

For Review Only



THE  
ULTIMATE  
GUIDE  
TO GREAT  
COPYWRITING

# WRITE TO SELL

ANDY MASLEN

WRITE TO SELL

Marshall Cavendish  
Business

How do you persuade someone to buy from you just by writing to them?

What does effective copywriting look like – and sound like?

*Write to Sell* has the answers.

Read this book and you'll learn:

- The confidence and the skills to write better copy faster.
- New ways to gain readers' attention, respect and trust.
- Hints and tips on turning selling skills into copywriting skills.
- Simple techniques to improve the readability of your copy.
- The impact of design and layout on copywriting.
- The meaning of good written English – the rules you must follow, the rules you can safely ignore.

*Write to Sell* is a guide to the practice of great copywriting – not just the theory. Checklists, exercises and mnemonics give you the tools to craft better copy. "Case notes" and concrete examples show you the difference between what works and what doesn't. Clear and concise, this is the copywriter's manual. Don't start writing without it.

"If I were starting out as a writer tomorrow, I would definitely want to read this book. I pretty much taught myself most of the tricks all those years ago – and it took me far too long. Had I read it, it would have saved me years of trial and, for the most part, error."

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# Write to Sell

*The ultimate guide to great copywriting*

NEW EDITION

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## Contents

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<b>Introduction</b>		<b>7</b>
<b>Section One</b>	<b>It's not about you</b>	
Chapter 1	Where most people go wrong	14
Chapter 2	A few thoughts on human nature	17
Chapter 3	Getting to know your reader	22
Chapter 4	A word about businesspeople	31
Chapter 5	The B-word (and why it's so much better than the F-word)	34
<b>Section Two</b>	<b>What do you mean, you don't have a plan?</b>	
Chapter 6	Yes, but what are you trying to say?	38
Chapter 7	Setting out your goals	43
Chapter 8	A simple but powerful fast-food mnemonic for creating perfect plans	45
Chapter 9	Understanding what you're really selling	48
Chapter 10	The killer structure for every piece of copy you'll ever write—online or offline	52
<b>Section Three</b>	<b>What works? And what doesn't?</b>	
Chapter 11	What works	74
Chapter 12	And what doesn't	84
<b>Section Four</b>	<b>OK, start writing</b>	
Chapter 13	The black arts (and a few magic words)	98
Chapter 14	Why your sales copy should be like a bowl of Rice Krispies	103
Chapter 15	Good English style for copywriting	110
Chapter 16	Tone of voice: What it is and what to do with it	123
Chapter 17	Why punctuation is a sales tool	126
Chapter 18	Stuff you learned at school you can forget	138

# For Review Only

<b>Section Five</b>	<b>Dressed to impress?</b>	
Chapter 19	Editing your work	144
Chapter 20	Proof-reading	148
Chapter 21	Checking readability	152
Chapter 22	Layout—what you can do to help your reader	155
Chapter 23	Design—what designers can do (and what you should never allow them to)	164
<b>Section Six</b>	<b>What now?</b>	
Chapter 24	My tips for action	170
Chapter 25	How to brief an external copywriter	174
Chapter 26	The last word	179
<b>Appendices</b>		
Appendix 1	Writing for the web—myths and realities	181
Appendix 2	Copywriters' reference sources	187
Appendix 3	A note on the readability statistics for this book	191

## **A note**

Throughout this book I use the word “selling”. Please accept that I use this term in its widest possible meaning. That is, persuading someone to do or feel or think something they don’t start off doing, feeling or thinking.

As well as the classic sales goals of winning orders or generating leads, it could mean influencing an internal committee to allocate budget to you or your team; getting a pay rise or a promotion; securing a new agreement with a distributor; or even gaining preferential treatment from a hotel.

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## **Introduction**

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Writing clearly in English—the standard language of the Internet, not to mention business—has never been more important.

Just think of all the times you put fingers to keyboard. Letters, reports, proposals, publicity and marketing materials, emails . . . the list is long. If you can write well, you are more likely than the next person to get what you want.

As a professional copywriter and writing coach, I see a lot of copywriting. And much of it is mediocre at best.

Too often, copywriters achieve their goals not because of what they write but despite it. With this in mind, I set out to write a simple guide to good copywriting.

My aims are to:

- Help you write better sales copy, faster.
- Inspire and entertain you along the way—writing should be fun, too.
- Share with you some of the professional secrets I've learned over the past 20 years.
- Show you that it's not as hard as you might think to write well (though it does take practice).
- Give you a copywriter's toolkit stuffed with practical hints, tips and techniques for better copywriting.

Overall, to:

- Help you get results using the written word.

I know you're busy. And I know that you don't want to have to plough through a dense textbook. That's why this book is

short. But don't be misled by its size. I've packed enough ideas between its covers to transform the way you write. I'll help you answer the really big questions facing every copywriter:

“How do I persuade someone to buy from me using nothing but the written word?”

“What does good copywriting look like—and sound like?”

“How can someone who isn't a professional writer still write compelling, persuasive, believable sales copy?”

“How do design and layout affect the impact of my writing?”

## **Four things you MUST remember about copywriting**

### **1 Copywriting is about selling**

There are lots of people out there who need to write sales copy but who aren't equipped or trained to do it well. They are doing it badly because they have never been shown how to do it properly.

Yes, people are taught to write at school (sometimes even quite well). But there is a deep chasm between academic writing and effective copywriting.

Why? Because copywriting is primarily about selling and only secondarily about writing. And that distinction calls for an understanding of people and what makes them tick. Yes, of course you need to be able to write well and correctly, but that alone will not take you all the way.

I'm often asked whether my degree is in English. It's not: I read psychology. If you are going to influence people using the written word, it helps if you understand a little about how their minds work.

## **2 We must focus on the reader**

Most copywriting underperforms because it is all about the writer and not about the reader.

Business owners are in love with the company. Managers are in love with the product. Agency copywriters, frequently, are in love with themselves (bound by their artistic aspirations and their desire to win creative awards doled out by their peers).

But who's in love with the reader? Who's trying to figure out what they want to hear? What their needs and wants are? What will motivate them to pay attention to a sales message, believe it and act upon it?

## **3 Beautiful things come in small packages**

Most business copywriters, especially in-house copywriters, assume that bigger is better. Long words are better than short words. Long sentences are better than short sentences.

But readers—even CEOs—do not engage with this style of writing. It's all head, no heart. To engage our reader, we must use wheelbarrow language: the earthy, flinty words we can almost pick up in our hands and smell.

## **4 Most people lack the necessary skills and experience to do it well**

Most copywriters have never done any selling. If they have, they've often missed the connection between the two activities. That means they don't see how their writing works as a sales process. They lack the relevant experience.

Most sales people have never done any serious writing, so they lack the relevant skills.

## Ten ways this book helps you

This book:

- 1** Gives you insights into how to gain your reader's attention, respect and trust.
- 2** Gives you the confidence to try a new approach to copywriting.
- 3** Helps you understand the relationship between selling skills and copywriting skills.
- 4** Saves you time, effort and heartache when you next want to write sales copy.
- 5** Means you won't waste money on doomed sales and marketing communications.
- 6** Gives you practical, easy-to-use tools to craft better copy.
- 7** Frees you from anxiety about so-called "correct" English.
- 8** Shows you specific techniques for improving the readability of your copy.
- 9** Refreshes your knowledge of some basic rules of good written English.
- 10** Helps you to get sales, marketing and commercial results.

Getting what you want is what this book is all about. Its techniques and ideas are designed to help you with:

- Letters—selling, enquiring, agreeing, informing, complaining.
- Emails—to clients, colleagues, staff, managers, suppliers.



- Reports—for clients, colleagues, boards, regulators, investors.
- Proposals—to win funding, secure approval, generate new business, excite investors.
- Public relations—press releases, articles, newsletters.
- Marketing—advertisements, direct mail letters, leaflets, brochures, websites, emails.

In other words, this book is about goal-focused writing. In each of the above, you have a specific aim in mind. It could be anything from generating a simple sales enquiry to winning a multi-million pound contract. But to achieve it, you have to do something special.

## **You have to change someone's behaviour.**

Through the power of your writing, you have to get someone to do what you want them to do. The reader is in one mind when they get up in the morning; they've changed it once they've read your copy.

How do we change someone's behaviour? *Write to Sell* will set you on the right path. We'll look at the copywriting process from start to finish—everything from understanding your reader to designing your text so they feel compelled to respond.

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**Section One**

**It's not  
about you**

*“Writing, when properly managed  
(as you may be sure I think mine is)  
is but a different name for conversation.”*

Laurence Sterne, English writer, 1713—1768

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## Chapter 1

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# Where most people go wrong

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If this book is about any single thing, it's about understanding your reader. Not your product. Not your company. Not your current special offer or promotion.

Something I learned very early in my career as a copywriter was that the only person who counts is the reader. It doesn't matter what you think. It doesn't matter what your manager thinks. It only matters what your reader thinks (and feels). That means you have to do something that might feel strange at first. You have to write not what you want to write, but what your reader wants to read.

Many men still believe the “chat up line” is the route to a woman's heart. But pre-prepared lines usually fail. Why? Because they don't take into account the recipient's feelings—they're all about the sender.

Ditto for much copywriting. If the copywriter has a plan at all—and more on planning in Section Two—it generally involves a list of the points they want to make, the information they want to get across, the facts they want to write about. Much rarer, about as rare, in fact, as a four-day-old mayfly, is a plan focusing on the reader. On their wants, needs, expectations, ambitions.

But without taking our reader into consideration, we're heading for trouble. All we can do is talk about ourselves—and we know what happens to people like that at parties.

### **Why you have to work harder**

There's a simple reason why you have to write for your reader—not yourself, not your boss, not your colleagues. And it has to do with the level of investment they make in your writing.

Imagine your reader sitting at their desk or in their sitting room at home. The post arrives and, after retrieving it, they return to their chair. After putting bills to one side they are left with three items:

- 1 A letter postmarked Australia—the handwritten address shows it's from their old friend Lydia.
- 2 That month's issue of *Gardening Today* magazine, complete with a free trial-size sachet of bonemeal fertilizer.
- 3 Your mailshot.

Your mailshot is the odd one out. It's the only one in which they have no investment. They haven't paid for it. They didn't seek it out. They don't care who wrote it.

When people have an investment in reading—either emotional or financial—they will read. And they'll read despite poor spelling, faulty grammar, loose punctuation, unengaging tone of voice or any one of the many insults it's possible to inflict on the English language. When they don't have that investment, they will be ruthlessly unforgiving.

The only thing that will get their attention and keep it is a message aimed squarely at them—their interests, their concerns, their lives. A message delivered in such effortlessly good English that they don't notice the writing, just the content.

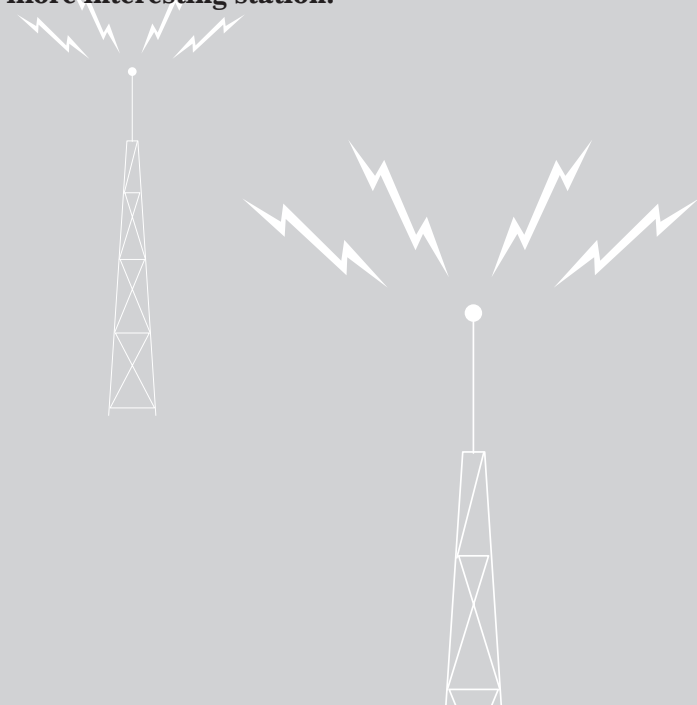


## Copywriter's toolkit: Radio WIIFM

**Whenever you sit down to write—it doesn't matter what: a sales letter, press release, web page or email—first tune in to the frequency your readers are all transmitting on: Radio WIIFM.**

**What your reader wants to know, what every reader wants to know, is the answer to a very simple question. What's In It For Me?**

**Send your message on this frequency and you'll have a far better chance of being listened to. Send on WIIFM (What I'm Interested In) and you'll lose them to a more interesting station.**



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## Chapter 2

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# **A few thoughts on human nature**

Did you know that men think about sex every six seconds? That means if you write a letter that takes four minutes to read, your carefully crafted sales pitch gets interrupted 40 times. I have no idea (a) where that statistic came from and (b) whether it's true (I suspect it's a teeny weeny bit of an exaggeration). However ...

The depressing truth—for us as copywriters, anyway—is that on any given day, at any given moment, our reader is far likelier to be focusing on something they care about than our sales message. Here's my point. Being a good copywriter means knowing your product inside out and being able to write convincingly about it. Being a great copywriter means knowing your reader the same way—their foibles, their motivations, their innermost fears and desires.

Before we put finger to keyboard, we need to build a psychological profile of our reader. Here's a list of questions I like to ask about the typical reader when I'm writing some copy:

- 1 What sex are they?
- 2 How old are they?
- 3 What do they want more of (and less of) in their lives?
- 4 Where would they rather be right now?
- 5 What do they want more than anything else out of life?
- 6 What are their values?
- 7 How do they see themselves?
- 8 How do others see them?
- 9 Are they head or heart people?
- 10 Are they more likely to be tempted by the promise of riches or the removal of worry?

Why ask these questions? Because I am always aware of this section's opening point: my reader would rather be thinking

about something else. The more insights I can gain into the reader's preferences, state of mind and general outlook on life, the easier I'll find it to write copy that speaks directly to them in a way they'll find hard to ignore.

Not everyone shares my view, of course. Here are three things that many copywriters imagine their prospective customers find interesting. I assume they do because so many sales letters, ads and emails begin like this. (I'm going to follow this list with some things that customers DO find interesting.)

### **What people are REALLY interested in**

#### **Things that many copywriters think their customers are interested in:**

- 1 The copywriter's state of mind. Eg "I am delighted to tell you ..." or "We are pleased to announce ..."
- 2 Statements about the customer's job, industry or hobby. Eg "As a busy finance director, you need to know about ..." or "Recent years have witnessed an explosion of interest in building cathedrals out of used matchsticks."
- 3 Narratives explaining the copywriter's company's development (usually from humble roots) eg "We began publishing Practical Composting in 1979. Since then ..." or (and very common nowadays) "We have totally redesigned our website ..."

#### **Now for that list of things people like reading about:**

- 1 Themselves.
- 2 Er ...
- 3 That's it.

Now of course I don't mean that you, as a copywriter, should tell people about themselves. Apart from anything else, when you display the fruits of your list research or database analysis, you'll come across as a stalker. You know the kind of thing:



*“Dear Mr Sample,  
With your preference for red satin boxer shorts, you’ll be dying  
to get your hands on Sexy Beast, our new catalogue featuring  
exotic underclothing for today’s go-getting gentleman.”*

No, I mean, write about your product or service from your reader’s perspective. Don’t tell them what it is: tell them what it does for them. In fact, I’ll be more specific. Tell them how your product will make their life easier, better or more rewarding. If you don’t know, find out, work it out or make something up. In other words, talk benefits (more about these in Chapter 5).

### **Love the sinner, then sell to them**

If you don’t feel like wearing your psychologist’s hat, how about dusting down your theologian’s gown?

Peel away the business suits, the carefully constructed personae, the intellectual body armour with which most people protect themselves from the truth, and you’re left with humanity in the raw. And it turns out we’re all sinners. So why not exploit the worst in human nature to achieve your goals?

Let’s remind ourselves of the seven deadly sins and then look at how we might use them in our copy:

**1 PRIDE** (also known as vanity)—A simple way to make your reader believe you is to flatter them. Tell them how important they are. Acknowledge their huge knowledge and experience. They won’t gainsay any of it. Then suggest that someone with their obvious talent for making the right decision really ought to be subscribing/buying/going along with your suggestion.

**2 ENVY**—Make them aware that other people already have the thing you’re selling and are benefiting hugely as a result. Nobody likes to miss out and if they feel that the people with whom they identify are all having a great time enjoying product X, they’ll want to join the party.

**3 GLUTTONY**—Why do people eat more than they need? Maybe they like the taste. Or the sensation. Maybe they're in need of comfort. Or solace. Unless you're selling food or promoting a restaurant, this sin won't have much relevance for you. BUT ... if your product makes people feel happy and contented when they 'consume' it, you have a real selling point.

**4 LUST**—A little harder, this one. But if you can suggest that becoming a customer of yours will satisfy this particular little craving, you're on to a winner. (I'd also suggest that you're wasted in your current job and should be on talk shows.)

**5 ANGER**—People get angry about all sorts of things. I had a problem with my ISP a couple of years ago that made my teeth grind like a pepper mill. Give people an exit route from this unpleasant emotion and they will thank you. If you know that your main competitor is making their customers angry (through failings such as poor service or product quality and excessive price rises), you have some great leverage to capture market share.

**6 GREED**—A major motivator for sales people through the ages. People sometimes want stuff they don't need. People often want more of what they've already got. Especially profits, pay, respect, office space, bottles of wine, pens, calculators, holidays, cars and clothes. Promise your customers MORE and you'll have their ear.

**7 SLOTH**—People are lazy. So show them how your product or service can save them energy. Perhaps they can sit at their desk and have stuff emailed straight to their desktop. Maybe you'll deliver something direct to their door instead of their having to walk to the shops. Help them avoid work and they'll open their wallets.

So remember ...

Whether you are selling to consumers or people at work, ignore the baser human emotions at your peril. Yes, people will want to RATIONALIZE their decisions, so make sure you provide plenty of objective reasons why buying your products is a sensible thing to do. But people BUY on emotional grounds first. So make sure you hit at least one of the deadly sin buttons in your sales pitch. (By the way, only a beginner would tell their reader that they were lazy, lustful or greedy: BE SUBTLE.)