All-write

Copywriting for business
Tips on grammar and content

Copywriting for business is a specialist activity. You need clear messages, impact, excitement, precision and a whole lot more.

This document gives you a few writing tips learned during many years of writing copy for sole traders, small firms and global businesses. They are practical tips – you won't find too much pedantic talk about 'subjunctives' or 'finite clauses', so grammarians should swallow hard before proceeding.

The topics covered are shown below. If you're a busy professional and want outstanding copy written *for* you, please go to www.all-write.co.uk.

Grammar

- Apostrophes
- Brackets
- Bullet points
- Clauses
- Colons
- Commas
- The comma splice error
- Conjunctions
- Dashes
- Definite article
- e.g. and i.e.
- Effect and affect
- Exclamation marks
- Hyphens
- Less or fewer
- Only
- Proper nouns and capital letters
- Quotations
- Semicolons
- Split infinitives
- That and which
- UK &American English
- Who or whom

Copywriting content & voice

- Copywriting basics
- Features versus benefits
- Starting a piece
- The USP
- Evidence
- Writing for your audience
- How to say 'yes'
- Writing effective signs
- Writing direct marketing letters
- Writing emails
- Version control
- Companies – they or it?
- Callouts
- Subheadings
- Key marketing questions
- Keep copy 'punchy'
- Clever headlines
- Passive versus active copywriting?
- Keep it brief
- Writing technology copy
- Writing environmental copy

Tips on grammar

Apostrophes

Where to start... You have to get these right or you look dim. Nothing sets off righteous self-satisfaction more than someone catching you with an apostrophe in the wrong place. There are good reasons too: *In this issue: dead boys pictures* is nonsense (or even alarming) without *boy's.*

Possessives
The golden rule here is that the apostrophe goes after the owner/s and you should never end up with a non-existent word **before** the apostrophe:
The customer's invoice. (one customer)
The customers' invoices. (several customers)
A child's toy. (one child)
Children's toy. (not childrens' toys because childrens is nonsense)
James's invoice. (although you're probably OK with James' invoice)

Plurals
I have a few books is correct so you don't need an apostrophe for the similar *I have a few CDs.* Acronyms are simply written with a lower case *s* on the end if you want them to be plural. Numbers are different: *they came in 2's and 3's* is strictly correct, but you should write *twos and threes* anyway, and I personally prefer *1990s* for years.

Contractions
Who's going? (who is)
Whose hankie is this?
It's alive! (it is)
Its main obsession is its dinner (insane but true – the possessive its)

Finally, some apostrophe puzzles if you're feeling like it (answers below):

- *seven months gestation*
- *nine months pregnancy*
- *six months pregnant*
- *Phillipa Jones books covers*
- *he was the couples friend.*

- seven months' gestation (a gestation of seven months)
- nine months' pregnancy (a pregnancy of nine months)
- six months pregnant (a 6-month pregnancy – no apostrophe)
- Phillipa Jones' books' covers (assuming several books)
- he was the couple's friend (friend of one couple)
- he was the couples' friend. (friend of several couples)

Hot tips: ✓ No big shortcuts. You just have to know these rules

✗ Never make up imaginary words before an apostrophe

Brackets

There are times **(**but not many**)** when brackets are a useful way of changing meaning. The reason brackets are not very helpful in business copywriting is that you are trying to get **one** strong message across.

Simply using brackets as in the sentence above can suggest that you need to consider more than one thing – there **are** times **but** not many of them. The sentence is weak because you immediately cast doubt on what you have just said. Your goal with all business copy is to make it feel as if only one course of action makes any sense.

Of course it is essential to use brackets if you're Introducing An Acronym (IAA) or if you are identifying the source of a piece of information (ACME Research, 2009).

They can also reinforce rather than shed doubt:
It was red (bright red).

Square brackets are used differently, especially in adjusting quoted text so that it makes sense in a new context:
He said, "While we want to help [our suppliers] we have not been paid."

Hot tips:
✓ Essential for clarity…

✗ …but avoid lazy use of brackets where you interrupt flow and text should be rewritten entirely

Bullet points

Nobody agrees on the right way to use bullet points because they are not really formal punctuation. I prefer to think of them as informal semicolons separating items in a list. So...

Things that make me wake up screaming include Hollywood musicals; people who say 'leverage'; and anyone who describes himself as a 'brand champion'.

Becomes

Things that make me wake up screaming include
- *Hollywood musicals*
- *people who say 'leverage'*
- *anyone who describes himself as a 'brand champion'.*

Note that the bullets **replace** the semicolons and there are no initial capitals (except for Hollywood which is a proper noun). A full stop goes at the end.

Hot tips:
✓ Be consistent throughout a document

✗ Avoid fussy punctuation

Clauses

This document plays fast and loose with the word 'sentence' in places. That's because everyone knows what a sentence is and I don't want to get bogged down talking about clauses, predicates, finite verbs and adverb clauses. Largely because I don't know what most of those things are.

For those who insist, a clause is a group of words that has a verb in it and a subject: *I like you.* (the verb is *like*, the subject is *you*).

Or at least that used to be true before the grammarians did their thing and made it all too confusing to breathe. If you're writing copy for business, you don't need to know most of this stuff.

Very, very simply:

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I like you. (An independent clause making a sentence.)
I like you because I am drunk. (A clause, a conjunction and an adverb clause, making a sentence.)

Marketing copy often plays fast and loose with structures of this kind, using sentences without verbs and other horrors. It still needs to make sense, however, so read it out aloud and make sure you avoid errors like the comma splice.

Hot tips: ✓ If you break the rules, at least know that you're doing so

✗ Creative is one thing, sloppy is another

Colons

A colon should be used where you would use a full stop**:** the difference is that it implies a link of some kind.
His grammar was terrible: he was forced into a marketing career.

Note that this **cannot** be written like this:
His grammar was terrible so: he was forced into a marketing career.

That's because the sentence '*His grammar was terrible so.*' is gibberish.

If you want to use a colon when introducing lists or bullet points then keep the same rule in mind:

Examples include the following:
- *bananas*
- *apples*
- *pears.*

The version below is **wrong**. See bullet points for more.

Examples include:
- *bananas*
- *apples*
- *pears.*

Hot tips: ✓ Use them where a full stop would make grammatical sense

✗ Try not to use them in a way that creates a 'fragment' of text that wouldn't be a sentence in its own right (e.g. 'this includes:')

Commas

Everyone knows what a comma is**,** right? Except that many people think it's a 'pause for breath' and the world is full of copy that uses commas atrociously.

Some mistakes are fairly trivial, such as the use of an American comma after the final 'and' in a list:
*A book**,** a CD**,** and a newspaper...* (second comma is not needed in the UK)

Other errors such as the comma splice can make grammarians wince and make readers work harder to understand you. However, the worst offences are a long way from trivial because they change meaning:
*A woman**,** without her man**,** is nothing.*
A woman: without her, man is nothing.

The first of these examples is equivalent to putting *without her man* in brackets, leaving the meaning *A woman is nothing.* That's why commas of this kind must always come in pairs. This is similar to the example given in dashes.

A comma can be used to replace 'and' if you're using two adjectives:
He is a strong and healthy rotweiler.
*He is a strong**,** healthy rotweiler*.

It can replace 'then' if you're starting a sentence with a 'weak' clause (one that can't stand alone):
If you don't know what you're doing then tell me now.
*If you don't know what you're doing**,** tell me now.*

It's often used before 'and', 'or' 'but' and 'for' when they join two clauses:
I shouted loudly enough, but pianos can move fast downhill.

It introduces quotes:
*He said, "What do you mean, 'us'?**"***

And it helps start many sentences:
However, there are reasons to be cheerful.
Yes, I would like quite a lot more gin in that.

When put in the middle of a sentence, 'therefore' and 'however' and similar words or phrases are sometimes surrounded by commas:
Something like that, however, will need planning.

There are many more examples but you probably have the gist.

Hot tips: ✓ Use them to clarify what might be an ambiguous sentence

✗ They are not a pause for breath

Comma splice

Comma splices are the kind of thing that make grammarians write letters to The Times. They are one of the most common errors I come across. A comma splice involves replacing a full stop (or similar) with a comma. For example *Our competitors are doing well**,** call David Beckham for an underpants shot.*

This comma is incorrect because it separates what are essentially two sentences. The comma can be replaced with a full stop, a colon or a [dash](). You could also add a [conjunction]():

*Our competitors are doing well**,** so call David Beckham for an underpants shot.*

However, nobody could seriously object to this:
I came, I saw, I conquered.

Copywriting is partly about flow. If a comma works well for stylistic reasons, it's worth considering it even if you're breaking the rules. If you're using it accidentally, you'll usually come unstuck.

Hot tips: ✓ You came, you saw, you conquered

✗ Don't use a comma by accident when you really need a full stop, a colon or a rewrite

Conjunctions and prepositions

Simply using the word 'conjunction' is enough to take you back to Thursday afternoon English lessons and trying to pass out using nothing but the force of your own mind.

Just in case you still want to know what conjunctions and prepositions are, a conjunction simply links one clause to another while a preposition links a clause to a noun. Clear?

Prepositions (60 of them including *of, in, to, with, as, at, for, on by*...)
Everyone gets hung up about them.
They link part of a sentence to its noun.

If you 'strand' a preposition then you're condemned to grammar hell (*Which house did you arrive at?*), although an editor's attempts to avoid preposition stranding supposedly made Winston Churchill scribble 'This is the sort of English up with which I will not put'.

Conjunctions (joining two clauses)
All animals are equal but some are more equal than others.
The operation was a success before the patient died.

None of this is terribly important when writing copy for business, except for differences of opinion over starting a sentence with 'and' or 'but'. I'm personally in favour of this. But very sparingly. And only if you feel it adds impact.

Hot tips:

✓ Relax

✗ Don't back yourself into grammatical corners. If it reads badly, rewriting entirely may be better than changing the word order

Dashes

The dash is a great piece of punctuation for marketing copy.
You'll find that a dash forgives less than perfect grammar – and it helps you make two points in a single sentence.

The dash above is slightly longer than a hyphen. It's actually an 'en dash' which you can usually create in Word by hitting two hyphens in a row between words.

Dashes are informal punctuation. They usually go where a colon or semicolon would go (as above) or they can act a bit like brackets :
Nobody – and I mean nobody – should have to put up with that.

This example should actually use an even longer dash, called the 'em dash', but life's too short to be that up tight. Note the similarity with commas. If you remove the section between the dashes, you are left with a workable sentence.

If you get overexcited at the prospect and find you want to use more than one or two sentences on a page with dashes in them, you'll need to make some changes to ad variety. Try using a colon as one variant. And starting a sentence with 'and' or 'but' has some similarities in terms of formality and the implication of one idea following on from another.

Hot tips:

✓ Perfect for marketing copy

✗ Restrict yourself to once or twice per page

Definite article

Hilariously, for a term that makes people nervous about grammar, the definite article in English is simply the word **'the'.** It may give you an insight into the minds of grammarians that they take a one syllable word and describe it in six syllables. Indefinite articles are much more complex (just kidding). In English, there are two indefinite articles, **'a'** and **'an'**.

Hot tips: ✓ The

✗ Pretty difficult to get this one wrong

e.g. and i.e.

First off, I think it's better to write these with the dots, **e.g.** like this. That's a style preference, so you may disagree. However it's crucial to understand the difference between i.e. and e.g.

'**e.g.**' means 'for example' (*exempli gratia*) whereas '**i.e.**' means 'that is' or 'in other words (*id est*).
*I have many great ideas, **e.g.** pyramid marketing of cheap soap.*
*We're going to sell you something life changing, **i.e.** soap.*

Neither of these two abbreviations are designed for speech – stick to using them in writing. And although 'e.g.' is fine in marketing copy, I'd avoid 'i.e.' because it sounds like solicitor speak and it interrupts the flow of thought.

Hot tips: ✓ For *eg*sample

✗ Use them in writing, not speech

Effect and affect

This is a quick one, but it's a common mistake and needs to be nailed. Anguish affects you. An arrow in the eye affects you. The word 'affect' relates to what influence something has on you. Affective disorders are illnesses that influence your mood.

By contrast, many nasty illnesses are effective (i.e. they kill you fast). The word effect goes with 'cause and effect' – an effect is an outcome. It's easy to see why confusion arises, because anguish that affects me may have an effect on you. So good luck...

Hot tips: ✓ Affect = influence, usually a verb. Effect = outcome, usually a noun

✗ Cause and ~~a~~ffect

Exclamation marks

F. Scott Fitzgerald said that an exclamation mark is like laughing at your own joke. It's worse still when you sprinkle 'screamers' around your copy at random, because they are grammatically incorrect too.

There are times when you need exclamation marks. If you are writing an imperative such as *Put that down**!*** then the exclamation mark is needed. In fact it can be essential in some contexts to make your meaning clear. You should also use it for actual exclamations, such as *Wow**!***

And that's about it. If you insist on writing it after ordinary statements simply because you want to add emphasis, your copy reads as if you're adding *"We're just crazy guys down here!!!"* This effect is reinforced further if you add several screamers instead of just one. Perhaps the most important point here is that only evidence will persuade readers, not wild claims or extravagant punctuation.

Anyway, it's OK to write *Low prices. Buy now!* because the second part is a command to act. Putting two exclamation marks will not make your message stronger.

You could also put *Amazing! Buy now!* – this is grammatically correct, if a little bit hysterical.

Hot tips: ✓ For commands or actual exclamations

✗ NOT a way of adding emphasis to anything you want to make stronger

Hyphens

This section is specifically about hyphens rather than dashes.

Hyphens allow green-ink using pedants to write mind numbing nonsense.
This sentence needs a hyphen because we could **either** be considering people who write their letters to The Telegraph in green ink (*green-ink using)* **or** green people who use ink (*green ink-using*).

The crucial point is that hyphens should be used only when they avoid confusion. We could have hyphenated *mind-numbing nonsense* if we wanted to, but no reader is going to need the extra help that this gives.

Hyphens are always a judgement call, and there will be times when you get them wrong, but a light touch is best. Read a sentence a couple of times and try to see if you can make it acquire a different meaning if you're not sure. Do use them where they are absolutely essential, for example *a two-person team*. And be aware of context:

out-of-date clothes. (hyphen needed to avoid ambiguity)
his clothes are out of date. (hyphen not needed)

Hot tips: ✓ Use them when they aid understanding

✗ Don't get carried away – a light touch is best

Less or fewer

Fewer *people are often* **less** *competitive.*
This one is fairly easy, but many people get it wrong.

'Fewer' belongs only with 'more'. It applies to things you can count: literally, things you can point at and go "1,2,3..."
So the sign at the checkout **has** to say 'Ten items or fewer'.

Ten items or **less**
Let's have **fewer** *clutter around here*
Both of these are wrong. 'Less' describes the extent of something, not the number of items. So you can be less competitive but you can't be fewer competitive.

You can also have less clutter, because 'clutter' is an indeterminate number of items, placed around your living room for a 'good reason' so you can have arguments with your spouse.

Incidentally, time and money are exceptions because we sort of think of them as continuous. So it's correct to say, "In less than two hours I will make more than a grand."

Hot tips:	✓	Fewer than ten items
	✗	Our rivals are ~~fewer~~ competitive

Only

*I **only** have eyes for you.*
This risks sounding a bit apologetic. As if I wish I'd thought to bring you a nice cup of tea as well, but you're going to have to make do with my eyes because that's all I've got with me.

*I have **only** eyes for you.*
This reinforces the fact that my eyes are all you're going to get.

*I have eyes **only** for you.*
A third version suggests that the **unique** reason behind me having eyes in the first place is because I needed something to look at you with.

*I have eyes for **only** you.*
The final version brings us to the crux of the matter – I am not prone to ogling anyone else, simply because they are wearing something more revealing than you are. You matter more than anything else.

You can judge for yourself which is the most romantic, but it really does matter where you place 'only' in a sentence because you can end up saying something quite different to what you intended. Put the 'only' immediately before the word you want it to apply to:

*Customers need **only** to apply...* (it's easy to get what you want)
*Customers **only** need to apply...* (if you're not a customer, go away)

Hot tips:	✓	Put 'only' immediately next to the word you are modifying
	✗	Beware unintentional meanings

Proper nouns

Solicitors and tax inspectors are prone to thinking that every thought is a pearl and every utterance deserves capitals. So a firm might claim they are offering a range of **S**ervices that guarantees guilt-free **P**ersonal **I**njury **C**laims.

Leaving aside the fact that initial capital letters are not the worst thing about solicitors, the point is that only unique entities deserve capital letters. Hence, *The gods in Greece upset people who believe in God.* There are many ancient gods. By contrast, there is only one Greece and only one God; see the section on theology (just kidding).

You may feel that your Services are unique but the truth is they are probably just services. Save the self-promotion for where it will do the most good, on Facebook.

Hot tips:	✓	Reserve them for the real thing
	✗	Get over yourself – not everything you do deserves capitals

Quotation marks

There are two uses for quotation marks. For speech, the double quotation mark works best:
Nigel was heartbroken: "Fiona has decided a Porsche looks common."
Nigel said, "Fiona has decided a Porsche looks common."

Note that you can introduce the quoted speech with a colon or a comma (and in other ways). Note also that the full stop goes inside the quotation marks.

If you are reporting speech that continues over several paragraphs, you don't put the final double quotation mark in until the very end. However, you **start** each new paragraph with an opening double quotation mark to remind the reader what's happening.

Now, on to single quotation marks. If Nigel is quoting his fiancé's actual words, we have to use single quotation marks inside the double ones, to avoid confusion:
Nigel said, "Fiona has decided a Porsche 'looks common'."

The other use of quotation marks is to highlight individual words. Nigel may wish to indicate that he doesn't think the word 'common' is an appropriate word for anyone to use:
Nigel was unimpressed when Fiona told him a Porsche looked 'common'.
(Nigel has remembered his roots and disapproves of the word **'common'.**)

This example also shows the advantage where possible of reserving single quotation marks for highlights and double marks for reported speech:
Nigel was unimpressed when Fiona told him a Porsche looked "common".
(Nigel is directly quoting Fiona.)

In a business context, the most common error when using quotation marks is to use double quotation marks to highlight a word: *Many banks offer "low cost" loans but...* This example is better if you use a single quotation mark.

Hot tips:
✓ Reserve " for speech or direct quotes.

✗ Use ' to highlight words

Semicolons

Author Kurt Vonnegut said that semicolons are useful only as a way of telling people you've been to college**;** he had a point.

Apart from the fact that almost nobody is confident about using them, semicolons are not a good choice for marketing copy because they mess with beautifully crafted flow. The exception is in lists:
*You can use semicolons in brochures and letters**;** and in web sites**;** and in promotional emails.*

To avoid semicolons elsewhere, write shorter sentences. The semicolon in red at the top of this entry can be replaced with a full stop or a colon, but never with a comma (which is called a comma splice).

Hot tips:
✓ Use them to separate complicated items in a list

✗ Think about writing something shorter and snappier instead

Split infinitives

For my money, this one was nailed definitively by James Tiberius Kirk decades ago:
To boldly go where...

This is incorrect, but it sounds a lot better than *To go boldly where...*

Cap'n Jim was in the wrong here because for any verb in its infinitive form (to go, to see, to run etc.) the verb should not be separated from its 'to' by any other word. If you want to know why, spend two minutes on Wikipedia and then pour a strong gin (neat).

However, this is the sort of issue that causes paper cut fights among grammarians and we are writing for *businesses* here. Anything that adds impact is fair game, as long as it doesn't set you apart as a pariah.

I would probably draw the line at some point, so
They decided to all really pull together
is probably clumsy.

They all decided to really pull together
is better because the emphasis you are trying to make is 'really pull' rather than 'all pull'.

Avoiding the split infinitive is difficult here without weakening the sentiment. You would have to write it like this:
They all decided really to pull together.

Hot tips: ✓ Use them when effective

✗ Don't put so many words between 'to' and the verb that people doze off

That and which

The fight to use 'that' and 'which' correctly has pretty much been lost, with almost nobody noticing the difference. Even for those who are passionate about the English language (which obviously includes all business writers), the difference can be tough to understand.

Put simply, 'that' implies a very direct connection while 'which' implies more of a by-the-way aside.
*The hand **that** rocks the cradle is a soft target for disposable nappy campaigns.*
*A baby gets through a lot of nappies**, which** is a big sales opportunity.*

The first example needs 'that' because ***that** rocks the cradle* cannot be separated from *The hand* without losing meaning.

In the second example, ***which** is a big sales opportunity* conveys extra information and is not essential. We could put a full stop after *A baby gets through a lot of nappies* and it still makes perfect sense. Notice the comma before 'which'. Clauses containing 'which' are always separated from the main sentence using a comma (not true for 'that').

Hot tips: ✓ **that** implies a direct relationship
which is more of an aside

UK and American English

The internet has spread a lot of American English into the UK, and some UK businesses even take an explicit decision to use American spellings.

The most common difference is the use of 's' or 'z' in words like reali**s**e (UK) or reali**z**e (American). Ask any Old Etonian or UK Education Secretary about the Greek and Latin origins of these words to find out more (try and avoid swallowing your own tongue). Mercifully, word processors have UK and US dictionaries built in and it is very easy to choose the one you want for individual documents.

If you're using Microsoft Word then highlight all of the text in your document (using CTRL-A) and then click once on the link at the very bottom left of the Word window which should say 'English (United Kingdom)'. You can then choose the dictionary you want and spellings will be checked from then on using the new rules.

Hot tips: ✓ Just use the right PC spelling dictionary

✗ Um, that's it really. Just use the right dictionary

Who or whom

When someone has finished boring you to death about semicolons, they will often move on to 'who' versus 'whom'. There is real danger with this issue, because using 'who' incorrectly makes you look ignorant and overusing 'whom' makes you look pretentious. Take your pick.

Context is everything, I guess. The well known book *Who's Who* really ought to be called *Who's **Whom*** and the publishers have got away with this for many years, rightly judging that *Who's Who* makes a better title.

It's really simple, anyway. It all revolves around whether the person we are referring to as 'who' is actually **doing** something. You use 'who' where you could use 'he' and you use 'whom' where you could use 'him'.

Who *has been sleeping in my bed? (He has been sleeping in my bed)*
Someone is actually doing something here, so it's 'who'.

*To **whom** should I send the cleaning bill? (Send the bill to him)*
We are referring to a person here – he is not doing anything so it's 'whom'.

Use with caution. If you have painted yourself into a corner where you have to use 'whom' awkwardly, go back and rephrase the whole thing.

Hot tips: ✓ *Who* is like *'he'*.   *Whom* is like *'him'*

✗ You'll lose all of your friends if you get carried away

Tips on content and tone of voice

Copywriting basics

Before writing any copy for any product or service, bear these things in mind:

- everyone has a mental age of three when reading copy (including you and me)
- you have two seconds of their time (or less)
- nobody cares what your company thinks
- nobody cares what your company does
- people want what **they** want and they want it **NOW.**

Many businesses write copy best described as *that's enough about me,* **you** *talk about me*. For example…

Our saddles are made by a dedicated embroidery department using the finest zebra-themed simulated glove leather.
This is too detailed and focuses on the manufacturer. Rather than starting with what you do, how well it works and which department handles it, think about the customer first. Why would they want it?

Zebra saddles – stop chafing, ride with style.
This gives two good reasons why a user would benefit. Which brings us on to next first important topic: features versus benefits.

Hot tips: ✓ Think about your audience first – what are they looking for?

✗ Avoid talking about **yourself** – what matters is what they want, not what you want

Features versus benefits

I honestly think that confusion between features and benefits is one of the biggest single reasons why external copywriters and creatives are used to implement marketing, rather than in-house copywriting and design teams.

Writing copy about your own business is always difficult, because it's hard to see things from an external audience's perspective. You spend your whole working life developing better ways of doing things, so it's easy to believe that people will be most interested in **what** you do and **how** you do it.

In fact, people are interested in what **they** do and how you can help them do it.

Incidentally, features are very important and need to appear somewhere. But you can leave them on a page for people who want to know more. In the meantime, you need to flog the benefits to death, which involves turning around by 180 degrees what you know about your business. For example

- *Shellshock vodka contains 50% more alcohol* (feature)
- *Get drunk fast* (benefit)

- *The inspirathon boasts a 25Ghz octocore processor* (feature)
- *You can switch away from your games screen instantly when the boss appears* (benefit)

- *ACME cuts your cleaning costs by an average of 15%* (feature)
- *Use your cleaning budget to hire more frontline staff* (benefit)

The last of these examples highlights how slippery the concept of features-versus-benefits can be. Most companies offering 15% lower cleaning costs would insist that this is a benefit, and it sort-of is. However, effective marketing needs to go beyond the obvious and highlight **what will actually be better in someone's life/business**. Of course the most significant improvement can then be used as the USP (Unique Selling Proposition) for an entire campaign.

Hot tips:

✓ Tell them how it will improve **their** situation

✗ "Our product is great. Honestly, it's great. This is how great it is."

Starting a piece

Headlines aside (and see the entry on clever headlines), one of the biggest challenges with any piece of copy is how to start. A favourite strategy in bad business copy is to state the blindingly obvious. A few years ago, every other piece of rough draft copy I was sent started '*In these fast moving times…*'

I wish I could say that things have improved - the *plat du jour* is now '*In these challenging economic times'* (which I have seen twice in one paragraph before now).

People do not need to be told that they are facing stiff competition, a tough economy or rising gas bills. A novelist once told me that the best way to start writing was to get the first few paragraphs down and then delete the first paragraph, which she said was always 'throat clearing'.

This is excellent advice. Get the challenging economic times out of your system first if necessary, but then hit delete and tell the reader **straight away** what they will gain if they talk to you. As an example, read the two paragraphs below and see which one would make you buy a chair if you were an upmarket high street travel agent. The first is almost entirely about setting the scene, while the second talks directly and immediately to client priorities.

The marketplace for business furniture is highly competitive. Choosing the right chairs, desks and cabinets is only possible when you know which models represent the best value for particular applications. ACME chairs come with a five-year guarantee and you can be sure of a genuine commitment to customer service.

Furniture is one of the first things your customers see: it helps set the tone of their visit. Value matters, but so does making the right furniture choices. ACME works with travel firms throughout the UK to help them find the best possible combination of furniture, and our five-year no-quibble guarantee means that you know...etc

Hot tips:

✓ Say what matters – straight away, without preamble

✗ You don't work for *The Sun*. Don't be clever or use puns

Unique Selling Proposition (USP)

If I had a pound for every time I'd heard the question, "What are the USPs?" I'd have...OK, about twenty quid.

The clue to the Unique Selling Proposition or USP lies in its name. It's unique. You can have as many propositions as you like in a campaign, but the dominant proposition will do most of the work and it has to hit prospects squarely between the eyes.

Big business is better at this than many SMEs. If an inexperienced sole trader had commissioned the original Kit Kat ad campaign we would have missed out on *Have a break, have a Kit Kat.* Instead we would have had something like this: *Kit Kat offers compelling impulse confectionery purchase opportunities. We make a portable, easily unwrapped chocolate bar that is suitable for use during a coffee break, after work or during movie viewings.*

The point here is that Kit Kat offers all of those things, but the impulse to buy comes from a dominant idea – make your next break better. Note also that the real campaign is directed at the consumer's desires, whereas the sole trader version is happy to describe at length what the business offers - see marketing features and benefits for more ranting about that. The entry on key marketing questions also explores in more detail some of what you need to know before deciding on a USP.

Hot tips:

✓ It's unique. That means one. Just the one.

✗ The USP has to answer the customer's needs, not corporate ego.

Evidence

There is no substitute for giving evidence that backs up your marketing claims. It may even be that a particular piece of evidence is what forms your USP, for example you may deliver pizzas in less than thirty minutes and that can be the basis of your whole business.

Many businesses have less well defined differentiators, especially in service industries such as IT or financial services. Here you are often selling a quality of service that is more difficult to pin down but it doesn't let you off the hook when it comes to backing up your claims.

For example , if you want people to believe that you are serious about customer service and you will respond to customers' needs, you could try writing
We are serious about customer service and we respond to customers' needs.

Unfortunately, every company on earth makes a claim like this, so you really need to do more. In this context, 'evidence' doesn't mean incontrovertible proof that you really are telling the truth. However, you do need to show that you understand what is needed to provide great customer service. For example, you would be better off saying something like this:

We are serious about customer service:
- *you will always speak to a named individual*
- *90% of queries are answered within 24 hours*
- *more than 95% of our customer feedback is positive.*

This reveals both your understanding of customer priorities (provision of a named individual) and some hard numerical evidence. As a reader, I am reassured simply by the fact that you know these issues ought to be addressed.

Hot tips:

✓ One fact is worth a thousand claims

✗ Avoid generalities

Writing for your audience

The very first step in any kind of marketing is to decide who you want to sell to and what drives them.
It sounds obvious, but I have often asked clients, "If your perfect client walked through the door now, who would it be?" and the answer has sometimes been silence.

The issue of audience has become more and more critical as markets have split into increasingly diverse groups. Selling instant potato mash was easy when tens of millions of people were sitting in front of their telly in beige family living rooms, looking for something to eat with their spam.

Now instant potato buyers will also include depressed singletons and people who want to smear it on all over. It means very different selling propositions, such as *cheer yourself up* or perhaps *tastes a bit like potato,* all the way through to *never blocks shower drains.*

Seriously, if you're selling IT support then make sure you know how big your target companies are, what their most common needs are and what might be wrong with their current situation. Not only will large companies speak an entirely different language, involving SLAs and uptime, but their whole focus may be on a key issue such as disaster recovery, rather than the small trader's focus on friendly advice and reasonable costs.

The entry on key questions explores in more detail some of what you need to know about your audience.

Hot tips: ✔ Define your audience before doing anything else

✘ Generic messages will be far less effective than those aimed at specific people

How to say 'yes'

People are half asleep when they read marketing copy (or soon after if it's mine). It's why emotional tone matters as much as content – we are virtually talking about hypnotising a chicken here. With that in mind, consider the following: *Nobody can afford to miss this offer.*

This example fails at every hurdle because it strings a whole load of negatives together and offers these subliminal nuggets to the reader's hind brain:

Nobody can
Nobody can afford
Miss this offer

All three of these messages are the precise opposite of what you are trying to convey. If you want to tell a reader that an offer is too good to miss then you could try saying *too good to miss*, although this still contains the pure marketing poison that is the word 'miss'.

It's better to abandon clichés altogether and say what you mean:
An opportunity you can seize right now

...or similar. This is insanely positive and tells the hind brain all of the following things:

An opportunity
You can
Right now

For more on a related topic, see the entry on writing effective signs.

Hot tips: ✔ Yes you can

✘ 'Why not?'
  'Nobody should...'
  'Poor service makes us all....'

Writing effective signs

When I worked with one banking client, it was well known in the marketing department that the best efforts they made would be derailed in branch by staff who were armed with a felt tip pen, a roll of sellotape and poorly suppressed creative impulses.

Everyone from the local greengrocer to global finance giants manages to mess up when they want to say something simple about an unexpected event or to make a request to retail customers.

For example, just after the credit crunch (and when a cold snap had hit) a shop in Bristol city centre had a sign on the door saying *Closed due to cold - please come in.* This had a particularly unfortunate effect when posted among shops that had closed permanently due to bankers' cocaine habits.

A local restaurant used to have the following notice on every menu: *Order strictly from the menu. Any variation will incur a £1 additional charge.* Apart from the obvious hostility to customers implied, they were actually missing a marketing opportunity. Maybe they would have made more money by saying *We will be pleased to accommodate off-menu orders at additional cost.*

As a final example, one retail development had this sign distributed liberally around when building work was underway:
Over 300 shops open during refurbishment. We look forward to seeing you.

This starts well but why put the 'seeing you' in the future tense? *Come on in* would be better, given that the shops actually want me to visit them today, not at some point in the future.

See also the entry on how to say yes.

Hot tips:

✓ Say what you/they **can** do, not what is impossible

✗ Try not to sound as if you wish your customers would crawl away and die

Writing direct marketing letters

Direct mail (DM) letters are one of the earlier forms of direct marketing and there are a lot of conflicting opinions out there about what works best.

Bear in mind that whatever you write, testing is the cornerstone of any marketing so you should always send out a few variants to gauge response if time allows. You also need to test other media, especially email.

Conventional wisdom, reinforced by experience from organisations such as DM pioneers Readers Digest, is that long letters work best. This is counterintuitive, because we all like to think that we have minds like steel traps and so prefer simple, direct communication. The stats seem to show, sadly, that most of us have minds more like a box of sparrows. The trick is to use structure so that a 'long' letter is really lots of short and prominent messages. That helps with the 'grazing' behaviour that most peopole use when reading DM.

For my money, a good DM letter is one full page of A4 in length and has to have the following elements:

- a 'P.S.' - essential because the evidence is that people read a P.S. first. This means that it has to contain the USP
- a main heading below the name in bold, giving the USP in different words
- a short introductory para explaining how the service or product will benefit the reader (ie an extended version of the USP)
- three or four follow-up paras with their own bold subheadings, explaining the secondary propositions
- a clear call to action at the bottom. For example, 'I would very much like to show you how XXXX can cut your costs so please call me on XXXX.'

A structure of this kind means that a reader can look at the P.S., jump to the main heading, and perhaps quickly absorb the bold paragraph subheadings. If they are still interested, they may read more. In any case, your P.S. and your main heading have to do the lion's share of the work, so make them good and avoid 'clever' titles.

Hot tips:

✓ About a page is the right length

✗ Avoid a tombstone of text – use subheadings and bold highlights

Writing emails

This is similar to writing letters, but the subject line is supremely important. Testing is almost essential if you want to find the subject line that excites readers most (*Five ways to…* is often a good starting point).

Emails need to be shorter than DM letters, and layout should encourage at-a-glance reading. It's often good to have a column at the right that highlights the big takeaway messages as bullets.

Finally, remember that an email gives you a direct response mechanism. Make sure there is something to click, and that the result of the click is a directly relevant page (not just your home page). You must also make the call to action compelling. So, *Find out if you qualify for your own free assessment* is much stronger than a forlorn *Click here.*

Hot tips: ✓ Get the subject line right

✗ Make the click count

Document version control

Most business copy needs review before it's used, whether from a client, a boss or a colleague. There are lots of different ways of controlling the process, but control is essential however you do it.

File names
The first important discipline involves file names. One option is to go for v1.0, v2.0 etc at the end of a filename, with minor amends denoted as v1.1, v1.2 etc. You could also add the date at the end, so if the last version was edited on 2 October 2009 then the file name would end with 02-10-09 (although this makes multiple versions in the same day difficult).

Whatever system you use, stick to it and create a new file name with every new version, however minor. You may also find it useful to use change tracking in Word, although if so then it's worth accepting all changes before going on to a new version, otherwise the whole document ends up as a mess.

Action lists
File names are rarely enough to stop even the simplest copywriting project to descend into chaos and name calling (or is that just the way I handle projects?). So it is also useful to include a front page on the document that includes changes in the current version, historical changes and action points. Below is an example of what a front page might look like after three rounds of amends.

Version 2.1 (current version)
Article on pony trekking made less contentious at Pete's request
Further tracked amends on executive summary
Version 2.0
Changes made to all articles as per Jane's comments
Article on pony trekking added at Pete's request
Tracked amends on executive summary
Version 1.0
Five articles written to brief
First draft executive summary included with questions inserted
Actions required:
PW: *Approval on pony article needed by DATE*
JS: *Final approval on executive summary*

Hot tips: ✓ Change the file name on every version

✗ Don't send a document for review without making it clear whose opinions are needed (and when)

Companies – they or it?

This page is half about grammar and half about good copywriting practice.

Talking about companies as if they are collections of people is an understandable mistake (and the BBC does it all the time). However, a company MUST be treated as a single person because it holds a similar status in law to a single person.

*Ryan Air **is** one of the world's most charming airlines.*
*Ryan Air **are** one of the world's most charming airlines.*

The mistake is obvious in this context: Ryan Air is a single company, even though many people work in it. That means we also have to avoid 'they' in favour of 'it': *Ryan Air says that **its** directors didn't get enough hugs when they were children.*

Now, when writing copy for a business this presents a big problem. Talking about yourself as an 'it' does not conjure up the warm, cuddly feelings that companies such as Ryan Air want so much. There is no way out of this that respects grammar entirely so I suggest the following compromise:

*ACME **is** a major supplier and **we are** serious about service.*

This is a good half-way house, with warmth in the 'we are'. If you are writing about the company more formally, in terms and conditions etc. then you need to revert to more lawerly language:

*ACME **is** a major supplier and **it** may not answer phone calls any time soon.*

Hot tips:

✔ A company **is** a single entity

✘ A company **are** not plural

Callouts

Humans seem to have a driving need to find out more about 'callouts' when seeing them in articles. A callout is the larger font extract that's positioned artistically on the page. Newspapers and magazines use them a lot and they are a great way of highlighting your big message.

If this page were about the idea that bankers are now known to share 20% of their genes with vultures then your callout practically writes itself (and with luck, a web page will make it to page one for Google searches on banking).

> Bankers are now known to share 20% of their genes with vultures

Of course, the message you are more likely to be pushing will be less arresting. That's OK. Callouts are so useful because they allow you to extract the best from what you do have. Ideally, choose something you can verify, for example ACME services achieve a 10% annual saving on your IT budget.

Quotes are also very useful as callouts. If you don't have a quote and want to use one anyway, make it vague and unattributed, because this can still help to add emotional tone. For example, "*We were so relieved when our options were explained*" is not a quote you have to attribute to anyone, but it can improve an advert that is trying to establish empathy with people who are facing a crisis of some kind.

Hot tips:

✔ Use text that appears in the copy elsewhere

✘ Don't make them too long

Subheadings

Subheadings are often underused in any copy, and it's particularly important to make the most of them when you're writing for businesses.

Direct mail letters benefit from subheadings, as discussed, but they have uses far beyond that. They make a lot of difference to any copy longer than a few sentences, including brochures, ads, web sites and more.

Make the subheading relevant
Avoid 'clever' subheadings. The idea here is to give the reader a shorthand summary of what they can find in a particular paragraph. If this paragraph had a 'clever' subheading like *Keep it simple, stupid* then you might feel you had earned your creative merit badge, but the reader would not be any wiser about what the paragraph contained. Subheads are there to push simple ideas with clarity.

Give the reader bite-sized ideas
Simply the process of breaking your text into paragraphs with subheadings will help you clarify your own thinking and avoid mixing up propositions. More importantly, subheads mean that your reader can gain a rapid idea of what you're saying, choosing to read the sections that are of particular interest.

Make the last subheading a call to action
This is marketing copy we're talking about, so the last paragraph needs to tell the reader what they should do next. Say something like *Call for your free quote* in the heading and then explain why, with contact details, in the paragraph that follows.

Hot tips:　　✓　Make them relevant

　　　　　　　✗　This is not your chance to show the poetry in your soul. Say what you mean

Key marketing questions

Copywriting often bumps into its grown-up sibling 'marketing' at times, because although marketing goals are sometimes already very clearly defined, you will more often need to work out from scratch what you have to say.

With that in mind, here are some of the important questions that **someone** should ask and answer before any project begins. That someone doesn't have to be you, but you do need to get hold of the answers before starting so that you are confident about delivering the right USP to the right audience. Almost all of the following marketing questions are absolutely essential if you're going to get the best results:

- What do you want to happen as a result of this piece?
- Who will be reading it and what do they know already?
- What do your targets **think** they want? (From you or from life.)
- What do they **really** want? (This may be the same, but if not then what they *really* want is what matters.)
- How will your offering change things for them?
- What can you use to back up your claims?
- What do you want the customer to do next? (e.g. call you?)
- If you're writing sales copy, can you close in one step? (e.g. response mechanism?)
- What is your one clear Unique Selling Proposition (USP)?
- What are the other key messages?
- How will you measure success?

Hot tips:　　✓　Be clear about what you want from this – if you don't, who does?

　　　　　　　✗　Never send out generic marketing because you 'ought to do something'

Keep copy 'punchy'

Nobody loves a windbag. Your message has to be short, relevant and 'punchy':

- Get straight to the point
- Focus on 'you' not 'we'
- Sell benefits not features
- Show, don't tell (i.e. back up your claims)
- Include customer testimonials or evidence
- Be concise
- Keep sentences and paragraphs short
- Keep words simple
- Make it relevant to your audience
- Use bullets to drive home points
- Assert, don't describe (*you can...* not *it could be argued that...*)

Hot tips: ✓ Make the most of the second or two of attention available

✗ Steer clear of fancy book learning

Clever headlines

Tabloid writers spend most of their time thinking up puns to use as headlines.

OK, that isn't true. They spend most of their time in the pub trying to bribe Z-list celebrities. The point is that writing for business is not the same as writing for *The Sun*. What someone wants to read for entertainment is very different from what they want in an advert or brochure or direct mail letter.

In fact, readers don't want to see your advert at all, so they won't spend time working out what you really meant.

I admit I've been guilty of this in the past. For example, I was asked to write an invitation to a bread-making theme day, aimed at clients of an accountancy firm. The brief was to try and make it stand out from all the other corporate entertainment invitations. The headline I used was *Knead dough? Make bread with your accountant*. I would not repeat this mistake.

As with any marketing, what matters is appealing to self interest. People read adverts with their reptile hindbrain, not the bit they use to appreciate Oscar Wilde. So a headline has to say what it means. For example, meeting other business owners might be the hook that's needed, for example

Join like-minded business owners on a unique away day
A unique business event – bread making for local business owners
Make new business contacts while you're making gourmet bread

Remember, you have a second or two at most before your reader goes elsewhere so make sure they know what you're offering, what's in it for them and what they'll be missing if they say no. Coincidentally, the SEO performance of straightforward headlines will be far better than clever puns.

Hot tips: ✓ Say what you mean

✗ You don't work for *The Sun*

Passive versus active copywriting

Save 10% now.
A saving of 10% is available here.

There is no doubt which of the above is stronger. An active instruction to do something is faster and carries more weight than a description.

If a sentence that you write is put in the passive voice, it can be weak.
If you write in an active voice, it's stronger.

This is related to the trap that writers often fall into regarding features versus benefits. If you have just designed a product and you think it's wonderful, the temptation is to talk all about it – to start talking about the product first. In fact, readers will be interested in what they want first, who you are second, and what your product is third. This means it is better to use an 'active' voice, where the person carrying out an action appears first:

You can exterminate more cockroaches (active)
More cockroaches can be exterminated by you (passive)

There is an exception with headlines. Sometimes you need to grab attention with the main topic, especially if the subject is the whole point. So *Dolphin-faced camel revealed by scientists* is far better as a headline than *Scientists reveal camel with a dolphin's face.*

Hot tips: ✓ You can... We provide...

✗ Services of this kind are provided by us

Keep it brief

If you've just written a sentence that needs a word like 'thereby' to separate two huge chunks of text, you're slightly off piste.

Marketing copy depends on brevity. Ideally, you need once concept per sentence – although using punctuation such as the dash can allow you two. I'm not suggesting that everything you write has to fit on a single page, just that what you **do** write has to be condensed down to essentials.

This all becomes even more important when you're writing emails. Of all the media, messages are most likely to get lost in longer emails. People often read and digest only the first part of a message, or in a 'newsletter' format they graze and select only the interesting bits.

Cut to the chase and use short sentences. But never. I mean, never. Get all trendy. For the sake of it.

Hot tips: ✓ You're writing marketing copy, not an essay

✗ Brief? Yes. But. Some people. Go too far

Writing technology copy

There are many different audiences for technology products and services. If you are a systems analyst and you're writing for other systems analysts, things are easier because you can use a spaghetti soup of acronyms.

On the other hand, conveying the difference between *your* integrated suite of applications (or mobile phone service...) and the service provided by other companies is a lot more difficult when you are writing for a non-technical audience. As with a lot of marketing, the essence is to identify the benefits, rather than the features. Don't tell people what you provide, tell them what their life will look like after they have bought your stuff.

So a bluetooth headset *could* be marketed as *offering the latest ergonomic styling* (a feature) or it could be sold on the basis that your product will make punters *look more important when in coffee shops* (a dubious benefit).

Seriously, even a technical audience wants to know what's in it for them. And avoid clichés when you're telling them: every IT company on the planet tells customers they will cut costs. Instead, home in on the unique selling proposition of your own particular service.

There will always be a unique proposition, and 'unique' doesn't necessarily mean 'nobody else does this'. For example, if you work in Bristol and offer IT support to Bristol companies, you can focus on local service and fast response. You could even quantify this. If a firm in Glasgow offers the same service, it won't make your proposition less unique in Bristol.

My own experience is that small companies try to appear big by listing lots of different services, and the problem is especially acute in technology. If you look at the global technology players, they make do with one, sexy strapline and leave you to assume that they can handle anything. So, when you have a revolutionary telephone system that will transform everything, you could try to big yourself up with the following:

ACME phone systems offer the latest IP telephone in an integrated environment that allows lower call costs, higher sound quality, data integration and unlimited scalablity...

Or you could go down the big business route:

ACME phones. Business excellence.
Communications can make or break your business. Your customers expect...

Hot tips: ✓ What's in it for them?

✗ Avoid a long shopping list of services

Writing environmental copy

People can't do numbers. It's why popular science books stick to pictures and colourful metaphors. If you're writing about the environment you face a still bigger challenge. Many people either wouldn't believe or wouldn't care about the numbers even if they understood them. This is not simply because of the anti-environmental propaganda still being pushed so hard, but because the problems we are talking about will take place too far in the future (i.e. 'not in my lifetime' with a bit of luck).

What matters most is developing arresting images and metaphors that will make an achievable action memorable. For example, owning an average German Shepherd dog results in more than twice as much CO_2 as an average SUV (Robert and Brenda Vale, *Time to Eat the Dog).* This is because of the amount of meat it eats and because of the agricultural practices used to produce that meat. A cat, incidentally, is roughly equivalent to a VW Golf.

Now, the idea that Rover kills twice as many polar bears as the Chelsea Tractor is an arresting one. It could form the launching pad for many different messages: support organic farming; eat less meat; buy veggie dog food... the point here is that talking vaguely about 'saving the planet' (a fatuous message given that the 'planet' will be fine) does not begin to compete with a single striking, memorable image.

Environmental marketing depends on the fact that most people still have a conscience and on giving those people messages they can relate to and act upon. If you are writing for an organisation that has an emphasis on good environmental conduct, talk to the people doing the actual work and find out between you what might look best as a Daily Mail headline.

Hot tips: ✔ Memorable is good

                     ✘ 'Now for the science bit' is bad