

TEN RULES OF COPYWRITING



THE ANSWERS YOU NEED — NOW

BULLET GUIDE

Tina Konstant

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BULLET GUIDE

Tina Konstant

Acknowledgements

Thanks to all the businesses I've worked with over the years that have contributed to putting this book together.

As always, this is dedicated to Morris!

About the author

Born in Zimbabwe and raised in South Africa, Tina Konstant moved to the UK in 1988. While an undergraduate at the University of Aberdeen, Tina was invited to deliver a series of practical speed-reading workshops to students and the local business community. When she graduated in 1996 she refined and developed the material from the courses to create the speed-reading and information management seminars she delivered to businesses in the private and public sectors. Based on the workshops and consulting projects in the oil and gas sector, she wrote (and continues to write) books on a range of subjects from effective reading and information management to copywriting and change management.

Her debut novel is due out as soon as it's finished!

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Introduction

We all skip over adverts in magazines and newspapers, and use commercials as a tea break part-way through a movie. But would it stretch your imagination to consider advertising as more than an interruption? Could you consider it the lifeblood of progress?

Consider for a moment the service copywriting provides. It's information. It's the way inventors, businesses, creators and innovators tell us that they've made something new and special and exciting and, if we give it a minute, it might just solve a problem that's been holding us back.

The trouble is, we're jaded. We've seen too many adverts and read too much copy that promises the new world but ends up leaving us with the same stains around the kitchen sink. We're inundated with lies and exaggerations, boasts and gimmicks, to the degree that we can't tell what's real any more, so we ignore it all.

That's why a copywriter's job is so challenging. Even before we write one word, our audience thinks we're trying to con them into doing or buying or thinking something they don't want to do or buy or think.

If we're honest, we can't say we don't deserve the reputation, considering the ready use of spin that features in the tabloids just about every day.

Nonetheless, the businesses, ideas, products, inventions and innovations that are created with the aim of progressing mankind (or at least making whites whiter) would not make it into our homes without great copy.

That's what we do. It's our responsibility. We take dreams and visions and put them in the light so everyone can see and understand them.

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1

Audience,
medium and
message

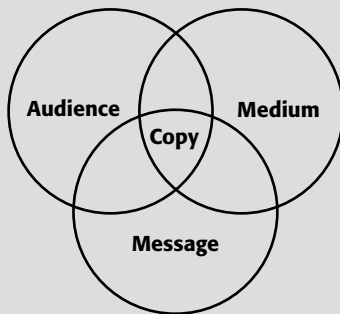
You're trying to get a message across but no one is listening, despite being bombarded with newsletters, desk drops, posters, articles and animated presentations.

You might have got the medium right, but are you targeting the right audience? Perhaps you are talking to the right people, but is your message exciting? What if you've got the right message and you're talking to the right people and you're using every medium available to you ... but are you telling the right story?

Great copy is the combination of what you say, how you say it, when you say it and to whom you say it. The elements – **audience**, **medium** and **message** – are inseparable.

It doesn't matter whether you're writing brief copy for radio and TV or extended copy for newspapers, magazines or businesses; the principles are the same.

- Culture
- Beliefs



- Internet
- Flyers
- Email

- Instruction
- Persuasion
- Information

Copywriting Rule No. 1:

Write your copy based on a combination of your audience, your medium and your message
.....

CASE STUDY

We rolled out a campaign for a company in one country. It worked perfectly: grabbed people's imagination and got the message across. Based on that success, we used the same campaign in another branch in a different country. It was the same business, the same message, but a different culture.

We made the mistake of leaving the copy (including layout and look) exactly as we did for the original audience. It didn't work. After a brief investigation into why we weren't getting the response we wanted, we changed the colours and a few words in the copy to give it a local look and feel, and it took off.

Lesson?

- * Don't take short cuts.
- * Never assume that just because your copy worked in one environment, it will work in another.
- * The economic environment will have an impact on your copy: stay current.
- * Don't undermine local fashions.
- * It doesn't matter if you don't like the look and feel of the copy – it's the audience that matters.
- * Change one thing at a time until you find exactly what isn't working.
- * Use local language, pictures and colour preferences.
- * Be aware of local sensitivities.

Copy isn't just the words. It's the overall impression people get when they look at it. If it *looks* complicated and cluttered, they won't bother reading the words.

Audience

Keep at least the following in mind:

Culture (country and corporate)

- * Where are they from?
- * What are the fundamentals of their culture and how do they differ from yours?
- * What are the similarities between this culture and any you've experienced before?
- * What is their history? Are there any sensitivities?
- * Are there any gender issues to be aware of?

Beliefs

- * What do they believe about themselves?
- * As a group, what are their spiritual beliefs? Will it have a bearing on what you write?

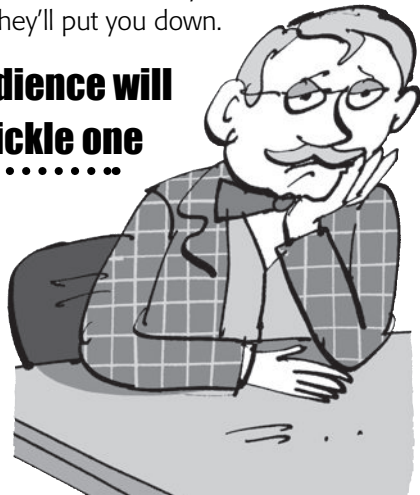
Desires

- * What do they want?
- * What do they want, but can't have?
- * What do they care about?
- * What would they do to get it?

When people read copy they read with their own interests in mind. They want to know only what's in it for them, so you have to give them good reason in the first few lines to read on and you have to use all your tricks to keep their attention, because the second they feel they're not getting what they want, they'll put you down.

**A copywriter's audience will
always be a fickle one**

.....



Medium

Whatever your message, use every medium available to you to get it out. Put your words everywhere:

- * team meetings
- * internal TV
- * intranet – including frequently asked questions, announcements, schedules
- * Internet
- * posters
- * banners
- * client magazines, newspapers and newsletters
- * factsheets
- * introduction DVDs
- * project story presentations
- * emails
- * flyers
- * infomercials
- * brochures
- * radio
- * newspapers.

To get your message across, you will always need to use more than one medium. The key is to make sure your words suit each medium. What works for a poster won't work for TV, emails or radio. Make sure there's a consistent theme, but write specifically for the medium.

IMPORTANT: However many different media you use, the message must be consistent.

Few things will confuse your audience more than finding different messages from you in different media. Even if you use the same or similar words – it doesn't matter. As long as the message is consistent.

TOP TIPS

- 1** Start small: bullets and slogans.
- 2** Expand that to a bigger piece: adverts and presentation material.
- 3** Expand the same message again: newspaper and magazine articles.
- 4** Expand it again: case studies and reports.
- 5** And so on. The same message: different media, different detail, but still the same message.

Message

What is your message supposed to do?

- * Instruct?
- * Persuade?
- * Inform?
- * Update?
- * Warn?

Don't mix your messages. Be clear about what you want to say, and what action you want people to take as a result.

If people are confused about what you want them to do, they'll do nothing.

**You can't stand for something
if you chase after everything.**

Ries and Trout



Almost all copy is produced to create an impact and make the reader *do* something differently – even if it's just thinking about the idea in a different way. **Start by really understanding what you want to change as a result of your copy**, then make sure you've:

- ✓ researched your audience
- ✓ gathered a full list of available media
- ✓ defined your message and the outcome you're aiming for
- ✓ given your readers more than they've asked for
- ✓ surprised them – if only a bit.

Most importantly, make sure you don't turn them off ...

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2

How to switch
your audience
off

If you want to frustrate your audience, do the following:

- 1 Treat them like idiots.
- 2 Use unexplained jargon and acronyms.
- 3 Use excessively sophisticated or complicated language.
- 4 Make your message a 10 page marathon with the point buried half-way down page 9.

For a while, 15–30 page sales letters were hugely popular. The trouble is, the people who made the most money from them were the ones selling the templates. Unless your product is exactly what people want, they don't have the time for such extended sales copy.

Copywriting Rule No. 2: Don't waste people's time.

If you've got something to say, spit it out

.....

Get to the point

Unless they're already motivated and interested in your business, product or idea, your average audience isn't interested in what you have to say. They aren't going to give more than a few seconds of their time, so use it wisely.

**On the average, five times as many people
read the headline as read the body copy.**

David Ogilvy

Hook them

The average city-dwelling American will lay eyes on over a thousand pieces of copy every day. Wherever you live, notice how much copy is out there.

For yours to stand out, at the very least, you must do everything you can to avoid switching your audience off.

Don't treat people like idiots

It will take exactly one sentence for people to recognize that you think they're stupid. The truth is, your audience is incredibly sophisticated. But even if the subject matter is over the laymen's heads, they won't like it pointed out.

If you really want to insult your audience and make sure they never look at anything you write again, turn your copy into 'my first reader' text. Doing that will make your readers feel like seven-year-olds. The problem is, anyone over eight years old will throw it out.

**Imagine you're talking to your best friend
when you write your copy**

.....

Make it easy for them to talk about

That's the point, isn't it? You want people to talk about your copy. So, if your favourite relative were to ask you what your 'business' was, what would you say? The chances are, you'll answer them as you would a normal human being without trying to be witty, complicated or clever. You'll probably put it across in a way that they can easily repeat if they wanted to.



Jargon and acronyms

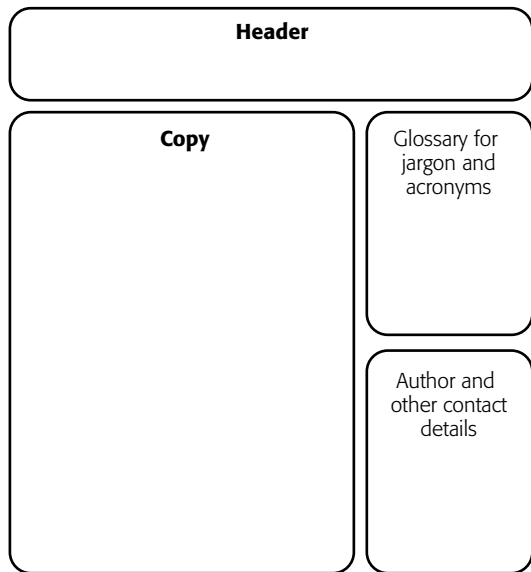
One of the greatest frustrations people have with copy on a new subject is the frequent use of jargon, acronyms and complex, specialized language. If you want your copy to be read and used, don't do this because it:

- * slows readers down
- * confuses people
- * annoys people to the degree that you will lose them.

Only use jargon and acronyms if there is no other way to explain what you're trying to say, and even then go to great lengths to provide definitions of what everything means.

If you really have to use excessively complex language, include a glossary and make it simple!

Naturally this isn't necessary on a one-page flyer (although not impossible). But it should be seriously considered for any detailed or specialized copy running to four or more pages.



Don't use sophisticated language

CASE STUDY

I did some work with someone who littered his language with words that people hardly ever heard let alone understood. He did it to gain an upper hand, knowing that people were thrown when they found themselves in the middle of a conversation they couldn't understand. People found his technique irritating and avoided him.

Coming across complex language in a conversation can be embarrassing and difficult to get out of. Coming across it in copy is much easier. The reader can either pick up a dictionary or drop the copy in the bin. Most people will take the second option, so keep it simple.

Does this mean all copy should be in plain English?

Plain English is good but being hindered by it means you lose all the colour and quality that a rich language like ours can provide.

Why describe a country hotel as a 'great place to stay' when you could describe it as a 'sumptuous, elegant place to fall back in love with life'.

Not plain English, but much more likely to get your audience's attention.

You don't want to use 'sumptuous'?

Try: lavish, luxurious, opulent, magnificent, resplendent, gorgeous, splendid, grand, palatial, rich, plush, ritzy ...

Plain English doesn't mean boring.

Keep it short and to the point

If you really want to write a 10 page piece describing your product, business or idea, then go for it, but make sure you actually need it and that you're writing for an audience that will read it.

The problem with the sales templates readily available on the Internet is that they're not new any more, so when people see that format, they skip all your delicious copy and go to where they guess the real information will be. So why waste your time and theirs?

**If you can get your point across
in one page, then do it!**

.....

If you insist on writing long copy that includes everything from the benefits of hair gel to the origins of mankind, then at least give your reader an easy-to-navigate table of contents. They'll thank you for thinking of them and the value of their time and perhaps, if they have nothing better to read, they might just read it all.



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3 It's all about
your audience

Copy is used in everything from local advertising to the promotion of projects fighting for attention in big business.

Unless you are very clear about exactly who your audience is – down to names and family histories, your copy will probably have to appeal to a fairly large and varied audience. Whether that audience is based in a single business or the general population, you need to engage everyone.

This doesn't mean your copy should be high-level, vague and fluffy – it means that you have to generate copy that will appeal to every type of reader.

**Copywriting Rule No. 3: In broad copy,
make sure there's something for everyone**

.....

The following are the five types of people that make up a typical audience:

Name	What they say	What they do
Factoid	They ask for facts, figures and data	They don't openly care about people they work with. They'll keep themselves to themselves and verify your facts
'People' people	They talk about how they and other people feel	They attend meetings and encourage everyone else to do so. They talk ... a lot
Present players	They talk about what's happening right now and how it impacts them	They just want to get on with the job
Future seekers	They'll ask about the plan and projections	They'll talk and think and plan. They won't act until they know what they're doing and why
Freeloaders	Not a lot. If anything, they'll joke about the project, product or idea	They'll put their feet up and wait for everyone to come to them

Factoids

These people are all about the details. No matter what you tell them, they won't believe you. People who like the facts also like to find them out for themselves.

In your copy, present all the numbers, dates and details, then tell your readers where they can go to verify them.

Make sure you get the facts right. If they find one mistake, they'll dismiss everything else you have to say.

Think about our hotel in Chapter 2. They might be interested in ...

Peagle Lodge – a 22 bedroom villa, 16 miles from Aberdeen on a 31 acre plot of land populated by deer and ancient trees where cycling and clay pigeon shooting are easily available. No hassle. No fuss.

'People' people

These people are more attracted to how things make them *feel*. At work, they're keen to make sure that everyone is taken care of and involved.

If they were looking for a country hotel, this might get their attention ...

**An exquisite hotel miles from the cluttered city
where you and your family can put your feet up in
front of a log fire on day one, cycle through ancient
forests on day two, ride horses on day three,
shoot clay pigeons on day four, soak in a jacuzzi
on day five and plan to stay forever on day six.
Welcome to Peagle Lodge.
The place you come to fall back in love with life.**

Present players

They are spontaneous and looking for action. At work, this person wants to dig in and get on with the job.

If a present player was looking for a country hotel:

**You got plans for the weekend? Why wait?
Make tomorrow the day you wake up in
Peagle Lodge to a view that shouts out
adventure, horse riding, sailing, shooting,
climbing, biking, hiking or simply soaking
wild Scotland in through every pore.
Let tomorrow be the day you wake up in the
place you come to fall back in love with life.**

Future seekers

These are the thinkers and planners. They won't do anything in a hurry but they are concerned about the future. If you want these people to come to Peagle Lodge ...

Take a moment ... you've worked all week, your family has worked all week, you'll all tired, you need a break. You need time to reconnect with what matters. Sometimes you need space to remember what it is to hold hands, to watch ants building a nest, to hear the wind through the trees. Sometimes you need space to let your dreams becomes plans. That's what Peagle Lodge is for. It's the place you come to fall back in love with life.

Freeloaders

If it's easy and cheap, or preferably free, then these people will be interested. It could be because they are being careful with their money or simply because they like a bargain. Getting them to Peagle Lodge won't be too difficult ...

If you want luxury, go to the Savoy. If you want cheap, go to Dayz Inn. If you want both, come to Peagle Lodge where you'll get a five star experience for a two star price. For the most amazing deals, visit us Monday to Thursday where you'll get the best view, the best service and the best Highland adventure – because loving life doesn't have to cost your life savings.

Hitting the buttons every time

No matter whom you're targeting, your copy must hit at least half of the following soft spots:

- * Get people's personal attention.
- * Prove that what you're offering will make a difference.
- * Make them *feel* something.
- * Give people the opportunity to take action.
- * Make it simple.
- * Paint an image that sticks in their mind.
- * Make them want to talk about you.
- * Make them want to come back.
- * Tell them what you would like them to do.
- * Give them a reason to do it.

**A copywriter should have an understanding of people,
an insight into them, a sympathy toward them.**

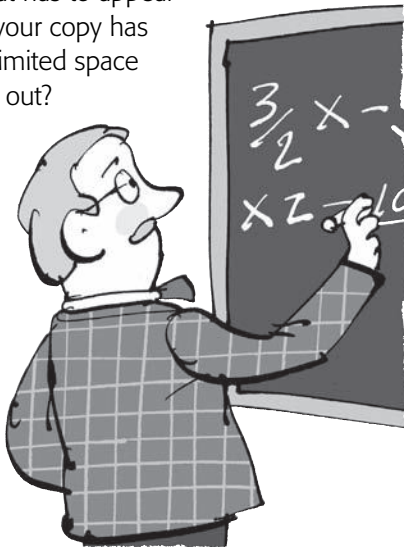
George Gribbin

Pull it all together

It's all very well if you're writing copy that has to appeal to only one of these types. But what if your copy has to reach all of them? What if you have limited space and only one shot to get your message out?

Put everything on one page in a way that allows people to find the type of information that attracts them most.

You've got the words – the rest is in the layout and design.



PEAGLE LODGE

The place you come to fall back in love with life

What would you like people to do TODAY:

Paint the present player's picture

Pictures,
references and
stories

We're all about you:

Paint the people person's picture

Pictures,
references and
stories

What taking action now will give you
in the future:

Paint the future seeker's picture

Pictures,
references and
stories

Loving life doesn't have to cost
your life savings:

Paint the freeloader's picture

Factoid's
picture

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4 Words that count

Every word must be weighed and measured to make sure it has the impact you want.

The trick is to write copy in such a way that people don't have to struggle to get the story. It's a little like watching a movie. When it's good, they're so wrapped up in it that they hardly notice that they're in a cinema. When it's bad, they notice everything: people around them, tiny lights on the ceiling, popcorn being crunched and tossed, bad camera angles ...

They'll be distracted, so follow Rule No. 4 ...

Copywriting Rule No. 4: Make every word count

.....

Do	Don't
Select your words to paint a picture	Repeat. Never repeat. It wastes time and gets annoying!
Use short paragraphs	Be verbose. Get to the point quickly and stick to it
If you're using bullets, make sure that they make sense	Create a list of one or two word bullet points that don't mean anything if skimmed over
Remember that design is as important as content	Clutter the white space with words
Assume that your competition will read your copy	Leave important information out because you don't want your competition to see it
Check your grammar and spelling	Guess spelling and grammar rules
Give people a choice	Tell people what to do
Be honest and straightforward	Worm your way into people's emotions

Select your words to paint a picture

Do

- ✓ *If you want people to remember what you write, then appeal to their imagination. People are faced with enough dull copy in the course of their lives. Don't add yours to it. Whether it's copy for a multinational or an advert for gumdrops, it doesn't have to be boring. Think about the adverts that stick in your mind. The best ones are almost like soap operas.*

Don't

- ✗ *Don't be the one who writes the advert that people mute as soon as it comes on the TV screen – the one where an actor bellows a phone number over and over again. Don't do it – not verbally nor in print.*

Use short paragraphs

Do

- ✓ *As far as possible use short sentences and short paragraphs. Pages and pages of unbroken text can be difficult to look at, let alone read and remember.*

Don't

- ✗ *Don't waffle! Get to the point quickly. Making people wait for the critical information is like making them sit through a shaggy dog story only to find out that the ending isn't worth it.*

Take a lesson from Blaise Pascal:

**The letter I have written today is longer than usual
because I lacked the time to make it shorter.**

Take the time. Be brief. Make your point so your audience can move on and do what you want them to do.

Using bullet points

Do

- ✓ *Bullet points make useful copy for a number of reasons, including:*
 - * *breaking the flow of text*
 - * *allowing for disconnected sentences to be grouped together*
 - * *making information easy to read and absorb*
 - * *splitting information into bite-sized chunks that people can read at a glance.*

Don't

- ✗ *Bullets become useless if they're so short they don't make any sense.*
- ✗ *If all the reader sees is a list of random words that mean nothing without the associated copy, they'll probably not bother with the bullets at all.*
- ✗ *Bullets must not be:*
 - * *too short*
 - * *badly constructed*
 - * *grammatically incorrect*
 - * *too summarized*
 - * *pointless*
 - * *meaningless.*

Pay attention to design

Do

- ✓ *You don't have to be an artist to be a copywriter. You do, however, need an eye for design and an understanding of what your copy will look like on a page.*
- ✓ *Pick up a good newspaper or magazine. Scan through it and stop on the pages where the design catches your eye. What do those pages have that the others don't?*

Don't

- ✗ *Whatever you do, don't be tempted to fill every space with words. White space is okay.*

It gives your reader a visual break and a little time to think.

Check for grammar and spelling

Do

- ✓ *If you're not a natural editor get someone who is to check your work.*

Don't

- ✗ *Guess grammar, spelling or grammar rules. Am I repeating myself? Let me say it again . . . Don't guess.*

CASE STUDY

Some time ago a colleague was putting a piece together for a sailing magazine and wondered why his copy was being turned down. After giving it to someone else to read he realized he had spelt 'scull' – each of a pair of small oars used by a single rower as 'skull' – bones enclosing the brain.

**Anything that
distracts the
reader is bad
for your copy**

.....

Don't guess!

Expect the competition to read your copy

At some point you have to put your message out there. If you're paranoid about your competition getting the details of what you're doing, then you'll never put anything out.

Write with religious fervour. What you want is to convert your competition and your critics. Don't give them a moment to stop to catch their breath. Keep going until you're over your paranoia and they're over trying to rip you off.



Don't tell people what to do

Do

- ✓ *Human beings are rebels. There are so many situations where we feel that we can't choose that, when we can, we sometimes do so even to our detriment.*
- ✓ *Case in point . . . as I'm writing this chapter I'm going through my mail. A housing company has sent me a flyer about its new development. On the front of the envelope the copy reads: 'Because you want to move NOW!'*
- ✓ *My first thought was, 'No I don't.' I didn't like the presumption. They told me what to do and I didn't like it. I tore it up and threw it out.*

Don't

- ✗ *Tell people what to do.*

Be straightforward

Always appeal to the audience you're writing for. Be honest and to the point. Don't patronize them – it gets tired and irritating incredibly quickly and they'll stop reading.

Ask yourself, what do you want people to *feel*?

- * confident in you and your ability to deliver?
- * in need of your product or service?
- * able to join in?
- * as if you're solving their problems?
- * happy, sad, revolted, shocked, informed, relaxed, at ease, nervous, anxious, excited?

Words can do that.

As a copywriter, they're your medium so make sure you stick to Rule No. 4: **make every word count.**

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5

Tell the truth,
but do it softly

Ask yourself

How do you feel when someone shouts at you? The worst offenders are TV advertisers selling windows or kitchen cleaning potions. They seem to think that if they are loud enough, the audience will get interested. What they don't realise is that people simply mute the TV and go and make a cup of tea. Your copy, if it's too loud and in people's faces, will have the same effect.

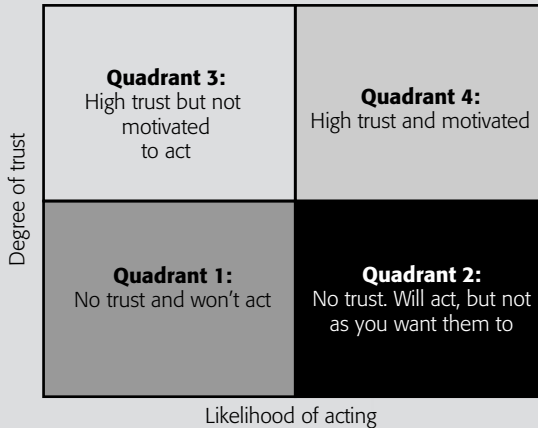
Tell your audience what you want them to hear, honestly and in a way that allows them to make up their own minds.

Copywriting Rule No. 5: Don't bully your audience

.....

The more people trust you, the more likely they are to believe you and take action based on your copy.

Assuming that everyone starts in Q1, how do you get people to like you, trust you, believe you and take action?



Quadrant 1

Let's assume that your audience is starting out in Q1: they don't like you or trust you or believe you and they aren't motivated to act.

At this point people need two pieces of information from your copy:

- 1 a reason to trust you and what you represent
- 2 a reason to act.

Fear and threats will make this audience fight back or ignore you. It's a bit like bankers asking people to invest after the banks have crashed.

Be absolutely honest with this group. Don't try to threaten or coerce them. Admit to your shortcomings and ask for their **participation**. Don't make any promises. They won't believe you.

If this doesn't work?

What if, no matter how honest or straightforward you are, people still don't believe you?

CASE STUDY

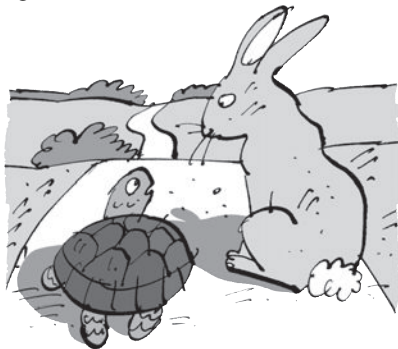
A company I worked with needed serious change to take place but certain key players weren't interested. We tried to be subtle and gently work people around but they still weren't interested. So we told them the absolute truth. We told them that jobs were on the line. Not theirs, but jobs nonetheless. Suddenly conversations opened up because they had the information they needed to fully understand the situation.

Sometimes being totally blunt is all that will work. What's important is that you don't exaggerate just to get the response you want.

Quadrant 2

So you've moved your audience out of Q1. At first, you'll wonder whether you've made a mistake; they still won't like you, but now they're motivated to act. The trouble is, their actions are not going to be for your benefit.

This is a dangerous quadrant as, no matter what you write, it will be interpreted to suit the audience's preconceived idea of who you are and what you're asking them to do.



Anger and fear are closely related emotions. In most cases, anyone experiencing genuine anger will also experience a degree of fear:

- * fear of the unknown
- * fear of loss
- * fear of appearing foolish
- * fear of being undermined
- * fear of being controlled.

If you can't get face-to-face communication with this audience, then make sure that your copy addresses their fears and frustrations and make sure it comes from someone who counts.

Don't send copy signed by someone on the fringes. Send it from the person they blame. At least it will start a conversation. From anyone else, it will be ignored.

Quadrant 3

It's taken some time and considerable effort but, by leading by example and showing them the right course of action, your audience is beginning to talk to you.

- ✓ You've told the truth.
- ✓ You've outlined scenarios of various courses of action.
- ✓ You've give them a choice.
- ✓ You've offered help and support.
- ✓ You've addressed their fears and concerns.

Q3 is where a conversation can finally take place. Your audience won't be ready to act in your interest, but they may be ready to listen. You're still in a delicate position. It won't take much to push them back into Q2.

At this point your copy should be all about them.

In Q1 you had to shock people out of inaction by showing them the bigger picture, part of which they probably didn't like. In Q3, it's all about what's in it for them.

The key to Q3 is to ask questions and keep the conversation going. Engage people and get their feedback.



**Worry not that no one
knows of you;
seek to be
worth knowing.**

Confucius

Quadrant 4

This is the quadrant in which your audience not only trusts you, but also wants to act.

In sales, this is exactly where you want to be – it means that people are ready to buy. In business, it means that people are ready to change.

Don't stop now. Aim to get your audience beyond trust and into friendship

Are there any businesses or products that you use and will use forever?
Are there some businesses that you feel are almost part of what keeps your household together?

These businesses are so integrated into your life that, even if a competitor offered you a cheaper deal, you probably wouldn't take it.

This is the best position to be in. At this point, you will have people who will pass on your copy, reprint it and use it. They will spread the word, act on your ideas, be loyal to you, your product or your ideas, and defend their right to use you.

In short, you have fans! All because you followed Rule No. 5: you didn't bully your audience.



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6 If it's in print,
it's evidence

Make sure that what you write is accurate and unambiguous. Whatever your copy is for – internal project communication, marketing material for an organization or promotional material for your own business – people will expect that what you print is true, and will use it against you if it's not.

Depending on where your audience is on the grid in Chapter 5, they will be more or less forgiving of errors in your copy and of promises you make. To avoid unnecessary trouble, follow Rule No. 6.

**Copywriting Rule No. 6: Don't put
anything in print that you can't back up**

.....

There are **eight key questions** to ask yourself as a copywriter.

- 1** What are the consequences of misrepresenting your idea/business/product?
- 2** What if you make a mistake and don't know it until it is gone to print?
- 3** Can a mistake be turned into a good thing?
- 4** If your copy is inaccurate, who will take the hit?
- 5** If you're taken to court, can your copy be used against you?
- 6** Are you making promises to get you in the door that you can't or won't keep?
- 7** How many times can you repeat yourself before you drive people nuts?
- 8** How seriously will people take your copy?

The consequences of misrepresentation

Don't go there. Don't even try.

**Please don't make the mistake
of thinking that you'll get away
with misrepresentation**

64

You'll propel your audience into Q1, outlined in Chapter 5, and you won't get them back.

Return to Peagle Lodge, our countryside hotel. If you advertise an experience that will help people fall back in love with life but, in truth, your sumptuous lodge is a bed and breakfast on the edge of an industrial estate, then you're asking for trouble, abuse and perhaps legal action if people have paid for their holiday in advance.

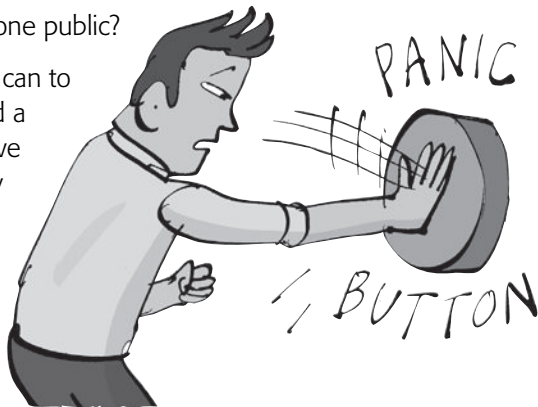
Mistakes

You've made a mistake in your copy and it's gone to print. What now?

If it's gone to print but not gone public, ditch the flyers, brochures or posters and start again. The cost of reprinting is nothing compared with the hassle of retraction.

If it's gone to print and gone public?

Then either do what you can to make what you promised a reality or tell people you've messed up, pull the copy and put out a correction.



Can a mistake be turned around?

If you can't correct your mistake or use it to your advantage, find a way to turn it around so that the audience focuses on the least calamitous aspect. These are typical reactions to mistakes – based on who made them.

Who makes the mistake?

Mistake made by senior figure:
people will watch and enjoy
every moment of discomfort

Mistake made by a middle ranking
individual: some people will take
notice but it'll pass

General low-level error:
most people won't be
too bothered and will
probably ignore it

People's reactions to that mistake

**What's important is that you do
something – whether you own up or spin
it, it doesn't matter, just DO something**

Inaccurate copy you can't fix?

Who takes the hit?

This should never happen. As a copywriter you shouldn't put anything into print unless it's been signed off by the client, an expert on the subject and by the person on whose behalf you're writing.

If there are mistakes, the person whose signature is on the bottom will take the hit publicly; privately the copywriter's reputation will be at stake.

To make sure this never happens to you, no matter who signs it off, get independent confirmation that what you have written is correct. Do your research. Make it a professional rule.

Legal trouble?

You are writing copy, not contracts. If you think that what you're putting in print might get the client, the company or you into legal trouble, stop immediately and get lawyers involved.

A few things you must make sure are correct before you go to print:

- * All branding must be absolutely accurate.
- * Facts and figures must be correct.
- * Quotes from people must be accurate and their permission received.
- * You have not trashed the opposition, no matter how tempting.

As a copywriter you must keep the interests of your client in mind. You might not end up in court personally, but make it your responsibility to help your client stay out of it too.

Making promises

If you are writing copy for your own business or product, think about the long-term value of your customers. If they read your copy and walk in the door thinking they'll get what you promise, only to be told that there are conditions attached that exclude them, they'll leave and never come back.

If you're writing copy for someone else's business or product, walk away from the job if all they want is foot-in-the-door copy.

You could write the copy but you won't be able to put it in your portfolio in case future clients have already come across it and know that it's a con.

TOP TIP

Imagine you're writing for your best friend. Imagine the people reading your copy know where you live!

How many times can you say it?

Whatever your message, however big or varied your audience, present it in every medium available:

- * newsletters
- * mail drops
- * desk drops
- * emails
- * Internet
- * intranet
- * leaflets
- * open days
- * TV
- * endorsements
- * the news
- * advertising
- * word of mouth
- * personal letters.

The key is to make sure you present the same message but in different formats. The words don't have to be the same, just make sure the message is. People will spot inconsistencies and it will confuse them.

Keep it straight, keep it honest and always follow Rule No. 6: don't put anything in print that you can't back up.

How seriously will people take your copy?

Don't take it personally, but you can spend hours and days and weeks researching and writing the most inspiring copy and people will ignore it, scan it, dismiss it, ditch it, or use it to line their pet parrot's cage.

The only people who will read your copy word for word are the people who commission it or the company/product fans.



**If advertising had a little more respect
for the public, the public would have
a lot more respect for advertising.**

James Randolph Adams

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7

Show, don't tell:
why should
anyone
believe you?

Give people a reason to believe you. Empty promises touted by snake oil salesmen don't impress today's audiences; if they don't believe you, they won't follow you – and the cheapest form of advertising is repeat business.

Great copy is about building relationships with your customers. But they won't take your word for it. You're going to have to prove it.

Sometimes, the advertising is better than the product. Nothing kills bad product like good advertising. Everyone tries the thing once and never buys it again.

Jerry Dells Famina

The more you talk, the less people will listen. Instead, *show* them who you are and what you do.

- * References – people who like you.
- * Client lists – people who use you.
- * Qualifications – people who taught you.
- * Research – people you learned from.

Warning

Make sure that you get permission from the people whose comments you use to promote your business. If you don't, and they find out, you will lose a fan and your credibility in a single step.

**Copywriting Rule No. 7: Your credibility is
in the fine print. Take it seriously**

.....

References

By references, I mean anyone who can vouch for, uses and likes the idea, product or company you are writing about.

But choose carefully:

- 1 Use the person's full name and, ideally, their city and as much other information as they will allow you to print. Don't attribute a reference to 'D. Smith'. That means nothing.
- 2 Use the person's job title, if relevant. If the product is aimed at administrative staff, use a reference from someone in the admin pool. Don't use the CEO because it will hold no weight.

Make sure they're genuine. You could make them up, but you would know.

Get permission!

CASE STUDY

Some time ago a reader contacted the publisher of one of my books with feedback on it. The publisher forwarded it to me, and I liked it so much I decided to put it on my website – along with the person's name and the city he lived in.

A while later I got an angry email from that person telling me to take his name off my website because he hadn't given me permission.

I took it off immediately. Not too smart. In a single step I'd lost my credibility and a fan.

Client list

Depending on your product, company or idea, a client list may or may not be relevant.

Back to Peagle Lodge

If we wrote a glossy four page brochure filled with everything amazing about the place, we'd include a list of people who had stayed. But instead of just their names, we'd tell their stories too:

- * The Cran family, who went clay pigeon shooting for the first time ... and hit them!
- * Dennis Matthews, who proposed to Liz Duner in the jacuzzi on a snowy winter night. She said yes!
- * Mr and Mrs Anders who celebrated their 40th wedding anniversary in their own private lodge.

If your references are companies and not individual people then **represent them accurately** – show their logo, not just their company name. People are more likely to recognize the logo than the name.

However, follow these rules without fail ...

- * Get the company's permission.
- * Contact the company for the correct logo.
- * Make sure the resolution is right for the print medium.
- * Make sure you follow the company rules on how to display the logo.

It's not worth going to print only to be told by a major client to pull the material because they don't like how their brand is being used.

It's not good for business.

Qualifications

In Chapter 2 we looked at the different types of people who will read your copy. Factoids will be most interested in the qualifications. They will want to know what makes you (the business/service) think you are qualified to do what you say you can do.

The more skilled the job is, the more qualifications they'll be looking for.

The alternative therapy industry has issues with this sometimes. You see someone promoting themselves as a hypnotherapist or reflexologist and they'll have a list of letters after their name. Some of the letters might mean something, others may mean that they've attended a weekend course.

**People will look the qualifications up.
Make sure that they are relevant**

.....

No qualifications but a lot of experience?

If you're a surgeon, lawyer, doctor, teacher or in a business that requires qualifications to practise, then you need certificates and all the associated paperwork. However, sometimes it's experience that gets you through the door.

In this situation your copy should include:

- ✓ your client list
- ✓ your history
- ✓ clients' names and their stories
- ✓ what you actually did.

Include case studies from your clients. Show the good and the bad and how you solved their problems. Include detailed profiles of the team including their histories.

Research

CASE STUDY

A colleague attended a talk, and was so impressed by the speaker's associated copy that he came away from the event wanting to promote her. She didn't have any qualifications in the field and she was new to public speaking, but she was attracting large audiences.

What had she done?

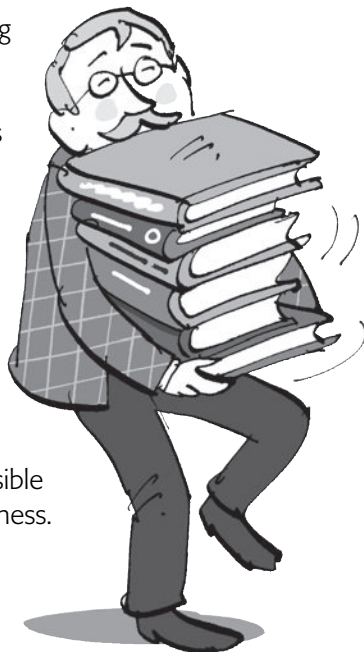
She had carried out considerable research in a field of personal development in which she'd had a bad real life experience.

People didn't know her, but they had heard of the people she'd interviewed and that in itself loaded her copy with credibility.

No matter what field you're writing copy for, when people feel that money and time is tight, they need to know that the businesses they're dealing with are legitimate and professional and can deliver.

Your copy can make an average company seem like the latest miracle. It can also make the world's most amazing business seem like pre-schooler children stuck in a sandpit.

As the copywriter you are responsible for creating the image of the business. Do your research.



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8 When copy goes wild

Copy is what you say it is. Depending on your combination of **audience**, **message** and **medium**, use whatever you need to get your message across.

Although traditionally 'copy' is short and to the point, there is justification for expanding that copy to include extensive content and technical detail. This results in the increasingly popular info-brochures – four page flyers that aren't designed to sell a product but rather an idea. Commercially, the four page info-brochure is free. The expanded version (anything from 12 to 30 pages), however, can be sold for anything from £15 to £150 – and people buy.

Why will people pay for a 12–30 page document?

- * It catches their imagination.
- * They learn something real (not just a promise of something).
- * They believe it because it's backed up with evidence.
- * It's shorter than a book and cheaper than a conference or seminar.



These documents are detailed, well-researched, to the point, direct, factually accurate and relevant. This is copy on steroids.

**Copywriting Rule No. 8: There are no rules.
Do whatever it takes to get your point across**

.....

It catches people's imagination

Most academic papers are not written with the layman in mind – even if they're the intended audience. But when a layman does the research and writes the findings for another layman, then a subject that would normally be incomprehensible and dull becomes interesting, understandable and surprisingly useful.

For your extended copy to appeal to your readers' imagination:

- * Make it relevant to your audience.
- * Keep it practical.
- * Keep it credible.
- * Write with the end-user in mind.
- * Write as if you're speaking to someone you know and like.

**Make it simple. Make it memorable.
Make it inviting to look at. Make it fun to read.**

Leo Burnett

Using the information is the key to this type of copy.

Up until now we've talked about copy that informs people and gets them to act in a different way. This extended copy is designed to do all that but also to get people to *think* differently. To allow them to do that, your copy needs to include:

- ✓ a good clear argument
- ✓ solid case studies of real people in real situations
- ✓ what the reader needs to do to make use of the information.

**People are attracted to this type of copy
because it saves them time**

.....

People learn something

Any copy you produce has to leave something with the reader that wasn't there before. Otherwise, what's the point?

It's a smart, active intelligent audience and it will take them exactly 30 seconds to realize that you're filling their heads with mush rather than content.

When you write copy, especially extended copy, think about what you want your reader to learn.



Extended copy has the luxury of space

You don't have to cram everything you want to say in a single page flyer, so use it!

Read any book on how to write a thriller and you'll be told to make sure there's serious action on every page. It's why it's called a page-turner.

The equivalent in copy is extended copy. You want people to say, 'No way! Really? That's so cool!' on every page.

- ✓ Be original – don't just read a lot of books and summarize them.
- ✓ Be clear and concise.
- ✓ Give your readers something they haven't thought about.

Back it up with evidence

If you're writing extended copy on any subject from motivation and leadership to the global economy and world peace, it's advisable to be able to back up what you say.

Urban myths

Have you come across *59 Seconds: Think a Little, Change a Lot* by Professor Richard Wiseman? The book outlines real research into some of the myths repeated in dozens of self-help books. It seems that a few authors have read the same books and have all used the same stories without making sure they're true.

Get your facts right!

Be careful of repeating 'evidence' that you haven't checked up on yourself. Exercise due diligence. Don't take shortcuts. It's all about Rule No. 6: if it's in print, it's evidence.

People might read brief copy then shelve it or bin it. Unless they're going to act on it, they're unlikely to pay detailed attention to it.

Extended copy, however, will be read thoroughly and critically – especially if people have paid for it.



What else is extended copy good for?

- 1 Use it as promotional material to invite people to a course or seminar.
- 2 Use it as a precursor to an extended piece of work.
- 3 Use it as a summary of what you do to get your foot in the door.
- 4 Send it to magazines and newspapers with a proposal for a series of articles on the subject.
- 5 Send it to other specialists in the field as an invitation to collaborate on a bigger piece of work.

**You could give your copy away
or you could use it as a tool
to build something bigger**

.....

- 6 Break it into sections and submit it bit by bit to journals and specialist publications.
- 7 Use it as part of a proposal for an idea for a book.
- 8 Use it as a foundation for a business plan.
- 9 Write a few more on other subjects and build a library of growing information.
- 10 Enter it into article writing competitions.

**The key is to refresh it and review it
each time you use it**

.....

Keep it up to date and you'll have a body of knowledge and copy that you can use and use and use again in all sorts of media.

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9 Power of persuasion

The bottom line is that most copy is used to get people to do something that they hadn't planned until they bumped into your work. The following need to be considered when you intend to use what you write as a persuasive tool:

- 1 How do people currently feel about you, your area of expertise, your idea, your product, your business?
- 2 Do you merely want to keep them informed or do you want them to *think* differently?
- 3 How do you change the way people behave towards you?
- 4 How can you learn from the world's oldest business?

CASE STUDY

We were introducing a piece of software into a company whose workforce didn't want it. Based on points 1 to 4 opposite:

- * Everyone knew it was cumbersome and difficult to use.
- * We needed people to *like* the new software.
- * We wanted them to *use* it consistently.
- * We knew that they didn't trust the software and, by association, us.

SOLUTION

We provided information that touched on their need for facts and figures and took account of their feelings. It took time, but they stopped throwing our copy away and started listening.

**Copywriting Rule No. 9: Touch people's
hearts and you'll reach their minds**

.....

How do people currently feel?

Before you can persuade people to do anything, you have to know what their existing opinions are.

- * Do they like the product/idea/business you're writing for?
- * Does the business have a history it's recovering from?
- * Are existing customers loyal?
- * Has anyone ever heard of the business/product/idea?

How easily persuaded your audience are will depend on how deeply rooted their ideas or beliefs are about your product, business or idea.

If you're simply asking them to consider a new washing powder, then it will be a fairly straightforward campaign.

Bigger ticket item ...

But what if you're asking them to change to something that'll cost them considerable time and money? Again, fairly straightforward if you appeal to what they value and guarantee you'll give them something worth even more.



But what if you're asking for the Holy Grail of all changes?

**What if you're asking people
to consider a change in
something so fundamental
to who they are that it
makes up their identity?**

.....

How do you change the way people behave ...

... towards your product/business/idea if it means them changing their beliefs?

- ✓ Don't rush them.
- ✓ Don't expect overnight converts.
- ✓ Give them security and demonstrate that their loyalty will be valued.
- ✓ Give them what you say you'll give them, then give them more.
- ✓ Be honest and up front about your strengths and weaknesses.
- ✓ Give the business/product/idea a human face.
- ✓ Make the business something the audience wants to identify with.

Think Richard Branson. He doesn't even run most of the businesses carrying the Virgin logo but when people think 'Virgin' they think Branson.

But what if the business can't deliver that?

Persuade the business you're writing for to review its product and ways of doing business *or* write copy that matches what the business *can* do. False advertising will land you with a bad reputation and the business in potential trouble.

People might be persuaded by your copy, but when they finally take a step to try the real thing, and find that it isn't as described, they won't trust or believe you again.

- ✓ Keep delivering.
- ✓ Deliver consistently.
- ✓ Keep your promises.

Your aim is to have fiercely loyal customers who won't go anywhere else because you make them feel too good.

You've done everything you can

- * You've taken time to allow people to get used to your ideas.
- * You've been honest.
- * You know you can back your promises.

But, *still*, they won't listen.

Take a moment to think about religion and what it does to gather and grow its flock.

It's the oldest business on earth and it keeps growing. People need something to hold on to and believe in. Your business might not be as high on a person's list of priorities as what faith they adhere to, but you can use the same principles.

Copywriting principles ...

... from the oldest business in the world:

- * Make your business part of the family.
- * Make people feel part of a community.
- * Make your readers a part of something special.
- * Give members access to something non-members will never have.
- * Don't change the rules on your members once they join.
- * Give your customers a sense of exclusivity.

The common factors? Membership, family, exclusivity, access, community, belonging.



How do you keep your customers?

CASE STUDY

As I'm writing this, I'm working on a project with a team of technical specialists. A comment from one made me pause. She said: 'We'll monitor how many hits this article gets and then decide if it's worth writing another one.'

She'd missed the point. You don't monitor the hits on one piece of communication; you monitor the impact of the entire campaign. An article you publish might not be read by a lot of people, but it might have been read by the right people who then take your message to another level by promoting it through their networks.

Copy isn't a one-hit wonder

Don't take anything for granted. Keep going. Keep repeating. Keep in touch. Get in people's faces and don't get out until you get the results you want. Then, when you get the results, stick around and keep going until you take the relationship between you and your customer from stranger to casual acquaintance all the way up to life-long friend.

Whatever you do, don't let them down. Friends still break up.

If you're trying to persuade people to do something, or buy something, it seems to me you should use their language, the language they use every day, the language in which they think. We try to write in the vernacular.

David Ogilvy

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10 Tell a
good story

So you've done everything you need to: you've taken account of your **audience**, your **message** and your **medium**, you've kept it short and to the point (or interesting and extended), you've told the truth and told it softly, you've treated your audience with respect. Now you have to make sure that they read your story and keep reading it.

- 1 **Beginning** – Why should they read your copy?
- 2 **Middle** – What is in it for them?
- 3 **End** – What do you want them to do about it?
- 4 **Echo** – When they've put your copy down, will they keep thinking of you? Again and again and again?

**Copywriting Rule No. 10: Tell a good story:
beginning, middle, end and echo**

.....

With so much trying to catch people's eye, why should anyone read your copy? Your readers are busy and won't be interested unless you give them something they want or catch their imagination.

Nobody reads ads.
People read what interests them.
Sometimes it's an ad.

Howard Gossage

To catch their attention, you have to do the equivalent of 'Once upon a time on a dark and stormy night ...'



The Beginning

There's a reason fairy tales have been around forever and there's a reason why so many of the great ones start with 'Once upon a time on a dark and stormy night ...'

Those words immediately open people's minds and hearts and put them around a campfire with people they like to spend time with: warm flames, marshmallows, that tickly feeling in their stomach when they think about the dark surrounding their glowing circle.

They want heroes and villains. They want to win – to be on the top of the world. If you can take them there, they'll listen.

Start as you mean to go on ...

'Once upon a time on a dark and stormy night there was a family that lived in the part of town that was so busy, so full, that they hardly had time to notice each other let alone the wind in the trees around their little home. They spent so little time together they soon began to wonder whether they ever really knew each other.'

**'In that little house, caught between
a million other houses, they felt
squashed and trapped and
sometimes a little frightened ...'**

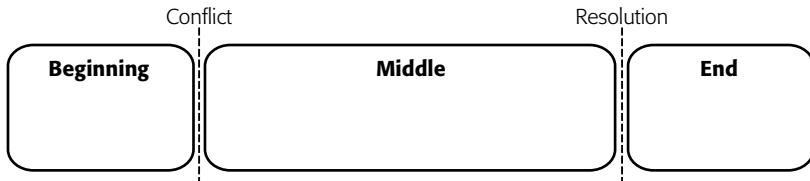
.....

The Middle

In the beginning, your copy should set the scene and give your readers some context:

- * Who are you?
- * Where do you come from?
- * What can you do?
- * Why do you do it?
- * What problems can you fix?

The middle of your story tells them of the conflict and issues, challenges and obstacles, that you can help them overcome. As in a good story – it's what comes between the conflict and the resolution – it's the core.



'... Then one day, when the sky was particularly dark and the wind particularly mean, Jiggy Riddle sat alone in a corner and drew a tree. It was a big tree, a beautiful tree, full of the peace, promise and magic that comes from being rooted for over a hundred years.

Jiggy Riddle showed the picture to his parents hoping against hope that they'd stop to look at the tree. They didn't. But Jiggy Riddle didn't give up. For three weeks, twice a day, he showed his parents the picture until finally, on a day far darker than all the others, they stopped and looked at their son as if they were seeing him for the first time ...'

The End

The ending is all about what people do. This is the part of the story where the villain is beaten and the hero does what has to be done. It's where the decisions are made and people move forward.

In your copy, this is the part of the story where you want people to stand up and say:

- * Yes! I understand!
- * Yes! I want you!
- * Yes! I like it!
- * Yes! I'll have it!
- * Yes! Let's do that again, and again, and again ...

This is the first step to victory. It's where people move from passive to active.

'... In the stillness that followed, the family heard the wind. They realized that it wasn't hard and angry; it was simply knocking on the window to get their attention. The rain wasn't cold and sharp; it was trying to open the door to let them out. The dark wasn't trying to hide the shadows; it was trying to make the light they lived in brighter than it really was.

That night, the family packed their bags, opened the door and walked into the wind and the rain. They travelled north and didn't stop until the winding road ended at the door to Peagle Lodge. Tired from their journey, they fell into a deep and dreamless sleep ...'

The Echo

It doesn't end there.

You want loyal followers – people who will read your copy and keep coming back for more. You want people to be a part of your business and contribute to your growth. Most important, you want people who will talk about you to friends and family, colleagues and strangers.

**That's what the echo is all about – the words
that keep going after you've stopped talking**

.....

A word of warning ...

**While it may be true that the best advertising
is word of mouth, never lose sight of the fact
it also can be the worst advertising.**

Jef I. Richards

'... In the morning Mum, Dad and Jiggy Riddle woke to bright sun and soft breezes, and outside their window, not ten steps from where they stood, was a tree. A beautiful tree, full of the peace, promise and magic that comes from being rooted for over a hundred years.

They stayed for just seven days. Day one they rode horses. Day two they climbed hills. Day three they swam lakes. Day four they sailed boats. Days five and six they ran and hiked and played. Day seven, they put Jiggy's drawing in a frame and vowed to return to the place where they fell back in love with life.'

Further reading

When I think about the art of writing copy, I learned most from the books on how to write great fiction. This might seem a little odd, but copywriting and fiction aren't all that different. In both forms, the key is telling a great story. The following are my top five recommended sources:

Teach Yourself Screenwriting by Ray Frensham (Hodder Education, 1996).

Writing the Breakout Novel by Donald Maass (Writer's Digest Books, 2002).

On Writing by Stephen King (New English Library, 2001).

Write a Blockbuster and Get it Published by Helen Corner (Hodder Education, 2010).

<http://www.sunfish.co.uk>: This is the website for Andy Maslen (freelance copywriter). It contains a huge amount of valuable and insightful information.