

Copywriting, Copyediting, and Proofreading— Nitpicking or Necessity?

By Emily Harrison Weir

Copywriting

Nearly every adult knows how to write, so it's easy to assume that you'd be the best person to write copy about what you want to promote. Sometimes that's true, but more often collaborating with an outside writer produces the most effective communications.

You know what you mean to communicate, but will your reader? That's the crucial question. All too often, the message you send is not the message that the reader receives. Why?

- One common reason is that the writer is too expert in her field to write about it clearly for others. The technical knowledge is there, but the ability to communicate it in a way non-experts can understand is lacking. (That's why some brilliant professors are weak teachers.)
- A related problem is that it's extremely easy to let jargon creep into the way you express yourself. Each field uses words, abbreviations, acronyms, and terms that everyone understands—within your field. You don't consider them jargon because you know what they mean. An outside writer is more likely to know what those outside your field of expertise—your prospective clients—will and won't understand.
- Most people need help organizing their thoughts and translating the mass of information that could be communicated into a short, effective package of words.
- Professional writers have a “way with words.” And, as Mark Twain said, “The difference between the right word and the almost right word is the difference between lightning and a lightning bug.”

- Writers know how to produce communications that embody what writing guru William Zinsser calls the four basic premises of writing: clarity, brevity, simplicity, and humanity.
- Copywriters will also collaborate with marketers, account executives, and graphic designers on your communication pieces, so the strategic goals, messaging, and images work seamlessly together.

Working with a Copywriter

Ideally, a copywriter should start working with you at the beginning of each project, to help gather and focus your ideas. At an initial meeting, the copywriter should find out:

- Whom you aim to attract. (Who's your target audience?)
- What medium you'll use to communicate. (Text written for the Web should be significantly different than text written for a print advertisement, brochure, or magazine article.)
- What precisely you're trying to explain or promote. (I once read a lengthy product description without understanding what the product did or to whom it was being marketed!)
- And finally—the most important, yet frequently neglected, piece of information—what you want this particular communication to achieve. (What specific action do you want the audience to take after seeing this communication? Contact you for more information? Buy the product? Subscribe to a service? Sign up for your e-newsletter?)

Having gathered ideas and appropriate background information from you, the copywriter

will draft the text of your communication. That's far more easily said than done. Author Nathaniel Hawthorne described the process this way: "Easy reading is damn hard writing." Most writers go through multiple drafts before showing you the fruits of their labor. And if they do a really good job, you won't see the work behind the words. All you'll see is a clear, compelling message that you—and your audience—will want to read and act on.

You'll be given the draft text to review; usually there are one or two opportunities to have the copywriter alter the copy before it's sent for copyediting and then to the designers.

Copyediting

Copyediting is related to, but not the same as, copywriting. Ideally, the writer produces what he or she believes is finished copy, then sends it to a copyeditor for checking and polishing. A good copyeditor:

- Reads the text for sense. (Do I understand it? Are questions answered that readers are likely to ask? What's missing that would be helpful to add?)
- Checks the structure. (Are the chunks of text in a logical order? Is there the right amount of detail in each section? Are the chunks of text the appropriate length?)
- Makes sure the text is grammatically correct and as jargon-free as possible.
- Checks the facts. (Does the math add up? Are the dates and prices accurate? Are names and titles correct? Do the referenced Web URLs work, and direct the reader to the right place?)
- Checks the spelling both on a computer and by reading it closely. (Computer spell checkers won't catch errors such as using "too" instead of "two.")
- Asks questions about anything he or she doesn't think is clear. (This is a final check to be sure that the message you send is the message that the audience actually receives.)

Copy Preparation

Whether or not you use an outside copywriter, there are certain steps you should take before

declaring any text final. Someone (you or the copywriter/copyeditor) should be sure the text:

- Answers the "five Ws": who, what, where, when, and most important why. This is something they teach beginning journalists, but it applies to all promotional writing as well.
- States the obvious. When you know a lot about a topic, it's amazingly easy to forget to say the most basic things—that your product is the first to have a particular feature; that your institution offers more of X than competitors; that your product saves more energy than standard products, etc.
- Makes a compelling case. A promotional piece can't just describe; it must also persuade the client that your product or service is useful and better than what's offered by your competitors.
- Is organized in a way that your audience can follow easily. (Text should "lead" the reader in a logical fashion from point to point.)
- Tells a story. Whatever you're trying to promote, don't forget the human angle—how have people used your product? How has your service made customers' lives better?
- Is an appropriate length for your product, communication medium, and audience. For example, one page of narrative text might be fine for a brochure, but is way too long for a print advertisement.
- Is as jargon-free as possible. If you must use jargon (meaning any words specific to your field), define the terms you use (as I just did).
- Is accurate. There's no substitute for double-checking. (Is the boss's name O'Neil, O'Neill, or O'Neal?)
- Has been spell-checked both by computer and at least two sets of human eyes who haven't seen the copy before.
- Is prepared in a way that's technically easy for the designers to use. Microsoft Word is the standard word-processing program. A few technical tips: Use tabs (not a series of spaces) to indent paragraphs; use italics instead of underlining; use one space after the period that ends a sentence, not two.
- Save your text as a .doc Word document with a number as part of the file name (for example,

copyprep01). That way, when changes are made, you can differentiate the new document (copyprep01, 02, etc.) from the original.

Proofreading

Although you should proofread text yourself before it's sent to a copyeditor or designer, it's important to have someone who's never before read the copy proofread it carefully to see if you any words out. (Did you notice that the word "left" was left out of the previous sentence?) Any fresh set of eyes is helpful, but not all are equal. Always use a professional proofreader.

The most important rule in proofreading is that absolutely no one can effectively proofread his or her own work. (This is because our brains read what we think should be there rather than what actually is on the page.) Even if you don't use a professional proofreader, get someone—anyone other than yourself—to look at what you believe to be perfect, finished copy. Ninety percent of the time, that person will find at least one error or omission.

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How important is that final proofread? I once sent a development newsletter to print only to discover that one big donor was described as an "investment baker" rather than an investment banker. (She graciously let me know of the error by offering to bring cupcakes to the next board meeting, but the damage was done.)

Lastly, always be sure to do a final proof—and get a final client sign-off—before you go public with your communications. Never assume that corrections were done correctly; the chance of making new errors in the process of correcting is suprisingly high.

By investing some time and effort into preparing the text, you will greatly improve the effectiveness of your communication (and save yourself from embarrassment).