'you' is an excellent way to make a benefit feel directly relevant to the reader.

Brand / Product	Feature	Benefit	Copy
L'Oréal	Improve appearance of hair	Feel attractive	'Because you're worth it'
Kellogg's Rice Krispies	Makes noise when milk added	Kids have fun eating them	'Snap! Crackle! Pop!'
The Independent	Politically neutral	Readers seen as discerning and intelligent	'It is. Are you?'
Interflora	Get flowers delivered	Delight loved ones	'Say it with flowers'

‘The real engagement is between reader and writer.’

Roger Black

‘The talent is in the choices.’

Robert De Niro

Persuade the reader

These four principles of persuasion have been proven to influence people. Select the ones that will work best in context, and use respected third-party information and sources to back up your position.

Authority

People defer to experts

‘Guinness is good for you’
Guinness

Social Proof

People follow the herd

‘8 out of 10 owners said their cats preferred it’
Kitekat

Consistency

People act on their commitments

‘Like X? You’ll love Y!’
Soft Return

Scarcity

People want what they can’t have

‘Quite frankly, the American Express card is not for everyone...’
American Express

‘You turn the handle the way it goes, not the way it ought to go.’

Confucius

‘It is do, or do not. There is no try.’

Yoda

The most persuasive words

As chosen by David Ogilvy in 1963 and L.M Boyd in 1970, and ascribed (wrongly) to several US universities. Possibly mythical. Use at your own risk.

sensational hurry results bargain startling
introducing quick love save
proven you easy challenge
remarkable offer wanted
compare suddenly now new announcing
amazing money health revolutionary
improvement safety guarantee miracle
discovery magic

‘No tears in the writer, no tears in the reader. No surprise in the writer, no surprise in the reader.’

Robert Frost

Choose the right structure

It’s not enough to have the right words, or the right ideas: they must be in the right order. Choose a structure that leads the reader from self-interest to action, in a sequence that makes sense and holds interest.

Problem / Solution

Describe a problem that the reader faces, then position the product as a solution to it.

Story

Tell a story – of how someone uses the product, how they arrived at the point they needed it, how the product was developed etc.

Question / Answer

Ask and answer the reader’s most likely questions in order, e.g. ‘What is it?’ ‘How does it work?’ ‘Why can’t I just…?’ etc.

Numbered list

Different views

Chunk down

Break down your content into a set number of points or sections.

Choose a reassuring cardinal number (3, 5, 7, 10, 12, 15, 20, 25), not a discomfiting one (2, 9, 13).

Examine the same situation from a range of different viewpoints.

For example, copy for a car insurance provider could look at the viewpoints of each party in a motor accident.

Start at the general level, then move iteratively to deeper levels of detail.

Works well when the reader must understand some technical points to see the benefits (consumer electronics, personal finance etc).

‘Advertising is not voodoo. The Client could ultimately hope only to create the impression of a connection or resonance between the brand and what was important to consumers. And what was important to consumers was, always and invariably, themselves. What they conceived themselves to be.’

David Foster Wallace

Calls to action

Calls to action guide the audience towards a real-world action. They set a boundary on readers’ ‘information gathering’ experience, encouraging them to move into the ‘doing’ phase.

(‘DCR’ = Desired Customer Reaction.)

Know the DCR

Identify the DCR.

What single action do you want people to take when they’ve finished reading?

Express the DCR

State the DCR clearly and simply.

Command the reader directly.

Don’t obscure the message by saying ‘please’, ‘why not’ etc.

Stay on target

Keep the DCR consistent throughout the piece.

You can say it in different ways, but you should always say the same thing.

‘There are no dull subjects. There are only dull writers.’

H.L. Mencken

‘When you write, try to leave out all the parts readers skip.’

Elmore Leonard

Productive tactics

Sometimes, it's hard to get started. And sometimes it's hard to finish the job. Use these tactics to mix it up when things just aren't coming together.

- Discard your favourite.
- Read it out loud.
- Use a pencil.
- Write for someone you know.
- Read it off paper.
- Change venue.
- Start in the middle.
- Write anything, edit later.
- Delete your first paragraph.
- Ask someone who knows.
- Save a copy, cut hard.
- Write drunk, edit sober.
- Experience the product.
- Change the font.
- Too simple? Too obvious? It’s finished.
- Sleep on it.

‘Quantity produces quality. If you only write a few things, you're doomed.’

Ray Bradbury

‘When we read, we start at the beginning and continue until we reach the end. When we write, we start in the middle and fight our way out.’

Vickie Karp

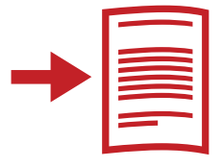
Sales letters

Sales letters are sent to businesses or individuals to promote a product or service. A sales letter must capture and hold the reader's attention, even when they are not in 'buying mode'.

Headline

Offer a benefit in the headline.

Body

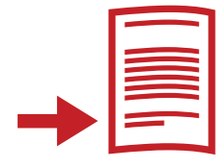


Get straight to the point (no 'I'm writing to let you know…').

Express, or explain, all features as benefits.

Maximise 'you'. Minimise 'we'.

Signoff



Finish with a call to action.

Use a PS to offer a new twist on the key benefit (time limit, free trial etc).

Information documents

Informational pieces such as how-tos and help articles are primarily intended to help the reader, but they also serve to build the authority of a brand. The more useful they are, the more the brand will benefit.

Structure

Organise thematically: answer the reader's likely questions, in order.

Organise chronologically: tell the story of using the product/service.

Design and layout

Use informative cross-headings so people can scan and jump in.

Use all the tools in the box: bullets, tables, diagrams, graphs.

Tone and length

Aim for a reading age of 10. Use Word's readability statistics.

Make it as short as it can be, but no shorter.

Web pages

Planning

Writing

SEO

Know each page's purpose, and stick to it.

How does this page help the reader?

Where does this page fit in the overall user experience or user journey?

It's hard to read a lot on screen. Use short sentences and make paragraphs one to three sentences long.

Aim for 300–500 words overall.

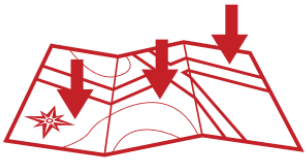
Identify target keywords for each page.

Include keywords in main heading, HTML page title and text (but never unnaturally).

Use keywords in internal links where possible.

Advertisements

Strategy

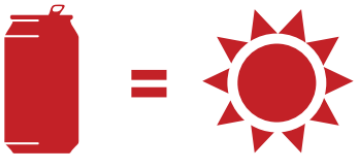


Who is the audience?

What is their situation?

What is the key benefit?

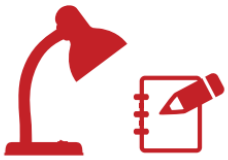
Concept



The creative concept dramatises the key benefit.

Find your angle. How can you compare it, contrast it, link it, invert it, make it fresh or say it differently?

Copy and design



Show, don't tell. Involvement is interest. Make the reader join the dots.

Imagery, headline, body and signoff should each sing a different part of the same harmony.

Revise, reject, revisit. The right idea is rarely the first.

'They're fancy talkers about themselves, writers. If I had to give young writers advice, I would say don't listen to writers talk about writing or themselves. '

Lillian Hellman

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