

A Copywriter Never Mumbles – and Other Principles of Effective Ad

Copy

By Walter Burek

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H.L. Mencken, the author, journalist and social critic observed that most people "write badly because they cannot think clearly." And the reason they cannot think clearly, he went on, is that "they lack the brains."

Putting aside H.L.'s criticism for the moment, let's assume that all copywriters have the "brains" and, more often than not, we are capable of clear thinking. It follows then, that we stand a very good chance of being able to write well. But clarity of thought is only step one. The following principles will help you move on from there, so that you can put down in writing exactly what you have in mind.

1. Don't mumble.

Advertising is most effective when it is easy to understand. (Take a look at any advertising effectiveness study.) In other words, you sell more stuff when you write copy that is clear.

Copy that speaks out commands attention; copy that mumbles doesn't. So once you've thought about what you want to say, come right out and say it. Don't mumble your message by being short on specifics or long-winded in your sentences. And don't use big words, cliches, jargon or borrowed interest.

Keep in mind E.B White's sobering advice: "When you say something, make sure you have said it. Your chances of having said it are only fair."

2. Get to the point.

Start selling with your very first sentence. Try to make it and every sentence that follows simple and declarative. Factual. And short. Short is powerful. Lincoln used only 266 words in his Gettysburg Address. And many believe that the shortest sentence in the New Testament – "Jesus wept." – is also the most moving.

3. Don't write like a nerd, a lawyer or a bureaucrat.

In his Simple and Direct, Jaques Barzun says, "The whole world will tell you, if you care to ask, that

your words should be simple and direct. Everybody likes the other fellow's prose plain." Don't inflict technical jargon, pompous words or fancy phrases on your readers. Remember, you're trying to communicate with them, not impress them with your grasp of show-off fad words or vague abstractions. Why write "sub-optimal" when you mean "less than ideal?" Why write "interface" when it is more clear and direct to write "discuss, "meet," or "work with?" Why take the chance of annoying your reader by writing "net net" instead of "conclusion?"

4. Use short paragraphs, short sentences and simple words.

The professional copywriter always practices this simple principle: Short sentences and short paragraphs are easier to read than long ones. And easier to understand. Rudolf Flesch, in *The Art of Plain Talk*, says that the best average sentence length is 14 to 16 words, 20 to 25 words is passable, but anything over 40 words is unreadable. So write in crisp, short, snappy sentences. A trick of the trade -- using sentence fragments -- can help keep your average sentence length to a respectable number of words. And add drama and rhythm to your copy.

Paragraphs should also be kept short. Long, unbroken blocks of text intimidate readers. If it looks hard to read, they probably won't read it.

As for short words, John Caples, the Hall of Fame copywriter said: "Even the best-educated people don't resent simple words. But they are the only words many people understand."

Plain writing in simple words simply communicates more effectively than writing with a lot of big words. Keep in mind that in Shakespeare's most memorable sentence -- "To be or not to be?" -- the longest word is only three letters.

5. Write simply and naturally

People like to read simple, easy-to-understand writing. And the simplest, most easy-to-understand style is to write conversationally, the way you talk when you're at your best -- when your ideas are flowing smoothly, when your syntax is fluent and your vocabulary accurate. A simple test to check on your conversational tone is to imagine yourself speaking to your reader instead of writing. Are you expressing yourself clearly, or are you mumbling? Are you using only those words, phrases and sentences that you might actually say to your reader if you were face-to-face? Or do you sound stiff and impersonal? If you wouldn't say it, why write it?

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