

Writing 'copy' that gets results

These guidance notes are designed to walk you through the principles of good copywriting, which are summarised at the end in '10 steps to copy that gets results'.

What is copy?

Copy is just another word for text that has been written for an external audience, with a view to persuading them to think, do or feel something.

Why make the effort with it?

Good copy makes the difference between your words being read and remembered, read and forgotten about or, worse still, not read at all. It's not just something to consider when you're producing flyers, posters, adverts and the like; your proposals and bids could also benefit massively from the application of a few basic principles.

It's all too easy to assume that because you've taken the time to write something, someone else will take the time to read it. But do you read everything that pops into your inbox or drops onto your doormat? Almost certainly not. And why not? Because there are other messages competing for your attention and, more than likely, other things you'd rather be doing. If you want to get noticed, your copy has got to be powerful.

How frustrated would you feel if you were chatting to someone and they wandered off before you'd got to the interesting bits? Social etiquette generally dictates that they wouldn't, but the same rules don't apply with the written word so you have to work extra hard to keep someone's attention.

What are the hallmarks of good copy?

Good copy isn't signified by a tone of voice, certain words or a particular style. Good copy is quite simply whatever gets you the response you need, whether that's someone seeking advice before they reach crisis point, a funder saying 'yes' or a journalist thinking 'wow, I never realised' then covering your story.

Where to start and when to stop

A blank sheet can be a daunting prospect but there are a few useful thought processes that will give you a starting point as well as improve your end result.

The first, and most important, question to consider is 'what are you trying to persuade your readers to do?' Being completely clear on this will help you focus your writing.

It's also a good idea to note down all the points that you need to communicate and think about the most appropriate order for them. Is there something the reader needs to understand before anything else will make sense? Will one of your points have more

impact if it's read in light of another? There will be endless variations and no definitive right or wrong, but some will be stronger than others.

As well as writing down your main points, you should also note down any 'mandatories' – things that have to be included. For example, competition terms and conditions, a website or a strapline. The last thing you want is to spend time crafting the perfect piece of prose to a word count and then realise you have to cut a paragraph to fit your mandatories in.

Just as important as knowing how to order your information, is knowing when to stop. Don't leave anything important out, but don't add anything in that's not absolutely necessary. Your reader's attention is limited and you need to make the most of it. Every second, and therefore every word, counts.

Make yourself relevant

When it comes to actually writing your copy you need to think about who it is you're writing for. That way you can pitch it at an appropriate level and tailor your tone of voice accordingly. Without doing so, your words are unlikely to resonate with the reader.

- How much do they already understand about the subject?
- How do they feel about your brand at the moment – positive, negative or indifferent?
- What's their situation – what do they need, want, or want to avoid?
- What sort of language do they use?

Good copy shouldn't sound like you! It's about finding a style that marries the personality of the brand with the interests of your readers. There are no real rules other than this. It can be conversational rather than grammatically perfect. It can be poetic rather than punchy. It can be absolutely anything, so long as it's true to the brand and something the reader will relate to.

Some people find it helpful to adopt the persona of the audience they're writing for. Spending a few minutes dreaming up your personality, world view and speech patterns can make for more colourful copy that's also more effective.

Take your readers on a journey

AIDCA is a popular model used by copywriters to help them structure their writing. It stands for Attention, Interest, Desire, Conviction, Action. Your copy needs to guide the reader through these different states one by one – it's just not possible to jump straight from attention to action, for example, and you can't create interest without having first grabbed their attention.

So what might that look like in practise?

Attention – use a headline. Visually it will grab the reader's eye and, if you choose carefully, it will grab their imagination too.

Interest – expand on the headline. Introduce some of the features of whatever it is you're writing about, giving the reader a reason to carry on.

Desire – turn those features into benefits. Tell the reader how the features will improve their situation, whether by giving them something they want, or helping them avoid something they don't want.

Conviction – give people a reason to believe with research, statistics, testimonials or anything else that backs up what you're saying.

Action – spell out exactly what you want the reader to do and how they can do it. Make it as easy for them as you possibly can.

Read your copy with a fresh pair of eyes

Go back to your writing with a fresh pair of eyes. Will it meet your objectives? Is there any unnecessary content? Does it flow when you read it aloud or do you stumble? Is the meaning clear or are there ambiguities? Get someone else to read it as well and ask them for their feedback.

Proofread carefully

Copy that hasn't been proofread properly will appear unprofessional and present a poor image for your brand. There are three main things to check for:

- 1) Sense
- 2) Spelling and punctuation errors
- 3) Consistency in the formatting

It's often easier to proofread on paper rather than on screen, so print a copy and mark your amends in a coloured pen so they're easy to spot when you come to make the changes in the original.

Proofread somewhere quiet if you can as it requires a lot of concentration. Reading aloud can also help you make decisions about which punctuation to use, and most people feel more comfortable doing that in private.

Finally, ask someone else to give it one last proofread. When you're familiar with the text it's easy to see what you expect to see, not what's actually there. Someone coming to the copy fresh will be able to spot errors that you might have missed.

How to get better

Good copywriting is one third thinking about the 'rules', one third practise and one third just enjoying words. Start to take a bit more notice of the copy around you, and it will inspire your own writing. Keep hold of your favourite pieces – strong headlines, clever adverts, direct mail packs that impressed you. They're a great reminder of the power and principles of good copy, as well as being something to aspire to yourself.

Summary: 10 steps to copy that gets results

- 1) Commit yourself to investing time and energy in your copywriting.
- 2) Be clear on your objectives – exactly what is it that you want your readers to do?
- 3) Write down the main points you need to communicate and think about the most logical way to order them.
- 4) Take note of any mandates at the outset to help you manage your word count.
- 5) Think about who you're writing for and tailor your tone of voice accordingly – aim to sound like your reader not yourself.
- 6) Get writing! Take your readers on a journey from attention and interest, through desire and conviction, all the way to action.
- 7) Read your copy with a fresh pair of eyes. Have you included all and only your main points? Does it flow? Will it meet your objectives?
- 8) Proofread your work checking for sense, spelling and punctuation errors, and consistency of formatting.
- 9) Ask someone else to give your work a final proofread as it's easy to miss errors in text you are familiar with.
- 10) Take more notice of the copy around you and start a collection of your favourite pieces. Enjoying words and appreciating other people's copy will inspire your own writing.

