

THE STRAIGHT NORTH BUSINESS WRITER'S HANDBOOK

Career advice and technical tips to improve
your skills and income.



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About Straight North

[Straight North](#) is an Internet marketing agency specializing in SEO, PPC and responsive lead-generation websites. We help small and middle-market firms generate high-volume, high-quality sales leads. Content plays a critical role in our campaign strategy and execution; our full-time staff includes content strategists, copywriters, editors, proofreaders and outreach specialists.

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PART 1: CAREER ADVICE

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5 ATTRIBUTES OF A GREAT COPYEDITOR



BY BRAD SHORR

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Any serious content marketing program has a first-rate copyeditor on the team. As a copywriter, I recognize the value of a great editor; unfortunately, non-writers sometimes don't.

But for any business aspiring producing high quality content (and no other type is worth producing), an editor is a must-have resource. An editor ensures that content is accurate, concise, clear, free of grammatical errors and written in a style appropriate to the target audience. Without an editor, few people will read your content and fewer still will find value in it. So, if your business is looking for a great freelance or in-house copyeditor (and no other kind is worth looking for), here are five attributes to look for, from a writer's perspective.

1. **Technical skills.** Is the editor familiar with AP Style and other style standards your business uses? Where did the person learn them? Does he or she have a degree in journalism? Editors must know the fundamentals because a great idea will be completely undermined if it is expressed in sentences full of basic grammatical errors. For online content, the editor should also have a working knowledge of Web usability and typographical best practices.
2. **Communication skills.** Writers can be touchy, so the editor must be able to make suggestions

and corrections while still maintaining a positive relationship with the writer. And, since editors also communicate with other members of the marketing team and company leadership, they must be able to clearly and persuasively explain editorial issues in non-technical terms.

3. **Organizational skills.** Editors must meet deadlines. In order to do so, they must be able to explain assignments clearly, and manage the editing process efficiently with writers, clients, internal personnel and sometimes designers.
4. **20/20 Vision.** To explain assignments clearly, editors have to convey the big picture of an assignment to writers as well as the critical details that will make or break client approval. Both ends of the spectrum require the editor to be neither nearsighted nor farsighted.
5. **Balance.** An effective editor edits neither too little nor too much. Nitpicky edits annoy writers and waste time; overlooking major shortcomings or errors is obviously catastrophic if it occurs frequently. ❖

A MARKETING PLAN TO GET CLIENTS STARTING TODAY!



BY MARIA PEASE

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We all know how vital it is to have a marketing plan for our business. After all, if no one knows your business exists, you won't have any business. But what does it mean to have a plan?



A marketing plan is a group of tasks that you do on a consistent schedule. For any marketing plan to work, you need a focused vision of what you want to accomplish — and then plan tasks you do on a regular basis, month after month, year after year to help you reach your goals. Over time, you will discover what is giving you the best results and tweak the plan as needed.

Having a niche can assist you in getting even more focused marketing efforts because you will know what the needs are for that particular industry and be able to use hot button words that speak to their greatest desires, all while showing them you are the authority in that niche.

PREPARING YOUR MARKETING PLAN

Start by evaluating what you'd like to accomplish and write it down. Whether it's getting more clients or getting known by your target market, knowing your goals will keep your mind free of clutter. After all, you can't get where you want to go if you don't know where that is.

Marketing plans consist of many moving parts, and you want to have a variety of them working together to get the best results. There are so many options when it comes to marketing your business, so I have included the tasks that will give you a well-rounded plan and make it easy for you to get started.

Here are some great ideas for marketing your business. Some of them are very easy to implement and you will just have to update the information occasionally, and some of the tasks you will want to do regularly. Commit to your marketing mix and watch your business grow.

Website — A website is a must for any business, but even more so for solo professionals. This will be the hub of your marketing plan so you want it to look professional, not complicated.

Be sure it is *clear* what service you provide. If you are a B2B copywriter, say it on your home page. I know it seems silly to say, but you would be surprised how

many websites I've seen where I can't figure out exactly what service the provider is providing! Also, be sure your contact information is on every page of your site and be sure it is easy to find.

LinkedIn — There are a lot of websites and social media outlets where you can post your profile, but the best one for business professionals is LinkedIn. It can be overwhelming to post your profile but remember, you don't have to do it all in a day. Plan out what you want to add and do it over a week or two. You can make changes anytime, so don't let the fear of not getting it right stop you from doing it at all.

Email Signature — This is an easy task that will take you just minutes to implement but can be a very important in regularly promoting your business. Use your name, business name, website address, phone number, and a short tagline. Keep it simple and focused. You may be surprised how this simple thing can lead to some great new clients.



“Fortune favors the prepared mind.”

- Louis Pasteur

Business Cards — Having business cards with you at all times is an important marketing tool. You never know when you will meet someone who could use your service or know someone who can, and being able to hand out a business card means no missed opportunities to promote how you serve your clients.

Press Release — Once you're open for business, write a press release announcing it and post it online to the media outlets. You can also send it directly to your local media if you are focusing on building your business local.

Even if you have been in business for a while, you can use press releases. Any time you add a new service, release a product, or have anything newsworthy to report, a press release is a great way to do it.

Direct Mail — Letters of introduction are a good way to connect with potential clients without trying to sell to them. You introduce yourself and let them know what you do and ask a thought-provoking question. Your only goal here is to make an introduction, but you might be surprised that many of the businesses you connect with will keep you in the back of their minds if they use your service or have been thinking about it. That's why it's so important to follow up with a call, email, a postcard, or another letter, this time asking them to visit your website for a free report or to take advantage of a free consultation.

Email Marketing — Having an e-newsletter is a great stay-in-touch plan. The important thing to understand is that you don't want to sell in your newsletter. You want it to be fun to read and provide useful information. This is a great opportunity to show that you know your niche and allow your personality to shine through. It also keeps you in the mind of potential clients.

Cold Calling — Making cold calls takes a special type of person. If you are comfortable calling, I suggest you do it. You can get quick wins this way, but if you're prone to hurt feelings, you may want to put this on the back burner.

Now that you have some ideas on how to market your business, let's talk about a schedule for putting the plan into action.



1. The first thing you need to put into place is your **website**. You want all your marketing materials to include your web address, so having it ready to go is your first task.

Remember, your website is your marketing hub. When clients want to know if they should call you, they will visit your site to learn more about you and look at your samples. You want to keep it simple, yet professional and easy to navigate.

Although this is something that you do one time, you will update it with new samples, articles, or other valuable information at least once a month. Of course, you can add information more often as you have the time (more frequent posting is better).
Schedule — right away; then, add content at least once a month.

2. Next, get your **business cards** printed. Again, you want professional-looking cards that include your name, phone number, email address, and website address. Keep them simple and clean looking.
Schedule — right away; re-order as needed.

“Failing to plan is planning to fail.”

- Alan Lakein

3. Your **email signature** is quick and easy but something a lot of professionals overlook. Take five minutes and do that now!
Schedule — right away.

4. Start writing your **LinkedIn** profile. Once your profile is complete, spend some time on the site each week and begin to make connections and endorse other professionals. This is a great place to find clients in your niche.
Schedule — weekly.
5. Write your first **press release** and submit it to an online site like PRWeb.
Schedule — 2 to 4 times a year or as you have business news.
6. When you are open for business and ready for clients, make a list of prospects and start **cold calling**. You could end up with a client meeting by days' end!
Schedule — weekly.
7. **Direct mail** — Start with your list of prospects. As you add more, just follow the plan.
 - Introductory letter
 - Second letter — offer free consultation or free report — one month later
 - Postcard — two months later and then repeat four times a year**Schedule — ongoing.**
8. Set up your **e-newsletter** and write articles to include in your first issue. This will go to everyone who signs up on your website, so offering a free report for signing up is a great idea. Also, your newsletter should focus on the subject of your niche.
Schedule — ongoing: weekly, bi-weekly, or monthly.

These are just some of the marketing tasks you can begin to implement to ensure you have a well-rounded marketing plan. Remember to write out your schedule so it will be easy for you to stay on track — and don't be afraid to add new ideas and drop what isn't working for you.

If you just commit to spending one day a week on marketing tasks, you will have a flourishing business in no time at all. ❖

GOOD BUSINESS COPYWRITERS ACCEPT CRITICISM ENTHUSIASTICALLY



BY BRAD SHORR

[BACK TO TOC>>](#)

Some people are attracted to a career in writing because they believe it will allow them to work independently. I'm not sure whether independence is possible in other fields of writing, but for business copywriting, independence is impossible.

Quite to the contrary, business copywriting is a collaborative art. Copywriters must accept input and feedback from clients, SEO specialists, managers, designers, editors — have I left anyone out? For many copywriting assignments, creativity is not so much a matter of crafting brilliant phrasing as it is balancing the diverse needs of the organization.

For this reason, a business copywriter cannot afford to be the stereotypical temperamental artist. If clients, SEO specialists, managers, designers and editors walk on eggshells every time they approach a copywriter with suggestions or criticism, it won't be long before that writer is unemployed.

In my experience, the best copywriters not only handle criticism, they handle criticism *enthusiastically*. They welcome suggestions and view criticism as an opportunity to improve the quality of the work, no matter how good it was to begin with. While it's true that not all criticism is on the mark, it still pays for a copywriter to accept it with a positive attitude. A positive attitude creates an atmosphere where copywriting issues can be discussed openly and objectively. If the copywriter digs in his or her heels, it only makes the other party do the same. So instead of having a productive discussion, the criticism turns into an order where there is no discussion at all. The latter scenario is not at all conducive to quality work.

On the other hand, criticism often makes good writing even better. Criticism from clients gives writers broader and deeper understanding of the client's business and customers. Criticism from SEOs makes writers more proficient in their SEO copywriting skills. Criticism from designers is extremely important: balancing text with design components is now a crucial writing skill, as the Web is moving toward a more visual experience. Criticism from managers deepens the understanding of the strategic objectives of the



assignment, and criticism from editors strengthens technical writing skills. Every copywriter should embrace these learning opportunities.

How can writers cultivate their ability to accept criticism enthusiastically?

First, view criticism as I just said, as a learning opportunity. Equally important (and admittedly difficult) is to not take criticism personally. When someone criticizes/attacks/destroys your work, it's a business issue; whether or not it becomes a personal issue depends largely on your response. Finally, develop the ability to articulate your position in a persuasive manner. Can you explain why you chose to treat a topic in a particular way, why you opted for a conversational tone rather than a formal one, etc.? If you approached your writing decisions thoughtfully, and can explain your thought, you may turn criticism into a learning experience for the critic!

Bottom line: Writers who handle criticism deftly improve their careers. They will be entrusted with bigger assignments and more responsibility. They will be more hire-able and more retainable. ❖

THE CROWDED FUTURE OF FREELANCE WRITING JOBS

(AND WHY THERE'S ROOM FOR YOU)



BY LINSEY MORSE

[BACK TO TOC>>](#)

Among square dances, rectangular pizza slices, reading circles, and the other geometrically dissonant aspects of childhood that pepper my memories, there's one thing in particular that stands out from my elementary school career: choosing a hero.



In fourth grade, my teacher asked everyone in class to name a hero and explain why s/he was so significant. While my classmates confidently stood behind presidents and comic book protagonists as heroes, I remember presenting about Robert Frost. It wasn't just because he, like me, was a poet; rather, it was because he was my introduction to the notion of freelance writing jobs, having sold his first poem, "[My Butterfly: An Elegy](#)" for \$15 in 1894. I was stunned that someone could make money from a passion like that. Frost knew he had something to say that would add dimension to the human conversation and change the lives of all who listened. And that impressed me to my core.

Today, as an associate community manager at Skyword, I work with full-time freelancers who inspire me both professionally and creatively. Through our conversations, I've learned that freelancers work long,

unconventional hours crafting stories from keywords and doing deep dives into research. They're masters of craft, working and reworking their pieces to fit a wide range of tones and brand voices; digging into the lives of various audiences to learn exactly what they need. Part storyteller and part analyst, these digital strategists combine data and algorithms with their passions and inherent knowledge to help create stories that add dimension to conversations and enhance lives. And they do all this alone, tuning out ambient noise to weave work from the fabric of their minds.

It makes sense, given everything freelancers do, that challenges would arise. From big-picture issues like [maintaining a work/life balance](#) to more granular difficulties surrounding writer payment and health insurance, there's a lot to account for in a freelance career. To better understand the challenges freelancers

face, I spoke with New York-based freelance writer [Nicole Cammorata](#), as well as Howard Schwartz, Mark Roth, and Joe Rubin—the founders of [Crowded.com](#), a marketplace for on-demand workers.

Here's what I learned.

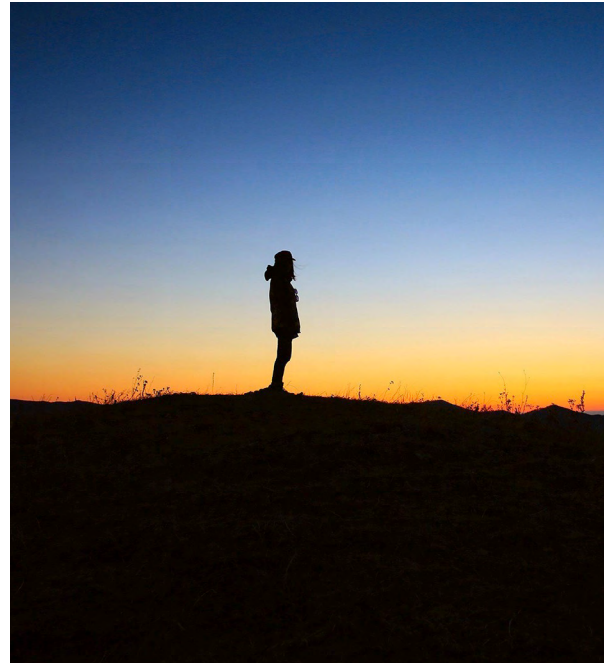
1. Freelancers Are Small Businesses

In running what is, essentially, a small business of one, freelancers face many of the same challenges as entrepreneurs. As Schwartz notes, these struggles include “exposure to opportunities, putting yourself out there and scheduling your clients, making sure your equipment is in proper working order, paying for your own materials and figuring that into your bottom line, actually knowing what business expenses you can deduct and then remembering to save your receipts, paying your own taxes, and being diligent in saving enough money to do so [...] and of course having insurance to cover your medical bills.”

2. They Work Alone

While freelance writers do get opportunities to interview others or conduct research in their fields, much of the actual storytelling process happens when they're alone. So instead of being able to turn to a colleague or supervisor for assistance with a question, they're often left to their networks and pools of resources.

So which resources are most helpful for freelancers? According to Cammorata, there are a few worth noting. “I use Invoiced, which is a free online service that automatically stores all your past invoices,” she says. “UberConference (also free) is really great for doing interviews. It's a call service that lets you schedule and host conferences and even allows you to record the call directly through the service and then download the recording. [...] I also use Google Drive to keep all my stories and assignments



organized. This is another super helpful tool for me because since it's stored in the cloud, I can access it wherever, whenever.”

Crowded.com itself is another great resource that meets a huge need for freelancers. “In our conversations with the [on-demand] workers that brought us lunch or delivered packages, we started to see a need for a place that aggregates all of these services into one place for the benefit of the worker,” Rubin says. “Even now as the market is emerging in the major cities, most workers we speak to still have no idea about 99 percent of the other platforms and opportunities out there. Discovery of new on-demand gigs and getting people more consistent work are the two main objectives of Crowded.com.”

3. Finding Consistent Work Is a Challenge

Issues with workflow can manifest in different ways for freelancers at all stages. Having transitioned to full-time freelancing in July of 2014, Cammorata experienced the struggle of finding consistent freelance writing jobs firsthand. “[S]ome months I [wouldn't] have a single story or project to do, which is a challenge when you really need to have that money coming in to pay for bills like rent, health insurance, and student loans,” she says. “So when I was first getting started, it was a constant hustle to make contacts, pitch stories, and look for any and all opportunities that would allow me to work.”

After establishing herself in Boston for nearly 10 years as a journalist for *The Boston Globe*, Cammorata made the move to New York City and had to reestablish herself as a full-time freelancer in a new place. Today, she finds, the challenge of inconsistency has a different, but equally challenging, spin.

“[N]ow that I’m more established, there are way more opportunities. Sometimes I’ll have months where I almost have too much work, where there will be multiple assignments from many different places, and all with equally important deadlines. It can be a challenge to juggle it all.”

4. Freelance Writers Seek Their Own Educational Opportunities

In traditional work environments, employees often have opportunities to learn and grow both personally and professionally. But for freelancers, continued education is often pursued through online resources.

“I’m always looking for new ways to learn about what I do, but it’s usually just by reading blogs, talking to fellow freelancer friends, or keeping an eye on other publications and writers,” Cammorata says. “I read a lot and I think as a writer that’s [the most important thing you can do](#). Probably even more important than writing. But would I be into something more formal, like classes or online seminars? Absolutely. This business changes so frequently and so quickly I think it’s important to do whatever possible to stay sharp.” Schwartz agrees that providing education to freelancers and other independent workers is an important service, and strive to provide resources for their network of users. “At Crowded.com, we put together worker meetups and a community where we educate [independent] workers. They learn from experts as well as each other. The worker meetup sessions have proven incredibly valuable for everyone who attends.”

5. Staying Motivated Can Be Difficult

Cammorata echoed the findings from [this infographic](#) from Crowded.com, saying that she values the freedom and flexibility freelance writing jobs afford. But it’s easy to understand how staying motivated could be a challenge. How can freelancers maintain their enthusiasm for their work?

“Lots of reading helps,” says Cammorata. “I read a lot of fiction, but I also read a lot of nonfiction

about things that interest me: food, cooking, urban farming, social history, and beekeeping are all current topics on rotation. I also find it helps to have some passion projects in the mix—things I’m writing just because they interest me and not necessarily because I’m being paid to do them. For me, that means writing a novel. But for someone else it could be anything: poetry, blogging, travel essays, whatever.”

It’s also important for freelancers to pursue clients and subject matter they’re genuinely curious about. “As a lifestyle writer, I love telling stories, sharing information, giving the inside scoop about a city, or helping a brand bring their mission to life through custom content. I really value the variety; that it allows me to do many different things but that it always comes back to the thing I love most: writing.”



6. Getting Started Isn't Easy

Starting a freelance career is a daunting task. But according to Cammorata and the Crowded.com founders alike, there are a few tips that can help.

“Try to book some jobs that are more consistent so that you know you can plan on that money,” Cammorata suggests. “I’m lucky in that I snagged a regular freelance gig doing digital advertising copy so everything else I take on that has a longer lead time, like magazine stories for instance, can happen around that. That way, if I have to wait a while to get paid for something I’ve written (sometimes it can be months), then I at least have a steady paycheck coming in.”

Cammorata explains that another key to advancing your career is taking on new challenges, even if you fear they’re beyond your capabilities. “I can’t tell you how many times I’ve just jumped into something that I was nervous about and wound up learning so much and using it as a stepping stone to something else down the line. You have to be the one to advance your own career. Because you’ll have many different bosses as a freelancer, you have to constantly prove yourself and what you can do.”

surprise that freelancing is so popular today. But if you’re jumping headfirst into freelance writing jobs, you might be wondering what’s on the horizon. According to Cammorata, the future of freelancing is bright. “Everyone is on the go these days and has the ability to log in from anywhere. As I answer these interview questions, I’m actually on my computer in the car driving from Boston to New York and using my cell phone as a mobile hotspot. Modern technology is awesome and has allowed me the flexibility to work from anywhere. “

And statistics support her beliefs: “Right now freelancers represent a third of the US workforce, and this number is expected to go up to 40 percent in the next few years,” says Roth. “The on-demand segment of that is expected to double to almost eight million people in the next few years.” To meet the needs of that growing segment, Crowded.com is continually working to ensure they are meeting their users’ needs. “We use these services every day and

“If you understand the independent worker, the self-employed professional, the freelancer, the e-lancer, the temp, you understand how work and business in the U.S. operate today.”

- Daniel H. Pink

And when it comes to paying your taxes, make sure you do your homework. “Something I wish someone had told me is to pay your taxes quarterly if your gigs are not taking taxes out as you go,” Cammorata says. “I learned that the hard way last year when I wound up owing a lot of money to the IRS. Ouch.”

Roth adds that research is a crucial component to any successful freelance career. “There are plenty of opportunities out there for on-demand workers. Some are better than others, some are a better fit than others, some will be your passion, and some will be just an income stream. Be sure you consider all the other things that go along with being an independent worker—do your taxes, save your receipts, etc. Then, once you start, be the best you can be.”

7. The Future of Freelancing Is Bright

With the continued evolution of collaborative technology that allows for remote work, it’s no

have on-demand workers show up to our office six or seven times a day,” Schwartz says. “We hear the good, the bad, the things people love and don’t love about their jobs and the platforms they work for. [...] We’ve built Crowded.com around that feedback.”

No matter your level of experience as a freelancer, you’re bound to encounter challenges you can’t face alone. But with the right tips, resources, and the past experiences of others, you’re sure to come much closer to reaching your goals and advancing your career. Want to learn more? Be sure to follow Nicole Cammorata on Twitter ([@nicolecammorata](https://twitter.com/nicolecammorata)), and check out everything that’s available at [Crowded.com](https://crowded.com).

To keep up with the latest career advice for content creators, [subscribe to the Content Standard Newsletter](#). ❖

WHICH CHESS PIECE DO YOU WRITE LIKE?



BY BRAD SHORR

[BACK TO TOC>>](#)

Chess, like writing, is a game of skill. And like writers, each chess piece has its own unique personality and style. **Which chess piece sounds like you?**

The queen is all-powerful, able to move in any direction as far as she wants. The queen is an expansive writer. Her interests are wide ranging and she attacks every topic deeply and with passion. Her writing can be rather intimidating, and while she may not make many friends, everybody wants her on their side. Queens make excellent short story writers, novelists, playwrights, and poets.

The king, like his queen, can move in any direction, but alas, only one square at a time. So while the king also has many interests, he writes in short bursts, focusing on a single point. However, the one point the king makes is usually an important one, one on which an entire topic may stand or fall. Kings have found many new employment opportunities since the advent of blogs.

The rook is quite powerful, but not very maneuverable, able to move only vertically or horizontally. The rook is a logical thinker and writes with dogged purpose. His interests are rather narrow, but he writes with authority and has deep vision within his sphere. He is superb at technical writing and excels in composing white papers.

The knight is an oddball who moves in an L-shaped pattern and has the unique ability to jump over other chess pieces. The knight is flamboyant and writes with flair. She is sometimes hard to understand because she has a unique take on every topic. She tends to jump around, and for that reason can be hard to follow. Just the same, the knight is full of surprises and can change the game when you least expect it. Knights crop up all over the board, but can often be found writing comedy, cartoons, screenplays, and blog posts similar to this one.

The bishop moves diagonally, fated to live his entire life on either white squares or black ones. Thus the



bishop is able to write on one or many topics, but always with a consistent point of view. About half the audience will find him tedious, but the other half will be enthralled. Bishops are happily occupied when writing reviews, editorials, essays, and advocacy materials.

The pawn is a plodder, moving one square at a time in a single direction — forward. But like most common folk, simplicity runs only skin deep. The pawn has a few surprising tricks up her sleeve, such as always capturing on a diagonal and sometimes capturing without occupying the square of the captured piece. Most amazing, if the lowly pawn reaches her ultimate destination — the eighth rank — she may become an all-powerful queen or any other piece except a king! The pawn writes in plain language, and may be underestimated by the casual reader, who doesn't take time to see the beauty and complexity of thought beneath her simple words. The pawn has enormous potential, and is like a caterpillar who may one day burst from her cocoon in the perfect form of any chess piece-writer she wants to be.

Oh, to be a pawn! ❖

WHY WRITERS DON'T “DESERVE” TO MAKE MORE THAN \$5 TO \$10 AN ARTICLE...



BY PETER BOWERMAN

[BACK TO TOC>>](#)



Something a little different for a change... This post originally appeared on Lori Vidmer’s *Words on a Page Blog* during “Writers Worth Week” in May of 2012. When I first sent it to Lori in response to her invitation to submit something for WWW, I thought it might be a bit...*blunt*, but she loved it, saying...

“That is one of the most honest, transparent, and spot-on posts imaginable! Fantastic! I agree 150 percent (if that’s even possible). I think you’re going to find a good bit of support for your point.”

And judging from the comments it elicited in [its original appearance](#), it apparently did strike a positive chord with many readers.

Now, I know that most of my “regulars” here — commercial freelancers who routinely get healthy rates for their writing — don’t need this reminder, but I suspected you’d enjoy it nonetheless.

And for those regular readers who *are* still working the low-pay sites discussed here, I figured you’d appreciate the confirmation that you *indeed* have options when it comes to where you seek your writing gigs, and that there’s a whole other “well-fed writing” world out there.

Regardless of who and where you are, if you enjoy it, I hope you’ll spread the word by forwarding this link to anyone you feel would benefit from the message,

tweeting it, Facebooking it — whatever and however you’re moved to share it. Enjoy!

Question: Do you consider yourself to be a smart shopper? When buying something big or small — flat-screen TV or a loaf of bread — do you try to get the best price (i.e., watching the sales in the case of the TV or clipping a coupon for the bread)? If you’re like most people, of course you do, right? Okay, file that away for a moment...

Over the past few years, I’ve seen any number of articles and blog posts attacking people who posted ridiculously low-paying writing gigs on online job sites. Yet, as I read these pieces, and the ensuing comments, I’ve been a bit troubled—and perplexed—by the stance taken by some. No, these pathetically low-paying job listings aren’t a positive thing, but they don’t happen in a vacuum. The target of the anger and frustration (i.e., those listing these sorry offers) was the wrong one.

One commenter (Mike) hit the nail on the head when he said, “If you don’t like the terms, then don’t apply—simple. You see these ads over and over for one reason

and one reason only—they work. I don't like them either, but I simply ignore them. No amount of complaining is going to stop them." But alas, his voice of reason has been all but buried under a mountain of righteous, if misplaced, indignation. *How dare they? How can a writer make a living? Who do they think they are?*

Frankly, it all smacks of victimhood. In blaming the job posters themselves, who are highly unlikely to change their tune any time soon (and we'll get to why in a moment), you give up control of your financial future and put it in their hands. Imploring them to change their evil ways assumes writers play no part in this unfolding drama. Wrong.

Say you were looking for some folks to crank out some writing (whether for a content mill or even any one-off project someone needs to have written). And say you didn't know what to offer said writers. What next? You'd go to some job sites and see, 1) what your fellow posters were offering, and 2) more importantly, what writers were accepting. And when you see listings offering \$5 or 10 an article and a long scrolling list of writers responding with various and sundry versions of "Me! Pick Me! I'll do it for that! I'll do it for less!" well, you've got your answer.

If that same poster went to a bunch of sites, and found nothing but writers saying, in essence, "I won't write your 500-word, keyword-rich article for anything less than \$250," again, he'd know the going rate. And in that case, think he'd dare post a job offering \$5 or \$10 for that same article? Not bloody likely. The cyber-hills would echo with laughter.

Of course, that \$250 response is a fantasy; it'll never happen on job sites like these. When supply (writers) outstrips demand (jobs), the reality of competition driving rates down to nothing is as predictable as the sunrise. Econ 101.

But, let's use the argument many make: that this is even driving down rates respectable entities are willing to pay. Maybe, but here's what'll happen. All excited that now they can get the writing that used to cost them a LOT more done for peanuts, they hire some of these writers. And soon discover they can't cut it. If you pay a bargain-basement writer, and then have to hire another writer to redo what they couldn't do, it's no bargain.

One comment read: "This vile writing segment gives professional writing a bad name." Why should it give

professional writing a bad name? Does McDonalds give the Four Seasons (or substitute any top-tier restaurant here) a bad name? Does the No-Tell Motel give Marriot a bad name?

Within many industries, there are different levels of practitioners, serving different client segments and for different rates. If it's not your segment and not where you make your money, then what do you care what they do?

So, let me address a writer outraged by the folks placing these listings. I realize there are more issues than just price, but that seems to be the biggie, so I'll focus on that. So, you believe you deserve to be paid more than \$5-10 an article, right? Okay, fine. Question: Why do you think that? As I see it, and correct me if I'm wrong, there are only two possible answers to this question and only one with real-world validity:

- 1) Writers deserve to be paid a fair wage, and \$5 - \$10 isn't a fair wage.
- 2) I deserve to be paid more because my skills are worth more than \$5 or \$10 an article.

#1? Sorry to say, but no writer deserves to be paid any more than the going market rate for a particular skill set, and that rate is determined by a back-and-forth process between buyers and sellers over time. Pretty much like anything else that's bought and sold on the open market—anywhere, anytime, any place, since the beginning of time.

And the key here is "a particular skill set." Which leads to #2: that your skills are worth more than \$5 or \$10 an article. Well, in the case of those running content mills or any other low-paying writing operation, they only need a certain level of writing - and no better. And guess what? Thousands upon thousands of writers have the skills to write at that modest level.

Translation? That level of writing has been "commoditized." Think gasoline. Or milk. Or sirloin steak. There's so much supply, and so little difference between brands, so assuming it's not some special variety (organic milk, grass-fed beef, etc.) prices will all be roughly equivalent. Same with this level of writing.



That being the case, if those job-listers have literally hundreds of writers lining up to bid on their projects at those crummy rates, then why on earth would they need to pay any more than that? They don't. And they won't.

And please don't say, "Because it's the right thing to do." That sounds really nice, and warm and fuzzy and all, but you don't really believe that. Not if you indeed agreed earlier that you were a smart shopper. With rare exceptions, you won't pay any more for something you want than you have to, and will often take time to ferret out a lower price on a particular item. Why should you expect different behavior from these job-listers?

Here's a serviceable analogy: McDonalds, again. Okay, so McDonald's pays burger-flippers, say, eight bucks an hour. And given the relatively low complexity of that task, there are tons of folks out there who can do an admirable job at it. Now, clearly hypothetically, let's say a world-class chef strolls into McD's one day and says, "I'd like a job flipping burgers, but given my formidable culinary skills, I deserve to make \$80 an hour, not eight."

to dig them out, which is why they pay far better. And those freelance writers making the highest wages out there are usually those with a special skill or niche. In another words, there are far fewer writers out there with comparable skills. Just like our world-class chef.

If you decide not to bother seeking out better work (and it's tough to retool your business, no question), thanks to inertia, uncertainty about next steps, or, let's say it, laziness, that's perfectly okay. But then stop complaining that these evil job-listers won't recognize and appropriately reward your stellar wordsmithing skills—skills which, like that McD's hiring manager, they're happy to have—heck, why not?—but don't need, and hence, will be unwilling to pay for.

Oh, and as for other crazy conditions some of these listers ask for (e.g., free samples, on-call 24/7, etc.), can you blame them? Given that writers, in droves, have already established their willingness — heck, *eagerness* — to be abused financially, it's only natural to assume they'll happily prostrate themselves again and again.

“Making money is art and working is art and good business is the best art.”

- Andy Warhol

To which, the hiring manager at McD's is likely to reply: "Well, Chef Pascal or Luigi, I'm sure your skills are amazing, but the fact is, I only need \$8 an hour, burger-flipping skills. I'm happy to have you—geez, times must be tough, huh?—and I'm really sorry about this, but I can only pay you eight an hour."

Same thing here. Content mill operators don't need anything more than \$5-10/article-writing skills. So, if you think you're a world-class chef of writing, or at least a mid-talent short-order cook of writing, then stop applying at the McD's of writing outlets, and instead go where the work pays far better, so your skills will, deservedly, be rewarded commensurately (like the commercial writing field, for starters).

And as many have accurately pointed out in countless posts in our industry, those higher paying writing gigs are almost never advertised or posted online. You have

No, that's not exactly enlightened behavior on their part, but they're simply reacting to the prevailing reality. In other words, in this scenario—no one abuses you. You allow yourself to be abused. And frankly, the sooner you realize and internalize that, the sooner you'll be making the money you feel you truly "deserve" to make.

Yes, I know there's been some "rate fallout" in better-paying segments of writing, but I hear daily from writers having great years, some their best ever, and getting rates well above \$100 an hour (and even more getting \$75+). Bottom line, if you want to believe the whole industry is in the toilet, that's your right, but it's not the truth.

That's my take. What's yours? ❖

WHY YOUR WEBSITE'S HOME PAGE IS MORE TRAMPOLINE THAN ELMER'S



BY SCOTT MCKELVEY

[BACK TO TOC>>](#)

Average bounce rates on the Home pages of websites vary wildly from industry to industry. But there are a few things you should know.

First, bounce rate, according to Google, is “the percentage of single-page visits (i.e. visits in which the person left your site from the entrance page without interacting with the page).” If eight of 10 people leave your site before visiting another page, your bounce rate is 80 percent.

Second, although bounce will never completely disappear, the goal should be to reduce your bounce rate as much as possible. Bounce rate can actually affect your website’s search ranking.

Third, the Home page is still the front door of the website. There are plenty of entry points — blog posts, newsletters, landing pages, podcasts, etc. — but most direct visits still begin on the Home page.

An effective Home page is the Elmer’s glue that begins to create a bond between your business and website visitors. This is where relationships begin and the conversion process is launched. An ineffective Home page is a trampoline. Visitors bounce as quickly as they arrived.

I find myself bouncing quite a bit. Sure, I can be picky. But most Home pages lack the basics that visitors need to move forward in their journey. If I’ve ever bounced from your Home page, it’s a safe bet that the reason is listed here.

I COULDN'T FIGURE OUT EXACTLY WHAT YOU DO.

This should be instantly obvious when someone visits your website for the first time.

Every business on the face of the earth must be able to explain what it does in one simple sentence, whether it’s an electrician, an app developer, or an insurance provider.



For some reason, you couldn’t. So I got frustrated. And left.

I COULDN'T GET THE SOUND OF CHARLIE BROWN'S TEACHER OUT OF MY HEAD.

You explained what you do. But I still don’t get the value of what you do, even in the simplest of terms. What’s the payoff? Instead of telling me how you’re going to make my life better or easier, or directing me to a page that provides that information, you claimed to be a full-service something-or-other (because nobody likes a half-service company) with the best customer service.

Wawah-wawawawah-wawawah...

For you whippersnappers who are too young to understand the Charlie Brown reference, [here you go](#).

I COULD HAVE SWORN I WAS JUST HERE.

I love WordPress. I love their themes. But so does everyone else. Most organizations aren’t doing enough customization to stand out from the thousands of others that use similar themes.

For example, the trendy thing to do on the Home page these days is to have a headline and short paragraph of content on a photo that takes up the entire screen.

This approach leads to high fives between designers and business owners. But in most cases, that giant photo does nothing to grab the visitor's attention, reinforce the brand, or help convey the value of what the company does. If it doesn't have a strategic purpose, it's nothing but window dressing. But everyone else is doing it, so you did it, too.

When your Home page is the same old, same old — the same theme with a different logo and stock image — you give people like me an excuse to leave. And forget.

I COULDN'T FIND WHAT I WAS LOOKING FOR.

Maybe you tried to be clever with your page titles instead of being obvious. Maybe your navigation was complicated. Maybe the language you used to preview the content on certain pages was unclear. Maybe your Home page didn't function properly on my smartphone.

I looked and looked but couldn't find. And nothing pointed me in the right direction. I have climbed the highest mountains. I have run through the fields. But I still haven't found what I'm looking for. So I left.

I DIDN'T KNOW WHAT TO DO NEXT.

I liked what I saw on your Home page. You grabbed my attention and kept my interest. Now what? Without a clear call-to-action, your visitors may take the less desirable action. Or no action at all. While I was trying to figure out what the best next step would be, I got an email from a potential client. Then my wife called. Maybe I'll get back to your website later.

I DIDN'T TRUST YOU.

You didn't put your [contact information](#) on your Home page. The design and content seemed a bit on the amateur side. I got clobbered with sales pitches, self-serving yet unsubstantiated claims of greatness, and pop-ups that tried to make me feel stupid for not submitting my personal information. In other words, I got the feeling you were more interested in making a buck and adding me to your email list than helping me. Even if that's true, you didn't have to make it so obvious on your Home page. I was a little uncomfortable. And you didn't earn my trust. So I left.

I HAD TO PINCH, ZOOM AND ROTATE.

I expect a website, especially the Home page, to be equally intuitive, informative and visually appealing on my 5-inch smartphone and my 24-inch desktop monitor. Perhaps you think my expectations are too high. I disagree. This is 2015 for goodness sake. But that's fine. I left your website and found a competitor who met my expectations.

IT NEVER SHOWED UP.

It loaded. And loaded. And loaded. I don't know why it took so long, but that's not my problem. So I left.

IS YOUR WEBSITE'S HOME PAGE A TRAMPOLINE OR ELMER'S?

If you want people to get beyond your Home page, make sure you understand who your visitors are and what they want. Make sure your content, design and functionality give them what they want and deliver the user experience they expect. Give them one compelling reason to continue their journey. Not three reasons or 10 reasons. A website visitor only needs one good reason to click and move one step closer to a sale.

To be fair, not every visit needs to go deeper than the Home page to be considered successful. For example, if the visitor goes to a retailer website to get the store address, finds it, and quickly leaves, the Home page did its job. But is it ever a bad thing if someone wants to learn more? Take a look at your Home page and break it down piece by piece. Ask your customers what they like and don't like. Remove or improve the parts of your Home page that are likely contributing to a higher bounce rate.

Be Elmer's, not a trampoline, and start converting more visitors into clients. ❖



The Straight North Business Writer's Handbook

Career advice and technical tips to improve your skills and income.

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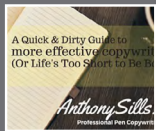
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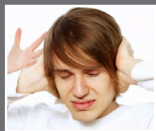
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15 TIPS TO CREATE KILLER WEBSITE CONTENT



BY SUSAN GREENE

[BACK TO TOC>>](#)

Write Copy with Your Customer in Mind. Here's how most websites are developed. The decision-makers gather around the conference table and begin brainstorming. "Our website should include our mission statement so visitors know what guides us," says one executive.



"It should look and sound professional, so let's use stock photos and have Mary write the copy because she was an English major in college," says another. "We should have a page with all our products, but let's not put too many details or prices because we want visitors to have to contact us," says a third.

Someone from the sales department adds, "On the Contact Us page, let's use a form with lots of questions that will help us make a sale. Have visitors tell us their budget and how soon they intend to make a purchase. And let's be sure to get their full name, mailing address and phone number so we can have a salesperson pursue them."

THE VISITOR'S NEEDS MUST COME FIRST

While all these ideas have merit for the company, they don't make much sense for visitors. And that's a big mistake. If you don't put your visitors first, your website won't be effective. Bottom line, it's not about you! The best websites are customer-centric. They're designed to provide the information visitors seek and to present it in an interesting, organized fashion. They let the customer see the real you, which then builds trust.

Finally, they make it easy for visitors to complete whatever action they have in mind, whether it's to buy a product, subscribe to a newsletter, or contact you for more details. Your visitors don't want cute or clever. They simply want to know what you're selling and whether it's right for them NOW!

Here are 15 tried and proven tips to help make your website successful:

1. Start with a clear navigation.

Organize your pages into logically-named categories and use standard terms on your menu. Visitors don't want to guess where to go. They don't want to analyze what you mean. And they don't have the patience to embark on a scavenger hunt for facts.

2. Use conversational English.

Despite what your high school English teacher may have thought, nobody wants to read text that sounds like a term paper. Yawn. Write copy as though you're speaking directly to the visitor. Use second person like "you" and "we." Contractions are fine. And a friendly, informal tone is better than stiff, corporate-speak.

3. Avoid industry jargon.

Don't use words or phrases that your visitors may not recognize. Use familiar terminology.

4. Provide all the relevant information.

When people search the web, they're seeking answers. If your site doesn't provide the facts, the visitor will move on to the next one in the search results. Don't be afraid of sharing too much, and that includes prices. Studies show information-rich websites are the most effective in converting visitors into serious prospects.

5. Leave out the hype.

Visitors don't want spin. They expect honesty and transparency. So proudly place all your cards on the table and let visitors draw their own conclusions.

6. Make your home page a to-the-point summary.

Since your home page is the most common entrance to your website, it should describe how customers will benefit from your content, products, or services. If visitors can't quickly figure out what's in it for them, they'll click that back button. Poof, gone!

7. Create unique landing pages for specific topics.

While you might want everyone to come through the front door, the home page of your website, that might not be the best strategy. A more targeted approach is to create landing pages that speak to specific subjects. If someone is looking for information on say your product's military application, he should land on your page that is dedicated to that subject. Landing pages convert at a higher rate than do home pages.

8. Let pictures help tell your story.

Stock photos are pretty, but do they tell visitors about the real you? No, they're too generic. You can use them in some places on your site to help break up what would otherwise be a copy-heavy page, but when it comes to products, real photos work best. Visitors want to see what they're buying and who they're buying it from.

9. Include trust-building content.

Explain why your company is uniquely qualified to provide its products or services. Provide some details about your company's history and achievements. Include a photo of the founder if it's relevant. Consider dedicating a page to

testimonials or case studies. Customers buy from companies they trust.

10. Keep your website up to date.

If visitors notice that your content isn't current, then your site loses all credibility. Continually update your site, add to it and remove any information that is obsolete.

11. Use a straightforward layout.

Nobody likes clutter, and that includes visitors to your website. Clean, simple and organized works best.

12. Make it easy for visitors to contact you.

Put your contact information in multiple places so it's easy to find. It should always be just one click away. Don't make visitors work too hard to reach you. They might not bother, and you'll lose them.

13. Keep forms simple.

If your website includes a form, such as on your Contact or Quote page, ask the fewest questions possible. Visitors hate completing all those fields, and they likely don't trust you enough to provide all the information you're requesting. Yes, you'd love to obtain their detailed information, but it's what they prefer, not you!

14. Include a call to action on nearly every page.

Tell visitors what you would like them to do next. Lead them down the path to a sale or to contacting you.

15. Make it perfect or as close to it as you can get.

Spelling and grammar mistakes make you look like an amateur. So does poor wording. Review your work closely, or better yet, consider hiring a professional copywriter to craft your content.

In today's information-saturated world, visitors to your website are likely to be impatient. If they can't quickly find what they want, they'll move on. They're skeptical of anything that sounds "salesy." If they could speak to you, they'd say, "Just the facts, please."

To be effective, your website must deliver true value. Put your visitors' needs and wants first as you create its content and watch your conversion rate soar! ❖

3 COPYWRITING TIPS FOR THE CEO



BY BRAD SHORR

[BACK TO TOC>>](#)

For many firms, copywriting is either a bottleneck or a weak link, holding up projects or making a half-baked contribution to an otherwise solid marketing campaign. In some unfortunate cases, copywriting does both.

The consequences of poor corporate copywriting are significant:

- Inaccurate copy undermines credibility
- Inwardly focused copy undermines brand affinity
- Incoherent copy undermines lead generation

Here are a few tips for bringing copywriting up to the same standards you apply to every other aspect of your business.



1. Pick Your Writer Right

Would you have a plumber landscape your yard? Then don't have a sales manager write your brochure. Business writing is a craft; it takes more than a good vocabulary and typing skills to create copy that informs, persuades, explains, instructs, describes or motivates. Besides having formal training, your writer should have at least a few "clips" your team can use to evaluate his/her ability.

Another key consideration is matching a writer's strengths to your needs. An industrial B2B firm may need a technical writer, whereas a B2C e-commerce firm may need a writer skilled in search engine optimization and sales-oriented writing. Web copywriters need to understand the basics

of web typography and style; print writers need to understand the basics of print typography and graphic design.

2. Equip Your Writer Right

Whether you use an in-house writer or an outsource, set up your writers for success. Depending on the assignment, your writer will need either a basic understanding or deep knowledge of your business and industry. Your writer will need to know the assignment's purpose, the audience, the key points to be discussed and the hoped-for response from the reader.

The best process for accomplishing all of this is to give the writer a **creative brief** for each assignment. It will not only save the writer time, but also streamline the entire process and ensure that your communications stay on message.

3. Edit Your Writer Right

Behind every great writer is a great editor. If your business aspires to greatness — then it only makes sense to have a great editing team in place to support your marketing and communications activity. Editing has three levels.

Substantive editing reviews the document in terms of logical coherence, factual accuracy and sufficiency of supporting data. **Copyediting** reviews the document in terms of clarity, style and consistency. **Proofreading** reviews the document in terms of punctuation and grammar.

Copyediting and proofreading can be outsourced, since they don't require an intimate knowledge of your business; in fact, not having intimate knowledge could be an advantage. Substantive editing, however, often requires a deep understanding of both your business and business writing generally. ❖

3 WAYS TO WRITE MORE PERSUASIVE BUSINESS CONTENT



BY BRAD SHORR

[BACK TO TOC>>](#)

The more persuasively you write, the more business you'll do — and the faster you'll do it. Here are three proven writing tips that add persuasive power to whatever form of business content you're working on.



1. Don't Bury Your Lead

The very first issue to address in copywriting is this: **Why should somebody read what I'm writing?** Notice the first sentence of this post. Why should you read a post about persuasive content? Because it will help you do more business. Is that point self evident? Maybe yes, maybe no. But for Web writing in particular, never assume. People don't read Web pages from top to bottom, as they would a book. And they are in a hurry. Don't make them think. You have only a few seconds to capture their attention, so get to the point immediately.

2. Create an Emotional Connection

Dry copy produces a dry pipeline of leads. A lot of website product pages suffer from severe content dehydration. Companies go on and on about product features and benefits and blah blah blah — but in the end, the reader is left thinking, *Great. I need a nap.*

You can write about one benefit or 100 benefits; it won't get readers to **take action**. Instead, you need to explain your product along these lines: If you don't buy this item now, you will put your business in jeopardy. You will be hopelessly outflanked by

competitors. You will leave profits on the table, infuriate stakeholders, create a mass exodus of employees, and get yourself fired for incompetence.

I'm exaggerating for emphasis, but then again, there are products and services where such statements would not be off the mark. Whatever you're selling, don't rely on intellect alone to make a sale. Readers have to make an **emotional connection** to your product or service or company or you personally.

Think about it this way. If you've read every book on the shelf about Bigfoot and find yourself lost in the forest, your ideas about Bigfoot will make you freeze. On the other hand, if you feel a 10-foot tall hairy monster breathing down your neck, you'll run like there's no tomorrow. If it's leads and orders you want, your business copy needs more Bigfoot and less Bookshelf.

3. Talk to Customers

We all know how important it is to talk about benefits rather than features. We all know how important it is to write from the customer's point of view. But how does a copywriter do that, exactly?

There is no substitute for getting out in the field and talking to living, breathing customers. That's how you learn their language. That's how you come to understand their problems, frustrations and concerns. That's how you to understand what motivates them to change and take risks.

Your writing will never ring true if it is based on a superficial understanding of the customer — and it will take customers about 30 seconds to pick up on that. The best way a company or agency could help aspiring copywriters is to invest in field training.

Why don't we see it more often? ❖

5 B2B STORYTELLING TIPS – HOW TO WRITE CASE STUDIES



BY BRAD SHORR

BACK TO TOC>>

The latest rage in content marketing is storytelling, but this is old news for B2Bs, who have been using case studies since the beginning of time to establish credibility and directly influence purchasing decisions.

Most case studies naturally fit into a story format:

- A business problem or opportunity is described
- A solution (product or service) is implemented
- A problem is solved or an opportunity is realized

Case studies are persuasive for two reasons. First, the story format is much more interesting than a recitation of cold facts. Second, case studies take the focus of the seller, which is boring, and turn the spotlight on the customer. Nevertheless, poor execution can dilute or destroy a case study's effectiveness.

5 TIPS FOR WRITING A CASE STUDY

1. **Consider your audience.** Engineers are interested in technical details and thorough explanations. Executives are more receptive to summaries that make hard hitting, high level points. Trying to appeal to both audiences? Start with an executive summary and then present all of the details.

2. **Facts sell.** *We helped a company dramatically increase sales* sounds dubious — it's an unsupported claim. *We helped a company increase sales 127% in five key markets within 12 months* sounds like something a business professional would want to sign up for.

3. **Make the problem relevant.** In some ways, every business is unique; in other ways, all businesses are the same. When setting up the story — stating the problem or opportunity — emphasize those aspects that have the broadest appeal. If you get too much into the details of a company's specific issues, you may lose readers before they make the connection between what is happening in the case study and what is happening in their company.

4. **Use jargon judiciously.** Conventional copywriting wisdom says never use technical jargon. Case studies can be an exception, though — it all goes back to knowing your audience. If your study is going to appear on an industry-specific website read predominantly by people in your industry, jargon can actually be a plus. On the other hand, if the study will appear on a general interest site, jargon will confuse and turn off readers. If the study will appear in both types of sites (or print publications), it may be worth creating two versions.

5. **Images clarify complex and/or new ideas.** If you are struggling to describe a business problem or solution in a reasonable number of words, consider replacing text with a pie chart, graph, before/after photo, or some other visual approach that conveys the idea(s). Infographics, while overused by Internet marketers, are actually a perfect format for case studies with a lot of complexity, or for new products or services the readers may not be familiar with. ❖



50 SHADES OF MEDIOCRITY: DOES CONTENT HAVE TO BE GOOD, OR JUST GOOD ENOUGH?



BY ANN HANDLEY

[BACK TO TOC>>](#)

When a franchise like **50 Shades of Grey** enjoys crazy success, is it a signal that content doesn't have to be good to be crazy-successful?

Popularity is only one measure of success, of course. And for most of us in the content marketing world, it's not a very good one.

Yet popularity is still very often the thing that persistently defines value. (Witness the popularity of popularity lists.) On the one hand I get it, and on the other, I think it's weird.

Is it the goal for your business to have the most followers on Twitter? Or is it to attract more customers than your competitor?

"Best" is rarely the same as "popular," as [Seth Godin has pointed out](#). And "most-read" is rarely the same as "most-loved," as [I've talked about here](#).

"If you become popular it is always because of the worst aspects of your work," Hemingway famously said.

(It's practically like Hemingway was prescient enough to anticipate the 50 Shades franchise, isn't it? But I digress...)

The 50 Shades of Grey movie [made an estimated \\$30 million at the box office](#) when it opened this past weekend.

The book by sold [100 million copies worldwide](#).

I don't begrudge any author any success. If 100 million of us loved this story enough to buy it... well, should I judge? Should any of us? No.

At the same time, any thinking person would have misgivings. In the battle against content mediocrity, it's kind of depressing that a poorly written piece of content gets this much love, isn't it? So, does our content need to be good? Or should we aim for a new 50-Shade-inspired metric of Good Enough?



(Here, I'll ignore the broader, cultural issues about the storyline of the book and movie. But I will say we should all have misgivings on moral grounds, too: Will our kids' generation grow up thinking that [abusive relationships are kind of hot](#) — among other [troubling issues?](#))

Quality Does Matter

Your content needs to be ridiculously good for the audience you are trying to reach: It needs to be empathetic, useful, and inspired.

[The Formula for Innovative Content](#) from [Ann Handley](#)

The imperative of any content publisher is to generously create value for an audience—to focus on their needs. In a content marketing context, that kind of mindset makes it easy for people to trust you and believe in your company, and to also rely on you.

[Contently](#), a content management platform, suggests that those creating content on behalf of brands should actually adhere more strictly to publishing standards than mainstream journalists do, because people are naturally skeptical of something produced by a brand.

I'd also say that we need to try a little harder creatively: "In this world of omnipresent omnimedia, the most successful companies will be those whose superior content draws consumers routinely and repeatedly," [wrote my friend and IAB President Randall Rothenberg](#) in Adweek last week.

In my mind, the best content creators we have out there feel a kind of responsibility to create great content—maybe **just because they can**.

I'm thinking here of [Basecamp](#), [Airbnb](#), the [Humane Society of Silicon Valley](#), [Salesforce UK](#), [Doug Kessler](#), [Moz](#), [Mash+Studio](#). To name but a few. (Actually, to name eight.)

Am I naïve? Maybe. But so be it. I'd rather strive for excellence and fail than be okay with mediocrity.

"A book must be the axe for the frozen sea inside us," Franz Kafka [once wrote](#).

The best content marketing can do something similar: It can transcend the business driving it to shape our understanding of how the world works. And, "at their very best, [storytellers] can empower our moral imagination to envision how the world could work better," wrote [Maria Papova in Brain Pickings](#).

So how does that mindset translate to your daily work life? If you have a big budget: Tell [inspired stories](#) using all the tools you can.

If you have a small budget: Understand what good content looks like, and get some [training](#) and [advice](#) on how to do it better.

And no matter your budget:

- **Understand your customer.** Tailor the value of your content to your specific buyers by looking at their behavior, not just demographics.
- **Hone your tone of voice,** because it's the secret sauce in your content barbecue.
- **Use an editor.** I'm astounded at the number of blogs and websites that are hiring writers like crazy but think editors are optional. Editors are not optional; they are necessary. Editors are to content what a gem cutter is to a raw diamond: They don't make the stuff, but that stuff is not as pretty or as valuable without them.
- **Remember, "Done is better than perfect."** At the same time, don't take that as a pass to produce less than your best work.

- **Forget about viral.** *Fifty Shades of Grey* is a reminder of why you shouldn't worry about "popular" or "viral" as a measure of your marketing. Don't fret about popularity. Don't worry about lists or Twitter followers or vanity metrics. Just offer the best value to the people who matter most to you.

The Next Time Your Boss or Client Asks You for Viral Content

Let's end this post where we started.

The next time your CEO or your boss tells you to create a viral video or asks why yours isn't the top blog in some random list, you should drop what you're doing, run out and buy a copy of *50 Shades of Grey* (real-time update: 100 million and one copies sold!).

Sit him or her down in a windowless conference room, open the book randomly, and read aloud. Together. You'll be forced to say passages like the following, and if the words don't feel thick and sluggish and stupid in your mouth, well... I don't think we can be friends:

"His voice is warm and husky like dark melted chocolate fudge caramel... or something."

Or:

"I feel the color in my cheeks rising again. I must be the color of The Communist Manifesto."

And perhaps my favorite, because it's unnecessarily and weirdly specific, like the EL James spent a little too long trolling WebMD:

"And from a very tiny, underused part of my brain—probably located at the base of my medulla oblongata near where my subconscious dwells—comes the thought: He's here to see you!"

Side note: [Katrina Passick Lumsden](#) kept careful tally of the irritating repetition in the book ("irritating repetition" is another phrase for "zero creativity"). [In a hilarious and now classic review on Goodreads](#), she counted and published the number of times the book repeats key words and phrases, including "Oh my" (79), "crap" (101) and "murmur/murmurs" (199).

So do the reading. Then ask your boss: We can do better than this crap, can't we? Oh crap, she'll murmur. Oh, my... Yes, we must. Because we can.

Header image: [Vermont Teddy Bear Co.](#)

A QUICK & DIRTY GUIDE TO MORE EFFECTIVE COPYWRITING (OR, LIFE'S TOO SHORT TO BE BORING)



BY ANTHONY SILLS

[BACK TO TOC>>](#)

I understand your frustration. I see it all the time. I'm talking about copywriters, or aspiring copywriters, who work hard on their copy but just don't get the results they want. Unfortunately effort doesn't guarantee results. Just because you put a lot of work into your writing, doesn't mean the end product will get the job done.



Copywriting is a critical key to the success of any business. That's why you want to avoid writing that seems awkward and unnatural. You also want to stay away from "creative" writing that doesn't drive prospects to take a measurable action.

Here's the thing: When you get it right, effective copy can be one of the biggest levers in your business. Because copywriting is not about writing. It's about selling.

Copy is the most critical factor affecting your ability to attract prospects and close them as customers. If you've been struggling with writing copy, trust me you're not alone. Plenty of folks have a hard time writing copy that sells.

If you write, edit, or approve copy, don't give up hope. This post will help you write all your copy faster and increase your chances of success. It should make the work of writing copy quite a bit easier.

Imagine: Not only will you be able to improve weak copy, you'll develop the ability to come up with ideas that help you earn your prospects' attention by educating,

entertaining, inspiring, and connecting with them. Sound good? Let's get started...

The Embarrassing Problem Many Copywriters Completely Ignore

So you want to write better copy?

Or maybe you work in business and want to [learn the difference between good copy and bad copy](#) so you can hire copywriters and review their work.

Well, keep in mind it's not always about looking into the latest techniques to make things work. Sometimes, it's the little things that keep you from reaching your goal. Like forgetting **The First Rule of Copywriting**.

"People will not be bored in print. They may listen politely at the dinner table to boats and personalities, life history etc. But in print they choose their own companions, their own subjects. They want to be amused or benefited. They want economy, beauty, labor savings, good things to eat and wear."

- Claude C. Hopkins in *Scientific Advertising*

Claude Hopkins, the author of [Scientific Advertising](#) (and one of the greatest copywriters of all time), recognized the truth of things waaay back in the day. You can't persuade people if they're bored.

Think about it like this: If copywriting is "salesmanship-in-print" like John E. Kennedy said, then boring copy is the weak presentation that gets the door slammed in your face. It's the telemarketing phone call that's not as exciting as finishing your dinner. In other words, when your prospects "choose their own companions" they will choose

those who amuse and benefit them...not those that bore them.

Boring copy is akin to an ineffectual salesman (or woman). Here's the thing though: That boring copy doesn't write itself. That's right. Somebody has to write it. I'm sure they tried their best. Unfortunately, they never had a chance.

Why? Because boring people write boring copy. Simple as that. Which brings me to...

The Simple Truth About Successful Copywriters

I'll tell you the secret when it comes to writing persuasive copy: it's as much about your mindset as it is your skill set.

That's why successful copywriters never forget **The First Rule of Copywriting**.

Because they know that people will not be bored in print, successful copywriters don't write boring copy. Successful copywriters know that the second their sales copy becomes boring (or even predictable) they've lost.

So how can you avoid writing boring copy? Easy. You have to understand the two things that cause boring copy. And what's the cause of boring copy?

1. Bored copywriters
2. Boring copywriters.

Before we go any further, let me explain. A bored copywriter lacks interest in the task at hand. And if you think a copywriter who isn't interested in what they're doing can write copy that sells, think again.

"I have news for you: there are no dull products, only dull writers. I never assign 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."

- David Ogilvy in Ogilvy on Advertising

Whoa! If "The Father of Advertising" — the man who introduced us to the Big Idea — wrote bad copy when he was bored, what do you think will happen if you try to write copy when you're not interested? If you don't think this is a problem, hop over to Google and do a quick search for "boring product or service" and you'll see that many marketers and copywriters think that their problem is their product or service isn't sexy.

In my experience, there's *something* exciting about every product, service, and industry. The real problem is that not every copywriter can see it. Legendary ad man Leo Burnett (creator of the Marlboro Man) said it better. "There is an inherent drama in every product. Our No. 1 job is to dig for it and capitalize on it." When you write copy are you digging for the drama?

On the other hand, if a copywriter is boring, it's just as unlikely they'll ever write persuasive copy. Perhaps that's why Ogilvy observed that "...few of the great creators have bland personalities."

Most of the copywriters I know are interesting folks. When they're not writing copy they spend time with friends and family. They also invest time in their hobbies and interests. Consider:

- Eugene Schwartz collected contemporary art.
- One of Bob Bly's hobbies is collecting comic books.
- Gary Halbert's hobbies were buying cameras and boats (and pranking his buddy John Carlton).

So what's the solution? I've already alluded to it but let's talk about...

The 1 Essential Rule Copywriters Must Follow to Write Copy That Sells

So, what if your copy is boring? How do you fix it? Simple. You just follow this rule:

If you want to write better copy, you must be interested and interesting —not only in print — but in your life.

(Technically, I guess this is a corollary to the First Rule of Copywriting but let's not split hairs.)

There's no way around it. This is a must for all serious copywriters. If you don't do this, all the copywriting tips & techniques in the world won't improve your copy.

Let's break this down.

1. **Be interested** — Dale Carnegie said "To be interesting, be interested." That's why good copywriters are fascinated by people. They want to know what makes people tick. But that's just the tip of the iceberg. You must also be interested in the product, the market, good copy, bad copy, general knowledge, etc. You never know what tidbit of information or random fact will provide a Big Idea or help you persuade your reader. Maybe that's why Bob Bly says "Most of the successful professionals I know are compulsive information collectors. You should be one too."

2. **Be interesting** — What's interesting to your reader? To answer that question, you have to know and understand their hopes and fears. Being interesting means writing about benefits...not features. For example, I don't care that the iPhone 6 has a hybrid IR filter (Maybe because I don't even know what that is?). I do care that said filter minimizes the effects of infrared (IR) light and improves color accuracy and sharpness so all my pictures look awesome. Awesome pictures are interesting. Tell me more about that. But hit me with a list of features and product specs and watch my eyes glaze over.

Now that we've explored why people will not be bored in print, and how to fix it, let's look at what you should do with 5 specific ways to become more interested and more interesting.

How to Immediately Become a More Interested, Interesting (and Better) Copywriter

You just can't bore your reader. Need some help? Here are a few tips for being more interested *and* interesting.

- **Pay attention** — Be observant. The raw material for your copy is all around you. People you meet, places you go, stories you hear. All of it is grist for your creative mill. Your everyday life can be a goldmine of good ideas... if you're alert. If you're

related to your experiences. So, if you want a new idea go do something new.

- **Ask better questions** — Asking the right questions can help you find the best way to approach writing your copy. Asking questions like "why?" and "so what?" can help you think about topics in new ways. After writing copy, review it from your prospect's perspective. Always ask yourself, "Is this specific enough?"
- **Learn how to tell a story** — Even simple stories can help you form an emotional connection with your prospect. Telling [*stories allows you to activate more areas of your reader's brain*](#) than just sharing factual information. The ability to tell a good story comes from studying stories (good and bad) and practice.
- **Be obsessively curious** — This may be one of the most common traits of successful copywriters. They want to know everything about a subject. They're eager to learn. *How does this work? Who invented it? Why?* If you want to write better copy, develop a sense of curiosity about the world around you. Demian Farnworth, Rainmaker Digital's Chief Content Writer, says "The most fascinating and the best writers are those who are just insanely curious and can't stop."

"When I write an advertisement, I don't want you to tell me that you find it 'creative.' I want you to find it so interesting that you buy the product."

- David Ogilvy

smart, you'll stay on the lookout for good ideas because ideas are a pro copywriter's stock in trade. Or as copywriter & founder of AllGoodCopy.com Glenn Fisher says "If you want to be a top, TOP copywriter the one thing you'll need in abundance—more than any other skill, in fact — is the ability to come up with good IDEAS."

- **Do something new** — New experiences can set the stage for new ideas. If you usually read nonfiction books, read fiction... or a children's book. Take a class on something that you know nothing about. Go rock climbing. Or ice skating. Get out of your comfort zone. Your creative output is directly

CONCLUSION

There is a lot that goes into effective copywriting. Copywriting is a science and you should definitely understand the principles. But today's copywriters must possess a level of empathy and intuition that goes far beyond just copywriting tactics and strategy.

Great copywriting is defined by your ability to persuade your customers to take action. You stand a better chance of persuading in print when you're interested and interesting.

Remember... Life's too short to be boring. ❖

DOES YOUR COPYWRITING “NAG” YOUR CUSTOMER? (IF SO YOU’RE PROBABLY BEING IGNORED)



BY AMY HARRISON

[BACK TO TOC>>](#)

On a recent road trip, my good friend and I chatted jovially about our husbands. We noticed that both the fellas in our lives had a similar bugbear about us:



We asked them to do the same thing again and again.

Do you relate? You know what I’m talking about:

- “In the wash basket my lovely, not ON TOP of the wash basket”
- “Could you just keep your clothes off the floor?”
- “Why do you never wash the cheese grater when you do the dishes?!”
- (Okay, probably a less common one that just befuddles me in my household – why is my husband so afraid of washing the cheese grater?)

We chuckled as we walked through the same requests that were seen as “nagging” by our other halves.

“You know why we nag, don’t you?” My friend said. “Why?” “Because they don’t do what we asked the first time around!”

You can see where I’m going with this can’t you? In marketing, it’s well known that you often have to ‘touch’ or make contact with a prospect around 6 to 7 times before they decide to buy.

And that poses a challenge if you are a business owner who wants to [improve your marketing copy](#).

Because let’s say that you send out an email announcing the launch of your new product. You get a few bites, but you also notice a big chunk of people didn’t decide to buy. What do you do?

Well for a small business owner the next action often falls into 2 camps:

1. Don’t email again about the launch – you don’t want to annoy people and hey, if they really wanted it they would have bought it first time right?
2. Email them and let them know about your product again

You need repetition in your marketing

Option 1 is not a good option. Your prospects only turned down an invitation.

If you invite a friend to a party and they decline does that mean you NEVER invite them again? I would hope not (and feel free to send party invitations my way).

[Tweet this: Don’t be afraid to market multiple times to prospects \(just know how to keep it fresh!\) http://ctt.ec/qf4ng+](#)

However, if you call me up every day for a week and give me the **same invitation** (that bit in bold is important, hence the boldness) and I’m still saying no, you are definitely going to get on my wick.

Repeat the contact, NOT the message

You don’t want to invite a customer once and then never again if they decline that initial invitation. As I mentioned, some people don’t make up their minds until they’ve heard from you a handful of times. Sometimes

they're not able to take you up on your offer because of not enough time, or money or not needing what you have at that particular moment. But if you're simply saying what it is you said last time, there's a specific part of your customer's brain that will actually learn to ignore it.

You need to know about Broca (before it kills YOUR marketing)

There's a region in your brain called "Broca's Region" and it deals with the processing of language. Now, not to go too far into it, what you need to know is that if it sees the same things too many times, it tells your brain:

I've seen this before, I know what it means, ignore it. I'll give you a shout if anything changes

Which is why as soon as I mention about laundry going IN the wash basket, not ON top, my husband automatically tunes out. He's heard it a few times before and his brain is simply saying: "Nothing to see here, we've done this all before." If your marketing message are all pretty similar, those people who may have been interested before but weren't quite persuaded to buy, probably won't be reached by your follow-up messages. If they're not seeing anything new, they've no reason to tune in.

In last week's [Copywriting Lab](#) we were looking at writing persuasive sales pages and landing pages. One of the submissions for a "Hot Seat" review was from Kip Kitchen. The team from Kip Kitchen wanted to know how to improve their landing page for their eBook sign up and the solution was a classic case of 'waking up Broca.'

There were multiple messages directing people towards the download, but each message was too similar. And similar messages are easy to ignore.

Instead, I recommended that Kip Kitchen focus on one main message to drive people to the sign up, with more details about the value of eBook.

So how do you shake things up?

In the case of my domestic laundry-placing requests, I'm honestly not sure — any suggestions, please let me know in the comments! (Side note, I did once read a book on training your spouse using the same techniques to train killer whales. It was okay but my husband objected to being submerged in the bathtub as I stood on his back and threw fish at him.)

In the case of your marketing, I do have some recommendations. Repetitive marketing messages often happen when you try to sit down and write your emails, landing pages or promotional blog posts off the top of your head. What's likely to happen, is that the same key thoughts are going to come to you.

Repeating the same sentiment as your last message, could then condemn your brand new marketing message to the bin of 'being ignored.'

So here's what you do:

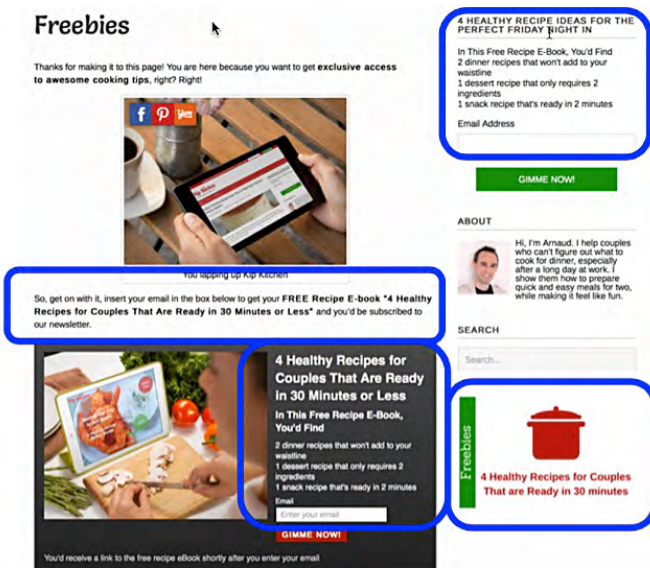
- List the different value points of your offer
- Focus your messaging on a **different** value point each time

You're still promoting the same product, but your marketing is going to sound new and fresh rather than like a nagging spouse.

For example, let's say you are selling a new web design service. During your initial launch, you might split out several email marketing messages on the following topics:

1. How to know if you need a new web design
2. What a bad web design could be costing you
3. Case studies of people who have used the service and loved it
4. How a professional design can elevate a business owners 'expert' status

You should be able to come up with a list of at least 10-20 strong selling points about your product, and then you have some variety for shaking up your marketing so you're not writing about the same issues again and again. ✨



TIPS FOR 18 ODD COPYWRITING JOBS



BY BRAD SHORR

[BACK TO TOC>>](#)

Need help on a business copywriting assignment that's off the beaten track? Find all sorts of helpful tips and links below!

1. AdWords Ads

A very exacting type of web writing, with a limit of 25 characters for the headline and 35 characters apiece for lines 1 and 2. Here are a couple standout articles about how to write effective AdWords ads:

- [9 Tips to Write Effective Google AdWords Copy](#)
- [How To Write Killer Google AdWords Ads](#)

2. Bios

It is extremely difficult to write corporate bios for a website without sounding mind-numbingly formulaic and packing them with corporate speak. Lately there's been a trend toward less formal bios, which helps a great deal in keeping them fresh and engaging. A good bio conveys key background information clearly and compactly. A great bio connects the person's background with the needs of the reader. A few tips:

- *Write in a style appropriate for your audience.* Bios for a mortuary tend to be more serious than those for a circus. Where does your brand fall on the scale of seriousness to silliness?
- *Keep bio sets properly balanced.* The purchasing manager's bio shouldn't be 50 words longer than the CEO's. If one bio is funny and the next reads like grim death, the reader will become confused about your brand.
- *Keep corporate bios short.* Unless credentials are monumentally important in your line of business, you'll only turn off readers with excessive chest thumping.

3. Blog Post Titles

A blog post without a great title is like a balloon without air. It's the title that peaks reader curiosity and attracts search engine interest. Much has been written on the topic. Here are a few articles to get you started:

- [33 Foolproof Headline Strategies](#)
- [10 Sure-Fire Headline Formulas That Work](#)
- [Write Magnetic Headlines With These 7 Tips](#)



4. Brochures

Downloadable brochures are an important component of many Internet marketing strategies. Copywriting and design are closely intertwined on brochure projects, and there really isn't any formula to shortcut the hard work of capturing the essence of the topic at hand and turning it into a compelling statement of value. From a content perspective, the biggest trap is trying to say too much in one brochure. In our short attention span world, sticking to one thing at time makes the most sense most often. Common types of brochures include:

- Individual products – Usually heavy on specifications
- Product groups – Provides an overview; should be heavy on benefits
- Capabilities – Important to tie capabilities to customer needs
- Positioning – Explains what your firm does, how it does it, and why anyone should care

5. Calls to Action

It doesn't get any more important than writing [effective calls to action](#), whether for a website, landing page, email blast – you name it. One thing I've learned: Thinking you can compose the perfect CTA based on theory, instinct or experience is a fool's game. The only way to achieve perfection is to TEST. Here are examples to get your creative call to action juices flowing:

- [37 Calls to Action to Get People to Read, Click and Buy at Your Website](#)
- [25 Examples of Convincing Call-to-Action Buttons](#)
- [60 Call to Action Examples](#)

6. Case Studies

They can be as short as a paragraph or as long as a white paper. Case studies are particularly valuable when a firm's products, services or benefits are complex. For example, you'd read a lengthy case study about how a \$500,000 piece of equipment resulted in a 3% increase in operational efficiency. On the other hand, you'd pass on a five-page case study about ABC Corporation's new coffee machine.

Writing resources for case studies:

- [How to Write a Case Study](#)
- [How to Write a Great SEO Case Study](#)
- [How to Write a Great Case Study](#)
- [17 examples of business case studies](#)

7. Display Ads

Less is more. Copywriters tend to expand the content to the size of the ad, but white space and brevity sell. Here are some growths you can hack off of your ad to make it more noticeable and persuasive:

- *Your logo.* If your brand isn't widely known, why waste space showing it? The only reason to do so would be if your campaign's goal were brand awareness.
- *Your company name.* See above.
- *Phone number.* Do you really think anybody is going to call rather than click?
- *Multiple benefits.* If people notice or remember one thing about your ad, it's a victory. The idea that people will digest two or three benefits defies the laws of Internet behavior. Stick to your key benefit, and if you have more than one, A/B split test them.

8. Facebook Fan Page Posts

For brands that leverage the engagement and conversion power of Facebook, effective writing is

a necessity. I'm still learning this new art form, and here are some things I've picked up along the way:

- *Ask meaningful questions.* Facebook is about engagement. There's a real art to asking questions people want to answer. I draft them up in bunches, pick the best ones, and tweak them. It takes time.
- *Emphasize non-business topics.* I get more engagement when I talk about bacon than when I discuss Internet marketing. Your brand has to be really popular before people will want to talk about it, but everybody likes to chew the fat.
- *Use recurring themes.* Having a weekly "Ask the Expert" exchange is a popular technique. Our Facebook fan page features an "Internet Marketing Question of the Day" (that often has nothing to do with marketing).
- *Quantity and quality.* "Out of sight, out of mind" applies to Facebook in spades. Visibility comes from comments and Likes, so it's imperative to provide your community with ample opportunity to engage.
- *Don't over polish.* As with most social media platforms, putting too fine a point on your composition frequently backfires. Incomplete thoughts, informal style, occasional typos, and a little emotion are A-OK on Facebook.



9. Instructions

Writing instructions is a technical writing discipline, but it often crops up in the marketing world for things such as rules/disclaimers for contests and

promotions, shipping and payment instructions, and return/exchange policies. Stylistically, instructional writing differs greatly from other common business forms. Here are helpful resources:

- [Online Technical Writing: Instructions](#)
- [Instructions: How to Write for Busy, Grouchy People](#)

10. Landing Pages

Landing pages aren't really "odd" copywriting jobs, but since many firms fail to utilize them on paid search and email campaigns, I'm going to touch on them. A landing page has one purpose: conversion. For that reason, writers must be in top form, creatively using proven persuasive writing techniques. Resources:

- [How to Make Your Landing Page Take Off](#)
- [Seal the Deal: 10 Tips for Writing the Ultimate Landing Page](#)
- [10 Landing Page Optimization Tactics](#)

11. Meta Descriptions

Although they no longer carry weight for SEO, meta descriptions are crucial for conversion: if you want people to click on your link, a persuasive meta description can make all the difference. Composing effective meta descriptions requires a delicate balance of persuasion and information. I start by thinking, if I were searching for this on Google, what kind of description would make me want to click through on this link? Resources:

- [Influence Customers with Meaningful Terms in Meta Descriptions](#)
- [Tips for Writing Meta Descriptions](#)
- [Meta Description Best Practices for SEO](#)



12. Newsletters

Company newsletters are quite popular for keeping employees, customers, suppliers and stakeholders connected with management and each other. From the agency standpoint, they require a great deal of editing, organizing, and careful writing. With a newsletter, it's really important to understand the audience and write in the proper tone. If, for example, a newsletter adopts too much of a boardroom tone, rank and file employees may be put off. On the other hand, projecting a devil-may-care attitude will spook investors and key managers.

Resources:

- [How to Write Effective Email Newsletters](#)
- [Super Sampler of eNewsletters \(InternetViz\)](#)
- [How to Do a Newsletter that Gets Read](#)

13. Press Release Boiler

Creating "About" boilerplate is very exacting, much like writing bios. An additional complication with press release copy is that it needs to incorporate SEO techniques along with a concise and persuasive snapshot of the firm's capabilities and value proposition. Learn more:

- [How to Write an Effective Boilerplate](#)
- Use the [AP Stylebook](#) or another accepted source to get the details right
- Don't forget to update your boiler periodically

14. Proposals

Sales proposals are the most important offline content we tackle at Straight North: What could be more important than persuading a prospect to sign on the dotted line? All by itself, a sales proposal may not win the business for you — but a bad one can cause you to lose it. Structure, formatting and content strategy vary, depending primarily on the product or service's complexity and cost.

12 writing tips for sales proposals:

1. Lead with a brief, clear statement of purpose: define the products/services, scope, and value proposition.
2. If the proposal is lengthy, add an executive summary.
3. Close with a call to action: give the customer a way to say yes on the proposal itself.
4. Clearly state pricing.
5. Clearly state terms and conditions.
6. Provide additional detail on products/services in an appendix rather than overly expand the main body of the proposal.

7. Focus on benefits. Paint a picture of how the prospect's life will improve when they say yes.
8. That said, don't sell too hard in a proposal; e.g., any and all benefit statements must be solidly backed by facts. At its core, a proposal is informational.
9. Include credibility statements: associations, awards, testimonials, links to published articles, etc. These items can be presented graphically to heighten impact (see below).
10. Include design elements: photos, charts, etc. Images focus attention on key points.
11. Avoid jargon.
12. Use typography best practices: bullets, numbered lists, bold text to highlight key points, short paragraphs and readable fonts.

15. Taglines

For me, taglines are the most difficult form of business writing there is. Crafting an effective tagline takes a high level of imagination and strategic thinking, along with a thorough understanding of the firm's industry, business, customers and key differentiators. Whew — no wonder taglines are so expensive.

17. Tweets

Communicating 140 characters at a time presents many challenges. Obviously, business tweets must be succinct – but they must also include SEO best practices. I've written quite a bit on this topic:

- [How to Write Business Friendly Tweets](#)
- [Tight Title Tags Attract Twitter Traffic](#)
- [Twitter and Writing within Limits](#)
- [10 Essential Twitter Writing Tips](#)

And Twitter writing tips from other sources:

- [How to Write on Twitter with Confidence](#)
- [How to Write the Perfect Tweet](#)
- [How to Write Tweets that Get Clicks](#)

18. Twitter Bios

Your Twitter bio is extremely important for engaging tweeps and search engines. Since Twitter limits your bio to 160 characters, you have to think through your messaging very carefully. A solid Twitter bio conveys personality and key facts expressed in strategic keywords. Keywords are crucial because the bio is your most search engine-visible Twitter content. ❖

“When I was writing my first two books I was also freelancing and teaching and doing other odd jobs.”

- Curtis Sittenfeld

Resources:

- [How To Write A Terrible Tagline](#)
- [45 Creative, Clever and Effective Blog Taglines](#)
- [The New Rules of Writing a Memorable Slogan](#)
- [Good examples of taglines](#)

16. Testimonials

Writing or editing testimonials can be tricky business. To help you gather ideas, I pulled some great posts loaded with examples and excellent tips. Here they are:

- [How to write a great testimonial](#)
- [How To Write Results Based Testimonials That Pull Orders](#)
- [How to Write Testimonials](#)
- [13 Tips to Make Good Use of Testimonials](#)



TO WRITE AUTHENTIC B2B COPY, TALK TO YOUR CLIENT'S SALES PEOPLE



BY BRAD SHORR

[BACK TO TOC>>](#)

One of the biggest challenges for writing B2B website content is learning the language of our client's business.

It's possible for a writer to have all the facts and understand the key messaging concepts and still not produce copy that conveys a sense of industry expertise and experience. How can a writer with no inside experience learn, in a matter of days or weeks, the texture of business conversation — something that takes industry insiders an entire career to master?

An approach that's worked well for us is talking to the client's sales people. This is great because sales people talk and think like their customers, whereas a client's marketing specialists talk, well ... more like us. To understand what a B2B operation feels like in the trenches, where sales are being fought for, won and lost, there's really no substitute for the sales rep's perspective.

We'll ask things like:

- Give us your sales pitch
- What objections do you normally hear?
- How do you try to overcome these objections?
- Why do customers buy from you?
- Why do they stop doing business with you?

What I always find interesting is not just the substance of the response, but the actual words and tone that are used. Marketing people and executives can throw around jargon that may or may not be meaningful to their customers. Sales reps, in stark contrast, almost always use terms that resonate with customers. They've learned through experience which buzzwords connect with their prospects — and which ones turn them off. They speak the language of their customers with words and story lines that are proven persuaders.

In terms of tone, you can sense the frustration when they talk about certain objections: a strong indication that the underlying issues require delicate and perhaps extensive treatment in the site content. You can also sense the confidence they express when detailing certain benefits they offer: a strong indication that these are topics to play up.



One word of caution: a sales person's perceptions may not always align with marketing's or the true situation. For instance, it's not uncommon for sales people to view pricing as a huge obstacle ("the competition is giving it away!") but in reality something other than price is causing the sale to be lost. If we sense big disconnects, we'll explore them further until the client is satisfied our writer has the proper sense of proportion in handling the topic.

Now I'll add something that may surprise you: I think that for a writer, talking to a client's sales people is more valuable than talking to the client's *customers*. The reason is simple. A customer's head is wrapped around his own business, whereas a sales rep is living and breathing the business you are trying to write for. As a result, the customer may not be able to articulate his reason for buying something nearly as well as the person who sold it to him. This is not to say that talking to customers is a bad practice; it is in fact very useful for gathering marketing intelligence and gauging sentiment. But for details, language and context, I want the sales rep's take any time I can get it. ❖

The Straight North Business Writer's Handbook

Career advice and technical tips to improve your skills and income.

PART 3: WRITING REFERENCE GUIDES

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150 JARGON FIXES FOR B2B AND B2C WRITERS



BY BRAD SHORR

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Introduction

When business writers resort to business jargon, it's because they lack the time, creative energy or subject mastery to find a more exact word or phrase.

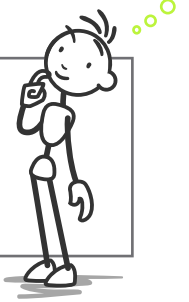
Unfortunately, B2B and B2C writers face these obstacles day in and day out. It's difficult to come up with a suitable alternative to “solutions” when assignments are coming in by the hour. And in the agency world especially, writers are often forced to write about businesses and industries with which they have very limited experience or knowledge.

This guide is meant to serve as a quick fix for business writers looking for powerful alternatives to the tired phrases that drain all the life out of their content. The information herein was originally published as a series on the Jeff Bullas blog.

150 BUSINESS JARGON PHRASES, WITH BETTER OPTIONS

1. **800-pound gorilla.** Convey the idea with more style by saying a force to be reckoned with.
2. **Actionable.** An actionable item is one you can take action on. Whether the action is desirable is another story. For that reason, an item may be more clearly described as practical, useful, realistic or workable.
3. **Action item.** What's the difference between an action and an action item? Other than word count — none.
12. **Bells and whistles.** These are fancy features added to a product or service to entice prospects. Since bells and whistles suggests unnecessary features, avoid the phrase when talking about your own products.
13. **Best of breed.** “Of breed” adds nothing to “best.” Just say you're the best.
14. **Best regards.** How lucky am I to receive your best regards rather than only your regular regards! Don't be pretentious; stick with regards.

4. Aha moment. A trendy way of saying you just discovered something important. Suitable substitutes include revelation and insight. (Aside: Would an aha moment in a sushi bar be an ahi moment?)



5. **Around.** Don't have a discussion around an issue; have a discussion about an issue.
6. **ASAP.** This means you're in panic mode; you need it so fast you don't even know when you need it!! Spare us the theatrics and just provide a due date.
7. **At the end of the day.** Any time you write this phrase, your next step is to delete it.
8. **Awesome.** If you're describing the Grand Canyon or the dimensions of the universe, awesome is fine. Otherwise, find a less sensational (i.e., more realistic) adjective, such as outstanding or exceptional.
9. **Baked in.** Instead of saying that a given possibility or fact is baked into something, say it is accounted for.
10. **Balls in the air.** Sound less like a carnival act and more like a business professional by saying that you are busy or have several projects underway.
11. **Bandwidth.** This is a euphemism to make we don't have time sound like it's part of the plan. If you simply say you don't have the time or resources, people will respect your frankness.
15. **Big bang for the buck.** A sleazy fast-talker's way of saying this or that product or service has exceptionally high value.
16. **Bleeding edge.** With so many companies on the bleeding edge, it's no wonder the economy is hemorrhaging. Overstatements such as this inspire skepticism. Instead, talk about your groundbreaking business model or new approach.
17. **Boil the ocean.** To boil the ocean is to waste time. Since not everybody knows this, don't force readers to boil the ocean trying to figure it out.
18. **Brain dump.** Brain dump is an overly casual way of saying we'll teach you. (At the pretentious extreme, we engage in knowledge transfer.)
19. **Brain surgery.** This isn't brain surgery has been so overused it carries comical overtones the author may not intend. Better to operate with a straightforward word like complicated.
20. **Brick and mortar.** Physical locations are best described as such.
21. **Bring to the table.** This is an overused way of saying a person contributes this or that specific thing to a project or work group.

22. Business case. Redundant. If you're talking business, you should simply say case.

23. Buy-in. Try support or agreement instead.

24. Champion (as a verb). Replace with support, defend or perhaps spearhead.

25. Change agent. A change agent is either a person who works at a toll both or a consultant with a mighty high opinion of himself. Personally, I'd prefer to develop and implement new ideas with the former rather than the latter.

26. Check the box.
Replace with
complete the task.



27. Circle back. A roundabout way of saying discuss later that belongs in the circular file.

28. Circular file. Wastebasket.

29. Compelling. Overused! A 90 percent discount is compelling, but a 5 percent discount is merely interesting. Don't describe something as compelling unless it is.

30. Competitive advantage. This phrase is a puffed up, boardroom-y way of saying your company excels at something.

31. Content is king. A massively overused metaphor that broadcasts your ignorance. King metaphors work for a clear, measurable hierarchy; e.g., The blueberry is the king of antioxidants. Content is one element of a complex marketing system in which all components have unique and essential value.

32. Contrarian. A contrarian is someone who thinks and acts contrary to public opinion. Be careful how you use this, because contrarianism can be seen as a big negative. It's also worth noting that self-described contrarians sometimes turn out merely to be raving lunatics.

33. Core competencies. A fancy way of saying we're good at this. There's nothing wrong with saying we specialize in this, or we excel at this.

34. Corporate culture. Small businesses overreach when they claim to have a culture. It's more realistic, honest and believable to say you have a particular kind of environment or atmosphere.

35. Cross-training. A sales trainee spending an hour watching an accounts receivable clerk file invoices is not cross-training. Use this phrase only if you have a serious, comprehensive and documented training program.

36. Cutting edge. See bleeding edge.

37. Deck. Some people know that a deck is a slide presentation. Everybody else will think you're not playing with a full one.

38. Deep dive. Overuse has sunk this way of describing a thorough analysis. Try explore, analyze, or the soon-to-be-overused unpack.

39. Deliverable. Agency-speak for work product or output. Because deliverable is necessarily vague, avoid it as much as possible, and instead describe the things your client will receive from you.

40. Dialog (as a verb). Don't dialog with someone; talk to him or her.

41. Disambiguate. The word you're looking for is clarify.

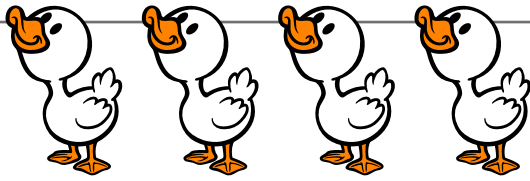
42. Disconnect (as a noun). This word is not only overused, it's also vague. Does disconnect imply a difference of opinion or just a misunderstanding? Clear up the confusion by using the former or latter.

43. Disruptive. If a product or business model is truly disruptive, you don't need to describe it as such; it will speak for itself.

44. Drill down. Replace with look more closely at.

45. Drink the Kool-Aid. This phrase was gruesomely powerful in the '80s, when the Jonestown Massacre was fresh in people's minds. With overuse, the phrase has become vague: Does it mean a person is a fanatic, believes in something evil, or just toes the company line? Think about what you really mean and use a more precise description.

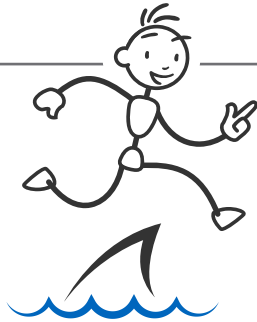
46. Drop dead date. This phrase is sometimes used as a bluff to get staffers or clients moving. Use it too often and people will stop taking you seriously.



47. Ducks in a row. A silly way of saying we're ready or organized.

- 48. Ecosystem.** Ecosystem can describe Microsoft Windows or Apple, where users have deep and broad interaction with products and services in a closed system. For the most part, however, ecosystem is an overreach. In most business situations, ecosystems are merely systems or networks or product groups.
- 49. Empower.** Better options are assign responsibility or delegate responsibility. Besides being overused, empower has a bad business vibe, as it suggests class warfare.
- 50. Epic (as an adjective).** Epic describes something of heroic, sweeping proportions. Applying the word to business content or situations is an epic overstatement that serious-minded people won't take seriously. A simple adjective like useful or memorable carries more weight.
- 51. Evangelist.** A generous, one-sentence Yelp review does not an evangelist make. Evangelism takes fiery passion and sustained, unsolicited effort. Too often businesses describe as evangelists those who are loyal customers or casual fans of the brand.
- 52. Evolve.** More precisely stated, a business plan or relationship develops, strengthens or grows in complexity or size.
- 53. Execute.** Fancy words won't get you fancy fees. Instead of saying we'll execute the task, just say we'll do it.
- 54. Fish or cut bait.** Scale back this reel bad jargon and say make a decision.
- 55. Frictionless.** Overstatement. Friction has to do with change, and what type of business change has ever occurred without friction? If you say something can take place with minimal friction, you'll be much more accurate and believable.
- 56. Functionality.** Instead of multi-user functionality, try supports multiple users. The latter phrasing is easier to read and contains an action verb rather than a bland, corporate compound noun.
- 57. Game changer.** Whereas paradigm shift is too formal, game changer is too casual. Instead of either of these, meet in the middle with significant change or fundamental change.
- 58. Get on board.** See buy-in.
- 59. Give 110%.** At this rate, by 2020 we'll have to give 250% to demonstrate our commitment. C'mon: 100% — i.e., everything — should be sufficient.
- 60. Going forward.** For the most part, this phrase can be eliminated: Going forward, we will hire 10 people.
- 61. Good to go.** A slangy way to say ready.
- 62. Granular.** Instead of taking a granular look, look at the details.
- 63. Grow the business.** Unless you're a farmer, build the business.
- 64. Guesstimate.** Replace with rough estimate and reduce the odds of being taken for an idiot.
- 65. Guru.** If others describe you as a guru, people will be skeptical. If you describe yourself as a guru, people will laugh in your face.
- 66. Herding cats.** This phrase describes the attempt to manage a group of difficult and/or disagreeable individuals. Because herding cats is insulting to the individuals in question, the phrase should be used with care — especially if your cats are customers.
- 67. Holistic.** Comprehensive or complete is more straightforward.
- 68. Human capital.** Ironically, few pieces of business jargon are as dehumanizing as human capital. Much better to speak of employees, workers, laborers, workforce, crew or staff.
- 69. Ideation.** To ideate is to form ideas or concepts. The word is frequently used in a clinical (and rather ominous) context, such as suicidal ideation. In business, stick with phrases such as develop a strategy or brainstorming session.

- 70. Impact (as a verb).** Grammatically correct options: have an impact on or have an effect on or simply affect.
- 71. Incentivize.** A mouthful of mush that means motivate.
- 72. In light of the fact that.** Replace this useless phrase with because. (Side note: Did you know that because is one of the most powerful and persuasive words in all of business writing?)
- 73. Innovative.** Describing a product or service as innovative means nothing. You have to explain in what way the product is innovative. Since most things described as innovative aren't, this can be a daunting task.

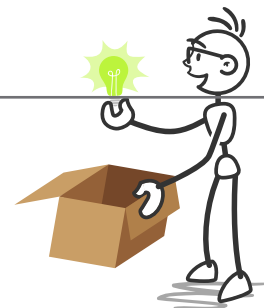


- 74. Jump the shark.** If a business or product is past its prime and grasping at straws to stay relevant, it has jumped the shark. The metaphor is past its prime; grasping at this straw makes your writing suck.

- 75. Key takeaways.** A puffed up way of describing important points.
- 76. Killer app.** More overstatement. Most “killer apps” are dead within months of their introduction.
- 77. Knowledge transfer.** We’ll teach you beats We’ll engage in knowledge transfer by six syllables and a country mile.
- 78. Laser focus.** I guess when regular focus isn’t enough, companies must bring out the big guns and employ laser focus. C’mon: drop the pretentious laser and just focus.
- 79. Leaders.** Everybody is a leader in this or a leader in that — so what? Here’s a case where frankness and modesty paradoxically arouse interest. If you claim only that you’re good at this or that, people may actually take notice.
- 80. Learnings.** Ironically, this is not even a real word. Teachings or lessons, on the other hand, are.
- 81. Level playing field.** Stop going over the same metaphorical ground and replace this phrase with fair competition.
- 82. Leverage (as a verb).** Instead of, we leverage our volume to offer low prices, try, our volume enables us to offer low prices.
- 83. Lipstick on a pig.** When you try to make something bad look good, you’re putting lipstick on a pig. A more professional phrase: put the best face on.
- 84. Low-hanging fruit.** This phrase drives people bananas. Pear down fruit metaphors and juice up clarity with easy opportunities or easy options.
- 85. Luddite.** A Luddite is someone who opposes technological innovation. It is not someone who rejects your new, untested, unproven and unendorsed gizmo.
- 86. Magic bullet.** High caliber business writers replace this overused phrase with cure-all or panacea.
- 87. Make hay while the sun shines.** Maybe this is what a farmer does after putting lipstick on his pig. If you’re not a farmer, replace this phrase with make the most of the opportunity.
- 88. Maximize.** To sound like a real person, say that your product or service improves results rather than maximizes results.
- 89. Methodology.** Scholars, scientists and extremely complex businesses have methodologies. To avoid sounding pretentious, say that your business has documented methods, processes or internal systems.
- 90. Mission-critical.** What’s the difference between critical and mission-critical? Unless you want to sound like an astronaut, stick with critical.
- 91. Most unique.** Something is either unique or it isn’t. If what you’re describing is truly unique — a rarity indeed — by all means call it unique. More likely, you’re looking for a word like special, rare, or extraordinary.

- 92. Move the needle.** This means to get meaningful or measurable results. Why not, then, say one or the other?
- 93. My bad.** If you made a mistake, don't trivialize it by saying it was my bad — this only makes people think you're indifferent as well as incompetent. On the other hand, by saying I made a mistake, you'll earn respect.
- 94. Next steps.** This harmless-looking phrase escalates word count. Instead of, as a next step we will ... just say, next, we will.
- 95. Ninja.** See guru.
- 96. Offline.** Replace discuss offline with discuss privately.
- 97. One throat to choke.** This means you are the only place your client needs to go for answers. Don't give your client any ideas! Instead, simply say that you are fully accountable.
- 98. On the same page.** In the old days, we were singing from the same sheet of music. Now, we're on the same page. In any era, it's easier to simply say, we agree.
- 99. Open the kimono.** If you're sharing secrets or proprietary information, just share them and be done with it. There's no upside to bringing hidden body parts into the discussion.
- 100. Optimize.** This term is overused; whenever possible, replace with improve.
- 101. Out of pocket.** A tailor's inventory may be out of pocket. You're just busy.
- 104. Paradigm shift.** If you say significant change or fundamental change, people will actually understand what you're talking about.
- 105. Pencil in.** You penciled me in: that means we're tentatively scheduled, right? Hmm ... maybe not. Maybe we're definitely scheduled but you didn't have access to your calendar. Maybe you should have said tentatively scheduled or definitely scheduled.
- 106. Preplan.** When people say preplan, they usually mean early-stage planning. Preplanning is something (I'm not really sure what) that people do before they start planning.
- 107. Preschedule.** See preplan.
- 108. Preso.** I stopped using this word when I realized nobody knew I meant slide presentation. It probably saved my job.
- 109. Price point.** For general business use, price is all you need.
- 110. Proactive.** When people are proactive they take the initiative. Doesn't take the initiative sound stronger and more like something a real person would say?
- 111. Push the envelope.** This could mean to act aggressively, assume risk, expand the boundaries of, or advance to the boundary. Think about what you mean exactly, and then describe it.
- 112. Quite frankly.** Use this phrase only when you want people to know you're being otherwise deceptive and insincere.


102. Outside the box. Ironically, using this tired phrase alerts people that you have no creativity whatsoever. Instead, talk about creative or imaginative thinking.



103. Pain point. Replace with problem, challenge, frustration, difficulty or headache.

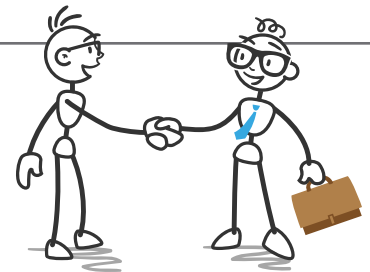
113. Radio silent. When you don't hear from a customer or prospect for a good while, he's gone radio silent. Radio doesn't add anything to this disturbing situation. Better to say the customer has gone silent or stopped communicating.

- 114. Raise the bar.** This means to set a higher standard, which sounds a whole lot better.
- 115. Rationalization.** This is a euphemism for getting fired. Vendor rationalization means your supplier got fired; workforce rationalization means you get fired. Avoid euphemisms always. They infuriate people and are guaranteed to worsen the reaction to your bad news.
- 116. Reach out.** Customers don't want you to reach out, as that phrasing is vague and nonchalant. They prefer you visit, call, email or text them (ideally within a stated amount of time).
- 117. Reinvent the wheel.** When people reinvent the wheel, they are laboriously recreating something essential that already exists in finished form. The phrase is actually useful for describing this situation; problems arise when it is used to describe something that is not laborious, not being recreated, not essential and/or not already existing in finished form.
- 118. Resonate.** When an idea resonates, it reaches people on an emotional level or in a way they can relate to. This is why it may be better to say either that people will be moved by this idea or will relate to this idea.
- 119. Roadmap.** Vague. In business, a roadmap could be a strategic plan, a tactical plan or a set of instructions. Decide what you really mean and describe accordingly.
- 120. Robust.** Robust functionality just doesn't resonate. On the other hand, people will relate when you say your product does a lot of useful things.
- 121. Rock star.** See guru and ninja.
- 122. Rocket science.**
See brain surgery


- 123. Seamless.** See frictionless. Few things, if any, in business are seamless. Replace this word with something along the lines of easy to implement.
- 124. Secret sauce.** Your secret sauce is your competitive edge; something crucial you can do that your competitors cannot. Secret sauce trivializes a supremely important concept; replace the phrase with key benefit, unique benefit, unique advantage, etc.
- 125. Sense of urgency.** When I hear this bit of corporate-speak, I think the seller is just going through the motions of sounding concerned. I'd rather hear, we're deeply concerned, which is personal and direct, or we're working an extra 10 hours a week, which is specific. Or both.
- 126. Skin in the game.** A gruesome phrase you'd expect to hear from Hannibal Lecter. Stick with the professional and universally understood ownership interest.
- 127. Solutions.** For my money, the worst word in the world. When people hear solutions, they think, "Here's a complicated product that will create more problems than it solves." Or, their minds simply go blank because they've heard the word a million times. Replace solutions with specific benefits; e.g., This product simplifies household budgeting.
- 128. Soup to nuts.** To avoid coming off like a buffoon, substitute comprehensive or complete.
- 129. State of the art.** This phrase used to be state of the art ... but now lets customers know your product has jumped the shark (see jump the shark). Better to avoid superlatives and describe it as your latest model, or having the latest technology.
- 130. Strategic plan.** Few companies have the stamina and expertise to create a genuine strategic plan. More often, the phrase is used to describe a strategic sketch, strategic guesswork or a tactical plan. Don't overinflate what you've created (and your ego) by calling these latter items a strategic plan.
- 131. Strike while the iron is hot.** See make hay while the sun shines.
- 132. Synergy.** When things synergize, they combine to have a greater impact than they can achieve on their own. Synergy is a useful business concept, but the word has been run into the ground. The key is to avoid synergy when you mean only collaboration, cooperation or consolidation.

- 133. Table stakes.** Table stakes are minimum requirements to engage in a particular business. Use minimum requirements instead.
- 134. Take strides.** A way of saying we're improving that implies you started from a poor position. If that's what you mean, fine.
- 135. Take to the next level.** A way of saying we're improving that implies you started from a strong position. If that's what you mean, fine.
- 136. Task (as a verb).** Don't task someone; give him or her an assignment.
- 137. Thought leader.** See guru, ninja and rock star.
- 138. Touch base.** See reach out.
- 139. Traction.** In general business usage, when something gains traction, it begins to take hold or gather momentum. Either of these latter phrases conveys the idea more clearly than traction.
- 140. Unpack.** To unpack an idea is to examine it in detail. Unpack is becoming overused; better to stick with examine in detail.
- 141. Utilize.** Don't utilize something; use it.
- 142. Value-added.** Saying your product or service has "value-added" components doesn't tell anyone anything about what the value is or how the value is relevant; in other words, the phrase is meaningless. Reaching for this phrase means the time has come to point out product and service benefits.
- 143. Valued partner.** Beware of valued partner followed by but: You're a valued partner, but you've been selected for our vendor rationalization initiative. In general, valued is unnecessary; being a partner implies the other party values you.
- 144. Viral.** Few things in the world of marketing go viral. Most business mentions of this word mean four or five people tweeted your blog post.
- 145. White Paper.** Bad on two counts. First, it's pretentious: THE IVORY TOWER HAS SPOKEN! Second, it's too often used to describe a scrap of drivel rather than what it is supposed to be — an authoritative report.
- 146. Win-win.** Theoretically, it's a game where both parties win; the opposite of a zero-sum game. In business world reality, a win-win is a phrase the party that wins more uses to console the party that wins less. Better to avoid the whole concept and describe specifically what each party gains.
- 147. With all due respect.** Usually a prelude to an insult. This phrase is utterly delete-worthy.
- 148. World class.** A bold statement that should be used only to describe proven and widely accepted products, services, systems and organizations. Even then, it doesn't convey anything concrete. As with solutions, it is far more persuasive to describe the standout quality of the subject in question: Our customer service reps answer every call within one ring.
- 149. Wordsmith (as a verb).** Don't wordsmith the sales copy; edit it.
- 150. Zero-sum game.** A game where one party wins and the other loses; the opposite of a win-win. Since not everyone knows this, a clearer (and powerful) way to describe it is winner take all. ❖

143. Valued partner. Beware of valued partner followed by but: You're a valued partner, but you've been selected for our vendor rationalization initiative. In general, valued is unnecessary; being a partner implies the other party values you.



COMMONLY CONFUSED BUSINESS WORDS AND PHRASES



BY BRAD SHORR

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The English language is full of quirks, traps, and pitfalls. A list of tricky words and phrases could run a mile long. The ones I've selected occur frequently in "real life" business writing. **Any additions?** I've tried to catch the biggies, but I'm sure I've missed more than a few.

A lot, alot. There is no such word as *alot*.

A while, awhile. A *while* is an indeterminate length of time. *Awhile* means "for a while." *The meeting starts in a while. The meeting lasted awhile.*

Accept, except. *I accept your proposal, except for the fourth clause.*

Adverse, averse. *I am averse to (against) the adverse (detrimental) effects of the new compensation plan.*

Affect, effect. In the sense most common in business, *affect* is a verb — to change or influence. *Effect* is a noun — an outcome, result, or condition. *High energy costs adversely affect profits. High energy costs have a negative effect on profits.*

Among, between. *Between* applies to a group of two: *among* applies to a group of three or more: *Between the two of us, but among the three of us.*

Anxious, eager. *Anxious* suggests apprehension, anxiety. *Eager* suggests excitement, joyful expectation.

Appraise, apprise. To *appraise* is to set a price or value on something. To *apprise* is to notify or brief someone (of a situation).

Begging the question. A statement that assumes the point one is trying to prove — *This product is incompetently designed because their R&D department is incompetent. Begging the question does not mean raising the question.*

Better, best. You can have the better of two options, and the best of three or more options. What you can't have is the best of two options.

Between, among. Strictly speaking, *between* applies to two people or things; *among* applies to three or more people or things. *Between the two candidates, Jane is better qualified. Among the three candidates, Jane is best qualified.*

Between you and I. Never. This is a prepositional phrase, so it's always *between you and me*. (*Me* is the object of the preposition.)





Biannually. Occurring twice a year. (Something occurring every other year is *biennial*.)

Bimonthly. Use with care. Strangely, this word describes something occurring either twice a month or every two months.

Borrow, lend. You borrow *from* someone; you lend to someone.

Capital, capitol. *Capital* refers to money, property, and other sources of wealth, AND a city that serves as the seat of government. *Capitol* refers to the government buildings themselves. *Private investors from the capital city raised capital to repair the capitol grounds.*

Compare to, compare with. When you show how two apparently different things are similar, you compare to. When you show how two apparently similar things are different, you compare with. Dying is easy compared to giving a speech. Public education doesn't compare with home schooling.

Compose, comprise. A whole is composed of parts; parts comprise a whole. The meeting is composed of three one-hour sessions. Three one-hour sessions comprise the meeting.

Continual, continuous. Continual means ongoing, frequently recurring. Continuous means without interruption. The meeting was continually interrupted by questions. The meeting ran continuously for 8 hours.

Consul, council, counsel. A consul is a governmental official who resides in a foreign country. A council is an administrative group or assembly. To counsel is to give advice. Counsel can also be a noun when referring to a legal advisor.

Convince, persuade. When you convince, you change someone's way of thinking. When you persuade, you motivate someone to act. He convinced me that I was negligent. He persuaded me to settle out of court. (Note — it's always convince of/convinced that, and persuaded to.)

Different from, different than. Different from is universally accepted. Stick with it.

Discreet, discrete. Discreet means prudent, diplomatic. Discrete means separate and distinct.

Disinterested, uninterested. Disinterested means impartial, unbiased. Uninterested means not interested in, apathetic. If you were standing trial, you'd want a disinterested judge, not an uninterested one.

Due to, because of. Here's an easy way to remember which phrase to use. If the phrase can be replaced by "caused by", use due to. If the phrase can be replaced by "as a result of", use because of. Poor quarterly results were due to rising energy costs. Quarterly earnings decreased because of rising energy costs.

e.g. and i.e. e.g. means "for example". i.e. means "that is to say."

Elder, eldest. Jane is the elder daughter (of the two). Jane is the eldest daughter (of the three).

Ensure, insure. To ensure is to make certain. To insure is to protect against loss, especially financial loss.

Euphemisms. Avoid euphemisms that sugarcoat disagreeable ideas or actions. They tend to annoy people. Examples —Negative growth for loss, vendor rationalization for "we're dropping you as a supplier," downsizing or streamlining for "you're fired," challenge or pain point for problem, pre-owned for used.

Farther, further. Use farther when referring to measurable or spacial distances. Use further for abstract distances. John is further ahead of Jane in his studies. Jane lives farther from Chicago than John.

Fewer, less. Use fewer when referring to a specific or measurable number. Use less when referring to an abstract or unmeasurable amount. He owns fewer stocks and has less money than than his business partner.

First, firstly. Purists object to "firstly, secondly, etc." When enumerating points, it is safer to use "first, second, third, etc." construction.

Flammable, inflammable. They mean the same thing — easily capable of bursting into flames.

Former, latter. Former is the first of two; latter is the second of two. “Idleness and pride tax with a heavier hand than kings and parliaments. If we can get rid of the former, we may easily bear the latter.”
— Benjamin Franklin.

Fortuitous, fortunate. Strictly speaking, fortuitous means happening by accident, having either positive or negative consequences. The word is commonly used as a synonym for fortunate, but this usage should be avoided in formal writing.

His, her, their. Don’t mix singular nouns with the plural pronoun their. Each client has his own file and Each client has his or her own file are correct. Each client has their own file is incorrect.

Hopefully. The word means in a hopeful manner — John submitted his job application hopefully. Using the word as a substitute for I hope that — Hopefully, John will get the job — is frowned upon by grammarians, but widely used nonetheless. Avoid this word in formal writing. If and when. Avoid this phrase. Its meaning is unclear even to experts.

Imply, infer. The speaker implies, the listener infers. During a staff meeting, John implied that he had lost the ABC account. Jane inferred from John’s comments that he had lost the ABC account.

In lieu of means in place of, not in light of. In lieu of cash, Jane payed for dinner with a credit card.

Internet, Web. Not synonymous. The Internet is a vast network of networked computers, of which the World Wide Web is one part. People access information on the Web by using browsers to access Web pages. The Internet contains other types of networks; for instance, email.

Irregardless. Not a word. It’s regardless.

Its, it’s. Its is a possessive pronoun; it’s is a contraction for it is. It’s amazing how quickly its sales ramped up.

Lend, loan. In the U.S., to loan or to lend is accepted usage. In Great Britain, to lend is preferred.

Less, fewer. If you can count ‘em, use fewer. John made fewer sales than Jane in October. John has less sales experience than Jane.

Literally, figuratively. A literal statement is actually, physically true. A figurative statement is symbolically, metaphorically true. Jane literally fell out of her chair and bruised her ankle. Jane figuratively fell out her chair when she heard John’s surprising comments.

May, might. Something that may happen is more likely than something that might happen. You may be wondering how to increase your sales. You might be wondering how to sell Canadian bacon.



Me, myself. Unless you’ve already used I in the sentence, use me. This site design doesn’t appeal to me. I myself don’t care for the layout of this Web page.

More important, more importantly. Once upon a time, more importantly was not allowed. Today, both phrases are acceptable.

More than, over. If you’re talking countable numbers, more than is preferred by some. Mr. Jones has more than ten years experience in the financial services industry. However, there are no hard and fast rules, so trust your ear.

Moot point. A point that is open to debate, questionable.

Most unique. Not to be used. Something is either unique or it isn't.

Neither is, neither are. Neither is is correct.

Precede, proceed. Precede means to come before.

Proceed means to go forward or move along.

Prescribe, proscribe. Opposite meanings. Prescribe

means to order, as in a rule, law, or medical prescription.

Proscribe means to prohibit, ban, or condemn.

“Your grammar is a reflection of your image. Good or bad, you have made an impression. And like all impressions, you are in total control.”

- Jeffrey Gitomer

None is, none are. None is is technically correct, but this formality is melting away because “none are” often sounds better to the ear.

Notorious. NOT a synonym for being accomplished, virtuous, or highly esteemed. A notorious organization or individual is one that is famous for doing or being evil.

People that, people who. Generally, who follows people and that follows things: People who sell insurance; policies that cover theft. However, people that is acceptable — just stick with one or the other.

Practicable, practical. Practicable means feasible; practical means common sensical, realistic rather than theoretical.

Principal, principle. A high school has a principal.

Ms. Jennings is a principal of ABC Company. The principal reason for accepting the proposal was the vendor's experience. Ms. Jennings is a woman of principle. The training program explained important business principles.

Redundancies. Unnecessary repetition should always be avoided, but has a way of creeping into business phrasing. Examples — ATM machine, PIN number, UPC code, VIN number, absolutely sure, brief summary, completely eliminate, current status, end result, firm decision, foreign imports, free gift, future goals, future planning, greater metropolitan area, internal staff, major breakthrough, major disaster, mutual cooperation, new discovery, new innovation, old adage, past experience, past history, same exact, specific details, unexpected surprise.

Tertiary. As applied to business, tertiary refers to the service sector of the economy — distribution, transportation, financial services, etc.

Than I, than me. Fill in the missing pieces of the sentence to determine which phrase to use. Ms. Jennings likes Jane better than she likes me. Ms. Jennings likes Jane better than I like Jane. That, which. If the phrase is essential to the meaning of the sentence, use that. Otherwise, use which. The order that ABC Company placed was filled yesterday. ABC's order, which was placed yesterday, will be filled today.

Who, that. Use who when referring to people; that when referring to anything else. ❖



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Scott McKelvey writes marketing content that people want, like, share and remember. Gone are the days when you could rattle off a list of services, features and benefits, call it marketing, and expect people to hire you. He helps clients develop a message that builds relationships and closes sales.

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