

Writing Effective Web-Based Marketing Copy

Part I-Why Web Writing is Different

The foundation of effective copywriting can be summed up in one sentence: Know your audience.

The root of the difference between effective writing for the web and effective writing in other forums, then, is the difference in the audience. Those differences exist even when the respective audiences are made up of the same people. That's right. People read differently online than they do on paper, for a variety of reasons.

The visuals of reading from the monitor -- the resolution, the color contrasts, the light, even the fact that the screen remains at a fixed distance and angle from the readers eyes -- make prolonged reading less comfortable online. The custom of placing hyperlinks throughout web text has conditioned Internet users to jump pages and topics in the middle of a paragraph. Other options are more readily available than they would be in other formats.

A potential customer reading a traditional direct-mail brochure or flyer typically won't have the brochures of dozens of your competitors at his fingertips, so if he's interested in the service you provide, he's likely to read further. A potential customer online, however, has almost certainly come looking for the service you provide. That means not only that he knows what he wants, but that, with the click of his "back" button, he has a convenient list of links waiting patiently to take him to other websites where similar services are offered.

Once the reader clicks that back button, there's no guarantee he'll ever return to your site, even if he liked what he saw there. Unlike a paper brochure or flyer, your website isn't going to sit on the corner of his desk waiting to trigger his interest when it catches his eye again. If he isn't motivated to actively bookmark your site or make a note of the URL, odds are you'll never see him -- or his business -- again.

Clearly, then, we can't let him return to the list.

Grab the reader. Tell him what he wants to know. Don't let him click that button.

That's going to mean throwing out many of the conventions of "good writing" that you learned in high school and college:

That introductory paragraph where you lead in gradually to your key point? Suicide! The first few lines are often the only ones a visitor to your site will read -- if they don't convey the really important information, chances are that information will never be seen.

Four to five sentences to each paragraph? Not if you want anyone to read them.

Short paragraphs -- even single sentences set off with paragraph spacing -- are most effective on the web because they can be differentiated and skimmed at a glance. Visual formatting is a key aspect of effective copy on the web.

Show off your vocabulary? Most writing aimed at the general public should be geared toward a 7th-9th grade reading level.

Formal language makes you look professional? Formalistic language slows the reader down, and when web readers get slowed down, they tend to feel bogged down, and move on. Never say "formulated a plan" where "planned" will do, or "fabricated" in place of "made."

Once we've thrown out the fundamentals that make great essays but lousy web copy, we can move on to what's really important: In Part II we'll look at the two core goals of effective web copy, and then, in Part III, at the painless ways we can achieve those goals.

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Part II-Two Core Goals

Effective web content writers know something that journalists have known for decades -- most readers aren't going to finish the article. There are many reasons that Internet readers aren't likely to keep reading, but the reasons aren't important to us. What's important is making sure that we meet two key goals with every piece of web text we write.

1. Tell the readers everything we really want them to know RIGHT UP FRONT; and
2. Make the copy readable enough -- and compelling enough -- that readers want to continue to the end.

Unless you're a journalist, getting right to the point probably goes against your training. Most of us were conditioned as high school and college students to begin with an entirely useless "introductory paragraph" of five sentences or so. On the web, where most readers skim only a few lines before deciding whether to read further or move on to the next site, that introductory language can be suicide.

Consider the following lines:

Thanks for visiting our website! We're Bob and Carol Jenkins, and we've been in business at the same location for more than thirty years. Make yourself at home, take a look around the site. We think you'll enjoy the many handcrafted products available for online order or in our shop.

You've probably seen small businesses with introductory pages like this. The goal is probably to be friendly and accessible, to personalize the business. Bob and Carol told us their names, and that they'd been in business for a long time, which is nice. They created some atmosphere, let us know that their site was a casual place and we should be comfortable browsing around it.

Here's what they didn't tell us:

- What they're selling;
- What sets their products apart;
- Where they're located;
- How we can get their products;
- How affordable their products are
- Why you'd want what they're selling.

It's likely that Bob and Carol have included that information further down the page, but that doesn't matter, because if they haven't caught the reader's attention and carried him forward with those first few lines, he'll never see the third or fourth paragraph.

Share a piece of your childhood with your grandchildren!

For more than thirty years, Craftiques has handcrafted toys and collectibles with an old-fashioned feel and old-fashioned quality -- at a fraction of the price you'd pay for antique toys.

Browse our web catalog or drop by our shop in downtown Carlisle to see our hand-carved spinning tops, custom-built dollhouses and furniture, hand-sewn rag dolls.

This piece of text is 13 words longer than the first, but it includes all of the basic information someone searching the web is typically looking for along with a splash of nostalgia to "help" the reader want Bob and Carol's products. Each entry is three sentences long, but the first is in paragraph form. That makes it look denser, and it's harder to spot key words and phrases that we want to make sure the reader doesn't miss.

Bob and Carol probably worked hard at getting the wording for their site "just right," but they didn't know the simple rules that will allow you to write copy that delivers the key information up front and carries the reader along through the rest of the text. We'll look at those rules in Part III.

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Part III-Six Simple Rules

These six simple techniques will help achieve our two core goals of delivering key information up front and keeping our potential customers reading.

1. Write Like a Journalist. In the newspaper business, they call it the inverted pyramid. It's inverted because a newspaper story is top-heavy. Newspaper writers know that many readers only skim the first few paragraphs of a story, and that most never turn the page to see the end of the story that's buried inside the section. The first paragraph contains all the key information -- who, what, when, where? What's considered "key information" may vary a bit depending on your goals for the page, but whatever it is that you want to be sure to communicate to your reader should hit him right between the eyes when the page opens.
2. Keep it concise. Many site owners make the mistake of thinking that complex sentences will make their writing look more professional, and that volume of text will make their sites look more substantial. In fact, one of the most crucial aspects of writing effective web copy is making it clear and easily readable. That means short, concise sentences that get to the point. Unnecessary introductory clauses, descriptions, side notes, and redundancies simply slow down the reader and distract from the key words and phrases that you want to be noticeable. They also make it difficult to create visually accessible text.
3. Make your text visually accessible. To an extent, this is the job of the web designer, but only to an extent. A designer isn't going to chop up your paragraphs for you or turn something you have written in sentences into a bulleted list. Remember that you want the most important points to be readable at a glance. Don't make your reader work to find important information: odds are that he'll simply look elsewhere.

Consider the item below:

Plum Grove Acres offers horseback riding, riding lessons, stable rental, grooming services, campgrounds, picnic areas, and more.

Now look at the same information in a different format:

Plum Grove Acres offers:

- Ø Horseback Riding
- Ø Riding Lessons
- Ø Stable Rental
- Ø Grooming Services
- Ø Campgrounds
- Ø Picnic Areas
- Ø Other amenities

The text is virtually identical, but in the second entry the key terms -- those that will draw customers -- are isolated in a way that makes them immediately noticeable.

4. Break up the Text. Readers are going to skim, so help them find what they're looking for. Keep paragraphs short and limit each paragraph to a single subject, so that a keyword scan will allow the reader to quickly locate the right piece of text. For longer copy, use headings and physical divisions within the text. Don't bury the "bait" between things you'd like the reader to know. You can't force your potential customers to read what they're not interested in, and an inability to quickly locate the information they came looking for will most likely lead them straight to the dreaded "back" button.

5. Make the Language Accessible. Web users want and expect things to move quickly. They don't want to get bogged down in formalistic language, complex sentences, long paragraphs, or anything else that will make them work for the information. Straightforward, user-friendly language is far more effective than "smart-sounding" language that reminds the reader that he's reading and understanding. Good copy carries the reader forward almost unconsciously, and it is indisputably unlikely in most contexts that monosyllabic words, complex syntax, and multiple clauses will lend themselves well to unconscious and effortless reading on the part of your customers or potential customers. (See?)

6. Be meticulous. Although we're throwing out a lot of the rules regarding paragraph formats and introduction, we aren't throwing out the rules of grammar and spelling. Nothing says "amateur" like obvious misspellings and grammatical errors. The problem, of course, is that the errors you'll make are never obvious to you. Even professional writers have difficulty spotting their own errors. When you know what the text is supposed to say, human nature is to see what you're expecting rather than what's actually written there. That's why professionals have editors, and why you should, too. Always ask someone else to proofread your copy before it goes online. Following these six simple steps will help any site owner achieve the two key goals of business web copywriting -- providing the key information in the first few lines of text, and then making visitors to your site want to read further. Allowing the reader to find the information he wants, and then encouraging him to go forward and learn more about your company and its products and services, drastically increases your chances of achieving your ultimate goal: to turn that visitor to your website into a customer.

Tiffany Sanders - Copywriting Specialist
<http://www.rockstories.net>

Tiffany Sanders is a freelance writer/editor whose background includes corporate copywriting, web-based marketing and educational copy, journalism, community education materials and legal reporting. She has two books currently in print -- one fiction and one non-fiction -- and a third under contract.