

Selling Point vs. Sales Pitch

You could also call this understating vs. boasting. In terms of copy, this usually comes down to the amount and/or use of particular *adjectives*. For example, compare the understated “smell of pine” to the boastful, hollow “heavenly smell of pine.” There’s a fine line, especially as the whole point of most copywriting is effectively to boast about a product. As the writer, it’s your call. At the least, compare and contrast by taking any words like “great” and “tasty” out before putting them back in. As a definite rule, honest humanity beats phony every time.

Is Copy Dead?

This argument pops its head up every now and then. So *is* copy dead? Luke Sullivan argues that no one reads it. Although he also points out, “Long copy ads can be great. Even if a customer doesn’t read every word, it looks like the company has a lot to say.” Ken Muir makes a similar point: “It’s all there to read if [people] want to, but the first and last lines are really the ones that matter.”

Dylan Williams of Mother, London argues, “[with email and text messaging] people are respecting the written word again but also playing with it and coming up with new words. There’s a renewed energy and passion for language.” The internet (i.e., websites, email, and blogsites, etc.) has also increased the use and interest of the written word.

The reason why copy might continue to “come and go” could simply boil down to the need to create advertising that stands out. Perhaps it will be a never-ending cycle: when image-driven communication reaches saturation point, people will start to ignore the visual sound bite approach. The obvious strategy is to do the opposite, replacing the split-second image with longer, word-driven ads, until the cycle is reversed again.

Summary

Research

Find rational and emotional reasons to purchase the product. (Rational fact-finding: gather previous ads, factory visit notes, annual reports, brochures, articles, and independent test results. Emotional reasons: discover and deduce what the target audience is like. What’s important to them, how do they feel about the product/manufacturer/marketplace, and what role does each play in their lives?)

Organize

Review what findings you have; keep and/or rewrite the good points. Put the findings in the correct, logical order.

Shape

Work on the structure (beginning, middle, and end), plus the overall “look” and flow of your argument.

Edit

Cut down the copy by a third.

Rewrite

Try rewriting the whole piece from memory. It might produce a more natural result. Compare with the original version.

Edit

Cut down the copy (if applicable).

Finesse

Work on the details; look for possible use of alliteration, contrasting pair, or list of three. Check spelling, grammar, punctuation, and sloppy

Speak

Read the entire ad out loud, not to oneself. Adopt the appropriate tone or accent. You’ll hear immediately if anything sounds strange or doesn’t flow.

To remember these stages, use the simple acronym ROSE REFS. (If it helps you further, imagine a group of sweet old ladies judging the roses at a flower contest—the rose referees, or refs. Like writing a piece of copy, the judging process takes time. You have to keep returning to each item, checking, and double checking, until you’re happy with your final choice.)

- Up and down the country at this moment in time the winds of change are blowing

There are some possible reasons for using a cliché. It may be apposite (i.e., it works perfectly with your idea), or part of the deliberate use of sarcasm, or as a revealing commentary through the dialogue of a particular character. It may also be poetic, of special character, a way to introduce a note of familiarity into a difficult subject, or perhaps it has fallen into disuse.

In addition, there is also the inevitable, useful, and therefore overused *mini cliché*. Unlike the larger clichés above, if used sparingly, these can add a comfortable quality to a piece of writing. These include phrases like:

- On my way
- As a matter of fact
- Very occasional
- Here goes

Certain visuals are clichéd too. For examples, see *Avoid Clichéd Imagery*, page 34.

Puns

Like clichés, only a small fraction of puns work as useful and effective ways to put across information quickly, but preferably as newspaper headlines, rather than ad headlines or copy. The use of puns is discussed in detail on page 66.

Long Words

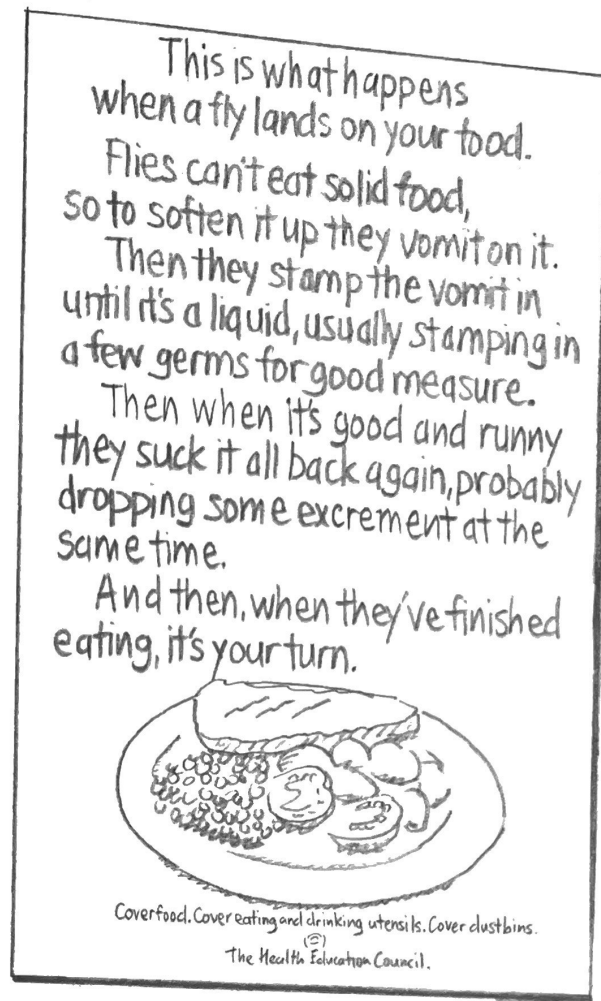
In general, use plain, simple, familiar spoken English. The only time to include a long or little known word is when absolute precision of meaning is vital. And if the audience doesn't know the word, what's the point of being precise about the meaning?

Long words often spoil the simplicity of a sentence. For example, "the very occasional minor cliché" sounds better as "the odd minor cliché."

Every time you come across a long or fancy word in your writing, spend 15 to 30 seconds to think of a one-syllable version.

Dull Words

The use of active, exciting words is another way of passing more information in a short space. It's not that words like "went" or "cut" are particularly boring, but they do miss the opportunity to describe *how* someone/something went or cut.



Don't write, borrow: these facts speak for themselves, without the need for opinion or persuasion.
Client: The Health Education Council. **Agency:** Cramer Saatchi, London.
Creatives: Charles Saatchi, Michael Coughlan, John Hegarty.

For example

went slid, bounced, waddled, jetted...

cut hack, dissect, bite, saw...

Note, too, that verbs like these create faster pictures than adjectives.

Gerunds

The use of too many "-ing" words make sentences sound more complex than they need to.

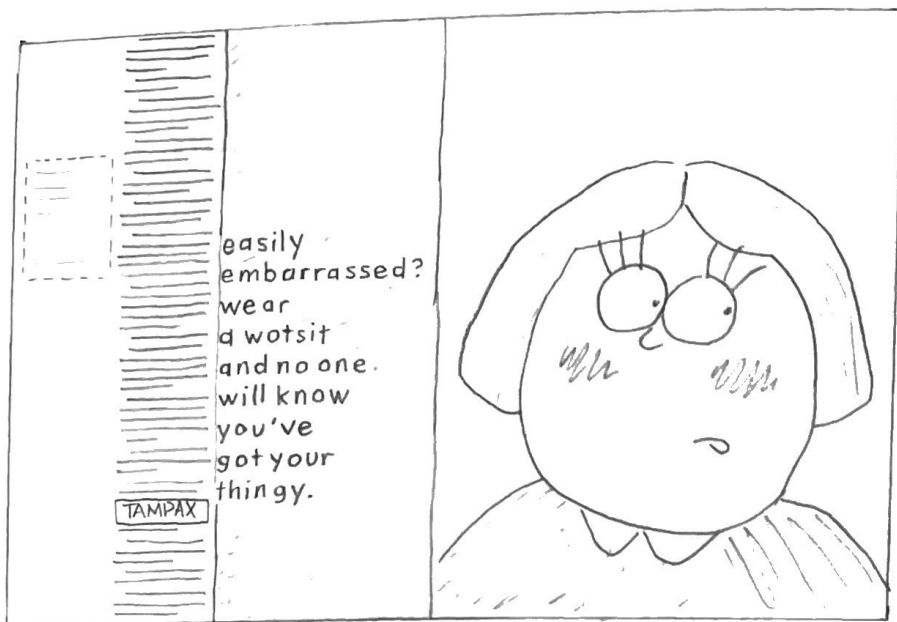
For example, compare

This is part of the thinking behind avoiding gerunds, and it's surprising how using them can make writing unexciting.

with

This is why you should avoid gerunds.

They gum up your sentences.



The wonderfully chatty, empathetic tone of this ad allows the writer to talk to (not at) an individual young “woman.” *Client: Tambrands. Product: Tampax. Agency: Abbott Mead Vickers BBDO. Creatives: Mary Wear, Damon Collins.*

sentences require prolonged concentration, whereas successive short sentences read more like a list than a piece of prose. Therefore, keep to an *approximate* short-long-short-long sentence flow.

And a quick point about long sentences being the result of embedded clauses (sentences within sentences): although not unacceptable, even a slightly complex piece of embedding is probably better off as two sentences. Therefore, write how it should be said (avoiding unintentional word repetition), then try breaking it up into simpler components. If the result sounds boring, it may be the content that’s boring, so say something interesting instead.

Separate Paragraphs

As with long sentence followed by long sentence, big blocks of text are usually off putting to read. Dividing long paragraphs up at appropriate points immediately makes body copy more inviting to read. (Part of what makes David Abbott’s flowing copy for Sainsbury’s so utterly readable is his use of relatively short paragraphs.)

To help the piece of copy flow as you’re writing it (and to avoid producing stodgy, Dickensian-sized paragraphs), break up each sentence into a separate paragraph. This helps to organize your thoughts, structure your argument, and speed up your writing. Then once you’re done, connect the sentences into appropriately sized paragraphs—some large, some small. (Remember, even a single word can be a separate paragraph.) From a design

point, be aware that too many short paragraphs can create “widows” in your copy. Look at your layout from a distance to see immediately how inviting and balanced it is.

Although there are exceptions to the reader friendly “multiple paragraphs” approach, (Samaritans’ “Reading”, page 59, and Reebok “Long Headline”, page 204, both have obvious *conceptual* reasons for using a single, fully justified paragraph of text), I would argue that the initial visual impact is usually negative. People are fairly reluctant to read long copy at the best of times, so why make it any harder? (See also *Is Copy Dead?*, page 208.)

Grammar Perversion

Just as the rules of grammar exist to create reader friendliness, so too can little departures of grammar, like the ad copy favorite, the “verb-less sentence.”

Like this one.

Other examples include the “subject-less sentence,” and sentences beginning with “and” or “because.” You don’t have to break any grammatical rules unless it aids comprehension. But if used appropriately, grammar perversion can spice up your copy, sharpen a point, change the rhythm, etc.

The Final/End Line

Here are three common ways to end or “sign off” your body copy:

- A call-to-action (e.g., phone number, website, email or street address, or other prompt)
- A concluding fact that completes the argument
- A line that relates back to the headline*

In traditional advertising terms, the third approach is the most common. It shows the reader that considerable thought has been put into the entire piece, and depending on the tone, the reader is left with a little smile in the mind, almost like a reward for finishing it.

*Note: if the ad does not have a headline, then substitute it with the first line of copy.

Collect Unused Headlines

Gather any unused, alternative headlines. These could be used for the first line of body copy, or perhaps the last, or even somewhere in between.

This is an unusually long headline for a print ad. With good reason though. By the time you've read from the first word to the last, including all these words you're trying to hurry past right now - you are, aren't you? - anyway, as we were saying, by the time you get to the last word, you'll have an idea of just how much time Elana Meyer carved off a world record - a world record - not just 0,2 seconds or 2,2 seconds - when she competed in a half marathon in Tokyo on Sunday, running in a pair of Reeboks.



A case when the idea works best with a single block of copy.
Client: Reebok. Agency: SM Lew
Burnett, South Africa. Creatives:
Mark Vader, Joost Hulbosch.

Linking Words/Phrases

Also known as "transitions," linking words are useful because they bridge thoughts and help to make copy flow from one sentence or paragraph to the next. These words or phrases create the illusion of natural flow, but can irritate if overdone, so only use in moderation. Examples (of which there are dozens more) include:

- So
- However
- Therefore
- First
- Second
- Additionally/In addition
- In fact
- Furthermore
- On the other hand
- But
- Indeed
- Of course
- After all

Punctuation (In Moderation)

Punctuation can add richness and texture to copy. Examples include:

- Colon
- Semi colon
- Brackets (parentheses)
- "Quotes"
- Dot, dot, dot...

De-stress Stresses

If you have to underline, use *italics*, bold letters, exclamation marks (!), "inverted commas," and hyphens—unless demanded by grammar or convention, it's probably just a lazy way to imply tone of voice (see Punctuation Marks, page 61).

The List of Three

The number "three" is not only preferred for some visual solutions, but also in copy. It appears that two words, facts, phrases or sentences are too few, and four too many. The third element can give a sentence *rhythm*, *balance*, and *closure* (comedians describe three people walking into a bar). Also known as "The Magic Three."

Some other well-known (non-advertising) threesomes:

- *Friends, Romans, countrymen, lend me your ears* (Shakespeare's *Julius Caesar*)
- *Government of the people, by the people, for the people* (Abraham Lincoln)

- *Never in the field of conflict was so much owed by so many to so few* (Winston Churchill)
- *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit*
- *Hip, Hip, Hooray*

Note: "threes" are also prevalent in visuals: the origins are in fine art. For example, the standard still-life painting often contains three objects. Two or four look too symmetrical and unnatural, and five becomes too much (see Visual Threes, page 83).

The Contrasting Pair

This tool can be (and has often been) used for headlines, taglines, or body copy. Shakespeare wrote the most famous contrasting pair: "To be, or not to be," closely followed by Neil Armstrong's "That's one small step for man, one giant leap for mankind." In the UK, Argos's tagline used a contrasting pair: famous names at unheard of prices. Equally, the Friends of the Earth tagline: Think globally, act locally.

The contrasting pair is a type of "headline twist" (examined on page 61), in that the first part (word or phrase) sends the reader in one direction, and then suddenly sends him/her the opposite way. It's this disarming nature that gives it power.

Alliteration

Alliteration is another powerful tool. It's the occurrence of the same letter or sound at the beginning of several words in succession, e.g., sing a song of sixpence. Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr.'s "I Have a Dream" speech used one of the most famous alliterations "...will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character." This sublime example works on another level because it's symmetrical: there is a balance between the two parts of the sentence, almost including the number of syllables. This gives it extra impact, and makes it even more memorable.

Note that alliteration, the list of three, and the contrasting pair can be combined. Julius Caesar's "Veni, Vedi, Vici" is both alliteration and list of three. Muhammad Ali's famous "Float like a butterfly, sting like a bee" is almost an alliteration plus contrasting pair.

Tone of Voice

Nowhere is tone more evident (and therefore more important) than in long copy. Tone can vary tremendously, but matching the unique personality of the client/product is a good place to start. Two other factors that can determine how you want to talk to your reader are (i) the idea and (ii) the target audience. Research is a good place to start.

Whatever your final tone or attitude, start by thinking in general terms. You might wish to sound like a dignitary making an important speech, or like you're chatting to someone sitting next to you on a bus. (Bill Bernbach once told a young writer to make his copy more conversational by imagining he was writing a letter to an uncle he had met, but rarely saw.) Whatever tone you choose, the more you can make your copy sound like one person talking to another, the better. This helps to disarm and engage the reader. Perhaps pick a friend, neighbor, or relative who might be a typical consumer. This will help you to get under their skin and talk their language.

Once you find the particular tone and attitude, don't stray from it (it will lack brand integrity and confuse the reader). From its launch, Crispin Porter + Bogusky defined Mini's tone of voice so well it was almost as if the ads wrote themselves (see overleaf). Remember, tone can be as general (e.g., humorous) or specific (e.g., a type/brand of humor) as you want to make it. For more details on the subject, see *Tone of Voice*, page 49.

Write in a Style or Theme

Depending on your idea, you might be able to extend it into your body copy. In other words, take an opening idea right through to the end. But choose carefully: if it seems contrived or tedious to continue a theme throughout an entire ad, drop it.

Although the two are linked, writing in a *style* or *theme* can actually offer up more than one possible *tone*. For example, a radio ad in the style of a Valentine's card can be written in one of a number of serious/humorous tones within that theme, depending on what you want.

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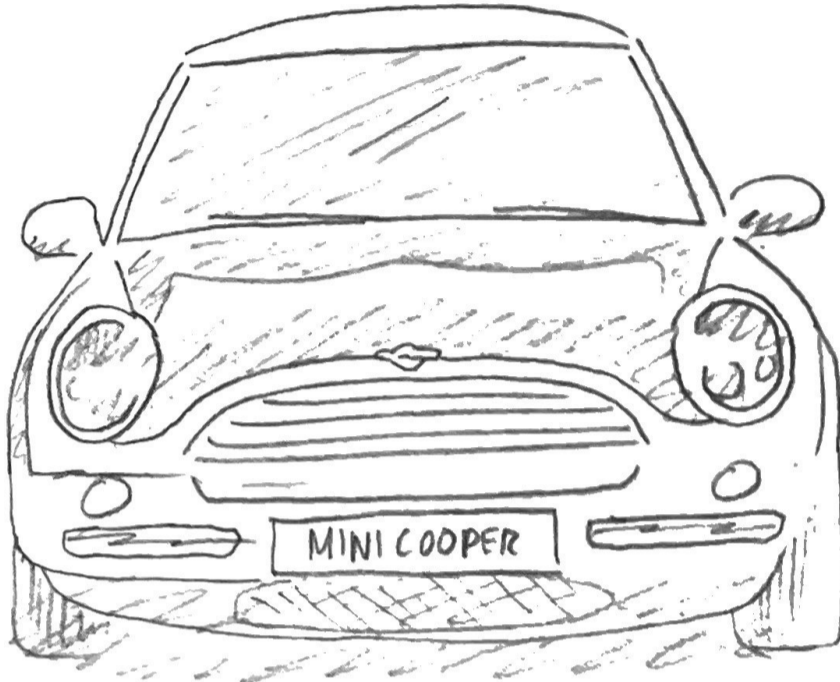
Exercise: find the classic children's story "Little Red Riding Hood" online. Rewrite a 200 word version in the style of either: 1) a women's fashion magazine; 2) a horror writer; 3) a wannabe, street-talking rapper; or 4) the voice over on a nature show/film.

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Be a Speechwriter

Famed writer Alfredo Marcantonio believes that copywriting is closer to speechwriting: "It's not simply about informing, entertaining or amusing the audience. It's about winning them over, to a particular product or point of view."

LET'S BURN THE MAPS. Let's get lost. Let's turn right when we should turn left. Let's read fewer car ads and more travel ads. Let's not be back in ten minutes. Let's hold out until the next rest stop. Let's eat when hungry. Let's drink when thirsty. Let's break routines, but not make a routine of it. LET'S MOTOR.



How to Do a Volkswagen Ad

In 1962, the following copy was written under the above headline in 1962, and has inspired many a copywriter ever since:

Call a spade a spade. And a suspension a suspension. Not something like "orbital cushioning." Talk to the reader, don't shout. He can hear you. Especially if you talk sense. Pencil sharp? You're on your own.

Facts, Stats, Demonstrations, and Quotes

Using facts, stats, demonstrations, and quotes within an ad help to create a convincing argument for the client. More so than opinion. Whether used within the body copy or elsewhere, these create an important sense of objectivity, as if saying, "don't just take our word for it." Fs, Ss, Ds, and Qs act as part of a "need I say more" tone of voice that has worked well for many famous campaigns. For example, Charles Saatchi's "Fly" poster is made up entirely of facts, without the need for opinion or even persuasion. If you have a list of facts, use the tools in this chapter so they don't read like a *list of facts*.

Don't Write, Borrow

As with radio scripts (see page 209), sometimes borrowing a piece of writing (as long as it's relevant) can be more effective than creating a new, "scripted" piece of body copy. The writer of an award-winning press campaign for Amnesty International simply used a collection of transcripts of the words of torture victims. To use the same example, the "Fly" poster (opposite) uses barely edited text from a government-issued pamphlet on food hygiene. This tip applies to all other media—TV, radio, and online writing.

Clichés

A cliché is a trite word or phrase that lacks originality because of frequent and prolonged use. As with disguised puns, even subverted or cleverly modified clichés are usually just lame jokes. Therefore the general rule is to kill them. Here are a few examples:

- Green with envy
- Cool as a cucumber
- A night to remember
- Family entertainment
- Go for a spin

You can tell it's a perfect ad just by reading it. **Client:** Jaffa. **Agency:** WCRS/Wright, Collins Rutherford Scott, London. **Creatives:** Andrew Rutherford, Ron Collins.

The clipped, chatty sentences help to make a multiple headlines short and snappy. **Client:** Tesco. **Agency:** Lowe, London. **Creatives:** Jason Lawes, Sam Cartmell.

You can tell a melon's perfect by squeezing it.

You can tell a pear's perfect by sniffing it.

You can tell a banana's perfect by peeling it.

You can tell a plum's perfect by pinching it.

You can tell an apple's perfect by shaking it.



You can tell a grapefruit's perfect just by reading it.

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Cheese.
Can cause nightmares.
Like you shopping elsewhere.
Scary.
That's why this piece is only 87p.

TESCO

This copy simultaneously defines the brand's mission statement, campaign strategy, and idea. **Client:** Pedigree. **Agency:** TBWA/Chiat/Day, Los Angeles. **Creatives:** Chris Adams, Margaret Keene.



We're for dogs.
Some people are for the whales.
Some are for the trees.
We're for dogs.
The big ones and the little ones.
The guardians and the comedians.
The pure breeds and the mutts.
We're for walks, runs and ramps.
Digging, scratching, sniffing and fetching.
We're for dog parks, dog doors and dog days.
If there were an international holiday for dogs, on which all dogs were universally recognized for their contribution to the quality of life on earth, it would be for that too.
Because we're for dogs.
And we've spent the last 60 years working to make them as happy as they've made us.
Dogs rule.



With good writing skills, nothing is impossible (like starting each sentence with the same word but in way that still makes you want to read it). **Client:** Adidas. **Agency:** TBWA/Chiat/Day, 180 Amsterdam. **Creatives:** Boyd Coyne, Ameer Lehto, Kai Zastro, Sean Flores, Brandon Mugar.

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IMPOSSIBLE IS JUST A BIG WORD THROWN AROUND BY SMALL MEN WHO FIND IT EASIER TO LIVE IN THE WORLD THEY'VE BEEN GIVEN THAN TO EXPLORE THE POWER THEY HAVE TO CHANGE IT. IMPOSSIBLE IS NOT A FACT. IT'S AN OPINION. IMPOSSIBLE IS NOT A DECLARATION. IT'S A DARE. IMPOSSIBLE IS POTENTIAL. IMPOSSIBLE IS TEMPORARY.

IMPOSSIBLE IS NOTHING.

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Because I've known you all my life.
Because a red Rudge bicycle once made me the happiest boy on the street.
Because you let me play cricket on the lawn.
Because you used to dance in the kitchen with a tea towel round your waist.
Because your cheque book was always busy on my behalf.
Because our house was always full of books and laughter.
Because of countless Saturday mornings you gave up to watch a small boy play rugby.
Because you never expected too much of me or let me get away with too little.
Because of all the nights you sat working at your desk while I lay sleeping in my bed.
Because you never embarrassed me by talking about the birds and the bees.
Because I know there's a folded newspaper clipping in your wallet about my scholarships.
Because you always made me polish the heels of my shoes as brightly as the toes.
Because you've remembered my birthday 38 times out of 38.
Because you still hug me when we meet.
Because you still buy my mother flowers.
Because you're more than your fair share of grey hairs and I know who helped put them there.
Because you're a marvelous grandfather.
Because you made my wife feel one of the family.
Because you wanted to go to McDonald's the last time I bought you lunch.
Because you've always been there when I've needed you.
Because you let me make my own mistakes and never once said "I told you so".
Because you still pretend you only need glasses for reading.
Because I don't say thank you as often as I should.
Because it's Father's Day.
Because if you don't deserve Chivas Regal who does?

No headline required. This idea is all in the body copy. **Client:** Chivas Regal. **Agency:** Abbott Mead Vickers BBDO, London. **Creatives:** David Abbott, Ron Brown.

10 Copy

Robert Sawyer describes copywriting as “Not exactly prose, not exactly poetry.”

Headlines, sub-headlines and taglines (i.e., short copy) were covered in the Print, The Tagline, and Generating Strategies and Ideas chapters. Plus, those copy tools specific to TV, Radio, and Interactive can be found in their respective chapters.

This chapter focuses primarily on *long copy* found predominantly in print and on the web, also known as *long form*, *body copy*, or *body text*. (Note: some of the tools mentioned in this chapter can be applied to headlines and taglines, plus TV and radio.)

As you know, advertising is all about communication. And whether it's with pictures or copy, it's all about simplicity. So despite what you might think, anyone can write decent long copy. Think of your job not as a writer of words, but an *avoider* of words. You're not writing a novel or a poem (although these skills don't hurt). But you rarely need to use long, fancy words. Focus on getting down the important stuff in a pithy, persuasive way.

Start by learning the following tried and tested tools of effective copywriting. Once you start applying these basic tips, your copy skills will improve dramatically.

The examples overleaf use various copywriting techniques and styles to great effect.

Again, good copywriting isn't limited to print. There are many TV and radio ads that demonstrate wonderful writing. See the TV and Radio chapters for examples.

The Invisible Thread: Make it Flow

Your primary goal is to make the body copy flow seamlessly, from line to line, paragraph to paragraph, as if an “invisible thread” is joining everything up. The bulk of ads with considerable body copy use this technique (as well as the other tools in this chapter) to a greater or lesser extent. According to instructor Tony Cullingham, once you have found a central thread, it should read like a drip of water slowly sliding down a wall; a light but unstoppable descent toward the final thought.

The first flow is from the headline (if applicable) to the first line of body copy. Then the first line threads into the second, and so on, until the end line, which flows from the penultimate line of copy. (You may wish to complete the circle by relating the end line back to the starting point: the headline. See The Final/End Line, page 202.) Just be careful not to make it sound too mechanical.

Note: there are also headlines that lead the reader into the body copy as a whole, not just the first line. (One might call this “headline introducing body copy.”)* The structure of the headline in Sainsbury's “Nappies” ad (see page 203) clearly sets up the entire copy. There are more subtle approaches, too, such as the Imperial War Museum's “Hitler” (see page 72) which uses a highly intriguing headline/visual to draw the reader into the copy.

*“Headline introducing visual” was discussed in the Print chapter.

Start Out with a Bang

The first line of copy has to grab the reader and pull him/her in; it sets up the rest of the piece. So start with the most surprising, persuasive, or intriguing line first. It could be a fact, a statement, or a comment. Maybe even a question. But as always, keep it simple (which doesn't always mean short). For the ultimate invisible thread, you may want to refer the first line directly back to the headline. However, there is one argument that states a very strong headline doesn't need to be referred back to in the copy.

Sentence Flow: Short-Long-Short-Long-Short-Long

Think of a piece of body copy like a piece of music. A quick, simple note played repeatedly gets boring. Conversely, a long, drawn-out instrumental solo is most effective if it's allowed “space” in which to breathe. So to give body copy rhythm, create variety. The most obvious technique is to alternate the length of your sentences. Successive long or short sentences are equally dull. Successive long