



# Copywriting Masterclass

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## About this ebook

This ebook contains the distilled knowledge that I've gained during my fifteen years as a professional writer and editor, spent in publishing houses, design studios and serving dozens of commercial and agency clients as a freelance copywriter.

I've aimed to cover every important aspect of the copywriter's craft. Beginning with the essentials, I work through some of the most important elements of every piece of copy through to sophisticated psychological techniques to make your writing as powerful and persuasive as possible.

Some sections focus on particular elements of the materials that copywriters work on, such as headlines, case studies and calls to action. Others discuss useful techniques that you can apply almost anywhere, such as conversational language, selling with USPs and exploiting the audience's built-in decision biases.

This book is not a beginner's guide. I'm assuming you can already write reasonably well – whether as a professional copywriter or just as part of your work – and you're looking to improve your skills. There are plenty of beginner's guides out there, so if you feel that's what you need, go ahead and read one before coming back to read this book.

I've also deliberately left out too much mention of writing for the web, SEO copywriting and online marketing. There are two main reasons for this. First (and foremost), because you should learn the principles of good copywriting before you start to consider how you'll apply them to the web. And second, because online copywriting shades into web design, HTML coding and search engine optimisation, making it difficult to stay on topic and keep things snappy.

I hope you enjoy this book and wish you every success with your writing. And I'd love to hear what you think – so do email me your comments, both positive and negative, at [tom@abccopywriting.com](mailto:tom@abccopywriting.com).

# Part 1: Essentials

'If you want to cut down a tree in four hours, spend three hours sharpening your axe.'

That's an important lesson for the copywriter. Every assignment will go far better if you spend some time at the outset focusing on the essentials: the benefits you want to communicate, the tone you want to strike and who you're actually talking to. This section explains how to think about these key aspects before you even put pen to paper.

## What is copywriting?

There are probably as many definitions of copywriting as there are copywriters. Every copywriter's work is different, as is the way they approach it.

My own definition is:

Copywriting is the optimum use of language to promote or persuade.

Now, let me unpack the elements of this definition.

First, copywriting is all about finding the **optimum** way to communicate. The professional copywriter is always looking for the right answer: the right length of copy, the right structure, the right tone, the right choice of words. Diligent copywriters are convinced that there is a single best solution, and they're driven to find it. Like Coleridge, they want to achieve 'the best words in the best order'.

Next, **use** indicates that copywriting is a 'useful art': a creative activity with a practical purpose. In contrast to 'pure' creative writing – writing principally to entertain, or provoke thought – copywriting is all about achieving a particular outcome in the real world. We might enjoy reading (or writing) great copy, but its *raison d'être* is to do a job. The value of copywriting is the extent to which it succeeds in its purpose.

**Language** is the raw material of the copywriter. Notice that I didn't say 'writing' – copywriting can include any carefully chosen language, including broadcast media or one-to-one communications like telephone scripts. It may also include visual language as well as verbal: the copywriter will often want to influence context and presentation (typography, design, imagery) to heighten the impact of their copy.

Most copywriting exists in order to **promote** something: products or services mainly, but also new ideas (as in rebranding exercises) or points of view (as in political marketing). The copywriter's goal is to communicate the strengths, advantages or benefits of whatever they are promoting so their audience buys into them – whether literally or metaphorically. (Promotional copywriting's evil twin, 'knocking copy', aims to denigrate a rival product, service or idea – see page 14 for more.)

**Persuasion** means getting people to think, feel or act in a certain way. Effective copywriting leads the audience by the hand across the stepping-stones of reading, thinking, feeling and acting – in that order. It's all about using intangible tools – words and thoughts – to achieve an outcome in the real world. And this, ultimately, is the fascination of

copywriting: making things happen with something as insubstantial as words on a page.

## Benefits

Whenever you see copywriters writing about their craft, it's a safe bet you won't get far before you see the word 'benefits'.

Benefits are the key to all good copywriting. In a nutshell, copywriting that focuses on benefits is more persuasive, more compelling and sells better.

We can define benefits very simply:

Benefits are the good things that a product or service does (or promises to do) for its customers.

Whatever you're asking readers to think, do or feel when they read your copy, it needs to offer them something good. All copywriting promises something of value or benefit to the reader.

## Meeting a need

The first and foremost benefit of a product or service is meeting a need. Don't underestimate the power of stating this simple truth to a reader. If your product solves a problem, make sure people know it. Your best customers are the ones who are looking for what you're selling, so make sure you cover the basics by confirming to them that you've got what they want. Making your copy too clever can sometimes obscure what you're actually offering, which is fatal.

This particularly important online, where people are impatiently searching and you need to confirm that they've found the right thing as quickly as possible.

## 'Hard' benefits

Then we come to 'hard', concrete benefits. These often boil down to one of three things: save time, save money or (for businesses) make money. They have tangible effects that can be measured – they're bigger, faster or cheaper. A kettle that boils water faster than competing products offers this type of quantifiable benefit, as does an insurance policy that's cheaper than the competition.

Hard benefits are powerful because they're so solid. They're based in facts and can't be debated or contradicted. If you've got this kind of benefit, it's always worth considering whether it should lead your copy – either by forming the basis of your headline, or just by being mentioned very early on.

## 'Soft' benefits

However, hard benefits aren't the be-all and end-all of copywriting. People are also interested in 'softer' emotional benefits such as convenience, fun, style, fashion or the sense of having made a sound buying choice. For example, when you buy jeans or trainers, you're looking for more than the optimum cost-benefit ratio – you want to buy into a brand that feels cool and appropriate for your age and style.

Soft benefits also come into play when you're asking readers to do something that may not benefit them in a tangible way – such as making a charity donation. In this situation, the benefit is helping someone else, and feeling good about that choice. So your copy needs to emphasise that.

'Quality' could qualify as both a hard and a soft benefit, since its definition is so fluid. For example, it might apply to something as concrete as 'build quality' in engineering – the durability, tolerance and precision of the components used to make something. But in more subjective areas of judgement, such as graphic design, one person's concept of 'quality' may be very far from another's, and affected by a range of personal or cultural factors.

We might say, broadly, that 'hard' benefits are more important in business-to-business (B2B) marketing, while 'soft' benefits appeal to the consumer (B2C).

But even if you're marketing to a business, the buying decision will always be taken by a human. And that human has emotions. So if you know who they are (either as a specific individual, or in terms of their likely profile) you can appeal to those emotions. The need to feel that the right decision has been made is particularly strong in B2B buyers – hence the saying 'no-one got fired for buying IBM'.

## AIDA and benefits

You may have heard of the marketing formula AIDA, which stands for 'attention, interest, desire, action'. These are the four stages through which a piece of marketing should (supposedly) guide its audience en route to a sale. If we look at it again, we can see that benefits are behind every one. Simple, strong benefits in a headline or slogan attract attention, while interest is generated by adding more detail. Desire is aroused when benefits are made real in the reader's mind, and action is elicited by giving a persuasive push to the promise of a benefit.

Whatever thought structure you use, the end result needs to be copywriting that speaks directly to your customers' needs, desires and hopes by offering something of benefit to them. If it doesn't, it won't bring much benefit to you.

## Focusing on the customer

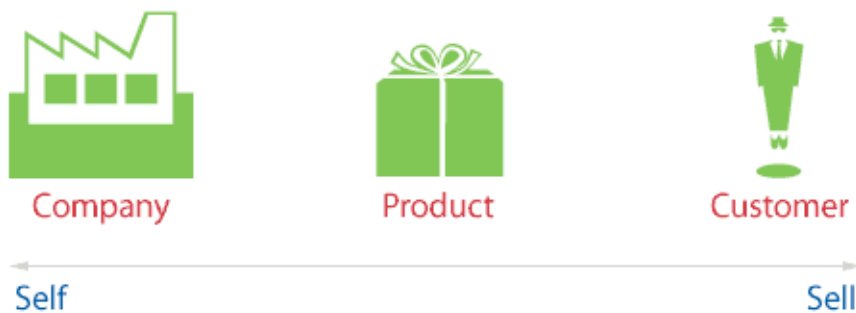
The previous section explained how important it is to communicate benefits if you want your copywriting to sell.

One way to assess how well your copy is expressing benefits is to think about where it is predominantly focused: on the company, the product, or the customer.

Imagine a conversation between the company and the customer. They are talking over a table, on which is the product being sold. It's a fairly one-sided conversation – the company is doing the talking, and the customer is listening. When the company has finished talking, the customer will decide whether or not to buy.

This is essentially what happens when a customer encounters your marketing copy. Unless they get bored or turned off, they 'listen' to what you've written as if it was a one-sided conversation.

Now imagine a line stretching from the company through the product and on to the customer, as shown below.



We might call this line the 'self-sell continuum'. The focus of copywriting can fall anywhere along it. The nearer the focus is to the business, the more selfish the copy will be, and the less it will sell. As it moves nearer to the customer, the more it will mean to the target audience, and the more it will sell.

### Company-focused copy

Purely selfish copy is all about the company: how long it's been trading, who runs it, where it's located, its principles and vision. Unless these points can be translated into benefits (a particular location, for example, could help customers access the product) they've got no place in marketing copy. This is the stuff that goes in 'About us' on websites, so people can easily avoid it. Admittedly, some company facts *do* constitute indirect reasons to buy – being a market leader, for example, is compelling – but most don't.

Slightly less selfish is stuff on the boundary between the company and the product – how a product was developed, the thinking behind it and so on. This might add some value, but it's background at best.

## Product-focused copy

Material on the product itself is good, but remember that a straightforward factual description will only sell to those who are already very clear about what they want and why. Lists of features are the kind of content that might appeal to technical staff rather than commercial managers. However, this practical content is good raw material – provided it can be re-expressed as customer benefits in order to sell harder.

Copy about the interface between product and customer concerns how the product can be bought, how and when it's used, what it does and so on. This is where things start to get interesting for the reader, particularly if the text explains why the various attributes described can benefit them.

## Customer-focused copy

Finally, and most powerfully, we come to copy that focuses purely on the customer. This content starts with customer concerns and goes on to explain how the product will help them, in words they'll understand. Effective copywriting spends most of its time here – or, at the very least, it starts here before moving across to the other areas if and when it needs to.

## How to achieve customer focus

Companies who produce their own copy often start with themselves and the product. That's perfectly understandable for people who are closely involved, but it highlights the importance of getting a fresh perspective on the text. As a newcomer and an outsider, the copywriter's job is to move the emphasis to the customer by (politely) asking questions such as:

- How does that help me as a customer?
- How does that affect my decision to buy, or not to buy?
- As a potential customer, why should I be interested?

Any points that are too company- or product-focused should be recast in terms of things the customer wants, or failing that deleted. The end result should be text that talks directly to the customer's own priorities, linking them clearly to the product. To confirm that this is so, compare the number of times you've said 'you' as opposed to 'we' or 'us'. There should be at least twice as many mentions of the customer as of the company.

Marketing may be a one-way communication, but as with any other conversation, acknowledging the other person's point of view is more likely to get positive results.

## Attitude

I once saw the following copy on the back of a packet of dry roasted peanuts – an own-brand (private label) offering from a major UK supermarket:

Our fundamental belief is that few things in life are more important than the food you buy. Good quality is essential.

One immediate comment is that the second sentence is flabby, redundant and pretty obvious too. If it needs saying at all, it can be rolled into the first sentence ('...than the quality of the food you buy'). But the real point is the attitude or stance of the text, and what it can tell us about copywriting.

### Be relevant

Does the average dry-roasted-peanut consumer care that much about quality? I personally doubt it. We'd better give the benefit of the doubt: this text probably appears on every product line. But even if I was reading it on the back of some broccoli, or baby food, do I really care that much about the beliefs of a supermarket?

The moral is to write about customer benefits, or don't write at all. Otherwise you'll just dilute the relevant messages you *do* have to offer.

### Be believable

Who's talking here? Who does 'our' refer to? The company? A company is a legal or financial construct without 'fundamental beliefs'. Perhaps 'our' refers to the people who work there. Are they all together on this point? Do the checkout ladies, the drivers and the shelf-stackers all buy in? When beliefs are so fluid and so personal, can they really be shared?

The truth is that no one really believes this kind of egotistical, self-centred 'value statement', or learns anything from it, or remembers it (apart from grumpy copywriters). It does almost nothing for the reader – and, as a result, for the company too.

The key take-away is not to stretch credibility. Read it out loud and see how it comes across.

### Be respectful

Although ostensibly about 'our' beliefs, the copy is just as just about 'you', and the importance you attach to your food. There's an insidiously preachy undertone. 'Come on now, you can't really want to eat those Wotsits [US: Cheetos]. Try this couscous instead, it's divine!'