The A**BC** of
Copywriting

Tom Albrighton

The ABC of Copywriting

by Tom Albrighton

Contents

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.

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.

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.

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 11 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'.

Turning features into benefits

All features of a product or service must be 'turned outwards' and expressed as benefits. Using the word 'you' is an excellent way to make a benefit feel directly relevant to the reader.

Brand/product	Feature	Benefit	Copy
L'Oréal	Improve appearance of hair	Feel attractive	'Because you're worth it'
Kellogg's Rice Krispies	Makes noise when milk added	Kids have fun eating them	'Snap! Crackle! Pop!'
The Independent	Politically neutral	Be seen as discerning and intelligent	'It is. Are you?'
Interflora	Get flowers delivered	Delight loved ones	'Say it with flowers'

Focusing on the customer

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.

Company   Product   Customer
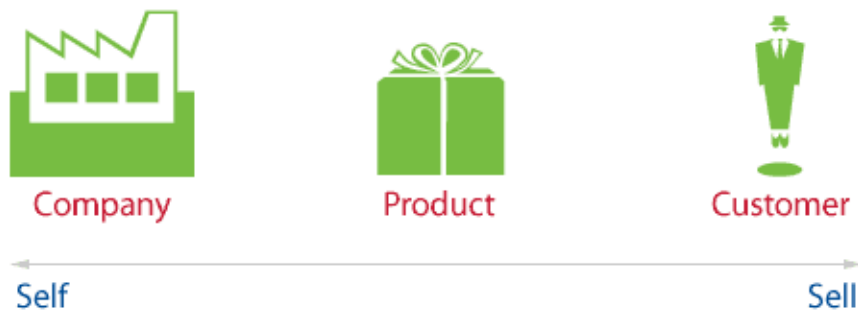
Self   Sell

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.

Negative benefits

We've seen how emphasising positive benefits is the key to connecting with readers. But there is an alternative approach – emphasising negative benefits, or using scare tactics.

Negative copy focuses on bad things that will happen if readers *don't* choose a particular product, service or course of action. The sell is predicated on the idea that the consequences of not buying will be distressing, embarrassing or otherwise undesirable. We might call these potential outcomes 'negative benefits'. Copywriting driven by negative benefits points out a problem that the customer has, before positioning the product or service being promoted as the solution to that problem.

Whole product lines have been driven by this kind of copy plot. As Steven Levitt and Stephen Dubner recount in their book *Freakonomics*, Listerine brought a completely new problem – 'chronic halitosis' – to the public's attention while simultaneously offering the solution. The fact that legendary copywriter Claude Hopkins had invented the faux-medical term didn't hold back the campaign or the product. Nowadays, the sell for such products tends to be more positive – we buy in order to have fresh breath, rather than to avoid bad breath.

Negative benefits don't even have to be real to be effective. Saatchi & Saatchi's famous ad from the 1970s asked 'would you be more careful if it was you that got pregnant?' The question is rhetorical but still thought-provoking, which was surely the intention.

Would you be more careful if it was you that got pregnant?

Positive or negative?

In most cases, there's a choice to be made between selling on a positive or a negative. Insurance can be presented as obtaining peace of mind (positive) or avoiding financial crisis (negative). Even classic 'distress purchases' – those that we make because we have to, not because we want to – can be positioned positively. For example, buying sticking plasters could be portrayed as part of being a good parent. Or there may be the opportunity to stress some benefit that mitigates the distress of the purchase, as with one-coat paint or similar convenience products.

So, is it ever right to focus on the negative? Personally, I think the scare tactic needs to be used with great care. You're evoking negative associations and banking on the reader taking the next step to the solution that you're offering – rather than simply walking away before you even get to make your pitch.

I once saw an ad for a will-writing service that described the problems of dying intestate in such apocalyptic terms that it was a complete turn-off. It made it sound like the taxman would take every last penny and your family would end up on the street. The aim was to cultivate a healthy fear of financial chaos, but the copy went too far and ended up generating resentment and irritation (in my mind anyway). As ever, there were positive aspects that could have been emphasised instead – being organised, helping relatives and so on. In most cases, it's probably less risky to associate your product with positive feelings and enjoyable outcomes that will mean something to the customer.

Solving problems

The exception to that rule may be products that solve a well-known or long-standing problem that the customer will definitely recognise and be

interested in solving (as opposed to one they've never thought about before).

An example would be online comparison sites that offer to take the hassle out of buying insurance, holidays or other items where the choice is very wide. Here, people are well aware that buying can be a chore, making the task of the copywriter far easier – there's no need to explain the problem before offering the solution.

Attacking competitors

The problem you offer to solve shouldn't include using a competitor's product, no matter how inferior that product is in reality. Comparative advertising or 'knocking copy', which actively criticises a rival offering, is another high-risk tactic. However, it's one that can work in the right circumstances, as Saatchi (again) proved with 'Labour isn't working'.

Most modern ads, if they choose this tactic, opt for (say) a comparison table that purports to let the facts speak for themselves. Of course, the advertiser is controlling the game by choosing the areas for comparison, but this can give the impression of being impartial – or at least factual.

However, mentioning your competitor is dangerous for two reasons. Firstly, it's an invitation for the reader to start thinking about the competitor rather than you. If they're not paying careful attention, it might be the competitor's brand that sticks in their head, not yours. In a way, you're inviting them to check out your competitors before making a decision. Or, if they're already using a competing product, your pitch implies a criticism of their choice. Telling the customer they're in the wrong is rarely the way to close a sale. By contrast, offering to improve their situation is a great opening offer. So it's better to focus on what you can offer the customer, not what a competitor can't.

Unique Selling Points (USPs)

A USP, or Unique Selling Point, is a unique attribute of a product, service or company that customers cannot get from any other source. By focusing on USPs, the received wisdom goes, firms can differentiate themselves from competitors and resist 'commoditisation', where competing products are effectively equal and customers buy primarily on price. Sugar and oil are commodities; iPods are not.

Most markets feature products and providers that are, to some extent, interchangeable: not completely commoditised, but not completely unique either. Each product or provider probably has *some* unique attribute, but it's just one of many factors affecting buyers' choices, along with price, quality, convenience, switching costs and so on.

Strong USPs

In order to sell, your USP needs to meet *all three* of these criteria:

* Does it translate into a **benefit** for the customer?

* Is it **clear** – easy to communicate and understand?

* It is **compelling** – that is, does it have the power to motivate a switch from a rival product?

The sorts of attributes that might constitute strong USPs are:

* The only product to offer a particular function (patented solutions)

* The only supplier to offer a particular range of services or set of skills under one roof (the 'one stop shop' argument)

* The only product, service or company of a certain type in a particular location

* The leading or largest company of its type, perhaps in a particular location

* The cheapest product or service of a particular type (but use with great caution: if price isn't compelling, it won't work as a USP – plus if you're undercut, your USP goes down the pan).

The sound made by Harley-Davidson motorcycles is a good example of a USP. If you want the noise, feel and sheer cool of riding a Harley, you have to buy a Harley. The Harley 'grunt' is a unique benefit that's compelling for

Harley's target customers, who are in the market for an *experience* as much as a product (hence the slogan 'Live to Ride, Ride to Live'). It's easy to communicate too – at least in broadcast media such as radio and TV.

Similarly, UK entrepreneur Clive Sinclair understood in the late 1970s that home computers would not become truly popular until they were available at the right price point. By designing a machine (the ZX80) that could retail for under £100, he gave his product an unbeatable USP – and one for which the ad copy practically wrote itself. For customers who wanted to get into computing, the £100 price represented a powerful psychological barrier. Once it was broken, the floodgates of the home computing revolution were opened.

Weak USPs

However, very few products can lay claim to 'killer' USPs like these. And if uniqueness isn't the be all and end all for the product or firm you're promoting, it follows that relying on USPs exclusively doesn't always make for good copywriting, or good marketing. 'Unique' doesn't necessarily equal 'good'.

Unfortunately, many firms attempt to use the USPs they *do* have, even though they're weak. I once worked for a firm that was over 200 years old. This point was much trumpeted in marketing and PR, since it positioned the company as an important part of local history – which, of course, it was. But although being long established is easy to communicate, it offers very little benefit to customers and therefore no reason to switch.

Other companies bend over backwards to achieve a USP just for the sake of it, setting up tiny ponds in which they can be the biggest fish. Don't fall into this trap. If you have to scratch around for your USP, it's unlikely to be effective. For example, I could position myself (I think) as 'the only copywriter in Norwich with both publishing and agency experience', but my clients couldn't care less about that. 'Experience, professional, reliable' is clearer, more compelling and offers more benefit, even though it's pretty generic and far from unique.

Doing without a USP

So what should you do if you haven't got a strong USP? It comes back to the three points above:

- **Communicate benefits.** Work out (or ask!) what customers really value about the product, service or company you're promoting, and build your message around that. Don't worry if it's not unique – very few companies have a genuinely unique offer.

- **Make it clear.** Just clearly and simply convey the value on offer. So much marketing falls at the first fence by trying too hard to be unique – or different, clever, quirky, whatever – and neglecting the audience in the process. Why not stand out with some straight-talking copy?

- **Compel the audience.** Give people a reason to switch with a special offer, fixed-price package, free consultation or some other variation on the standard offering in your market (see Reciprocity on page 72).

Not being unique isn't necessarily a barrier to success, but failing to connect with your audience certainly is.

Relevant attention

A pitfall of writing advertising copy is to try and grab attention. The idea is that once people are attracted or intrigued, they'll read the rest of the message and buy the product.

Unfortunately, this just isn't the case. If it was, we'd all be buying random goods against our will because we'd seen them advertised on buses or the internet, emerging later from our trance with yet another unwanted pair of shoes.

If we're honest, we all know from our own experience that momentary distraction doesn't translate into a purchase. But somehow, when it comes to writing our marketing materials, wishful thinking or delusion sets in and we fall into the trap of trying to get attention.

I once walked past a clothes shop, outside which was a model skeleton sitting at a table and a sign saying:

> Clothes to die for
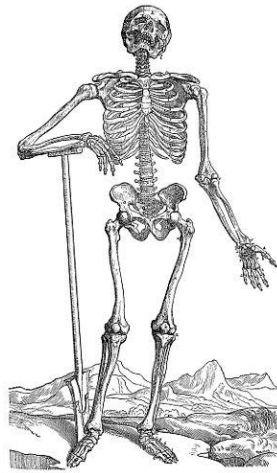
It raises a smile, which is nice, but would it actually make you want to buy clothes? The slogan links the skeleton and the clothes, but only through a play on words; there is no real connection. So it functions as an attention-grabber, but nothing more.

What really draws the reader in? As discussed, the answer is benefits: the good things that will happen as a result of buying what you're selling. Even something as lame as 'look hot this summer' would be better than the skeleton, because it communicates a benefit, however generic.

A product as sensually rich as clothes will sell itself – the product should have been out on the street in place of the skeleton. But it's tougher when your subject can't be touched or even seen – because it's a service, for example. Many print ads for B2B services get stuck at this point. Feeling that they should include some kind of visual content, the advertisers lose the plot completely, opting for jokey, obscure or downright irrelevant picture/headline combinations that say nothing about what's being sold.

It would be far better for them to choose a headline that communicates a key benefit and use images purely as illustration or decoration – if at all. A strong benefit, simply expressed, will always sell better than an attention-grabbing stunt. It might not be arresting, but it will attract the right kind of readers – those who are interested in buying.

It may also be worth considering a simple positioning statement – 'IT support services' or 'Facilities management' at the top/beginning of the ad. This orients the reader and tells them what the ad's about, while freeing you up from having to use such clunky language in your main headline.

Rather than trying to 'convert' readers, remember you can only sell to people who are interested. There's no point grabbing irrelevant attention

that can't be converted into sales. If you believe that willing customers are out there, your task is simply to reach them with the right message.

Honesty

When discussing copywriting assignments with my clients, I sometimes feel obliged to point out that whatever I write about their business should be true.

It's not that they're asking me to tell outright lies. It's more a desire to be over-optimistic or economical with the truth in areas such as the scope or depth of their services, the size of the business or the nature of their approach. The urge to 'big up' the offering is powerful.

Many small marketing firms fall prey to this temptation, anxious to position themselves as 'full-service' agencies instead of playing to their unique (albeit narrow) strengths. I have also worked with many sole traders who wanted to position themselves as companies (in fact, I do it myself).

Since words can carry so many shades of meaning, it's easy enough for the copywriter to bend or stretch the truth without overstepping the mark. Trusty stalwarts like 'leading', 'extensive', 'premium', 'consultative' and so on can make any firm sound fantastic without really making any concrete claim at all. But should we always do this, just because we can?

Neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) teaches us that in order to communicate effectively on a personal level, we have to be congruent: our words, looks and gestures should all tell the same story. A job candidate who claims to be confident but can't make eye contact is not congruent; nor is a consultant who can't stop talking about himself.

It's easy to see how this principle can be extended to businesses as well as individuals. In terms of marketing, your design, branding and copywriting all need to be 'on brand' – expressing a consistent message. But promises are easy to make and words are cheap; problems arise when the message doesn't match reality.

Customers aren't stupid, and they know when they're being lied to. Will the marketing claim be justified by their experience? And if it isn't, what will be the long-term effects on the relationship, or the firm's reputation?

In the case of the small marketing firms and sole traders mentioned above, the illusion is often shattered in the very first phone call. So was it even worth creating it in the first place? Does putting up a front bring us closer to our customers, or just build a wall between us?

I once saw a memorable talk by brand guru BJ Cunningham, creator of Death cigarettes ('the honest smoke'). He spoke of his consulting work for an insurance firm called Pinnacle (now part of BNP Paribas). In common with many service companies these days, they wanted their branding to carry a softer, friendlier message. Yet internally, their employees called the company 'cynical Pinnacle' – a reference to its reluctance to pay out on claims. As BJ pointed out, this was a strength, not a weakness – who wants to buy insurance from a soft 'n' cuddly firm that pays out on weak claims and charges big premiums as a result?

BJ's marketing advice to Pinnacle – based on commercial sense as much as ethics – was to emphasise their actual strengths, not cover them up with fake ones. The honest truth expressed a benefit that customers really wanted to hear. And it would be congruent with the way staff actually dealt with customers, without any need for patronising education about 'brand values'.

Often, the copywriter may be asked to write in an aspirational way – using words to express a desired future rather than the reality as it stands. That's fine, but it needs to be kept in proportion. The most effective copywriting is rooted in honesty.

As a bonus, it's also far easier to write, since it's so much more straightforward to communicate things that everyone can agree on. Once you move away from what's real, it's much harder to get a consensus on the copy.

Simplicity

For a while, the cars used by BSM (a leading UK driving school) carried this slogan:

> **Learn to drive**

That's right – just those three words.

It seems almost too simple to be true, but if we unpack it we can see that this little sentence accomplishes four very important functions:

- It clearly **defines the product** (driving tuition).

- It communicates a key **benefit** of the product (you'll learn to drive).

- It sets out a strong **call to action**, commanding the reader to act (learn to drive!)

- Through its basic, generic phrasing, it confirms BSM's **market positioning** – the market leader, default option or natural choice.

Notice how this slogan respects its readers. Nobly declining to spin or sugarcoat its message, it gives customers some credit as thinkers and choosers, setting out the stall and letting them decide. Its simple, solid language makes counterparts like 'For the road ahead' (AA's corporate tagline at the time) sound pretentious and patronising. (Most effective slogans are simple, but not all simple slogans are effective.)

But is it really copywriting? After all, it's 'just' a simple, everyday phrase. There's nothing really there – no technique, no clever choice of words, no sophisticated appeal to the emotions, no carefully judged tone of voice. Was it even deliberately created? Did, perhaps, the designer just insert it as a placeholder until the real slogan was created?

It doesn't matter. Great ideas are where you find them. 'Yesterday' came to Paul McCartney in a dream. And if this phrase did come from a copywriter, it was an exceptionally intelligent, brave and independent one. Someone who wasn't afraid to put forward the *right* solution – not the one that made them look clever, sophisticated or hardworking. For their part, BSM deserve praise for setting aside corporate pride and brand insecurity so they could communicate with customers in the most direct way possible.

Achieving this kind of simplicity isn't necessarily easy, quick or straightforward. Pablo Picasso said, 'It took me four years to paint like Raphael, but a lifetime to paint like a child.' Often, our first ideas are convoluted and confused as we try too hard to make something special, original or arresting. Then, over time and through many revisions, the diligent copywriter discards what isn't needed to arrive at the essential.

When the answer comes, it can seem ridiculously simple. But that's how you know it's right.

Imagine asking a group of women what they love most about their husbands. One says he's kind, charming, thoughtful, generous and handsome. Another simply says he makes her laugh. Whose opinion will you remember the next day?

Of course, not every brand, product or value proposition can be reduced to three words. Complex technical products and B2B services are very often tough to boil down to pithy phrases that don't sound glib. But when it comes to developing the messages about a brand or product, it still pays to focus on, or organise around, a single idea.

Trying to cover too many ideas dilutes the audience's cognitive resources and introduces ambiguity over the key message. It turns a straight-line narrative route into a garden of forking paths. It can only reduce the space you devote to hammering home the key idea. And, most importantly, it sends an implicit message of uncertainty and bet-hedging.

What constitues 'too many ideas' depends on context. For a short-copy ad, 'too many' means 'more than one'. The copywriter is looking for copy, imagery and layout to dramatise a single key benefit in an arresting and memorable way. Anything beyond that is not needed. Company taglines are also strongest when they express just one corporate character trait, instead of trying to cram in two or three.

Longer copy assignments, obviously, will have more points to make. But they'll still need a unifying theme or structure. And each paragraph will still need to say as few things as possible – ideally, just one.

Although writing to a formula is probably a bad idea, there's a lot to be said for three sentences per paragraph. The first introduces an idea, the second develops or explains it and the third adds proof or punch. See how I've done it in this paragraph, and several others in this section.

It's natural for projects to pick up content themes over time, like a snowball rolling down a mountain – the phenomenon known as 'feature creep' in tech product development. So achieving one-idea focus may involve getting rid of distracting extra stuff, or perhaps reassigning it to another campaign or publication where it will be more valuable.

The process can be challenging, but the outcome is worth it. While you may feel something's been lost, what you've gained is more important: copy that you can be confident in, with the best possible chance of being read and remembered.

Part 2:
Tone

If the first part of this book was about what to say, this part is about how you say it: the tone of your writing.

Tone of voice

Consider the following passage of marketing text:

> ABC Copywriting delivers professional, premium-quality business writing services to corporations and organisations throughout the UK. We're a cheerful lot and we're always chuffed to chinwag, so if you want to chat about your project, grab the rap-rod and give us a tinkle. With ten years' experience of developing content for clients of all types, we are ideally placed to meet your copywriting needs. Our copy's too bootylicious for ya baby!

The problem here is not quality, but consistency. While any of the ideas here might work in isolation, they are too different in terms of their 'personality' to gel. In other words, this text has no single, recognisable tone of voice – and this makes the communication almost totally ineffective.

What is tone of voice?

Written tone of voice is simply the 'personality' of your brand or company as expressed through the written word. Tone of voice governs what you say in writing, and how you say it – the content and style of textual communications, in any setting and in any medium.

Just as it's desirable to have a consistent look and feel in design terms across stationery, signage, advertising and online marketing, so it's also worthwhile ensuring that the content of all these media feels like it's coming from a single source.

Giving a brand or company a proper 'voice' gives an impression of solidity, trustworthiness and honesty; in NLP terms, it makes communication congruent. Conversely, inconsistent tone of voice (or graphic style) gives a dissonant, self-contradictory impression that readers will find discomfiting, even if only on an unconscious level. As in normal life, we find it reassuring when people stay more or less the same over time – if their style of communication changes radically from one day to the next, we might trust them less, or even become concerned for their mental health.

Defining tone of voice

The easiest way to consider tone of voice is in terms of the personality of the brand, company or product. If it was a person, what would they be like?

To keep things simple, three values are probably enough. More than that risks duplicating values, or obsessing over minor details. Three broad-brush statements of personality should be plenty to pin down the essence of a brand. Here are some examples:

	Value 1	Value 2	Value 3
Organic yoghurt	Honest	Friendly	Principled
Children's shoes	Fun	Practical	Economical
IT support company	Knowledgeable	Reliable	Proactive

If you want to liven things up a bit, you could try asking what type of car your brand would be, or what type of biscuit, or whatever. But beware of being led astray by your chosen metaphor. Inanimate objects only have the personality we project on them; this type of thinking can take you into a hall of mirrors where you're just playing with ideas, not talking in terms of business reality. Human values are the key to strong marketing.

The problem with B2B

The last example in the table above illustrates the problem for many B2B companies: finding values that are genuinely unique. While knowledge is a key attribute of a good IT support provider, in another way it's just the least one would expect. What differentiates one provider from another is the depth and nature of the knowledge and its application. But that kind of nitty-gritty detail doesn't translate very well to broad-brush statements. The values listed above could just as easily apply to any other IT support provider – or indeed, any professional support firm of any type whatsoever. And this results in broadly similar tones of voice across the B2B sector.

To wriggle out of this straitjacket, some B2B firms pretend to have values that they actually don't. This leads to self-consciously friendly or funky text, probably embellished with bright orange graphics and rounded corners. Personally, I think this is a mistake. Believable brand values and tone of voice can't be a work of fiction. Your tone of voice should be consistent

with reality, as well as with itself. It's far easier to stick to a tone of voice if it's in harmony with they way you habitually write or speak.

So if your IT support company is bluff, masculine and 'all business', make that your tone. Some people will want a partner like that, so focus on converting your most promising prospects. If you put on a mask, people will see through it soon enough anyway.

From values to style

Armed with your three values, you can consider how they translate into the nuts and bolts of hands-on writing: register, vocabulary and grammar.

Defining the register of your writing is often a case of choosing a point on a continuum. For example, you might need to decide where your tone of voice sits between these extremes:

Formal	Chatty
Detached	Warm
Professional	Wacky
Serious	Humorous
Laid back	Lively

Vocabulary is simply the choice of words, and you might want to stipulate what type of words can and can't be used within your tone of voice. However, we're now moving into a complex, highly subjective realm where the definitions of terms can be slippery. Let's say, for example, that your law firm is only going to use 'formal' language, or that your cellar bar is going to use 'funky' wording. Are you sure that everyone will understand what those words actually mean? Is your idea of 'funky' the same as theirs? Examples are one way to get over this problem, but it could still be an issue.

Copywriters are often told to make their writing more simple or accessible (I am, anyway), but there's always a price to pay. Long words may sound stuffy, but they are very precise. For example, there are no genuine one-syllable synonyms for words such as 'altruistic' or 'intuitive'. If you want to get rid of them, you'll have to rephrase at length or lose some meaning. Conversely, if you use the most precise language you possibly can, some sense of friendliness or 'looseness' will be lost. It's a trade-off either way.

In terms of grammar, you might want to consider whether to use contractions ('we're', 'it's' and so on), avoid long sentences or allow some rules to be broken (such as sentences beginning with 'and'). Here, it's just a question of how far you want to go, and what is useful to the people doing the actual writing. (There's no point talking about gerunds or dependent clauses if people don't know what they are.)

You might also want your writing to be original or arresting. While that seems a laudable aim at first sight, it won't necessarily guarantee that your communications succeed. Originality isn't necessarily effective. Readers over 50, for example, may be accustomed to finding certain content in a certain format or style; deviating from that norm probably won't bring you any benefit. Instead, your aim should be to express yourself as well as possible within the communication conventions of your sector, like a film director working within a genre.

Variation in tone of voice

Written tone of voice is rarely the same in every situation. Just as people might speak differently to their colleagues than they do to their children, so brands need to have different verbal registers. Some of the dimensions of variation are:

- **Mood.** Although the underlying 'character' of the brand might change, it can still have different moods. For example, a series of letters designed to guide the customer of a double-glazing firm from initial introduction through to purchasing might make the transition from a bright, breezy tone through to a more serious, studious and detail-oriented feel as the relationship develops.

- **Medium.** Different media require different ways of speaking. The most obvious example at the moment is social media, which is generally agreed to require a different tone from other online channels or offline marketing.

- **Audience.** Your brand might need to talk to different people. For example, a website selling children's shoes might include content aimed at the children themselves, and other content aimed at their parents. If the users and purchasers of a product aren't the same person, you might have to consider how you'll talk to each group.

Taking the right 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!'

Too proud to use actual evidence to support its position, it comes across as snooty and patronising, washing over the reader and missing a precious chance to connect with them. People aren't stupid, so don't talk down to them.

Writing like you talk

At university, I would sometimes help friends with their essay writing, partly because I could type and partly because I could write. I never had any problem getting my own ideas down on paper, although the ideas themselves were nothing special, as evidenced by my average degree. But for many of the people I knew, translating thoughts into written words was a huge challenge.

I'd often ask them to explain what they meant, and they'd reply with a perfectly clear summary of their thoughts. Then I'd suggest that they simply wrote down what they'd just said. And they would look at me blankly, or start laughing.

They were falling into the formality trap – the tendency to use jargon, long words and complex sentence construction out of a sense that the occasion demands it. Under pressure to perform, it's tempting to reach for a tone that sounds 'authoritative' or 'businesslike'. But if you're not careful, you just end up confusing the audience – and perhaps yourself.

They've gone now, but these words once appeared regularly on the soup tins of my youth:

> Do not boil or overheat as this will impair the flavour

The usefulness of this copy depended on the reader understanding the word 'impair'. Personally, I think that's a big ask for the average supermarket customer. And why use the obscure 'impair' when you can use the everyday 'spoil'? Presumably because it's less impressive, or too conversational. But who cares when there's a risk of the customer ruining the product by preparing it in the wrong way – and then never buying it again as a result?

Once, a woman approached me near a cashpoint that was displaying these words:

> Please enter the amount required as a multiple of £20

She asked me why she couldn't withdraw £10. Obviously, the word 'multiple' didn't mean a lot to her – quite understandably. Messages like this have now been replaced with something more like 'This machine contains only £20 notes', which is essentially what I said to explain the situation.

Often, the use of formal language is simply unthinking. The writer hasn't stopped to consider what the audience needs. At other times, I think writers drastically overestimate the vocabulary or attention levels of their audience. Quite simply, there's just no reason to take chances with your audience connection. By making your language too formal, you're basically shutting out a part of your potential audience.

However, formality can also be a symptom of a kind of organisational insecurity or defensiveness – there's a need or obligation to communicate, but a psychological incentive to stop people understanding. This is one of the key ways in which different types of work are turned into 'professions' – the practitioners develop a private language, or jargon, known only to them. Language is a curtain that stops outsiders seeing how the organisation works.

I once received a letter from our local council informing me of a planning application for the 'erection of single-storey self-contained dwelling unit'. I think this means that someone wants to build a ground-floor flat, but I can't be sure. The effect of the language, deliberately or not, is to discourage involvement in the planning process – in theory, a social space.

Writing for 'Customer A'

One of the classic copywriting no-nos is to address the audience as a group. For example:

> Many of you have called or emailed to request more details about our new Fairtrade coffee range…

This instantly shatters any intimacy or rapport with the reader, making them feel like an anonymous face in a crowd. (The right approach is to write neutrally, in the third person, and let the reader associate themselves with the group if they wish: 'Many customers have called…')

Most marketing is a 'one-to-many' communication – that is, it takes the form of an individual addressing a crowd. (Social media channels such as Twitter represent a fascinating opportunity for brands and customers to interact one-on-one.) However, it should still adopt a one-on-one tone – one that feels honest and sincere.

One of the most effective ways to do this is by writing for a specific customer. Not necessarily an expensively produced customer profile, but an actual real-world individual.

When you're writing, select someone you know and write your copy as if you were actually addressing them personally, and no-one else. Choose someone who likes your products or services, but is still discerning. Someone who spends carefully, but not avariciously. Someone who appreciates quality and value, but doesn't suffer fools gladly. Let's call them Customer A.

Bring Customer A vividly to mind as you write. Picture yourself speaking the words you write out loud to them, pitching the product or service in person. Picture their reaction too. And picture the interaction happening in the venue where your material will most likely be read – at the breakfast table, browsing Facebook, researching a holiday etc.

The Customer A approach automatically brings a number of very important benefits:

- Customer A's time is precious, and they're really doing something else right now, so you'll get straight to the point

- You want them to listen, so you won't bore them by banging on about yourself (customer focus)

- You want them to like you, so you'll offer something that really helps them (benefits)

- You want them to take action, so you'll explain what they need to do next – and politely ask them to do it (the call to action)

- You want them to respect you, so you won't embarrass yourself by being pretentious, cracking lame jokes or trying to look clever

- It's an informal, face-to-face interaction, so you'll use simple, familiar words that can easily be said out loud (conversational language)

- You're writing for an individual, so your points will be coherent and consistent, avoiding self-contradiction by trying to hit too many targets.

Writing for Customer A is a great antidote to all the classic copywriting pitfalls – talking features instead of benefits, overcomplicating the message and failing to persuade. Try it. It really works.

Being asked to write a case study for a client by interviewing one of their customers (whether in person or be phone) represents a perfect opportunity to hear what they think at first hand.

Part 3:
Elements

Although every copywriting assignment is different, there are certain elements that crop up again and again.

Nearly every advert or marketing material needs a headline, and nearly every company these days has a tagline. Everyone needs to think about how to structure their copy. And you'll probably want to include a call to action too, to encourage the reader to take the next step in the buying process.

Headlines and slogans

In many ways, the headline or slogan is the most important part of any piece of copywriting. In fact, for some media (such as print advertisements), the headline may be all the copy there is. In other situations, the headline may be backed up by additional text – perhaps several pages of it, in the case of a longer leaflet or brochure. But whatever comes after it, the headline is crucial.

What does a headline do?

With just a few words, a headline needs to achieve a number of things:

- It **grabs the reader's attention** and encourage them to read on or buy into the message, whether through interest, intrigue, temptation or any other emotional 'hook'

- It **sets the tone** for any copy that follows, so the reader understands what kind of communication they are looking at (humorous, businesslike, informative etc)

- It **establishes the theme** for the content, orienting the reader in terms of the subject matter and allowing them to decide whether it's relevant to them

- By establishing the theme, it explains, illuminates or otherwise **'talks to' visual elements** such as photography or illustration. (In the case of press or outdoor adverts, copy and imagery may form two halves of a single whole, working together to convey a simple, compelling meaning to the reader.)

It should be abundantly clear that although headlines are short, they're absolutely crucial. It's no exaggeration to say that a piece of copy stands or falls by its headline. The headline is like the doorway into the room you've created with the rest of your text. If people don't walk through the door, they'll never see what's inside the room.

How do headlines grab attention?

In Part 1, I covered the importance of getting relevant attention. My argument is that there's no point grabbing attention for the sake of it. The extreme example would be a headline that screams 'Free money!' or something similar. While most people will pause to check out an advert or

flyer with a headline like that, their interest will soon evaporate once they realise that the promise is empty. What's more, on an emotional level they'll feel betrayed, and probably irritated, by this 'bait and switch' tactic. Hardly a sound basis for building rapport with them.

What really grabs sustainable attention is a benefit – or, more precisely, a **believable promise of value**. Whether it says so directly or not, your headline will generate interest and attention only if it offers the reader something that benefits them.

Now, the benefit that you offer to the reader can have several dimensions. It might be something very concrete, such as reducing their insurance premiums. It might be something emotional, like the chance to protect their family (by, for example, fitting a smoke alarm). And it might even be something as insubstantial as the opportunity to be entertained by reading the rest of the advert, if you want to take that approach. But there needs to be a benefit of some sort.

Another way to express this idea is in terms of the reader's internal thought response or state of mind once they encounter your headline. You're trying to get your reader to think things like:

- 'I've never heard of this before, but I'd like to find out more.'

- 'That's something I know I need. I want to learn more.'

- 'I'd love to own/enjoy/have that.'

- 'That could really help me.'

- 'That could save me time.'

- 'That could make my life a bit easier.'

- 'That could save me money,' or 'that could make me money.'

- 'That could protect something (or someone) I care about.'

- 'That could be the answer to my problem.'

- 'That sounds interesting.'

- 'Someone I know would be interested in that.'

Once you have some headlines down on paper, try putting yourself into the reader's shoes and evaluating them from this viewpoint. Will your words prompt this type of response? If the answer's 'yes', you've got a

headline with potential. Now all you need to do is make it punchy and memorable. But always remember that the benefits come first.

From boasts to benefits

It's clear from looking at this list that boasts in headlines are unlikely to do the trick. For example:

More features than any other digital camera on the market.

This is a self-centred headline – talking about the attributes of the product without any consideration of whether the reader might be interested, or how it might help them.

However, translating the 'many features' point into a benefit gives a very different result:

The only digital camera you'll ever need.

This is a headline that might prompt the reader to think 'that could really help me', or 'that could be the answer to my problem'.

Whenever you want to write a headline about a product, service or company, always consider how you can turn it around so that it includes, or refers to, the reader instead.

The magic headline ingredient

In the example above, note that the improved headline includes the magic word: 'you'.

If you want to engage people, you must talk about *them*. Including words like 'you' and 'your' involves the reader in what you're saying, turning a monologue into a dialogue. By contrast, using 'we' puts you on the back foot from the outset, unless you're going to talk about something brilliant you can do for them. And who is 'we', anyway? If your name or brand is unfamiliar to the reader, saying 'we' isn't going to push any buttons for them – whereas 'you' encourages them to think about someone who's always in their thoughts: themselves.

Addressing the reader directly demands a reaction, even if only in thought. When we see or hear a sentence that includes 'you', it *always* prompts us to think something, even if it's only 'no, that's not true'. Consider:

> Don't you deserve a better kitchen?

Now you're thinking about your kitchen. It's almost impossible not to. But contrast that with a headline such as:

> Kitchens made beautiful

Many kitchen companies would probably be very happy to publish an advert with that headline. It's elegant, concise and seductive. It would make them feel good about themselves. But it would probably leave readers a lot colder than the first option. Often, we have to face up to the fact that the things we want to say about ourselves won't necessarily interest the listener – in copywriting, and in life!

What is the reader doing?

It's important to remember the reader's situation when they see your headline, which might have some influence on the reaction you try to get from them.

If they're on the underground (US: subway), for example, they're seeing your ad next to other ads that are probably for completely different products. You need to interest or intrigue them so they read yours first. Online, however, they're probably seeing your website headline alongside the other sites they've found from their Google search, which may be very similar to yours. You need to offer a unique benefit that will make them want to stay on your site. And if you're writing a direct mail letter, you need to hook their attention in such a way that will make them want to read rather than throw the letter straight in the bin.

Some types of headlines

Now let's look at some types of headline and consider how they work. (The examples are fictitious unless attributed to a specific company or brand.)

Type	Example	Notes
Literal description	'*The* vertical strategy game' (Connect 4 game)	Unless the product is incredible or unique in itself, this won't convey much benefit. Connect 4 was unique when introduced, so perhaps the headline worked.

Literal benefit	'4.5% annual return guaranteed'	Direct and forceful. Generates strong interest from motivated or interested readers. No risk of being misunderstood, but may come across as inelegant or brutish.
Softer benefit	'Now hands that do dishes can feel soft as your face' (Fairy washing-up liquid) '10,000 songs in your pocket' (Apple iPod)	Still expresses a benefit, but in a 'softer' way. Used for the vast majority of B2C headlines, where emotion is used in conjunction with real benefits to draw the reader in.
Emotional benefit	'Lee. The jeans that built America' (Lee jeans)	Offers a purely emotional, intangible benefit to the reader (in this example, the promise of ruggedness, heritage, authenticity and patriotism). This will only work if the emotional pull is strong enough – if it's not, there's nothing else there.
Obscure benefit	'See what you can do' (O2 mobile phone network) 'Impossible is nothing' (Adidas sportswear)	Alludes to a benefit in an indirect or obscure way. Use with care unless you have enough ad spend to make it stick. Note use of 'you' by O2.
Question (literal)	'What's the secret of healthy-looking hair?' 'Does your memory let you down?'	May draw the reader in, but equally may just irritate them if they don't know (or don't like) the answer. The question needs to talk to one of their own priorities or concerns.
Question (rhetorical)	'Who knows the secret of the Black Magic box?' (Black Magic chocolates) 'Is she or isn't she?' (Harmony hairspray)	May be intriguing and compelling, but risks sliding into nonsense or irrelevancy.
Twist on a familiar phrase	'I think, therefore IBM' (IBM computers)	Grabs attention but gives no clue as to benefits. Use with care.
Promise	'Always there for you' (Hyundai cars)	Offers generalised reassurance without necessarily stating any specific benefits. Use of 'you' is always powerful.
Command	'Don't leave home without it.' (American Express credit card)	Powerful if the reader agrees with the advice, but may backfire if it generates reactance – in other words, the reader thinks 'no!' or 'why should I?'

Pun	'Alarmed? You should be' (Moss Security burglar alarms) 'More smiles per hour' (TVS Victor motorcycles) 'Because the Citi never sleeps' (Citibank) 'Let's get fizzical' (Corona soft drinks)	Can be very effective, but only if the reader remembers which company used the pun – they could easily be used by a competitor. To avoid this, incorporate the brand into the headline (as with Citibank here).
Ambiguity	'Everything you hear is true' (Pioneer hi-fi)	Similar to a pun, but with less humorous intent. Gives a subtler effect, but with a risk of seeming smug or 'too clever'. Hence good for brands with 'sophisticated' values.
Neologism	'Bigsmall' (Toyota Yaris car) 'Innervigoration' (Gordon's gin)	If there's no word for what you want to say, just make one up! But make sure your audience will understand it…
Rhyme	'Don't be vague. Ask for Haig' (Haig whisky) 'Harp. Stay sharp' (Harp lager)	Very rare nowadays, but perhaps worth considering for that reason?
Metaphor	'Liquid engineering' (Castrol GTX engine oil)	Puts a striking and memorable in the reader's mind – but only if the metaphor is well chosen.
Simile	'Why creating a website is like buying a suit'	Works similarly to a metaphor. Ideally, illuminates an unfamiliar or boring topic in terms of something more interesting or entertaining.
List	'Five reasons to buy an HD-ready TV today'	Gives an impression of authority and comprehensiveness – like an informative article rather than an advert. However, by the same token, it may be daunting for readers who don't want to read much.

Structure

Structuring your copy is one of those things that can only be fully learnt through doing. It's something that comes with experience of many different copywriting jobs, as you organise many different types of material and intuitively grasp the rules that govern the shape of a piece of content.

However, I've done my best to pull together the key principles as I see them, to give you a head start.

Order and flow

You might want to decide the overarching structure of your copy before you start. On the other hand, it might be easier to put a few ideas down on paper and see what structure they suggest. Always remember that you don't have to write in the final order, or get it right first time, or use everything that you write. You can just let the ideas flow on to the page and see what pattern emerges.

Put each idea, sentence or even phrase on a separate line, rather than trying to maintain the text as a proper paragraph. Add headings as and when you want them, without worrying about whether they're the right ones. Use headings that make sense to you, for now – you can replace them with the real ones later.

As the text evolves, start to gravitate towards a more orderly structure. That normally means one point per sentence, and one theme or idea per paragraph. Often, this results in relatively short paragraphs (perhaps three or four sentences each). It's a good format for both print and web copy (and I'm using it here).

Some structuring options

In terms of the overall structure of your copy, here are some options you can consider:

- **Benefits.** Since benefits are at the heart of all good copywriting, it can't hurt to use them as the guiding principle for your structure. Let each section explain how a particular benefit will be delivered. The headings write themselves – simply describe each benefit.

- **Features.** As stated, benefits sell best in nearly every situation. But there are times, such as when you're writing for a very technically literate audience, when features are the way to go. If so, you could use them as the key to break up and structure your copy.

- **Story.** Your copy takes the form of a narrative with a distinct beginning, middle and end. It might be the story of someone purchasing and using a product, or joining a group, or anything else related to whatever you're promoting. Stories are easy to read, intuitively

understood and highly memorable. In B2B marketing, case studies are a form of very detailed storytelling. In B2C, the story might be fictitious, or a blend of fact and fiction, or a 'typical customer' story.

- **Problem and solution.** You begin by describing a problem that readers can relate to, before describing the solution. Naturally, the solution involves the promoted product or service in some way!

- **Numbered list.** You break down your points into a set number of modules or points, which you then tick off one by one. For example, 'ten reasons why you need a TravelCo holiday'. If you use this technique, make sure you choose a reassuring cardinal number: 3, 5, 7, 10, 12, 15, 20, 25 or 50. For some reason, numbers such as 4, 8, 11 or 17 just won't connect with readers in the same way. Don't ask me why!

- **Different viewpoints.** Your copy examines the same situation from a range of different viewpoints. For example, copy for a motor insurance provider might look at the viewpoints of each party in a motor accident.

- **From general to detail.** Perhaps in conjunction with another structure, you can move from the general to the detailed over the course of your copy. This has the effect of leading the reader by the hand from the headline into more complex territory, where you need to add more background to explain the benefits.

Bullets, bold and tables

As the previous section shows, bullet points are a great way to present a list of unordered (i.e. equal, unranked) items. Lists of benefits or features are prime candidates to be formatted as bulleted lists. Use bold leader text (again, as above) to explain what each bullet point is about before the reader actually works through it.

An alternative approach is to **pick out the key words** in bold (as in this paragraph). However, use this with care – the bold tends to **draw the eye**, and may **pull the reader's attention away** from the main flow of your text. Because of the bold, there's a good chance you jumped to the phrase '**pick out the key words'** in this paragraph before you started reading this section. If you'd carried on reading from that point, you would have **missed out** some of my **carefully crafted content**! (Of course, you may feel

that it's OK for a reader to skim-read as long as they understand your key messages.)

Tables are like bullets, but with an extra dimension. They let you list things and then compare their attributes – perhaps many different attributes.

You can fill the table cells with text, explaining how each attribute applies to the item you're on, or you can produce a binary 'checklist' table, which compares different products or services in terms of the components or features they include. In this latter format, table cells contain a bullet or some other graphic device to indicate that the relevant feature is applicable.

If you find you're struggling to set out the features or attributes of a number of different things, there's a good chance that a table will be helpful. However, you also have to bear in mind that tables do take up space, and also that they imply a very precise, actuarial tone that might not be appropriate for the piece you're writing. For example, it's easy to see how a comparison table might work well in the context of software applications, but it might be less appropriate for comparing different funeral services.

Sub-headings

Sub-headings (sometimes called 'cross-headings' or 'cross-heads') are headings inserted into the flow of the text, like the ones in this book. They serve three very important functions:

- They **break up the text**, so the reader isn't daunted by a huge block of words

- They allow the reader to **navigate directly** to the section that interests them

- They can be used to **sum up key points**, so reader can get a sense of your meaning even when they're skim-reading.

Sub-headings must be used appropriately, by which I mean they must be in proportion with the text they're breaking up. Over-frequent headings are intrusive and will disrupt the flow, while too few headings will fail to provide the orientation you're looking for. You're looking to provide footholds, or a way to get to grips with the text – no more, no less.

Ideally, sub-headings should occur with reasonably consistent pacing – for example, every three or four paragraphs. It also helps if they're all roughly the same length, and all take the same form. Using them in an inconsistent or irregular way will generate unease in the reader's mind.

Boxouts

Boxouts and panels are used to present important text that doesn't really fit into your narrative, or is different by its nature from the main part of your content.

For example, you might use a boxout to present customer quotes, industry research or a news item that reflects on your message in some way. In all cases, the boxout is somehow 'commenting on' the main content, which is why it's positioned 'off to one side' rather than being integrated into the main text.

However, that's not to say that boxout text is optional, or won't be read. Depending on its visual style, it could be the first (or indeed, the only) thing that people bother to read. So don't use it as a dumping ground for stuff you can't find a proper home for – instead, it should be used to deploy high-value content in exciting juxtaposition with the main text.

Direct marketing letters sometimes include a 'Johnson Box'. This is a rectangular box that highlights the offer at the very start of the letter, before the salutation. Some marketers claim that it increases response rates by up to 40% - but it's really just another form of headline, rather than a boxout. Similarly, the much-used 'P.S.' device in direct marketing letters is really a kind of sub-headline tacked on to the end of the letter – a way to restate the offer, or some compelling aspect of it, in a position that readers' eyes will naturally jump to.

Company taglines

Writing a tagline can be a good way to add character or differentiation to a brand, or to communicate benefits. This section looks at some of the main types of taglines, and the pros and cons of each, and discussed the special case of B2B taglines.

A long time ago in a galaxy far, far away...

If, like me, you fondly remember being taken to the cinema to see George Lucas' magnum opus in the late 1970s, you probably can't read those words without a little shiver of anticipation. Appearing silently in cyan text on a black ground at the beginning of the film, they conjured up far more magic than the doughty, bisyllabic title *Star Wars* ever could.
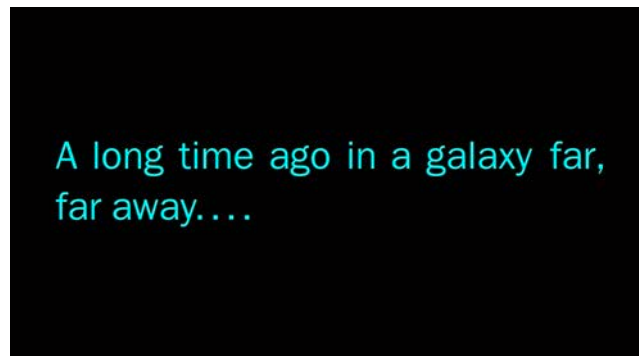
Such is the power of the tagline. Even if a company name is an emotional blank ('IBM'), you can always bolt some words on to it to make it sing. Provided your audience makes a lasting link between the phrase and your brand, you've added a new verbal and emotional 'hook' to your value proposition.

What is a tagline?

A tagline is simply a brief phrase that is closely allied with a company name or brand.

It can appear in a range of media, typically including websites, stationery, printed marketing collateral, TV advertisements and so on. Often, the tagline appears in close proximity with the company name and/or logo; in some cases it is 'locked up' with the logo so that graphic and phrase form a single visual unit.

Is there a difference between a headline/slogan and a tagline? Well, in my mind, a slogan is associated with a particular product, service or marketing campaign, whereas a tagline is associated with a company or a brand. Some marketers express this distinction as 'product tagline' vs 'company tagline'. So you can have several slogans or product taglines, but only one company tagline. And your slogans are likely to change more often than your company tagline, which is a key part of building equity in a brand long-term.

Every company tagline is different – or should be. (Yes, I'm looking at you, Lloyds TSB – see below.) However, there are recognisable types. Let's look at a few of them.

Factual taglines

These taglines simply state a fact about the company.

> Gaming since 1981 (Computer & Video Games)

Whether these taglines work depends on whether the fact invoked constitutes a customer benefit. Many facts of which companies are justifiably proud don't actually translate into benefits. For example, will I give more weight to CVG's views on *Heavy Rain* because they were around to review *Manic Miner*? Well, I might, but someone born in 1995 probably wouldn't – in fact, in the fast-moving games arena, longevity may even be the enemy of credibility. It's not a benefit, but a boast.

Egocentric taglines

These taglines try to encapsulate a company does, or what it is.

> Touching lives, improving life (Procter & Gamble)
>
> We try harder (Avis)
>
> We're Exxon (erm, Exxon)
>
> Good with food (Co-Operative)
>
> Beyond petroleum (BP)
>
> Beanz Meanz Heinz (Heinz)
>
> Never knowingly undersold (John Lewis)

In some cases, egocentric taglines can allude to a customer benefit. (One could argue that the Accenture, P&G and Avis slogans do this, and the John Lewis tagline definitely does – although I doubt if every reader understands it.) But at other times, they're simply corporate chest-beating (Exxon's above being an egocentric boast *par excellence*). And because the best copywriting focuses on the customer, not the company (as we saw in Part 1), that's probably best avoided. You want your tagline to leave at least some space for your audience to inhabit.

Benefit taglines

These taglines communicate a benefit that you offer to your customers.

> Every little helps (Tesco)
>
> Reach out and touch someone (AT&T)
>
> Feel better, look better (Boots)
>
> Discover a world of flavour (Unearthed)

To write a benefit tagline, you need to isolate the single most important benefit that people get when they choose your product or service. As we've discussed, a USP need not be unique. But it does need to be compelling.

In some cases, such as Tesco above, the benefit is very loosely defined, or only alluded to tangentially. But it's still there. The Tesco tagline positions the chain as a 'best price' value proposition ('every little saving helps') while also faintly evoking its broad service portfolio ('every little extra service helps').

Often, benefit taglines are written in the imperative mood (as with AT&T, Boots and Unearthed above) – a direct command to the reader. The unspoken postscript is '…by choosing our product'. AT&T aren't suggesting that you reach out and touch someone in the queue at the chemist's.

Abstract taglines

These taglines express almost nothing concrete about the company. Instead, they abstract tangible customer benefits or brand values into an emotional state or abstruse metaphor.

> For the journey (Timberland and, bizarrely, Lloyds TSB)
>
> I'm lovin' it (McDonald's)
>
> Just do it (Nike)
>
> Make. Believe (Sony)
>
> It's you! (Yahoo!)

The most obvious problem with this kind of tagline is that conjures no benefit, and therefore creates very little 'glue' between the phrase and your brand. So while these taglines might be striking in the context of a particular campaign, they might not give readers a lasting, memorable reason to buy from you specifically. 'For the journey' might prompt me to get some kit together for my outdoor holiday, but it doesn't give me any particular reason to choose Timberland – unless I recall the phrase and the association with that particular brand when I shop.

As these examples show, abstract taglines are the preserve of companies whose brands already have strong 'recognition' and 'penetration', in marketer-speak, and they're looking to give them a new twist to keep them fresh in people's minds. Multinationals have enough above-the-line spend to throw so much branding mud at the wall that some is bound to

stick – but that kind of marketing muscle is beyond the reach of most middling or emerging brands.

Abstract taglines magnify the mystique and aura of 'touching' a major brand. Using one if you're a sole trader or SME may not be so effective: you probably won't be able to deliver an experience that lives up to the glitz, or promote the message in the appropriate channels to make it convincing. A plumber who sticks a phrase like 'For the journey' on his personalised biro probably won't gain any new customers as a result.

Question taglines

These company taglines pose a question to the reader. The question may be rhetorical, or there may be an implication that the company asking the question can somehow help with the answer.

> **Where do you want to go today? (Microsoft)**
>
> **What's in your wallet? (Capital One)**
>
> **Doesn't your dog deserve Alpo? (Alpo, a US dog food)**

Question taglines tread the fine line between intrigue and irritation. Generally, questioning your audience is risky because you're asking them to think when they probably can't be bothered. It doesn't help if, as with Microsoft, the question you're asking them is open, abstract and not directly related to your product. The Alpo method is much better – ask a leading, rhetorical question that, when the natural answer is provided, implies or leads to a purchase.

B2B taglines

You've probably noticed that all the examples I've given so far are B2C (business-to-consumer) taglines, rather than B2B (business-to-business). That's because creating and using a B2B tagline is a very different – and far more difficult – proposition.

B2B taglines are fundamentally unlike their B2C counterparts because the mindset of the target customer is so different. Whereas B2C brands usually seek to establish 'soft' emotional connotations for their products, B2B marketing is much more focused on concrete benefits. B2C brands are usually trying to attract disposable, personal or leisure income to an

optional purchase; B2B is about securing a business's budget for a carefully considered commercial project.

While some B2B brands do have emotional overtones, they're much weaker, rarely feature in buying discussions and never constitute an overriding reason to buy. While I might spend extra cash to get a Mac rather than a Dell at home because I love the Apple brand and experience, I'm probably going to have a harder time convincing the financial director that we need them for the whole office on those grounds.

Stripping away the emotional elements of the buying decision effectively levels the playing field between B2B brands, commoditising their products to some degree. For many high-end B2B providers (i.e those likely to market themselves using a tagline), the justification for their higher prices revolves around premium quality, better service or superior RoI. Ultimately, most B2B benefits boil down to 'make money', 'save money' or 'save time'; they're not about the customer feeling, believing or loving anything unique.

The perennial problem in B2B marketing is that everyone else is saying the same kind of thing and invoking the same kind of benefits, obliging the B2B firm to go into detail to make their case (perhaps with case studies). But that type of detail is the exact opposite of a tagline, which is essentially a broad-brush, unsubstantiated statement of a brand value.

Because they can't encapsulate differentiation, many B2B taglines end up sounding generic, bland or non-specific; many end up relying on a small number of copywriting clichés that do accurately describe the benefits on offer but have lost their communicative power through overuse.

Invent (Hewlett-Packard)

High performance. Delivered (Accenture)

Simplify, Automate, Secure (Computer Associates)

The hazard here is the same as with abstract B2C taglines – making a generic case for using someone like you, rather than promoting yourself uniquely. The benefits are real, and the words are the right ones to describe them, but there's just no differentiation to be had at such a generalised level.

Many B2B taglines could be swapped with those of direct competitors, or even firms in other industries, with precious little effect. But you can still stand out if competitors have dissimilar taglines, or no tagline at all. Just don't fall into the trap of using something crashingly unoriginal such as 'our people make the difference'.

When I'm asked to come up with a B2B tagline, I often suggest that it should be informative rather than touchy-feely. If the brand is completely anonymous (e.g. 'GHD Technology') then the tagline can give the audience an insight into what's being offered (e.g. 'On-site PC service and repairs').

It's dull, but effective. The initial touchpoint for B2B brands is very often online – and when people are surfing, you need to hook them by confirming that they've reached the right place. If your brand doesn't do it, the tagline should; visitors might not bother to hang around and discover exactly what kind of 'proactive solutions' you 'deliver', or in what area you're hoping to 'exceed expectations'.

By precisely positioning a B2B firm, the right descriptive tagline can turn an also-ran into a specialist player – perhaps even a unique one. Many service providers want to look big by claiming a 'one stop shop' or 'full-service' offering – in many cases, they'd be better off admitting their limits and turning them into selling points.

Metaphors and similes

When we use metaphors or similes, we compare one thing to another so we can understand or explain it better. We do this to explain it, to understand it or sometimes just to make our language more colourful.

> Life's but a shadow, a poor player
> That struts and frets his hour upon the stage
> And then is heard no more.

Here, the core of the metaphor is the equation "life=theatre", with the secondary meaning "people=actors". In these lines, Shakespeare is explicitly saying that our lives are as brief and futile as a play – a meaningless shadow rather than anything real. Implicitly, he's also saying that we have little control over our destinies, like actors whose lines are written down for them. Once the parallel is drawn, a metaphor opens up a range of ways to think about something in a new way.

Metaphors in NLP

Neuro-linguistic programming (NLP) takes language seriously, acknowledging that it shapes the way we think. NLP practitioners pay close attention to the words people choose. By really listening to what people say, we can learn about the way they see themselves or the world.

To an NLP practitioner, metaphors are interesting because of their limits. They illuminate some truths while obscuring others; in NLP terminology, there are things they 'allow' and things they 'disallow'.

For example, we might say that a trusted friend is 'a rock'. Obviously, there are lots of unintended literal meanings: our friend probably isn't thousands of years old, rough to the touch or permanently rooted to the spot. When we liken them to a rock, we're saying that they're solid and reliable.

However, they are human, so their moods and opinions change. Since rocks don't change, our metaphor obscures this aspect of their personality, locking them into an idea of stolidity that may be limiting (for us, or for them). This highlights the importance of 'stepping out' of metaphors when they are no longer useful.

Liquid engineering

A good example of a strong metaphor in copywriting is the slogan used for Castrol GTX in the 1980s: 'liquid engineering'. In just two words, it

transformed an everyday, almost commodity product into something essential and sophisticated.

Copywriting metaphors like this derive their power from two sources: imagery and emotion. In general, people find it easy to grasp concrete images, and harder to understand abstract concepts. Moreover, they respond more strongly when their hearts are appealed to, rather than just their minds. 'Liquid engineering' equates Castrol's oil (an inanimate object) with attentive, skilful human engineers, suggesting that it provides a similar level of care, while appealing to the customer's desire to care for their engine and safeguard their investment.

Leaky umbrella

Castrol's metaphor was apposite, elegant and memorable – a brilliant piece of copywriting. But it's very easy to get drawn into using a metaphor for its own sake, or pressing one into service that isn't quite suited to the job at hand. The following is the text of a magazine advert used by a leading UK insurer:

> Would you buy an umbrella, if it didn't keep you dry?
> Neither would we. So why should you pay for an insurance
> policy that won't keep you properly covered? Unlike 8 out of
> 10 standard home insurance policies we include cover for
> your belongings if they are accidentally damaged or lost –
> as standard.

The text was accompanied by a picture of an umbrella, highlighting one of the handiest benefits of metaphors in marketing – they give you a handy hook to hang your imagery on when none is otherwise available. (Services are often hard to depict – it's even worse in B2B marketing.)

Although insurance=umbrella seems promising as a metaphor, it actually muddies the meaning rather than clarifying it. Have you ever had, or bought, an umbrella that didn't keep you dry? How would you know that an umbrella wouldn't keep you dry, before you bought it?

The umbrella is an everyday item, but the situation described is artificial and not one that readers will immediately recognise from their lives. As a result, the metaphor won't have the sensual, concrete force that drives emotional impact.

Don't be too clever

Instead of providing a useful stepping-stone between something familiar and a new concept, the headline metaphor in this example is adding a cognitive barrier between reader and benefit – and therefore putting obstacles in the way of a sale. The headline is literally a riddle, and asking your reader to solve riddles risks them simply walking away.

Since the core benefit is easy enough to understand for anyone who's ever bought home insurance (which is almost everybody), a better headline might be:

> **With [Insurer], cover for damage and loss come as standard.**

Or, for a bit more spice:

> **What's extra for others is standard for us: damage and loss cover included with every home insurance policy.**

Of course, you wouldn't be able to include a nice picture of an umbrella, but you would have a headline that would actually generate interest.

It's well known that headlines with benefits outpull those without. So if you've got a benefit that's easy to communicate, it should always lead your copy. If you want to connect with readers, don't try to be too clever.

Making metaphors work

Here are a few pointers for making metaphors work in copywriting.

- **Use sparingly.** Only use metaphors when they're needed: to clarify points that would otherwise be difficult to explain or understand. There's little benefit in introducing a metaphor purely to add colour or interest.

- **Choose carefully.** The right comparison can illuminate a key point like a ray of sunlight breaking through the clouds. But the wrong one can quickly lead you into deep water. Be sure your metaphor is appropriate.

- **Dig deeper.** Sometimes, metaphors have layers of meaning that you might not want. Consider what your metaphor really says about the product, service or company you're promoting.

- **Less is more.** Metaphors are like tissues. At the moment you need them, they're indispensable. But if you try to get too much use out of them, you'll end up in a mess. In other words, most metaphors support just one or two strong points; after that, they should be dropped.

- **Don't mix it up.** 'Let's run that idea up the flagpole and see if it holds water.' 'We weren't on the same page because they were dancing to a different beat.' Adding metaphors together doesn't concentrate meaning; it dilutes it. Give your metaphors room to breathe, so your reader can absorb each one fully before you hit them with the next. If they're too close, or if they overlap, the result can is ludicrous.

Calls to action

A call to action is a short piece of text (usually one or two sentences) in an advertisement or marketing communication that encourages the reader to take a particular course of action – buy, donate, make contact and so on.

Calls to action guide the audience towards a real-world action, so they don't turn the page, click through to another site or just carry on browsing your material aimlessly. They set a boundary on readers' 'information gathering' experience, encouraging them to move into the 'doing' phase.

The call to action is one of the most important 'take-aways' for the audience. If there's one thing the copywriter wants the audience to read and internalise (after the headline), it's the call to action.

Where are calls to action used?

Calls to action should be included in almost every piece of marketing, whether focused at businesses or consumers.

Examples of where they might appear are:

- **In brochures:** on the back page, or interspersed within the text

- **On websites:** on every 'selling' page, and perhaps also on a 'contact us' page (possibly not on 'more information' pages)

- **In direct mail sales letters or marketing emails:** towards the end, before the sign-off, and perhaps repeated in a PS

Often, a call to action will be highlighted by being boxed out, emboldened or otherwise 'biggened up'.

Calls to action are not used in pure 'brand-building' marketing, where the only aim is to make the audience remember the brand, or where the required action is obvious. For example, TV and outdoor ads for fast-moving consumer goods don't need to tell the audience to go to a supermarket and buy the product; they already know.

Define your desired customer response

Before you can create a call to action, you must know your desired customer response (DCR). What do you want the reader to do once they've read your message?

Whatever your DCR is, it should be all of the following:

- **Clear.** A ten-year-old should be able to understand what you're asking them to do.

- **Simple.** A DCR should consist of a single step. You may want people to go to a website and buy, but the first step is just to get them there – it's the website's job to convert traffic to sales.

- **Specific.** A DCR should make it clear exactly what the audience should do, in concrete terms: fill out a form, visit a shop, make a phone call, go to a website and so on.

A basic call to action

At its simplest, a call to action is a single sentence that tells the reader to do something, using the imperative mood:

> Call us now to claim your FREE sample copy of *Lawnmower World*.

Note the key characteristics of the basic call to action:

- It **communicates the DCR**, preserving its three key attributes (clear, simple and specific).

- It **links the DCR with a benefit** for the reader (in this case, a free magazine). This is essential. A call to action offers a *quid pro quo*. 'If you do this,' we're saying to the reader, 'you'll get that.' The benefit need not be concrete, but there must be something in it for the customer, even if it's only useful information on a product.

- It **commands the reader directly**, with no equivocation. The impact can be softened with 'please', but this is rarely necessary. People generally avoid the imperative in conversation, but commands aren't always confrontational and may often be welcomed or reassuring. (For example: 'Sit down, have a coffee and let me take care of it.')

- It **tells the reader when to act** ('now') instead of leaving the timeframe open-ended.

The simple 'sanity check' for calls to action is to read them through and ask yourself whether you'd be happy if the reader did *exactly* what you're asking, no more and no less.

It's OK to vary the *content* of your call to action (for example, to add variety if it appears on more than one page in your site), but the *message* (i.e. the underlying DCR) should always be the same.

Add the power of persuasion

Sometimes, it's not enough just to tell people what to do. They need to know *why* they should do it. To address this need, you can use principles of persuasion to add more power to your call to action.

There are a number of proven ways to persuade readers to act, which are covered in later sections. Here are some examples of persuasive calls to action, with cross-references to the relevant section.

> We all know how hard it is to find presents that friends and family will really love. So make Christmas easier this year at greatgifts.com.

(Liking: alluding to a rapport or shared interest with the reader. See page 63.)

> Thousands of businesses have already unlocked huge productivity gains by switching to *BookKeeper*. Call us to discover how you could join them.

(Social proof: do as others are doing. See page 64.)

> Are you tired of scrubbing off limescale? Pick up a FREE trial pack of ScaleAway at your local store and say goodbye to it for ever.

(Consistency: taking the desired action is consistent with the response to the question being asked. See page 65.)

> Doctors recommend eating at least five portions of fruit and vegetables a day. Call today to order your regular organic box from Willow Farm and make sure you have delicious fresh produce ready to eat, every day.

(Authority: the opinion of a reputable source supports the DCR. See page 67.)

> Just 250 of these special souvenir plates have been manufactured. Act now to secure yours before they are all snapped up by collectors.

(Scarcity: something is in short supply, or great demand. See page 69.)

Embedded commands

Embedded commands are sentences embedded within longer sentences that act as cues on the unconscious level. In theory, they direct the reader towards the DCR by subliminally planting an idea in their mind. The idea is that the conscious mind parses the entire sentence and takes on board the 'surface' meaning, while the unconscious mind hears the sentence within and acts on it.

Now, you may or may not believe that embedded commands work – but they can often be included in a very unobtrusive way, so you might as well give them a go!

However, if you can't make them work unobtrusively, don't bother. If the reader's conscious mind picks up on the message you're trying to slip in under the radar, the method will not work. If the effect is jarring, you'll end up disorientating the reader and may also elicit reactance (see page 76), where the reader reacts against your attempt to manipulate them.

The great thing about embedded commands is that they can, in theory, be scattered throughout the text without interrupting the flow or irritating the reader.

Here are a few examples, with the embedded command in red:

> When you choose our service, you're tapping into decades of expertise.

> How good would it feel to book a short break right now?

> You can call our order hotline 7 days a week.

> Think about the benefits that will be realised for your business when you work with a professional accountant.

> Most customers who buy in bulk from us make big savings.

> You don't even need to visit your nearest branch – we're also available online and by phone.

The last example shows that the 'surface' and 'hidden' meanings may be different, for example if the hidden meaning is masked by a negative. As long as they both lead the reader to a desirable action, that's fine. The unconscious doesn't really understand words like 'not' and 'don't'. That's why if I say 'don't think of an elephant,' you can't help picturing an elephant!

It won't always be possible to include the DCR explicitly in an embedded command. Instead, the embedded commands can 'soften up' the reader by gently introducing the general theme of the DCR, before you hit them with the direct call to action at the end.

Case studies

For organisations or companies who deliver services, case studies are a great way to showcase skills, experience and approaches. They work equally well for freelances, sole traders, SMEs and large corporates, giving potential clients a chance to see how your way of working actually pans out in practice, and what it could do for them. They also function as indirect recommendations, since the clients mentioned are giving their tacit endorsement.

Case study structure

The best case studies tell a story with a distinct beginning, middle and end. The beginning is the client's need, the middle is what was done for them, and the end is how they benefited.

In my view, every case study should follow this chronological approach, using some or all of the following sections in the order listed (though not necessarily with these headings):

- **Background:** some general information about the client or customer

- **Origins:** how contact was made

- **Requirement:** the client's needs, situation or problems at the time

- **Approach:** what was done that addressed their need, or solved their problems

- **Results:** the outcomes of the work, at a practical level

- **Benefits:** how the client benefited as a result of the work.

Medium and length

Case studies can be used almost anywhere: in brochures, as standalone printed handouts or folder inserts, on websites or in presentations. They may also form the basis for press releases. However, the length should be appropriate for the medium and format chosen.

A presentation version should be four or five slides at most, with three or four bullet points per slide. Each slide should cover a stage of the story as described above. If you can't say what's needed within those limits, choose a different medium. Don't shoehorn narrative into PowerPoint – it'll never get read.

A printed version might go onto a double-sided A4 sheet, in which case allow 500 words per side max (10pt text with some headings and illustrations).

If your case study is to be published online, you need 750 words per page at the most; something closer to 400, or shorter, is far more likely to be read in its entirety. However, it's worth considering the likely 'information appetite' of the target audience. If there's loads of material you simply must publish, you can always do a concise web-page version and link to a

longer PDF (designed exactly like a printed version, on A4) that people can download.

Length does not equal value, so don't add content for its own sake. But conversely, don't fall into the trap of cutting everything to the bone in the belief that it will maximise interest. Some people do still like to read, and it's only in the details that the quality and value of what you do can be fully substantiated.

Case study content

- Describe all the key facts, even those you feel are obvious. Your story needs to flow logically and make sense even to those not paying close attention.

- Don't get too bogged down in 'what was done'. The point is the benefits delivered rather than the actions taken.

- Don't use industry jargon – or, if you do, define each term you use.

- Give personal or business context that shows readers why the service delivered was so important, or made such a difference. For example: 'Our photographs were used in the key Christmas brochure, which is distributed to over 10,000 recipients.'

- Include quantitative (numerical) benefits wherever possible: money or time saved, profit made or anything else that can be measured.

- The sanity check for case study content is: 'if I were a potential client or customer, would this point interest me?' If the answer's 'no', cut it. Don't let B2B case studies turn into a love-in about the 'relationship' – it's great that everybody got on well, but we need to see some concrete benefits too.

Quotes in case studies

Direct quotes from the client add both weight and colour to a case study. It's always better to report people's actual words, instead of you saying how happy they were. Also, people have their unique ways of expressing themselves, and their voice will bring a welcome change of tone to the content of the case study.

For B2B, you should seek quotes from the highest level of the organisation you can, focusing on the strategic, high-level benefits that your service

realised or enabled, rather than the practical details of how it was delivered (which you can easily describe yourself).

Networking and directory sites allow you to solicit and display client testimonials on your profile page. If people have written enough words, you could use them in your case study.

You could also solicit quotes by email. If you want detailed answers in a range of areas, you could create a list of questions for your client to answer. Ask questions beginning 'how' and 'what', which invite the most expansive, expressive responses ('how did the service benefit your business?'). However, there's still a risk of receiving telegraphic or even one-word answers, which can be embarrassing if you can't use them. So interview your contact if you can. Prepare a list of questions, and send it in advance, but arrange a time to talk on the phone and record the conversation. That way you can explore the client's answers, get more detail and prompt them if they're not very forthcoming.

Case study presentation

- Use 'crossheads' (subheadings) so people can skim-read the case study or 'cut to the chase' if they wish (see page 42 for more). Your aim should be to provide detail for those who want it, without obliging casual readers to plough through everything.

- A 'standfirst' (bold paragraph at the start) that sums up the whole story, including the key benefits delivered, makes for a punchy opening. Look at magazines for examples.

- Another good tactic is 'pulling out' key content (such as juicy client quotes, see below) into highlighted boxes beside the text, or interspersed within it. Again, magazines will show you how. (See 'Boxouts' on page 43 for more detail.)

- Pictures are a great idea. Client logos, portraits of people, pictures of what you did – anything that's specific to the case study will add significant value and interest. Try to avoid bland royalty-free photos, since the incongruence between the specifics of the narrative and the general, irrelevant imagery will be jarring. Remember, your case study is a story – and pictures included in stories always reflect the narrative.

Part 4:
Persuasion

Persuasive copywriting is a matter of exploiting a number of proven, well-established principles. Those who persuade well know how to appeal to particular human desires and needs. By understanding these needs and appealing to them, we can become more persuasive copywriters.

The principles in this section are based on the work of management researcher and writer Robert B. Cialdini, who spent decades identifying what makes some people better at persuading than others.

Liking

The principle of liking states that people like those who like them, and are more likely to follow the suggestions of people they like. Similarities between people in terms of views, preferences and perceptions make them like each other, and people also like those who praise them, whether or not the praise is merited.

The principle of liking is clearly seen in adverts that deploy an attractive face to promote a product. Research shows that we generally like good-looking people more, and are more likely to respect their opinions.

Cialdini himself cites the example of Tupperware to illustrate this principle in action: the product being sold in the home, face to face, via a warm, friendly relationship between vendor and customer based on mutual liking. But copywriters, by definition, don't get to meet their audience and strike up a friendship with them. How can we apply the principle of liking in copywriting?

One way would be to write a headline or introduction that sets up a friendly rapport with the reader. Instead of beginning with the benefits of the product or service (as we would normally do by default), we can subtly align ourselves with the reader by suggesting that we have things in common, or giving them a compliment. For example:

> If you're a parent, you already know how to manage your time, deal with difficult people and juggle priorities. Now here's a way to get rid of at least one of your worries…

By demonstrating knowledge of the reader's situation, we indicate that we are like them; that we understand them. And because we're implicitly praising them too, we hope they'll warm to us as a friend. Copy like this

marks out common ground between the copywriter and the reader, using the reader's recognition of details from their own life as the key. This sets the scene for a marketing message that, because it comes from someone who is both 'like' and 'liked by' the reader, is more likely to be acted upon.

Of course, it's easy to get wrong. The setup needs to be convincing – which means writing it from first-hand knowledge or rock-solid research rather than a five-minute scan of a Wikipedia page. It also needs to be sincere, insofar as a mass-communicated message can be sincere. The whole message needs to be congruent, with content, tone of voice and presentation all working in harmony.

Social proof

The principle of social proof states that people follow the lead of others who are similar to them. They look to those around them for cues on how to behave, with peers giving the most powerful cues.

The most famous examples of social proof in copywriting are headlines along the lines of 'Ten million housewives can't be wrong', which position a product as the preferred choice of the majority – and therefore of the reader too. It is, of course, a *non sequitur* – the *argumentum ad populum* ('appeal to the people') that suggests that if lots of people believe something, it must be so.

A classic and much-used example is selling a product on the basis of its being the number-one seller, or promoting a company on the basis of its being the leader. The saying 'nobody got fired for buying IBM' encapsulates the appeal of going with the majority.

Social proof can have quite a powerful emotional sting. Recently, a door-to-door canvasser for the RSPCA told me that 'lots of people' in my 'animal-

loving neighbourhood' had signed up for regular donations. The inference being that if I didn't, I'd be some kind of animal-hating outcast.

In the examples above, the copywriter is actually imparting the information to support their position. But in the age of Web 2.0, the consumer is much more likely to go out and find such information for themselves. If customers want to know the views of their peers, they don't have to look much further than Twitter, Facebook, Amazon, the iTunes store or any of the myriad other channels where consumers share views and information. As a result, marketing messages have less authority and may simply be disregarded.

However, there's still room for copywriting based on social proof. Think about where your customers look for advice or guidance, and how you can emulate the tone or nature of that content. Testimonials and case studies are enduringly powerful, particularly in B2B marketing, and they allow the copywriter to shape, edit or subtly direct what is said so that it highlights the benefits of a product or service. In B2C marketing, there's a clear trend towards using real or mock-real figures in TV advertising and elsewhere, or documentary styles, to give a sense that the reader or viewer is directly accessing the views of their peers.

As long as the information feels trustworthy, the audience will still respond – remember, many people actively desire the reassurance of running with the majority, so as long as your message is consistent and clear, it's got a good chance of succeeding.

Consistency

The principle of **consistency** states that people align their actions with their clear commitments. Once they've made a public or explicit commitment, they tend to stick to it, since they want to appear consistent and honest.

Consistency is a very useful ploy in face-to-face negotiation. In the previous section, I mentioned an RSPCA canvasser who deftly used social proof to guide me towards a decision to donate. But at the start of the conversation, she'd also asked me whether I was an animal lover. I answered 'yes'. (Would anyone really say 'no'?) The appeal for donations followed on from this, with the implication that refusing to give would be

inconsistent with my stated position. Similarly, TV appeals featuring 'pledges' count on people's consciences making them follow through.

Copywriters, of course, aren't in a dialogue with those they wish to persuade. But they can still ask questions that encourage the reader to commit to a position, albeit mentally, and use that commitment as the basis for a persuasive message.

In the film *Boiler Room*, there's a great scene where Ben Affleck's character, Jim Young, exhorts his trainee stockbrokers to sharpen up their phone selling. He implores them to ask any question, however rhetorical or ridiculous, just to get a 'yes' from the prospect. 'If you were drowning and I threw you a lifejacket, would you grab it? Yes! Do you want 30–40% returns? What's he going to say?' By saying yes to something – anything – the potential customer implicitly aligns himself with the seller.

This is why utterly clichéd headlines like

Do you want to save money on your home insurance?

achieve useful aims: they elicit a positive response from the reader. They also provoke thought, generate active involvement and encourage personal identification with the product. From that platform, the copywriter can go on to build a case for the product or service they're promoting, using the audience's (tacit) commitment to their position as the foundation for their persuasive argument.

It's also easy to see how consistency could be used to promote an upselling proposition, such as continuing with a magazine subscription. You subscribed, you enjoyed the magazine or found it useful, so why not continue? (Silent implication: because cancelling would be inconsistent with your earlier decision to purchase.)

Authority

The principle of authority states that people defer to experts, and are more likely to accept a suggestion if it is backed up by authority.

Once upon a time, adverts could get away with making big, bold claims about their products and have them accepted at face value. Slogans such as 'Guinness is good for you' and 'Guinness for strength' just came right out and stated a (perhaps contentious) benefit based on the advertiser's own authority.

In a slight variation on the theme, washing-powder adverts used an off-screen 'voice of God' to the on-screen housewife, putting her right about her choice of Daz vs Persil.

Over time, people grew more savvy and wouldn't accept advertisers' own words as gospel. So they had to bring in third-party 'experts' to back up their claims. This is still going strong today, with ads for toothpaste, shampoo and cosmetics presenting ostensibly impartial scientists, stylists and make-up artists to endorse the product. The underlying message is 'do what the experts say'.

Sometimes, the authority isn't a 'real' authority, just someone who's likely to be regarded as authoritative – as in Carol Vorderman marketing Benecol to UK consumers in the late 1990s. She wasn't a nutritionist, but in the public mind she was clever, wholesome and trustworthy.

So, invoking authority has a long and distinguished history. Does that mean it won't work today? Absolutely not. As long as you use an authority that the audience actually respects, you can still persuade the audience very effectively. Some examples of authorities you could use (with potential products/services in brackets) include:

- Scientists

- Industry bodies

- Newspapers or trade journals

- Government studies

- Reports, surveys and statistics

- News items

Basically, you're looking for any material produced by an impartial authority that will back up your sales message. For example, it's easy to see how eConsultancy's trends and innovation reports could be used by online marketing firms to push their own service portfolios to potential clients.

Of course, if your audience is modern and tech-savvy, they may not take your word as gospel – or even the word of a third party. Instead, they'll go online to get the unfiltered, unvarnished truth, in the form of what other people are saying about you. For example, the typical Amazon user will probably glance at the official review and a third-party (e.g. newspaper) review, before focusing most of their attention on other users' views. B2B service providers can collect and use customer testimonials in their marketing, as well as inviting reviews on various networking and directory sites.

Gradually, these shared user opinions have moved from the margins to centre stage. Their credibility has grown to the point where it's eclipsing traditional authorities. Journalists have begun to establish the credibility of a 'backlash', 'movement' or 'trend' by pointing to the number of Tweets or Facebook groups about it, or including quotes from forums or blogs in their reports.

In an attempt to capitalise on the trend, cutting-edge initiatives like first direct live (now defunct) provide a snapshot of the social-media buzz (both positive and negative) about a brand. The idea is to appear open and honest, while also allowing the authority of real opinion to do the selling for you.

This approach can work, but it's important to consider some key questions:

- Does your audience know and understand social media?

- Will they attach any weight to social-media coverage?

- Does the user-created content about your brand have sufficient depth and detail to sell your product or service?

- Is the balance of opinion reasonably likely to be positive?

If you're happy with the answers, it could be worth invoking 'social authority' by incorporating social-media content into your marketing efforts.

Scarcity

The principle of scarcity states that people value something more if it is in short supply; perceived value has an inverse relationship to availability.

Some things are valued because they are useful, beautiful or powerful. And others are valued simply because they are scarce. Minerals such as gold and diamonds hold their value because they are so rare; all the gold ever found would fit into a 150ft cube.

For the purposes of persuasive copywriting, using scarcity means emphasising that your product or service (or something about it) is scarce or restricted in one or more of these dimensions:

Quantity

Only a few exist, or are available. Examples: 'limited edition' products, 'collectors' editions'.

> Just 500 of these beautiful limited edition Star Trek commemorative plates have been produced.

Time

Only available within a limited time window.

> Fantastic sale must end 31 January!

Hurry, sale ends midnight Tuesday!

Competition

Other people might get there first. Most likely to be used in conjunction with another dimension of scarcity.

> Demand for this unique cruise is sure to be intense. Act now to book your place before the May 30 deadline!

Threat

The opportunity will be taken away permanently if you fail to act.

> Post Office closure plans are based on usage patterns. So use your local PO – or lose it!

Profile

Only available to certain prospects or existing customers. The group can be defined on the basis of age, buying history, geographical location or any another attribute.

> As someone who's previously bought *Lawnmower World*, you've been selected to receive details of this incredible subscription offer…

Invitation

Only available if an existing customer invites you.

> Spotify Free is currently in an invitation-only beta, which means you need to have received an invitation token to access the service.

Scarcity derives its psychological punch from two sources: loss of freedom and fear of regret.

As things become more scarce, we progressively lose freedom – and we hate to lose freedoms that we already enjoy. In our context, a product that was previously freely available is suddenly restricted somehow. We react against that by trying to grab it and keep hold of it (i.e. by buying it).

At the same time, we have a strong fear of regret – that is, an anxiety that acting (or failing to act) in a particular way will bring us remorse when it turns out to be 'wrong' after some irrevocable future event. If the fear of regret is strong enough, it becomes easier and more desirable to spend money on a purchase than to risk regretting *not* buying. Buying is effectively an insurance against future regret – a sort of psychological investment. And it may have little or nothing to do with the tangible benefits provided by the product.

To use scarcity, simply invoke whichever of the dimensions listed above are applicable to your product, service or promotion. Scarcity is often used to add impact to calls to action – telling the audience what to do while giving them a powerful reason to do it right now (see page 54).

Of course, it may be that your product or service isn't actually scarce in any way. In fact, it's very likely you want to sell it to as broad a spectrum of people as possible, and manufacture or deliver it in massive quantities in order to realise economies of scale. But you still might want to artificially invoke one of the scarcity dimensions above in order to make it feel rare and desirable.

For instance, the 'invitation only' launches of Google Wave and Spotify made them feel exclusive and exciting. However, the actual number of invitations is infinite, since each new invitee is given ten invitations to hand out.

If you're going to use scarcity, it's important to remember that people aren't stupid. A 'limited edition' that's clearly mass-produced, with no numbering of individual editions, isn't going to be that compelling. A time window that's endlessly extended, like those shops that are forever having 'closing down sales' and then returning to normal trading, will soon lose its power to motivate.

Reciprocity

The principle of reciprocity states that people respond in kind: if you do something for them, they'll do something for you.

Reciprocity is the basic trading principle that drives all shared human endeavour, underpinning the division of labour and what we call the 'social contract'. Some scientists believe that the urge to exchange is hard-wired into our instincts, because collaboration (as opposed to relentless self-interest) is so frequently in the best interests of both parties.

Negotiators can use reciprocity to break a deadlock by offering up something that may not have huge tangible value, in the knowledge that people feel obliged to return favours. For the copywriter, this principle can work on several levels, depending on what you can offer and what you want the reader to do.

Offer benefits for purchase

If you're simply asking the reader to make a purchase, then reciprocity is kind of implicit in the offer of benefits. 'Buy this,' you're saying, 'and these good things will happen for you.' You might want to make this more explicit in your text, for example:

> We're giving you the chance to enjoy *Lawnmower World* completely free for six months. And all you have to do is complete the simple reply form below.

Sounds reasonable, doesn't it? Note the language: the use of 'giving' implies an unsolicited gift, putting the relationship on a completely different footing from a commercial purchase – although that is, in reality, what's happening. 'All you have to do' is a rhetorical, weasel words formation (see page 83) implying that the action required is no big deal, and that it's only fair to ask for it.

Offer benefits for action

Reciprocity can also figure in your call to action (with the action not necessarily being a purchase). In fact, as we saw on page 56, any call to action could have an element of exchange to it. Instead of just telling the reader to do something, you offer something in return for that action. For example:

> Reply before 30 March and we'll throw in this wonderful
> digital radio alarm absolutely free.

You could also offer a free trial, a discount, a product sample and so on. Whatever it is, it's a token that might make the audience feel they owe you.

Charities exploit this principle when they provide the pen you can use to fill out their donation form – on one level, they're just 'smoothing the path', but on another, they're cultivating a sense of obligation. You daren't throw the pen away, since you'd be discarding a gift – so it hangs around in the kitchen for months, reproaching you for your lack of charity. Eventually you cave in. 'Well, they've given me the pen, so the least I can do is send them some money,' you think, perhaps unconsciously. Whether a £25 donation for a 10p biro is fair exchange doesn't really enter the equation – if you accept the terms, a deal is done.

Offer benefits for attention

Finally, you can offer benefits in return for the reader's continued involvement in your message. For example, consider this famous slogan used by US radio station WINS:

> You give us 22 minutes, we'll give you the world

Here, something intangible is being given for something metaphorical, but it still sounds like a fair deal. In return for your undivided attention for a brief period, say WINS, we'll bring you up to speed on world events.

You might want to kick off your long-copy advertisement in a similar way, for example:

> This advert may take you a few minutes to read. But it could
> affect financial decisions that shape the rest of your life.

If you want attention, it needs to be a reasonable trade-off for the reader – they have to feel that the deal is fair. And that means answering their question 'what's in it for me?' as early as possible. Setting up a reciprocal arrangement is one of the most direct ways to do this.

Part 5:
Psychological techniques

So, you can put a piece of copy together and make it persuasive. But there are still a few extra weapons from the copywriter's armoury that might prove useful – ways to get inside the reader's head and tweak their emotions or motivations to prod them towards a sale.

Decision-making biases

One of the cornerstones of economics is the theory of rational choice – the idea that people decide how to act by carefully weighing costs against benefits.

In the aftermath of the financial crisis, largely unforeseen by economists, rational choice theory is looking a bit tattered. The rationality of the big players in finance, as well as the supposedly corrective hand of 'the market', has been shown to be an utter fallacy. Investors systematically ignored huge long-term risks, with catastrophic consequences.

Maybe the economists should hang out more with their colleagues over at psychology and organisational behaviour, where researchers have been investigating and documenting flawed decision-making for decades.

For the psychologist or sociologist, a human decision-maker still acts to minimise costs and maximise benefits (or to avoid pain and seek pleasure). But their assessment of those costs and benefits is likely to be hopelessly inaccurate, biased or incomplete.

All this is good news for the copywriter, because these decision-making biases can be exploited in order to nudge a reader towards a buying decision – even though the purchase may not benefit them in any rational or quantifiable way. This section outlines a few of the most common biases that affect our decisions, and how they can be exploited.

Bigness bias

Bigness bias is the tendency to discount relatively small amounts that are measured against much larger amounts. For example, you might regard £1000 as a lot of money to pay for a suit. But to secure a house you really wanted, you wouldn't hesitate to increase your offer by £1000 – or even £10,000. Context is everything. For example:

> For just 1% of what you take home each month, you can protect every penny you earn from the threat of serious illness or redundancy.

Distinction bias

Viewing options in conjunction makes them seem more different than when they are viewed in isolation. Exploit this by juxtaposing the

promoted offering with an alternative option and emphasising some distinction between them. For example:

> The EconoHeat offers four different ways to programme your heating – most controllers have just three.

The money illusion

We tend to focus on the face value of money rather than its actual purchasing power. That's why a £10 cashback offer is so appealing – it's free money! – whereas a voucher worth £10 is less powerful, and a free saucepan worth £10 even less so (even if we need one). Exploit this bias by quoting as many cash amounts as you possibly can when savings or reductions are concerned (i.e. talk in pounds or dollars, not percentages or fractions).

Reactance

Reactance is the urge to do the opposite of what you're told. (As the parent of a three-year-old, I can confirm this from extensive field research.)

Right-wingers in the US often harness reactance by suggesting that a 'liberal mafia' is destroying America; by doing so, they position voting for the profoundly conservative Republicans as some sort of rebellion.

Apple did something similar with its 1984 and Think Different campaigns, encouraging computer buyers to resist the domination of IBM. Reactance favours new market entrants, minority choices and fringe players, who can turn their underdog status into a virtue in their marketing by inciting customers to rebel against the established order.

Neglect of probability

Human beings are awful at estimating and comparing probabilities. That's why millions play the Lottery, even though the chance of winning (the 'positive expected value', in risk terminology) is infinitesimal. (Premium Bonds are a much better bet.)

This is great news if you're selling the chance to be, do or acquire something – simply emphasise a desirable upside and people will wildly overestimate their chances of success.

> Apply for our copywriting course today and you could be earning big money from home in under two months.

Every new applicant gets the chance to win a fabulous city break for two in Prague.

Déformation professionnelle

Déformation professionnelle is the tendency to view things through the lens of one's own professional skills or culture. You can exploit it when writing for trade magazines or niche websites – since no-one else is reading, go ahead and trot out the jargon, prejudices and petty concerns that your audience love, and generate instant rapport. (Obviously, you need to be able to do this convincingly, and sound like an 'insider', or it will backfire badly.)

Bandwagon theory

This is the tendency to jump on the bandwagon and do what others are doing. For more details, see **Error! Reference source not found.** on page **Error! Bookmark not defined.**.

Illusion of control

We believe that we can control, or at least influence, outcomes that we clearly cannot. Most superstitions are rooted in this belief, but more 'sophisticated' systems of thought such as technical analysis (using charts to predict share price movements) are arguably manifestations of the same thing.

Many distress purchases appeal to the illusion of control. Insurance, for example, is often predicated on the idea that the dark, chaotic world out there can be kept at bay for an affordable monthly payment. Some cosmetic treatments also encourage us to change things that, deep down, we know we can't.

NLP techniques

NLP (neuro-linguistic programming) is a way of thinking about the world that can deliver more positive results in work or life. It developed from a quest to discover what made top performers so good – can we discover what makes people excellent, and copy it for ourselves?

One of the central aspects of excellence is the way people use language, both to frame their own thoughts and to communicate with others. NLP places a unique premium on the importance of language, taking it

seriously as the substance from which our thoughts are made. By choosing particular ways of thinking and speaking, we can dramatically alter the way we conceptualise our world – and the way we express our ideas to others. In short, NLP takes language seriously as a mental framework that profoundly affects the way we think, communicate and act.

What does all that mean for the copywriter? Well, if you're using words to try and influence the way people act (in terms of making a purchase, for example), you already take them seriously. But NLP can still offer some specific techniques that can give your copywriting an extra edge, without taking anything away from its impact, persuasiveness or informational content. Here are a few of them.

Storytelling

Stories are vivid, memorable and compelling, and people love to read or hear them. NLP practitioners often use narrative to help people understand their own situation – for example, by considering which fairy story they might regard as being 'the story of my life'. Once they understand the story they're stuck in, they can choose – or write – a different story.

Stories work equally well in copywriting. They needn't be long; in fact, shorter stories can be more effective. They can describe any sequence of steps or events that can help to promote a product. Perhaps the most obvious sort of story is the case study, which I covered in detail in Part 2 (see page 58). But there are many other types of story too. Consider these examples:

> Dave hated his suit. It made him uncomfortable and awkward. Then he came to Sharp Threads and discovered that looking great didn't have to mean feeling terrible, or spending a fortune…

> First we take a crunchy wafer. Then we pour on chewy toffee. And last of all we cover the whole thing in thick, creamy milk chocolate.

> Most clients hear about our services from friends or family. Following an initial consultation, we prepare a detailed proposal for them to read at their leisure. Then we revise it in line with their requirements before beginning the first phase of work…

The first example is a fabricated tale that invites the reader to project themselves into the role of the protagonist. (Stories needn't be true, but they must ring true.) The other two are just different ways of presenting fairly standard information. Instead of describing a recipe or a workflow in prosaic detail, they use the linking techniques of narrative ('first', 'following', 'then', 'finally', 'in the end') to present a tale that the reader can engage with.

Stories orient the reader by giving them a recognisable structure they've known from earliest childhood. They know every story must have a beginning, middle and end. Give your story these three elements (perhaps as briefly as three sentences) and readers will feel reassured. They're also very unlikely to give up in the middle, which they might do with a less compelling structure.

Submodalities

A key focus of NLP is representational systems. These systems govern the way we imagine (or 're-present') things from the real world in our minds. We perceive the real world with our five senses (sight, smell, hearing, taste and touch), and the inner world is exactly the same. We picture remembered or imagined scenes with our mind's eye, just as we listen to remembered music or speech with our mind's ear.

In NLP, a submodality is a way of thinking that's linked to one of the senses. The idea is that we each have a preferred modality. Some of us like to think in visual terms (sight), some in aural terms (sound) and some in tactile or spatial terms (touch). Taste and smell, because they can't really carry meaning, tend not to be dominant modalities.

If you're talking with someone with a preferred modality, you can match it to improve the efficacy of your communication. For example, if someone said 'This doesn't strike a chord with me,' you might respond 'I hear what you're saying. Let me talk you through it again.' This would match their aural submodality and reassure them that you were on the same

wavelength. If they said 'I just can't see what you're getting at,' you might reply 'let me put you in the picture'.

However, when you're copywriting, you don't know what people's preferred submodalities might be. So you just have to use sensory language across the board, or perhaps favour the submodality best suited to the topic. For example:

Instead of…	…you could write…	…to evoke this submodality
A free trial will demonstrate our product's features.	Book a free trial and you'll **see** exactly how our product works.	Sight
Our training sessions outline the key concepts quickly and effectively.	A training session will help you **get to grips** with the main ideas.	Touch
Our support team are available on demand.	When you need us, we'll be **listening**.	Hearing
Visit us soon and try the fantastic new dishes on our menu.	Visit us soon and **savour** our fantastic new menu dishes.	Taste
Imagine waking up in a beautiful rose garden.	Imagine waking up to the **scent** of roses.	Smell

Positive language

When NLP practitioners are helping people set targets for their future development, they encourage them to focus on positive ('well-formed') outcomes rather than negative ones. In other words, they ask them to focus on what they *do* want, rather than what they *don't*.

If you focus on a negative goal, your unconscious mind finds it hard to imagine the steps to achieve it. 'Anywhere but here' is not a useful destination. What's more, sometimes people find that 'what you resist persists' – in other words, focusing on what you *don't* want sometimes has the opposite to the intended effect. For example, aiming to 'stop smoking' keeps your attention focused on smoking, which is what you *don't* want to do. Switching your attention to 'getting healthy' opens up a pathway to the activities and choices that will help you move forward.

As a copywriter, you can benefit by directing your audience's attention towards well-formed outcomes' by using positive rather than negative language. Express benefits in the form of good things to move towards,

not bad things to move away from. This should help to make the benefit more vivid, concrete and compelling in the reader's mind, and avoid making them think about things they don't like, or want to be rid of. For example:

Instead of…	…write
Lose weight	Get slim
Avoid waste	Conserve energy
Reduce your workload	Enjoy more free time
Cut costs	Save money
Untangle complexity	Simplify

It's easy to see how this ties in with the concept of positive and negative benefits, which was covered in Part 1. When framing a value proposition in words, you often have the choice between offering the chance to get something good, or avoid something bad. This NLP perspective provides another reason why positive benefits are usually the way to go.

Meta Model questions

The Meta Model is a set of questions designed to make thinking more precise, or open up new perspectives. Meta Model questions prompt the reader to reflect on or reconsider their situation, or the way they see themselves. By answering precise queries, NLP users can get more clarity on where they are and where they want to be. Meta Model questions usually begin with 'what' or 'how', allowing for a descriptive, expansive response.

Copywriters can use the same approach to throw out thought-provoking questions that start the reader on a particular train of thought – one that leads to a specific destination. Hence 'what' and 'how' questions are particularly effective as headlines or lead-ins. The follow-on copy should present the product or service as part of the answer to the question. For example:

Ask…	…in copy for
How would you like to spend your retirement?	Pension plan
What will you send?	Postal service
What's keeping you from the body you want?	Slimming product
How are you going to weather the recession?	Marketing agency

Contrast reframing

Once political parties have been in opposition for a while, they inevitably start campaigning on a 'change' agenda, almost regardless of policy. It appeals to our instinct for balance. Things have gone too far; they must be brought back into equilibrium. In the last US election, this was exploited by Barack Obama with his 'Change we need' and 'Change we can believe in' slogans. In the 2010 UK General Election, both the Conservative and Liberal Democrat parties campaigned on a message of change (and ended up forming a coalition government together).

This instinct is a double-edged sword for marketers. On the downside, it can lead to losing business if your customer decides they want a change. During my stints at a contract publisher and a design agency, we often found that long-standing, apparently satisfied clients would suddenly switch to another supplier 'for no reason'. Of course, there was a reason: they fancied something new and different, and there was nothing we could do about it.

For B2B service providers, this is a very real hazard. First you identify what works (or what the client likes). Then you repeat it, refining your approach and maybe delivering economies of scale. But then, after a while, you come to be seen as staid, uncreative or inflexible. You're their best friend, but they're looking for a bit of romance. So you're left weeping softly while they ride off into the sunset with a dashing new supplier.

But the same thing works for you if you're drumming up business. The marketing copywriter can provoke, cultivate and exploit the customer's restlessness simply by positioning a product or service as an alternative to something: the customer's current choice, the default option or the market leader.

In NLP this is called 'contrast reframing': asking the question 'what if things were different?' or 'how could they be different?'

Your product (you say) is great; theirs (you imply) is dull, outmoded or inferior. Simply by offering an alternative to what has become familiar, you can generate interest in the reader's mind.

For example:

> Ordinary kitchen roll is great for little spills. But Soakitup is completely different. It effortlessly mops away just about anything, from juice and wine through to sticky stuff like oils, sauces and even ink – without leaving a stain!

The alternative you offer needn't even be better, just different. Many people will still respond sympathetically, as George W. Bush knew when he suggested that US students should 'hear both sides' of the science v intelligent design debate. The urge for balance can be stronger than reason – something the canny copywriter should exploit.

Weasel words

Weasel words are used to plant an idea in readers' minds that is bigger than the actual claim being made. Working from vague, indeterminate facts (or no facts at all), you can generate perceptions that may be completely at odds with reality, without making a definite, absolute or concrete claim that could be open to challenge.

But should you do it? I've already covered the value of honesty in Part 1 (see page 18). But needs must when the devil dances. Whether you use these techniques is up to you!

'Help to'

In conjunction with 'can' (see below), 'help to' positions your product or service as part of the solution to a problem without taking sole credit. For example:

> **Crunchaflakes can help to reduce weight as part of a calorie-controlled diet**

Of course they can. Any food can. With the calorie-controlled approach, it's simply a question of adding up the calories keeping below a set target. The

claim is very carefully delineated and hedged about, and is neither distinctive nor remarkable. But it lodges the idea of weight loss in the reader's mind.

'Can' and 'could'

Use 'can' and 'could' for indefinite claims that you want to sound definite. For example:

> While traditional fan heaters have an average lifetime of 10–15 years, the RoomHeater 32 can last for decades.

Indeed it can, if used relatively sparingly. If used incessantly, its lifetime would be much shorter. *Caveat emptor!*

Hundreds and thousands

Look again at the example above. What period does 'decades' actually denote? Dunno, but it sounds like ages – just as words like 'dozens', 'hundreds' and 'thousands' sound like big quantities.

Strictly speaking, 101 is 'hundreds' – it's 1.01 hundreds, which is more than one and therefore plural. If you're uncomfortable with that, stick to 200 and above, which is definitely more than one hundred. 'Hundreds' sounds bigger than '217'.

Fractions

Closely related is the word 'fraction', as in 'now available at a fraction of the original price'. 99/100ths is a fraction, but your audience will think of the ones they learned at school, like 1/2, 1/3 and 1/4, which will make them think you're offering a huge discount.

Relative improvement

Whiter teeth. Improved search engine rankings. Increased sales. Shinier hair. Whatever it is you're offering to do, make it relative and unquantified, not absolute and specific. That way, even the tiniest improvement fulfils the promise.

Yes, of course my copywriting will increase your sales. I guarantee it. By up to 50%.

'Up to'

'Up to' or 'as much as' are used when you want to quote a numerical or statistical claim, but can only substantiate it within a certain range.

For example, you might be marketing a service that gets people tax rebates. Let's say that on average, people get rebates of around 10% of their bills, but some have received 50%. Instead of quoting the average, or the range, you can say 'customers have received rebates of as much as 50%'.

All you're really saying is that the rebate is in the range 0%–50%, but it's the upper number that will stick in people's minds. Very few will infer the corollary, which is 'some customers got nothing'.

Note that the 'up to' number must be honest: it may be unusual or exceptional, but it must be achievable.

'Over' and 'more than'

Closely related to 'up to', 'over' and 'more than' make numbers sound larger than they are. For example, 'over 50%' sounds bigger than '51%'. When given a vague numerical range, people tend to overestimate. (If you want them to underestimate, use 'under' or 'less than'.)

Watch out for using both 'up to' and 'more' together, which results in nonsense:

> Save up to £50 or more!

Here, the £50 is neither a minimum or a maximum, just an arbitrary point in a completely undefined range. Although the audience may latch on to the £50, blurring the meaning twice means more confusion rather than more impact.

'As much as' and 'as little as'

For a rhetorical twist, use 'as much as' or 'as little as' to imply that the figure you're quoting is particularly high or low. For example:

> The iPhone is now available for as little as £35 per month.

This suggests that £35 is low, but with no frame of reference to substantiate the claim.

Reported beliefs

> Tom Albrighton is now regarded as the best copywriter in
> the UK.

Sounds fantastic, doesn't it? But who's doing the regarding? Charles Saatchi, or my mum?

The use of the passive voice, which omits the subject of the verb, allows you to say something is being done without specifying who's doing it. With verbs such as 'thought' or 'believed', you can put out a claim that may be completely unsubstantiated, simply by saying that someone thinks it's true.

You can also use abstract nouns such as 'concerns' (usually 'growing'), 'speculation' (often 'intense' due to being 'fuelled') or 'allegation' (probably 'fresh') to generate a sense that something's cooking without naming the chef.

This ploy is very commonly used in political journalism, often to report an 'off the record' sentiment from a genuine source. A typical sentence might begin 'Critics of the Prime Minister now believe…'.

Consider the following quote from a story in the UK *Guardian*, which brings all the techniques together in one sentence:

> The disclosures will fuel growing concern that the prince
> [Charles] is continuing to interfere in political matters when
> many believe he should remain neutral if he wishes to
> become king.

Who is concerned, and why will the disclosures fuel their concerns? Who are the 'many' who believe Prince Charles should remain neutral? What is the factual basis for saying that he might not succeed to the throne, or that his succession is conditional on his behaviour? What, actually, is being said here?

Nothing. But it sounds good.

Rhetorical reinforcement

Use words such as 'clearly', 'surely', 'self-evidently' to make a premise sound like a conclusion. These rhetorical words add weight to a statement that

may have no basis in fact. 'Surely the recession is now drawing to a close?' It may be, or it may not – you haven't actually said either way, but readers will think you have.

Unprovable superlatives

The CDs entitled 'The best rock album in the world... ever!' and similar highlighted the useful fact that superlatives are unprovable.

Suppose you start describing your firm as a 'leading local widget maker'. Are you including firms who make other things as well as widgets? Or just widget specialists? Or just local widget specialists?

What's more, how do you define 'leading'? Do you sell most widgets? Make most money from widgets? Or just make the best widgets? Or are you just one of the best at making widgets?

It really doesn't matter, because the only thing readers will remember is 'leading'. They won't be querying your definition.

If you're still unsure about your claim, dilute it with 'regarded as' or something similar, or position yourself as 'one of the leading…'. Does that mean one of the top 10? The top 100? The top 1000?

Or you could copy Carlsberg, whose addition of 'probably' to 'the best lager in the world' allowed them to float the most outrageous marketing claim of all ('best in world') without actually making it.

Part 6:
Hints and tips

This final section includes ideas on how to improve your copywriting, beat writer's block and survive life as a freelance copywriter.

Six ways to improve your copywriting

Write consistently

When it comes to copywriting, practice makes perfect. So take every opportunity to improve your skills through use. It can be hard to set yourself fictitious assignments, but writing a blog is a great way to hone your writing while also enjoying the chance to write what *you* want for a change. That could be something related to copywriting, or it could be purely creative writing. Whatever it is, put in enough effort that you get real benefit from it, but not so much that it becomes a chore.

Listen carefully

Listen to the way people you hear from day to day use language. Not just marketers or other copywriters, but everyone: friends, relatives, children, colleagues, radio and TV presenters, people on the train. Notice how they express themselves, using language as a tool to achieve something they want. What can you learn from their skills?

Read widely

Your reading should be as eclectic as your listening. If your partner has a magazine you'd never dream of reading, try reading it. Pick a book you've never read off the shelf and try a chapter. If you always read non-fiction, try fiction, or vice versa. If you always read modern books, try something older, or vice versa. Throw yourself into some poetry, romantic fiction, popular science or travel writing – whatever you don't normally read, give it a go. You'll soon be absorbing styles, techniques and words you've never been exposed to before.

Many of the most fruitful ideas are not 'original' in the strictest sense, but flow from juxtaposing or combining things that already exist. Reading widely gives you plenty of ammunition to cook up an exciting new recipe from ingredients that are already in the cupboard.

Criticise others

I don't mean 'criticise' in the purely negative sense – I just mean 'be a critic of other people's work'. Look at the copy on outdoor advertisements, magazine and newspaper ads, product packaging, direct mail and anything else that comes into your vicinity. Do you like it? If so, why? If not,

why not? Beyond like or dislike, consider how the copy works. How does it achieve its effect? Is it using a recognisable ploy – perhaps one mentioned in this book? How successful is it? How could it have been done differently, or better? What would you suggest to the client if you were working with them?

Criticise yourself

It can be hard to get honest feedback from clients, friends or family. If you have any sort of relationship with someone, they probably won't want to hurt your feelings by criticising your copy. So do it yourself, by closely analysing something you wrote a while ago. (It's usually too difficult to do this shortly after a project is completed – you'll be too close to the work.)

Simply open up a text file from an old job, print it out and read through it. What do you notice? What would you change? Is there anything that immediately leaps out at you as 'wrong'? What about stock phrases and constructions – can you see any 'trademarks' of your writing style that you perhaps overuse?

It shouldn't be all negative. Notice what works as well – the things you wouldn't change. And do this exercise from your own point of view, not just the client's – clients don't always know what's good for them, and although you must accept their judgement on a business level, it's important to stay in touch with the value of your ability. Take note of your past successes and consider how you could build on them. If you work freelance, it's particularly important to be your own best friend in this way.

Build a 'swipe file'

If you like something, keep it! Many copywriters maintain a 'swipe file' of copy they particularly enjoyed, or found particularly effective. When inspiration runs short, you can go to your swipe file for ideas.

Traditionally, a swipe file would have been a physical file full of press cuttings, direct mail letters and so on. These days, your file is just as likely to be a collection of URLs, or perhaps PDFs you've generated from web pages. Either way, you'll probably want to create some sort of categorisation system, whether by medium, tone, linguistic style or anything else.

I'm not suggesting you steal other people's ideas. But for many assignments, there are only a certain number of approaches. There's no

harm in keeping some reminders around to shorten the process of finding the right one.

Ten ways to beat writer's block

'Blank page syndrome' is frustrating and depressing. Fortunately, there are plenty of practical ways to break through writer's block. Here are ten of our favourites.

Take aim before you fire

When words won't come, it can be because you're not sure quite what you're trying to achieve. So instead of writing the actual text, try writing yourself a brief. Set out the purpose of the text, who it's for, how long it should be, what the tone should be and so on. In particular, think about what you want the audience to do, think or feel when they read it. Even if you've been given a brief, there's almost certainly more you can add to it.

Clarifying exactly what you're trying to do often gets the words flowing. Or it may be that the content you put into the brief can be recycled into the actual content you use. Either way, you've made a start on shaping your ideas without the pressure of writing the thing itself.

Don't start at the beginning

The opening sentences of a piece of writing can be the hardest by far. The stakes are high: you're looking to summarise your message, get attention and encourage people to read on. But you'll find it far easier to write the beginning once you've completed the rest of the text, so don't worry about it in the early stages.

If there's a part of the text that you feel you could write now, go ahead and write it. Sometimes, ideas for later sections of the piece will keep popping into your mind and the only way to get rid of them is to write them down. There's no need to write the whole thing in order, and the task will seem easier once you've made a start.

Take five

Don't be too hard on yourself. As the saying goes, 'if you're in a hole, stop digging'. If you try too hard to write when it's just not happening, you'll just produce something inferior that will make you feel even worse. Even in the

face of a looming deadline, it's often worth taking a few minutes to relax and take time out.

What you do in your break is up to you – you might want to have a drink or a snack, go for a short walk, watch TV, listen to music or even meditate. Choose something you enjoy and give yourself enough time to move into a noticeably different frame of mind before you return to your writing. If taking a break is difficult (because you're at work, say), try moving to an undemanding or repetitive task for a few minutes, like filing or tidying your desk.

Sleep on it

Even more powerful than a daytime break is a night's sleep. Sleeping can have a dramatic impact on your ability to get your thoughts together. Most people find there's a definite limit on the number of words they can write (or rewrite, or edit) in a single day. The limit can vary from day to day, from two or three thousand when you're 'in the zone' right down to zero. But you know when you've reached it and, if you have, don't push it. Instead, turn in and let your unconscious mind loose on the problem. You might be surprised at how easily the words flow in the morning.

Change venue

When you can't write, your office can feel like a prison cell. It's hard to have ideas in that kind of atmosphere. So break the spell by simply going somewhere else. Grab a notebook and pen and head off to the countryside, the park, the beach or just a different room. If the words still don't flow, designate your time away from the desk as a break.

Remove distractions

If you're having a break, have a break. But if you're writing, write. If you're using a computer, that means working in a single application, probably Word. In other words, you can close your web browser, email client, instant messenger and anything else that's likely to break the spell of your concentration. Consider disconnecting or at least ignoring the phone – a call that turns into an hour-long chat will utterly derail your train of thought. It can help to tidy your desk or workspace too, so you feel fully focused on the task at hand.

Open the floodgates

It's almost impossible to get a piece of text right first time. People who write a lot know this, so they just put something – anything – down on paper and then work it into shape like a lump of clay on a potter's wheel. They know that nobody will ever see their first thoughts, so they just get in there and write. But people who write less, or who rarely write for an audience, can fall prey to 'stage fright' – as soon as they write something, they worry that it's not good enough and delete it, putting themselves back at square one again.

If this is your problem, remind yourself that nobody needs to see your writing until *you're* ready. So just let everything flow out – whatever occurs to you. Don't worry about accuracy, repetition or even relevance – just get something down on paper.

Free associate

Sometimes your mind can get stuck in a rut, going over and over the same old ground without turning up anything new. The worry of having to meet a deadline can make this worse. Give your brain a shake by introducing random factors into the thought process. Pick something completely off the wall, and start relating it to your subject. For example, if you're writing about a product, try comparing it to a sausage, or a monkey, or a lawnmower. This can open up unexpected new perspectives – or, at the very least, lighten up your mood.

Get healthy

Many of us work as if our bodies are just machines to keep our minds going – shovelling in any old food as fuel and overdriving the engine with coffee. But the body and the mind are two sides of the same coin. If you treat your body badly, you can't expect your mind to deliver peak performance.

Caffeine enhances our ability to perform repetitive or mechanical tasks, but tends to impede more creative or logical functions. Lay off the latté and see if that helps – at least until you've got a few words down on the page. Avoid eating anything too heavy that will make you feel dull or sleepy, or sugary foods that will give you a rush followed by a sharp fall in energy and mood.

Exercising before starting work can be hugely beneficial. While people's experiences differ, most find that exercise improves alertness, relaxation and mood (because it releases 'happy chemicals' called endorphins into our system). You might also find that new ideas occur to you while you're exercising. Even a brisk walk round the block can make a difference.

Reach out

Finally, if you're really stuck, don't suffer in silence. If you can, talk to someone who understands your subject and see if they suggest anything useful. If you're working for a client, don't be embarrassed to phone them for more guidance on how to approach the topic. As long as your questions are to the point, they'll probably be glad to lend a hand (and impressed at your attention to detail). And if you're not in a position to get subject-specific help from anyone, phone a friend – sometimes, just talking through your problems can take the pressure off and give you the motivation to get going again.

Ten tips for freelance copywriters

If you do your copywriting on a freelance basis, you've got much more to worry about than just writing. You also need to generate new business, manage the administrative side and keep yourself focused and motivated – largely on your own. Here are ten useful tips that should help the non-writing parts of the freelance copywriting life go as smoothly as possible.

1. **Believe in abundance.** If you're short of work, it's easy to fall into anxiety. Instead of focusing on scarcity, switch your attention to the many opportunities around – online, in your local area, around the world. If local competitors spring up, that's great – it means there's work around! We get what we expect in life, so start expecting that opportunities – and cash money – will be coming your way.

2. **Hold on tightly, let go lightly.** In other words, focus on the copywriting jobs you get, not the ones you don't. It doesn't matter why your quote wasn't chosen, or why that client stopped using you. What matters is serving the clients you have today.

3. **Accept blame.** In fact, actively *seek out* blame. If things go wrong, claim responsibility, even if it's not your mistake. Failures of communication, missed deadlines – whatever. Blame rarely sticks to

those outside an organisation, but your contact or client will be flattered at the implication that they've done nothing wrong.

4. **Pricing is a game without rules.** I don't mean 'rip off your clients'. I mean that people's expectations on price vary so wildly that it's almost impossible to find a consistent approach. Get used to pricing job by job. If the client proposes a price, be thankful you don't have to. Love clients who will negotiate instead of never contacting you again if your price doesn't stack up.

5. **Networking takes time.** With social media, anyone can rustle up a big network in weeks. Unfortunately, its power to deliver freelance copywriting work will be limited. What actually works is referrals from friend to friend, and they happen when your contacts' contacts realise they need a copywriter – which can take years. But as long as you keep meeting expectations, referrals *will* come.

6. **Learn to listen.** Forget impressing the client. Learn to listen, not speak. First and foremost, you'll do better work because you'll learn more. On a human level, people love the chance to chat with an impartial outsider – so give them it. It's a big part of the value you offer.

7. **Cultivate detachment.** I've found I can handle freelance copywriting much better if I'm not emotionally involved. I try not to get excited about new opportunities so I'm not disappointed when they don't pan out. I don't pat myself on the back for a good month, in case the next one is awful. Becoming a company is a good way to create distance between you and your work, and worthwhile for this reason alone.

8. **Don't flatter yourself.** Clients do not spend that much time thinking about you and your copywriting, so don't waste time and effort over-thinking about what they might want, or what a particular reaction (or lack of reaction) might mean. They have a job that needs doing, and you're a tool to get it done – end of story.

9. **Under-promise and over-deliver.** Tell the client the worst-case timescale, then beat it by four or five days. Maybe even reduce your price because you did the work quickly. Sounds like a cheap trick? Believe me, your customers will have dealt with too many flaky suppliers to feel that way. They will absolutely love it.

10. **Be in the moment.** Because the future is always uncertain for the freelance copywriter, some worry is always present. Try to let go of it and enjoy the work you've got today. Remember, no-one really has any security in today's working world, so let tomorrow take care of itself.

Thanks for reading!

Follow me on Twitter: @tomcopy

Read my blog: www.abccopywriting.com/blog