Six ways to improve your copywriting

Write consistently

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

Listen carefully

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

Read widely

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

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

Criticise others

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

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

Criticise yourself

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

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

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

Build a 'swipe file'

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

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

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

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

Ten ways to beat writer's block

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

Take aim before you fire

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

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

Don't start at the beginning

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

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

Take five

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