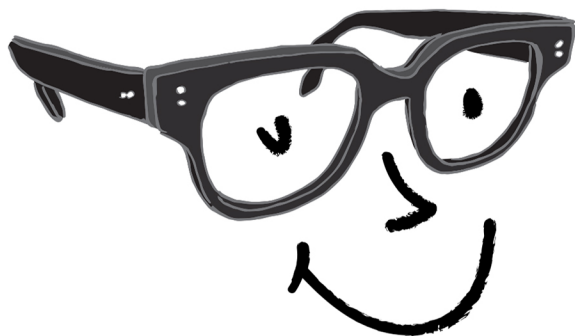Completely Revised and Expanded

EVERYBODY WRITES

10% funnier

New and Improved

{ Your ^ Go-To Guide to Creating Ridiculously Good Content }

ANN HANDLEY

WILEY

Praise for *Everybody Writes*

"Funny, insightful, and profoundly transformational. You can't say that about any other book about the craft of becoming a better writer and a more brilliant marketer."

—Andrew Davis,
author and keynote speaker

"Writing is a skill, not a talent. That's great news, because it means it can be learned. And who better to teach you the craft of commercial and professional writing than Ann Handley. This book will go a long way to helping you share your ideas and make an impact."

—Seth Godin,
author, *This Is Marketing*

"I never thought *Everybody Writes 2* could top the original, but it does. With apologies to *Top Gun: Maverick*, this is the best sequel. Absolutely indispensable! Buy a copy for all people who use words for any reason."

—Jay Baer,
author, *Hug Your Haters*

"There is no better way to become an exceptional writer than to spend a few hours inside of Ann Handley's head. *Everybody Writes* v.2 (it's 43.5% funnier) allows you to do just that and more. I LOVED every minute of it. It's a must for anybody. . . because everybody writes!"

—Ahava Leibtag,
President, Aha Media Group

"This clear-sighted framework will teach you to be a better writer. It makes this daunting topic so approachable, that I got excited just to write this blurb. No joke."

—Andy Crestodina,
Cofounder and CMO, Orbit Media Studios

"Here it is—the modern writer's handbook, finely tuned to meet the needs of today's extremely weird world. This book is the coach, cheerleader, and no-nonsense friend every writer should have by their side."

—Beth Dunn,
Marketing Fellow at HubSpot and author,
Cultivating Content Design

"This book shouldn't just be on every marketer's shelf. . . it should be right on their desks within easy reach!"

—Kevin Hamilton,
CMO, Toast

"Two books are required reading for anyone who decides to take up the mantle of writing: *On Writing* by Stephen King and *Everybody Writes* by Ann Handley."

—Joe Pulizzi,
author, *Content Inc.*, and Founder,
Content Marketing Institute and The Tilt

"*Everybody Writes* will make you a better thinker, communicator, and—yes—writer. Ann Handley shares timeless exercises and current examples that will have you writing stronger and more engaging content for your business, your clients, or yourself. (Plus, she brings the fun and joy to the process!)"

—Katie Yeakle,
CEO, American Writers & Artists Inc.

"*Everybody Writes* is packed with invaluable expert guidance on all things writing. It belongs on, well, everybody's shelf."

—Kristina Halvorson,
President, Brain Traffic

"I just glanced at the Table of Contents and I'm already a better writer. Ann Handley might just single-handedly save the world from content mediocrity."

—Jason Miller,
head of Brand and Content, Tyk Technologies

"Like a comet, Ann returns with an inspirational light for writers everywhere."

—Mark Schaefer,
author, *Marketing Rebellion*

"With wisdom and an infective wittiness, Ann shows you how to take your writing from awkward and awful to electric and elegant."

—David Meerman Scott,
author, *The New Rules of Marketing & PR*

"The alternate click-bait title of Ann's great new book could have been *73 Ways to Improve Your Writing and Conquer the World!* . . . and it would have been an understatement."

—Brian Clark,
Founder, Copyblogger Media

"Ann's witty take on what works and what doesn't will help you master business writing and—more importantly—have fun while you're doing it!"

—Ardath Albee,
B2B Marketing Strategist and author,
eMarketing Strategies for the Complex Sale

"As usual, Handley does what she does best: She overdelivers. If you create content, buy this. If you run a team that creates content, buy everyone a copy. This is one of those books that will always sit within arm's reach of anyone who must come up with ideas."

—Mitch Joel,
author*, Six Pixels of Separation* and *CTRL ALT Delete*

"This book gives you a deeper understanding of this new era of storytelling and content and equips you to make more contributions as a creative."

—Tim Washer,
B2B Marketing Leader and speaker

"Ann shatters the myth that writing is only for trained journalists and provides amazingly insightful tips on how everyone can tell great stories."

—Michael Brenner,
author, *Mean People Suck*

"Everyone who creates content for the web—text, audio, or video—should read this book."

—Sonia Simone,
Founder, Creative Fierce

"A fun, fast read that makes you want to run to your keyboard and tap out a masterpiece. But it's not just for writers; it's for anyone who commissions, edits, or works with writers."

—Doug Kessler,
Cofounder and Creative Director, Velocity UK

"*Everybody Writes* is your guide to creating content you can be proud of and that customers will love you for. It's a must-have guide for anyone."

—Lee Odden,
CEO, TopRank Marketing and author, *Optimize*

"Filled with valuable information, techniques, examples, and smiles—this book is for anyone who wants their words to have more success."

—C.C. Chapman,
Professor of the Practice of Business and Management, Wheaton College

"Ann has done the impossible by somehow making the second edition of *Everybody Writes* even more insightful, even more inspiring, and even more of a joy to read than it was to begin with."

—Melanie Deziel,
author, *Content Fuel Framework* and *Prove It*

"People forget that being a great writer is a skill AND a posture. It's how you write AND how you see things. What Ann offers (in the most entertaining and empowering way possible) is the chance to develop both."

—Jay Acunzo,
author, *Break the Wheel*

"Ann writes with equal parts humor and heart. You'll laugh as you learn."

—Nick Westergaard,
author, *Brand Now* and *Get Scrappy,* and Lecturer, University of Iowa

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ANN HANDLEY

WILEY

For Evan and Caroline

Contents

Acknowledgments

Ah. So I see you, too, are one of those people who reads acknowledgments. Welcome, friend. You and I have a lot in common.

If writing can feel like birthing a Honda Civic, then writing a book is like birthing a car dealership full of them.

It's not pretty. You sweat a lot. Most of the work is done while crying.

But you are not alone.

My name might be on this book, but the following people helped.

Most special thanks to . . .

Kristina Halvorson, who gave me the title of this book and in exchange asks merely for all my love, money, cryptocurrency, a lock of my hair, and perpetual acknowledgment of her genius. Here you go, Kristina. You are Writing Royalty.

Andrew Davis, for the steady beam of sanity-checking support, friendship, advice . . . and for acting as mediator when a few of these chapters and I got in a fight. Also thanks for answering random weekend texts toward the end of this book when ugh I just couldn't anymore.

Ahava Leibtag, for the unwavering support and honest, generous, gracious feedback. Any sentence that begins with Ahava's signature line *Can I tell you something . . .?* always delivers exactly what you need to hear. And by "you" I mean "I."

Jess Tyson, for lovingly organizing and managing All The Things. Without you, Jess, the manuscript for this book would be in piles around the Tiny House Studio or maybe littering the floor of my car, not neatly captured and bound right here.

Number-one son Evan W. H. Price, for the cover and interior illustrations, and also for suggesting that a seaside breeze coming through the slider might make for the best setting to finish this second edition. (It was perfection.)

Number-one daughter Caroline R. H. Price, for being the best hype person ever (*You've got this!*) as well as my Gen Z consultant ready to answer questions like *"Do you know who Rocky Balboa is?" "How about Seabiscuit?" "What about a Rolodex?"* (These references make sense when you read the book.)

P.S. Also, I'm not saying that your reading the first edition of this book when you were still a kid didn't launch your own career in Marketing, Caroline . . . but I'm not *not* saying that, either.

Also grateful to . . .

Doug Kessler, for being an early reader of The Ugly First Draft—yet still saying non-ugly things about it. Also for subtly prodding me to be a better writer because everything he writes is so ridiculously good and it rage-motivates me.

Kerry O'Shea Gorgone, for legal expertise, research help, hijinks. And for delivering more than I expect (always).

Katie Martell, for writing about important things and with wisdom and yet always a sense of humor. Sure, she calls us all to be better people . . . but I appreciate her telling me to loosen up with this book and have a little more fun already!

Andy Crestodina, Joe Pulizzi, Ruth Carter, Jay Acunzo, Corey O'Loughlin, Paul Roetzer, Jason Miller, Liz Murphy, Mitch Joel, Robert Rose, Justin Levy, Dane Sanders, Alex Rynne, and Tim Washer for answering my messages and emails even though I always need everything, like, yesterday.

To my MarketingProfs family. I used to feel weird referring to people I work with as *family*. But I've known some of you for almost half my adult life—so, I guess we're stuck with each other the way family is.

Team Wiley. Sorry for missing that deadline. And that other one. And really sorry this is late, too.

To TikTok, Instagram, and Twitter, for making the writing of this book at least twice as long as it might have been otherwise.

To LinkedIn for the swig of good vibes when I was eight hours from this book's deadline!

And thanks to the following for sharing their feedback and encouragement generously and without expectation:

David Meerman Scott, Jay Baer, Lee Odden, Mark Schaefer, Carla Johnson, Michelle Martello, Joe Chernov, Jesse Noyes, Heidi Cohen, Melanie Deziel, Jonathon Colman, Allison Tyler Jones, John Simmons, Richard Pelletier, Ardath Albee, Sonia Simone, Michael Brenner, Ashley Zeckman, Nick Westergaard, Nancy Harhut, Erika Heald, Erin King, Paul Gillin, Jill Foster, C. C. Chapman, and Keith Jennings.

Finally, thank you to Vahe Habeshian, the world's best editor, among other things. I'm sorry for arguing over your suggested edits quite so much. You were mostly right. ☺

* * *

Wait. One more . . .

Thank you to E. B. White—the author of my favorite book of all time, *Charlotte's Web,* as well as *Stuart Little* and the writing guide *The Elements of Style*.

The Elements of Style was a talisman to me when I was a college student learning to be a better writer. I studied it. Memorized its rules. Clung to it like a baby orangutan clings to its mother's back, thinking it's the only way to ever get anywhere. (I still reread the book every year or so.)

E.B. White's quote in the Epilogue of *Everybody Writes* reminds me that anyone who waits for the perfect conditions to write won't ever create much of anything. I think of that advice almost every day—there's a practical forgiveness in it.

Thanking a great writer I never met is maybe pretentious. I don't know.

But the gratitude is real.

Start Here

*L*ast Tuesday, for the first time in my life, I did a push-up. That wouldn't be remarkable for most of you, probably. It might seem even pathetic.

But for me it was an occasion to celebrate. It capped five (!) months of hard work that followed a lifetime of thinking of myself as spectacularly incapable.

I hail from a stunningly unathletic family: most of us are more Eeyore than Seabiscuit. We are the ones picked last for the team, the ones who are afraid of the ball. And I was (literally) a 100-pound weakling. So the idea of my being capable of a push-up (or 5, or 10, or—maybe, eventually—50 or more!) seemed as improbable as my writing this in Russian.

* * *

I wrote that ^^ in the Introduction of the first edition of this book, eight years ago.

Still today, when I meet fans of this book in person, the number one question they ask me isn't *What's your best writing secret?* Or *Will you read my work?* Or *Oh I thought you were Tina Fey.*

(That last one isn't a question; it was a comment I once got in a hotel lobby from a woman who bolted toward me from across the room, mistaking me for Tina. (Was it the glasses? The hair? Her bad eyesight? IDK.) She said it in a voice flat with disappointment and also . . . is that an accusation? Like I'd scammed her out of a million dollars?)

Anyway . . . the number one question isn't any of those. It's this:

How many push-ups can you do now?

It's a funny question. But it makes sense.

We all want to know . . . Did the effort deliver results? Did my single epic push-up become more . . . ? Did it actually become 5? Or 10? Or 50?

Is it true that learning to write better really just means working the right muscles? Does it actually pay off?

We want that assurance. We need answers.

Is it really as simple as showing up and strengthening your muscles?

* * *

Right now you might not consider yourself much of a writer, just as I never considered myself someone who could drop and pump out even a single push-up.

Many of us have the idea that the ability to write well is a gift bestowed on a chosen few. Writing well is considered an art, linked murkily to muse and mysticism and magic.

So we think there are two kinds of people: the writing haves—and the writing hapless, for whom writing well is a hopeless struggle. Like trying to carve a marble bust with a butter knife.

But I don't believe that. Neither should you.

The truth is this: Writing well is part habit, part knowledge of some fundamental rules, and part giving a damn.

We are all capable of producing good writing. We all have that magic within us.

"Writing is less about beckoning the muse than hanging in until the typing becomes writing," as the late, great journalist David Carr said.

So the two kinds of people are not the haves and the hapless. Instead, they are those who think they can write, and those who think they can't. (And often, both are wrong.)

In truth, most of us fall somewhere in the middle.

We're more capable than we think we are.

Choose Your Own Adventure

It's tricky writing this Introduction to you. There maybe be two kinds of writers . . . but there are many kinds of readers.

You might be picking this up for the first time. (Hi, new friend.)

Or you've read the first edition of this book and you're wondering what's new in this one. (Good to see you again.)

Or maybe you've cracked open these pages looking for answers to one or more of a few questions . . .

How is everybody actually a writer? Am I?

Does good writing matter anymore . . .?

How is content marketing changing?

Has writing evolved since the first edition?

Does everybody really *write in an age of TikFace and Web3 and robots spewing a spitcoin of social posts in less time than it took you to read this sentence . . .?*

Is the effort worth it . . .? Is it as simple as showing up and working the muscles?

To speak to all that . . . I've organized this Introduction as a modified Choose Your Own Adventure format. As with the adventure book series, you decide what's interesting to you.

Answers to those questions and more are here. Wander through this section. Choose what you need; stop and read. Skip what you don't. You're in control here.

We'll all reconvene at the start of Part I.

Ready?

Yes, You Are a Writer

If you have a website, you are a publisher. If you are on social media, you are in marketing. And that means we are all writers.

Yeah, but who cares about writing anymore? In a digital world dominated by short and snappy, by quick and hit—by TikTok and Twitter and gifs and livestreaming and BRT and emojis and Web3 and robots that write . . . does the idea of our focusing on writing seem ordinary? And a little useless?

Heck no—it's neither ordinary nor useless.

Writing matters more now, not less.

There are a few reasons.

We are all creators. The first edition of this book talked about how we have become a planet of publishers—a world where marketing content is a wellspring, generating real business growth.

In the years since the first edition, we've jumped into the deep end of the content pool.

We've set up swim lanes in the form of structures and processes to consistently create content.

We've linked those efforts with strategic goals.

We've upped content budgets. We're using lots of tactics and channels. We're all-in on social media platforms. *Look! We're even wearing metaverse arm floaties!*

That's a lot of splashing around.

Yet many of us still struggle to stay afloat. We struggle to create the kind of content that connects with the people who matter to us.

Technology has given us access and power and water wings—yet we aren't taking full advantage of them.

We are a planet of publishers, yet many of us are polluting the pool with content rubbish. We are all creators, yet many of us are squandering the opportunity we have to communicate directly with those we care most about reaching.

Harsh, I know. But no hate. I'm here for you.

The challenge has shifted: Google and other search engines have made it clear that they'll love up the good stuff more than any polluted, brackish backwater.

We've embraced the idea that we are creators; the challenge that remains is the joy and craft of the creating—the writing. The publishing. The storytelling.

Your genuine, engaging voice matters. Robots might write drafts. Your competitor might generate as much content as you do (more, maybe?).

But! No one can copy your voice. No one can show up quite as you can. No robot will ever write as you do—not really, because none feel or think as you do.

(The best a robot might ever do is pantomime. Will they pantomime well? Maybe. Probably. But it's still just a pantomime.)

Your true voice is the best way for your audience to like and trust you. Your voice sets you apart from everyone else—from me, from the robot, and from your frenzied competitor treating content like an arms race.

Our online words are our emissaries; they tell the world who we are, as author Beth Dunn puts it.[1]

I love that "emissaries" bit. I picture our words taking their role as diplomats for us very seriously—dressed up for a special mission, carrying important messages in their tiny attaché cases.

Our writing can make us look smart. Or it can make us look stupid.

Our writing can make us seem fun or warm or competent or trustworthy or likeable. Like someone who lightens the room just by showing up . . . *hey, look who's here!*

But it can also make us seem humdrum. Discombobulated. Flat-out boring. Or *ugh not them again*.

That means we need to choose words well. We need to write with style and honest empathy for readers.

Clarity counts. Clear writing matters in marketing. But it also is critical for us as professionals.

Yes you—sitting there in your home office, chatting on Slack, updating your colleagues or partners through internal blogs or messaging platforms or old-fashioned email.

Work today often gets done asynchronously—from various locations and with flexible work schedules. We communicate by (you guessed it) writing. (More about this in Part I.)

That's why we need to write clearly and succinctly: to communicate our ideas and thoughts in a way that doesn't meander maddeningly to and fro. To respect our readers. To write in a way that makes people *want* to read.

Being able to communicate well in writing isn't just *nice*; it's a *necessity*.

Craft counts, too. In an era of content superabundance, how we use our words matters. How we craft our communications, tell our stories, create or co-create customer experiences.

We need to place a high value on an overlooked skill in marketing: how to write (with style, flair, true emotion). And how to tell a true story well.

The very best marketing touches our hearts. It makes us pause, think, laugh.

Great writing makes us feel . . . I just struggled to find an adjective to complete this sentence. Then I realized, it's simple:

Great writing makes us feel. Period.

How Is Content Changing?

Remember the scene in *The Lion King* when King Mufasa and his son Simba survey their kingdom at Pride Rock?

Together they gaze out at the sweeping landscape—every baobab tree, every ant and zebra, every river and watering hole and setting sun and shadow—and Mufasa turns to his son:

"Look Simba," he says quietly. "Everything the light touches . . . is content."

There's a pause. A moment ripe with drama, as the cub absorbs his father's words.

Finally, Simba responds: "Wowwww," he says, his baby voice brimming with awe.

I'm kidding.

Mufasa doesn't mention content in the original script. He says, "Everything the light touches . . . is our kingdom."

But if Mufasa were a marketer . . .? He'd 100% ad-lib that line.

And he'd 100% recognize that his content kingdom is expanding by acres of baobab trees every day.

***

Content isn't limited to the text on our web pages or product pages or blogs or email newsletters. It's as broad as the landscape from Pride Rock. It goes beyond the boundaries of what we think of as "marketing."

Content is everything your customer or prospect touches or interacts with—including your own digital properties and website and the experiences they offer. But also everything on any social media platform or anything we might co-create in decentralized Web3 world. (An opportunity that will only expand as we mine Web3 to find more utility.) *Everything the light touches is content*.

Your "content" is any medium through which you communicate with the people who might use your products or services.

The kingdom might be expanding. But some things don't change.

No matter what form it takes, no matter where it's created or shared, our content should follow the Formula of Three:

High-quality content is packed with *clear utility*, *inspiration*, and *empathy* for the audience:

- ◆ **Utility** means you clearly help people do something that matters to them—you help them shoulder their burdens, you ease their pain, you help them make a decision.

◆ **Inspiration** means our work is inspired by data (more on this later) or it's creatively inspired (or both). It's fresh, different, well-written, well-produced, nicely designed—and it feels like it could come only from you.

◆ **Empathy** means you relentlessly focus on your customer. You view the entire world through their eyes—because *everything the light touches . . .!*

Or:

Utility × Inspiration × Empathy = High-Quality Content

The multiplication signs are important, because if the value of any one of these things (Utility, Inspiration, or Empathy) is zero, then the sum of your content is a big fat zero, too.

One more point, before we move on to the next Adventure:

"Quality" in the context of business doesn't mean writing with all the beauty or humor or gravitas of Toni Morrison or Tina Fey or any other writer whose work you happen to admire.

Instead, "quality" means we get to the essence of what makes those writers (or any writer) great—whether we wrote *Sula* or *Mean Girls* or an email newsletter or FAQ pages.

It's craft, yes. And maybe it is beautiful. But more than that, it has relentless empathy for a reader. It gets to a truth, no matter what kind of "truth" we tell.

One of the best bits of content I ever encountered was a neatly designed guide to dishwasher repair I downloaded from an appliance website. It delivered exactly what I needed—with clear utility, inspiration, and empathy for the true pain of having shards of a drinking glass caught in the drain hose.

How Has Writing Changed?

I'm glad you landed here.

Don't tell the other adventurers who might've skimmed past this Adventure to hurry on to the next . . . but this is my favorite part. To me,

it's the most interesting to think about: *How does writing change? Or does it?*

We're tempted to think that letters are letters and words are words and writing is always writing. As it was and is and ever shall be.

We treat language as a thing that needs to be controlled through grammar. Alphabetized, categorized, proscribed, prescribed: *Take two variants and call me in the morning.* Our dictionaries catalog words with the same luster as a carburetor manual. Which is to say . . . none at all.

There is no Sand Hill VC disrupting the alphabet. (No one is repeating the clichéd refrain: *"It's like Uber, but for words."*) No one is crowdfunding some hot new punctuation.

So no money fueling its evolution means that writing stays as permanent and unchanged as the sun . . . yeah?

Nay-nay, friend. That's the best part! We try to control and catalog it and don't actively seek to change it. And it slips through! It changes anyway!

Writing changes because we change. Let's say that again, but in bold:

Writing changes because we change.

I love that about writing.

Writing evolves with us.

And *boi-yo-boi* have we evolved. Our writing has become:

More relaxed. If writing were a dress code, it would say *yes absolutely leggings are pants and ugh no ditch that office necktie.*

We now communicate in less buttoned-up ways. We use shorthand (LOL, TBH, TTYL) and one-word sentences. (And sometimes incomplete sentences. In this book? Did you notice already how much I love them? How much . . . I. Love. Them.)

Periods find themselves with less work to do today. A period added to the end of a sentence texted to a friend comes off either aggressive or weirdly formal. So we leave them off—letting the full stop of the speech bubble do the work the period used to do. (Its use in a sentence has been questioned more broadly, too.[2])

Social media, emojis, cell phones all play a part in loosening up language.

But I think writing is more relaxed because we are more relaxed with writing. Chicken? Egg? *Insert shrug emoji.*

Playful. Boi. Kthxbye. Cheugy. Dad bod. I just got an email that greeted me with: "'sup, Ann." It wasn't from a friend. It was from a sock company.

Political. Language crackles like a wood fire, warm and loud. And like a fire it can sometimes get out of control.

Words can burn a little too hot. Individual words take on new heat (*woke, breakthrough, gaslight*). But also: brands write about social and political issues, wading in at a depth we haven't seen previously. (More on this in Chapter 61.)

More real. You might argue that *political* should actually be *more real*. Fair enough.

Real also means that we're addressing things we didn't use to address: We've destigmatized issues like mental health and medical challenges.

Empathetic. We speak in a conversational tone because no one needs the stiff language of business. We at least try to view the world through the eyes of others.

It's weird to think that a global pandemic had a lasting silver lining . . . but there is one I can think of: Covid made us more compassionate communicators. (If we care to be.)

(We do.)

More human. I hate describing the way we communicate with that cliché of "more human." (It invites the question: *Well, what's "not human"?*)

But it's true. When AI writes a first draft for us, we have both an opportunity and an imperative to layer on our unique point of view, personality, joy, playfulness. *The best a robot might ever do is pantomime.*

Accessible. Simpler, direct language is better understood by most of us. We saw great examples of making language accessible in the past few years. For instance, some forward-thinking healthcare organizations and agencies sought to interpret public health initiatives into plain language, so people like you and me could more easily understand them.

Inclusive. Language is like a strong magnet. It can bring us closer together—or drive us apart. We are embedding equity, diversity, and inclusion efforts into writing—for example, using "they" as a single pronoun. In other words: our writing increasingly reflects and respects the experiences and perspectives of others.

Imperfect. Imperfect bests polished. Unscripted bests scripted. I'm not inviting you to throw typos into your posts like coins into a fountain; you can't wish for "authentic." You can't manufacture it. But I'm documenting this shift: a bias to not sand off the rough edges in writing. Whatever that means for you.

<div align="center">* * *</div>

I told you I think about this a lot.

Anyhoo . . . All that above ^^ has mostly happened in the past eight years, since the first edition of this book. It's all reflected in the chapters inside—in both the writing and the ideas.

What's New in This Book

Sure, many How-To-Write books exist in addition to this one. But most offer up pithy maxims more than true advice. They're entertaining to read and they can be a kind of rallying cry . . . but they lack a can-do, how-to attitude.

Or the other extreme: writing books that get too deep into the weeds of construction. Great if you're looking to up your score on a college composition. Not so helpful if you just need some guidance on how not to sound like a total idiot when you craft this week's customer mailing.

What's also hard to find is a book that distills ideas about the craft of writing simply and memorably, framed for a business professional or content creator . . . as opposed to the novelist or journalist.

I wrote this book because I couldn't find what I wanted—part writing guide, part handbook on the rules of good sportsmanship in marketing, and all-around reliable desk companion for anyone creating or directing content.

So what's new here?

In so many ways . . . EVERYTHING. To be honest, that surprises even me.

I went into this updated edition thinking I'd take the 2014 original and add a chapter or two.

Fix some outdated things. Edit some words. Run the vacuum and puff the throw pillows and spritz some Febreze around the pages and . . . THERE! DONE! So fresh! So clean!

I thought it would take maybe 10 minutes.

It did not take 10 minutes. It took six months.

(Plus several months of elaborate procrastinating.)

Sure, there was some pillow-puffing and refreshing and Febreze-spritzing. The bones of the original are still good.

But I also built an addition on the back. Replaced the draftiest windows. Installed a bouncy house in the yard because Writing! Needs! Joy!

I expanded, rewrote, renovated the second edition for all the reasons we talked about above . . . and more:

This book is needed more now than ever.

Writing has never been more important to you, me, and the companies we work for.

Ideas in this book have evolved. I have new ways to help you be a better writer. I have new approaches to storytelling. I have fresh examples. I have a lot to say on brand voice—which I only faintly whispered about in the first edition.

I cut the boring parts.

It's now 10% funnier.

Writing has changed.

***I've** changed.* I am a much better writer now than I was eight years ago.

(That "better writer" thing is not a flex, by the way. I'm proving the point I make here repeatedly: You get better when you work that muscle. When you practice. Our writing always (ALWAYS!) gets better with a rewrite: *Everybody (re-)writes.*)

There's also a lot that's *not* in this book. It's not meant to be an exhaustive resource for the business of writing.

It's meant to be your practical go-to guide—offering the most important and useful guideposts. Lighting the path to better writing. And making us all happier, more fulfilled writers who love our work.

How Many Push-Ups?

So what do I say when someone asks: *How many push-ups can you do now? Did the effort pay off?*

Here's my answer: Yes, my single epic push-up became more.

Yes, it became 5.

Then 10.

Then I made it to 18 before I tore my rotator cuff when I fell on a snowy Boston street, sidelining myself from medaling in the Push-Up Olympics. (Still hopeful.)

But before that freak fall . . .?

Yes. The effort paid off!

Yes. It felt amazing!

Yes. It matters!

Is it really as simple as showing up and working the muscles?

Yes. It really was as simple as showing up and working the muscles!

* * *

Words are our emissaries. They carry important messages. They build our stories.

Our words (what we say) and style (how we say it) are undervalued, yet they should be our most cherished assets.

They make us who we are.

So the question becomes: *Are you telling your story from your unique perspective, with a voice and style that are clearly all you?*

Let's get to it.

Part **|**

Writing Rules: How to Write Better (and How to Hate Writing Less)

There is no one single way to write—just as there is no one way to parent a child or roast a turkey. But there are truly terrible ways to do all three. And truly inspired ways, too.

With each—the writing, the roasting, the parenting—you need a basic understanding of the process before you begin. I'm going to assume you have that—you know enough to buy an oven and find a pan before you begin to roast anything, for example.

In other words, this book assumes that you are equipped with some fundamentals: a working knowledge of English (that means basic levels of grammar, spelling, usage, and punctuation).

(And I mean *very* basic: if you recognize that this is a sentence and not . . . I don't know . . . a rhinoceros . . . we're good! You can safely proceed, knowing you aren't out of your depth.)

This book also assumes—*hopes!*—that you come with some gung ho. An eagerness to become a better writer. That you know it matters. And you've kicked to the curb the dumb notion that only a gifted few have what it takes.

Author Ta-Nehisi Coates spent a year teaching writing to MIT students. He later noticed how the rigors of math had better prepared his kids for the rigors of writing, even if they didn't immediately see it that way.

"One of my students insisted that whereas in math you could practice and get better, in writing you either 'had it' or you didn't. I told her that writing was more like math than she suspected," he wrote.[1]

15

You can learn to be a better writer—the same way you can learn algebra or Excel formulas or playing the ukulele. You need only a little knowledge, a lot of consistent effort, and good habits. (A framework or two can help, too.)

Here in Part I is everything I know about writing so far: everything I've learned intentionally and discovered by accident over decades of writing and editing professionally (and a lifetime of writing for the fun of it).

It's all here, mashed and distilled into what you need to know to be a better, more creative, more confident writer . . . slid down the bar directly into your hands. (*Salut!*)

If you have never written—if you are an "adult-onset writer" recovering from some trauma that made you feel like a hopeless writer—this section offers some processes and structures to help you get started.

If you've been writing for a while but feel stuck, here is some collected wisdom that will unstick you.

And if you are an experienced writer, I hope you rediscover the glee and joy of honing your craft. One of the things I like about writing is that you're never "done" improving. (That's why you're now reading a new edition of this book, which is so different from the first that it should be titled *Everybody Rewrites*!)

One final thing: I named this first section Writing Rules because I want to give you useful and memorable how-tos. I also want to differentiate these ideas from the general motivational aphorisms that pass for most writing advice. (Those aphorisms can be motivating. But they're frustratingly nonspecific.)

Think of these writing rules as more functional *tools* and less prescriptive *rules*: less hard-and-fast writing laws, more handy set of guidelines.

As bumpers on a bowling lane that nudge the ball away from the gutter, upping the odds that you will (BOOM!) score a strike.

Of course, you can break the rules (or ignore the tools). Isn't every rule made to be broken? Doesn't every rule have an exception?

Maybe you're a kind of confident content MacGyver who crafts superb social posts out of a metaphorical paper clip and roll of Scotch tape, improvising your own way.

Excellent! Good to hear! But to have gotten there, you've had to know what rules to break (or what tools to ignore).

Said another way by Pablo Picasso, the Dalai Lama, or that one guy on Twitter (no one really knows for sure):

> Learn the rules like a pro, so you can break them like an artist.

1

Everybody Writes

I was about to jump right into habits. To tell you that the key to taking your writing muscles from puny to powerful is to write every day. That writing is a habit, not an art.

But hold up.

Yes, all that is true. Yet, before we talk habits, let's reframe this idea of "writing." What "writing" actually is. And when we do it.

As you think of developing your writing habit, realize that you already *do* write every day. You write emails. You post to Facebook, Twitter, LinkedIn, Instagram. You comment in Slack or post to internal company blogs.

Recognize all that posting for what it actually is: *writing*.

And reframe it as a legitimate aspect of your daily workout—in the same way that always taking the stairs becomes over time not just part of a fitness program but a philosophy for how you live your life.

This first chapter is a call to arms to improve *all* of your communications—not just the writing we think of as "content" or "copy."

Embrace the idea that your words are your currency: They are a proxy, a stand-in for the important things you want to convey to your customers. Your colleagues. Your friends. And the world. That is especially true in a remote or distributed workplace, where work often gets done asynchronously—from various locations and with flexible work schedules.

Within those organizations, writing is the backbone of communication. Internal blogs stand in for meetings; messaging platforms stand in for real-time discussion. Writing is how we keep our colleagues updated and informed across time zones. It's how we collaborate on projects.

(Unclear writing will create havoc. "If you don't have that, you can have people thinking they're on the same page when they actually have different understanding," said Matt Mullenweg, founder and CEO of Automattic, the company behind Wordpress.com. Automattic has an editorial team whose job in part is to edit internal posts for clarity.)[1]

I want your readers and followers and audience to enjoy your words more. And I want *you* to maybe even feel a little proud of them.

But getting to that point requires a crucial shift: viewing all the words we use as important pieces of who we are online (and who our organizations are, too).

"If you want to be a writer you must do two things above all others: read a lot and write a lot," says Stephen King.

He's talking to those who want to make their living as he does, writing books. Yet, in our world, we're all already writing and reading a lot. Every day.

I am a writer. You are a writer. *Everybody writes.*

2

Writing Is a Habit, Not an Art

Each morning I am awakened gently by the sweet calls of downy-throated songbirds, welcoming me to a new day.

I arise and dine on a firm scramble of eggs laid at dawn by my cluck of heirloom chickens. I sip coffee from the rarest Kopi Luwak bean, harvested deep in the Sumatran jungle.

It's hand-picked.

By monkeys.

So after that . . . you can imagine that I flit to my desk, dip the nib of my fountain pen in its corner inkwell . . . and the insights spill out of me onto the page with the same intensity as the golden yolks of those heirloom eggs spread across my breakfast plate.[1]

* * *

Only part of that is true.

We're tempted to think that writing is an art, that only a chosen lucky few can do it well. But that's an excuse—a rationalization that lets the lazy off the hook for being the communication equivalent of a couch potato: Flabby. Unmotivated. Inarticulate.

The truth is that key to becoming a better writer is to be a more productive one. The key to being a better writer is to write.

You'd think that great writers would have special inspiration or special rituals or the perfect conditions to boost their output—like what I tried to pass off as my routine above.

My coffee is not picked by a team of monkeys. I have zero chickens and no songbirds.

Only this part is true: I start each day by writing.

* * *

Many of the world's best-known writers stressed regular routines and schedules for writing. Charles Dickens, Ernest Hemingway, Maya Angelou, and Barbara Kingsolver kept (or *keep*, in Barbara's case) regular hours to cultivate creative rhythms.

They might've had certain quirks (Hemingway wrote standing up; Maya Angelou kept a room in a budget hotel to escape the distractions of her home life). But many kept schedules and routines that look as ordinary and predictable as those in anyone else's life.[2]

No fountain pen. No rare coffee beans.

On the next page is a peek at what the prolific Ben Franklin called his daily scheme.

Ben's schedule looks an awful lot like everyday work. Like routine. Like a conventional pattern you'd see from someone punching a clock in a factory, right?

Well . . . that's because it is. Becoming a better writer—working the muscle—takes some commitment to simply show up, not unlike the commitment I keep with my gym trainer, Dorothy.

Both writing and strength training can feel awkward and a little painful at first: I felt like a total poser wearing my athleisure to be more *ath-* and less *-leisure*. I felt idiotic grunting under the weight of barbells that seemed sized for a toddler.

Keep at it, even when it's uncomfortable. Even when you'd rather quit.

The key to being a better writer is to write.

"Write like crap if you have to. But write every day. Keep the streak alive," says author and editor Beth Dunn.[3]

THE MORNING. *Question* What good shall I do this day?	5 6 7	Rise, wash, and address *Powerfull Goodness!* Contrive day's business, and take the resolution of the day: prosecute the present study, and breakfast.
	8 9 10 11	Work.
NOON.	12 1	Read, or overlook my accounts, and dine.
	2 3 4 5	Work.
EVENING *Question.* What good have I done to-day?	6 7 8 9	Put things in their places. Supper. Music or diversion, or conversation.Examination of the day.
NIGHT	10 11 12 1 2 3 4	Sleep.

Source: © Project Gutenberg.

So what kind of prescription works?

Set aside time each day when you're freshest.

I'm freshest first thing in the morning, before distractions hijack my day.

But maybe you're not a morning person. Maybe you'd rather set aside time before bed. You've been living with yourself long enough to know what time of day would work for you, so I'll leave that in your hands.

Slow down. Every morning—before I crack open the spine of my laptop or scroll through Instagram—I write down things that happened the previous day: stories I heard, things that made me laugh, snippets of conversations, whatever I connected with or found inspiring.

I write longhand in a notebook, with a Sharpie. Old school. Analog.

In the back of my notebook, I keep a random list of things: half-baked blog post ideas, speech fragments, book concepts. It's like an Amazon wish list of things I might buy from the Content Store if such a thing as a Content Store existed.

I use a notebook because the paper/pen approach is slower. It forces a bit more reflection. It tunes you into your life. It documents things too easily lost. (The world comes at you fast.)

For the rest of my day, I'm tied to the ping of email and meetings; the addictive ease of the social media scroll; the ferocity of notifications. I spend an enormous amount of time reacting to all that. It can feel grim and hollow if there's nothing to balance it.

So that few minutes with a pen and paper is a reflective reset.

I suppose what I'm advocating here is journaling. But I dislike the word "journaling"—partly because I'm allergic to nouns forced into labor as verbs, and partly because I don't like the halo of preciousness around it. So let's just say I encourage you to reclaim your own daily Slow Moments, to make them a foundational habit.

Don't write a lot. Just write often. Don't worry about how *much* you're writing—just that you're writing.

From writer Jeff Goins: "Spending five hours on a Saturday writing isn't *nearly* as valuable as spending 30 minutes a day every day of the week. Especially when you're just getting started."

I love how Jeff talks about why that daily part is important: He says habits "practiced once a week aren't habits at all. They're *obligations.*"

"And let's not kid ourselves here," he adds. "If you're doing something once a week, it's probably only a matter of time before you stop doing it altogether."[4]

There are no shortcuts to becoming a better writer. So show up and get to it. Daily.

Let's next look at how you motivate yourself to do that . . . even when you really aren't feeling it.

3

How to Keep a Daily Writing Ritual When You Aren't Feeling It

I've worked hard to create the daily writing habit I detailed in Chapter 2.

That might not sound like a big deal to you—keeping a daily journal.

But to me, it's huge. I spent a lifetime failing as a journal-writer. I never had the patience or discipline or interest to write only for myself. I didn't get the point.

(I also felt at once proud and like a failure. ***Proud:*** "All writers keep a diary." *Not this one, pal!* ***Failure:*** "All writers keep a diary." *What's wrong with me?*)

A daily writing habit is important if you want to build creative muscle. Every day, I work on getting my writing muscles as taut and toned and thrumming as a CrossFit disciple's.

What happens when you lapse a little? When you feel emptied out or tired? Or you got up late and have an early meeting?

What happens then?

I'll tell you: You lose motivation. Your daily journal entries read:

"Ugh."

"blllrrrrgh."

"What's the point?"

The Practice becomes The Plod. It's not fun anymore.

Time to get our groove back. Time to call on the genius of artist, author, professor (UW–Madison) Lynda Barry.

Lynda suggests a four-square technique to give structure and inspiration and a bit of whimsy to a daily habit.[1]

It works like this, which I've adapted from her:[2]

Source: Inspired by Lynda Barry from *Syllabus: Notes from an Accidental Professor.*

Divide a journal page into four sections, titled as in the image above. Every day, fill in each section. Bullet points help—because they give you permission to use sentence fragments and partial thoughts.

- **Did**—*How did you spend your day?*

- **Saw**—*What did you see? Notice?*

◆ **Heard**—*What did you overhear? Snippets of conversation overheard from strangers, neighbors, unsuspecting spouses on a Zoom call, kids, the meow of your colleague's needy cat?*

◆ **Draw** *a related doodle or sketch.* Important point: Just draw. Do not judge your talent or the artistic merit of the image. Your objective is just to loosen up and have fun—not judge the quality of your art.

After a few days, you'll start to notice the world a little differently. You'll start to act like a hunter-gatherer, collecting things inside your noggin so you can record them later. And you'll get your groove back—almost by default.

You aren't "writing." You're just making lists.

* * *

Other techniques can inspire your daily writing habit when you're stuck and rut-*ified*. (Not a word? It is now.)

◆ Set a tiny goal: Write a single line a day. You'll probably write more than one, of course.

◆ Use a daily writing prompt. (The Journal Club publishes a new prompt every day at joclub.world as well as on Instagram.)

◆ Try Morning Pages: Three pages of stream-of-consciousness writing.

◆ Copywork. "Copywork" means literally copying the work of others longhand to understand style, word choice, and more. Copy the sentences of writing you love in your diary or journal as a way to feel in your own hands what great writing looks like. I do this regularly with writing that delights me or makes me laugh.

◆ Don't overthink. Just go. Is this a technique? Or a state of mind? Maybe both.

4

Shake Off School Rules

In 2021, College Board officials announced sweeping revisions to the SAT college entrance exam. Among the key changes is that the dreaded five-paragraph essay portion of the test is now scrapped.[1]

Research from MIT professor Les Perelman—long a harsh critic of the College Board essay—found that writing fat paragraphs with fancy words earned high essay scores, even if the writing wasn't very good. Higher still were scores that sprinkled in random, esoteric facts.

Perelman coached 16 students who were retaking the test after having received mediocre essay scores. He encouraged them to be long-winded and to fill up the entire test booklet—including the margins and back pages.

The *Times* reporter Todd Balf writes:

> [Perelman] told them that details mattered but factual accuracy didn't. "You can tell them the War of 1812 began in 1945," he said. He encouraged them to sprinkle in little-used but fancy words like "plethora" or "myriad" and to use two or three preselected quotes from prominent figures like Franklin Delano Roosevelt, regardless of whether they were relevant to the question asked.

So what happened?

Fifteen of the 16 students scored higher than the 90th percentile on the essay when they retook the exam.

And then Perelman said, ". . . and then I told them never to write that way again! (Because) no one is actually learning anything about writing."[2]

* * *

Many of us learned in school to write what is commonly known as the five-paragraph essay. It's similar in format to the former SAT test, and it goes something like this:

1. **Introduction:** A thesis statement or a kind of mini-outline of what the essay will cover.

2. **Body Paragraph One:** The strongest argument, most compelling example, or cleverest point that dramatizes your thesis.

Each body paragraph should start with a transition—a word or phrase like *First* or *Another key point is*.

The rest of the paragraph should include at least four sentences in support of the first. The job of these sentences is to further explain your topic sentence to your reader.

The last sentence has another job: It should include a transitional hook to tie into the second paragraph of the body.

3. **Body Paragraph Two:** The second-strongest argument, compelling example, or cleverest point.

4. **Body Paragraph Three:** The third (or weakest) argument, example, or point.

5. **Conclusion:** A restatement of the thesis that uses some of the original words to echo—but not duplicate—the opening paragraph, as well as a summary of the three main points.

Feels formulaic, right? It is.

Feels boring? That, too.

It might be a perfectly fine structure to help guide a classroom of middle school writers. (Some educators question its use at all. But that's a debate for another book, not this one.)

The problem with its use beyond school is that it's a template: so structured and mundane that it's dull to write and torture to read.

Worse still, it implies there is only one right way to write. It suggests that other approaches to writing are wrong.

There is no one way to write—just as there is no one way to parent a child or roast a turkey.

What you learned in school might've once been a helpful guideline. But it's time to shake it off. Let it go!

As Janis says in the movie *Mean Girls*: "That's the thing with five-paragraph essays. You think everybody is in love with them when actually everybody HATES them!"

Actually, Janis was talking about the school's mean girls—The Plastics. Not essays. But same idea.

5

Publishing Is a Privilege

The other day I read an article citing a company's success and its "remarkable" ability to "churn out content."

"Churning out content." Like a company doles out blog posts and TikToks with as much joy as a Dickens-era orphanage doles out gruel.

No successful brand "churns out content." Instead, it puts the needs of its audiences first; it views the ability to create content as a privilege.

Does it sound naïve or quaint to suggest that publishing is a privilege instead of a perceived right?

It's not naïve.

It's a necessary mindset that creates a breeding ground for great writing and great content. It's a point of view that says we value our relationships with our audiences. We put their needs first. We want to earn their trust.

I don't say that lightly: Every bit of content you create should be to please the customer or prospect—*not* your boss or client. (More on that in a few.)

We all have easy access to a publishing platform and a potential audience. We all have great power to influence, educate, entertain, and help—but also to annoy, irritate, misinform, and . . . sometimes . . . fritter away our opportunity entirely.

So the challenge for all of us is to respect our audiences and deliver what each audience needs in a way that's useful, inspired, and empathetic to the reader.

We talked about this Formula of Three in the Introduction. But in case you are the kind of reader who skips an Intro and wades directly into the chapters, I'm dropping it here, too:

> High-quality content is packed with *clear utility*, *inspiration*, and *empathy* for the audience.

Said another way, but as a math formula:

> Utility × Inspiration × Empathy = High-Quality Content

◆ **Utility** means it helps an audience. Readers will read what we write only if something is in it for them.

◆ **Inspired** means it's inspired by data or creatively inspired. Or both.

◆ **Empathy** means we understand the reader's point of view. Also: We make it easy to understand. We don't make the reader work too hard. We take as long as we need to tell the story well. (The length of the content is dictated by the kind of content we're creating.)

<p align="center">* * *</p>

Write, rewrite, edit . . . always with your reader in mind.

As content strategist Jonathon Colman told me: "Start with empathy. Continue with utility. Improve with analysis. Optimize with love."

6

Why We Need a Writing Process

Writing can at times feel like birthing a Honda Civic, as I said in the Acknowledgments.

And writing can feel like inching your way along a pitch-black, long tunnel. You can make out only the next few feet in front of you. You take unsure baby steps. You have no idea where you'll end up or when you'll get there.

What helps with the pitch-black uncertainty and enormity and overwhelmingness of the task is to start with a process to guide the way.

When I was in middle school and learning to be a better writer, the focus was squarely on the end product. My teachers emphasized the final paper versus the rough drafts and scratch notes that helped it along the way.

In other words, they were more interested in seventh-grade Ann delivering an essay on *The Red Badge of Courage*'s Henry Fleming (a romantic farm boy who became a Civil War soldier) than they were in *how* the Henry essay came to be sitting on their desk at all.

Or so it seemed at that time. Maybe process was part of the curriculum? But I don't think so. I can't remember Ms. Dolan ever celebrating my *Red Badge* rough draft. I don't remember her vigorously waving a flag at the checkpoints along the way to that final piece.

* * *

Process is one of those things that feels hopelessly boring and mind-numbing. Like peeling skins from raw tomatoes. Matching socks from laundry. Scrubbing dirt from beets.

But process is necessary in writing. (And in many parts of life, now that I think of it.) We *need* a road map to get us to where we're going.

Think of your writing process as a kind of GPS navigation. Like a global positioning system, it gets us to where we need go. It turns our discombobulated thoughts into a coherent, clear piece of writing that others can understand and appreciate and love.

The Writing GPS acts as our guide.

The Writing GPS also reminds us that we aren't lost—not really.

The tunnel might feel dark. But there is always light at the end of it.

7

Introducing the Writing GPS Framework

Introducing the Writing GPS: a framework for any longer pieces you might write—blog posts, ebooks, white papers, newsletters, site content, and so on.

It's the process I use to write anything that's important: articles or posts that appear on MarketingProfs or my own site at AnnHandley.com, my fortnightly newsletter, and this book you're reading.

I've also used it to write the bones of video scripts and presentations, longer memo-style emails, and texts to my kids. (LOL. Just kidding about that last one.)

The Writing GPS has 17 steps.

Let's pause here for a minute. I feel like I know you well enough by Chapter 7 to know that number just made your stomach drop. *Did she say 17 steps? SEVEN. TEEN?!*

Seventeen is . . . *a lot*.

Seventeen sounds . . . *overwhelming*.

Seventeen feels . . . *when's naptime?*

I promise you: Following this Writing GPS is not exhausting.

Here's the deal: Most of these steps are fleshed out elsewhere in this book. Like serving the reader and not the writer. Finding credible sources or data to support your point of view. Creating The Ugly First Draft (TUFD).

What's more, some are small things you'll do almost automatically or reflexively—more mindset moments than tasks to check off on some project management software.

For example, is Step 6 of "Walk away" actually a "step"? Not really. It's a brain break.

Is "Recognizing the Joy and Regret" of writing actual "work"? No. It's honoring that there's a lot of emotion in creating.

Both so-called steps are part of the journey to ridiculously good writing.

I included all the steps and moments here because it's helpful to see how all these pieces work together to create a larger whole.

We need a framework that goes beyond the basics so that you can see where a little extra effort or attention can make the magic happen. That's what this Writing GPS does.

Here's the framework.

The Writing GPS:
Navigate Your Way to Ridiculously Good Content

GO
1. Goal
2. Ask *So what?*
3. Add data
4. Organize

PUSH
5. First draft
6. Walk away
7. Second draft
8. Rewrite to one person
9. Add voice
10. Headline

SHINE
11. Robot edit
12. Human edit
13. Read it out loud
14. Eyeball for scanners
15. Publish
16. Let it go with love
17. Reconcile your emotions!

© Ann Handley
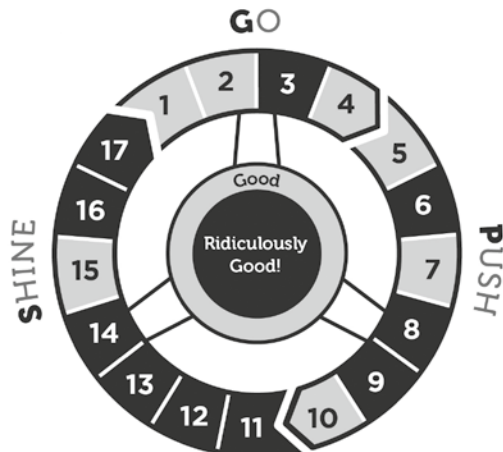
The Writing GPS acts as your guide. It subs in Go Push Shine for the usual words (Global Positioning System) to make the GPS acronym our own.

Our Writing GPS has three distinct parts:

> **Go** (1–4): The prep and research groundwork
>
> **Push** (5–10): The writing and the rewriting
>
> **Shine** (11–17): The polishing and the publishing

The framework is a steering wheel because the Writing GPS puts *you* in the driver's seat. You navigate your own way.

The steps most of us do already are in gray. The specific steps toward ridiculously great content are marked in black.

The seven steps in gray (1, 2, 4, 5, 7, 10, 15) are the required minimum for writing content:

> 1. Goal
>
> 2. Ask *So what?*
>
> 4. Organize
>
> 5. First draft
>
> 7. Second draft
>
> 10. Headline
>
> 15. Publish

This is the path most of us already take. You travel from the starting point to your You Have Arrived destination with only the most necessary steps in between. These are your gas, food, and bathroom breaks—metaphorically speaking.

The other 10 steps (3, 6, 8, 9, 11, 12, 13, 14, 16, 17) add magic and adventure to a basic journey.

> 3. Add data
>
> 6. Walk away

8. Rewrite to one person

9. Add voice

11. Robot edit

12. Human edit

13. Read it out loud

14. Eyeball for scanners

16. Let it go with love

17. Reconcile your emotions!

These 10 things—some big (voice!), some small (internalizing the emotion of writing!)—will elevate your writing. You'll create a ridiculously memorable journey for your readers.

Ready? Let's buckle up. . . .

1. **Goal**. What's your goal? What are you trying to achieve? Anything you write—even a standalone blog post—should always be aligned with a larger (marketing or business) goal.

    The key here is that you care about what you're writing: You can try to fake it, but readers are allergic to insincerity. If *you* don't care about what you're writing about, no one will.

    Let's say your goal is this: I want to drive awareness of and interest in the launch of our incredibly cool new collaborative editing software because we want to sell more of it.

2. **So what? Put the reader in it**. Reframe the goal to relate it to your reader.

    Why does it matter to them? What's in it for them? Why should they care? What's the clear lesson or message you want them to take away?

    What value do you offer them? What questions might they have? What advice or help can you provide? How can you best serve them, with a mindset of generosity and giving?

To get to the heart of this reframing, I ask: *So what?* And then answer, *Because.*

Repeat the *So what/Because* query/response string until you've exhausted any ability to come up with an answer. Or until you're questioning things best left to philosophers.

As in:

I want to drive interest and awareness in the launch of our new collaborative editing software.

So what?

Because our new text editor makes it stupid-easy in three specific ways for those without a geek gene to easily collaborate from remote offices, without overwriting each other's stuff or losing earlier versions.

So what?

Because that's a pain to deal with, and it causes a lot of frustration and suffering for collaborative teams working virtually.

So what?

Because pain . . . it hurts. And suffering is . . . umm . . . bad.

You get the idea.

Express your reframed idea as a clear message. In this case, something like this:

> *Our new text editor makes it stupid-easy in three specific ways for those of you without a geek gene to easily work together from remote locales, without overwriting each other's stuff or losing earlier versions. That makes for happier, less frustrated collaborators. And you'll get your work done faster, with less wasted effort.*

Put that sentence or two at the very top of the page. Like a pin on a Google map, it'll remind you where you're headed. (See Chapter 13.)

3. **Seek out the data and examples**. What credible source supports your main idea?

    Are there examples, data, real-world stories, relevant anecdotes, timely developments, or new stories you can cite? (See specific advice about using data in Publishing Rules, Part V.)

    Don't discount your own experience; at the same time, don't rely exclusively on it. Use yourself as one of your sources if you have relevant experience.

    "The more personal you are, the more universal you become," says writing coach Chip Scanlan. "The writer who uses herself as a source and resource has the greatest chance of connecting with the largest audience.

    "[A]sk yourself: What do I think about this story? What do I know about it?" he writes. "The smart writers I know start out by tapping into their own private stock first."[1]

    So look inward: What's been your own experience?

    Then: Is there research that quantifies the problem? Who else has dealt with catastrophes or successes? Could you talk to those people or organizations to get their firsthand stories and advice?

4. **Organize**. What structure best suits your story? A list? A how-to guide? A case study or client narrative? (See Chapter 14.)

5. **Write The Ugly First Draft**. Writing The Ugly First Draft is where you show up and throw up.

    Write badly.

    Grammar?

    Spelling?

    Complete sentences?

    Readability?

    Who cares?

You'll tackle all that later. For now, just get that TUFD down. (See Chapter 8.)

By the way, this show-up-and-throw-up phase is often where some writers start and end the process. But we don't do that, do we? (*Heck-no-we-do-not*!) We have respect both for writing and for our reader.

6. **Walk away**. Actually go for a walk. Move your body. Free your mind. Put some distance between your first draft and the second. (More also in Chapter 8.)

7. **Write Draft 2 with fresh eyeballs**. Start to shape that mess into something. (See Chapter 9.)

8. **Write Draft 3 with company**. That company is your reader. Draft 3 is when you invite you reader into the room with you.

   One reader. Not *readers*. Not an entire audience.

   You've been the writer, writing from your point of view. Draft 3 is where you swap places with your reader, and rewrite from their perspective. (See Chapter 10.)

9. **Write Draft 4**. This is my favorite checkpoint in the GPS!

   The checkpoint guards are like your best grandma, so friendly and welcoming! And everything you do is wonderful!

   Add voice, style, fun, sparkle, humor, fizz & ginger. (See Chapter 11.)

10. **Give it a great headline or title**. See Chapter 79 for more on writing irresistible headlines.

11. **Run your final draft through an AI editing tool**. I like Grammarly. Hemingway Editor is fun, too, if only for the Ernest name-check.

    Adopt or reject AI's suggestions. It's so satisfying to be confident enough in your writing to reject a robot's fixes.

12. **Send the post-AI edited version to your longtime editor**. All writers need an editor. Especially the best ones.

This is the person who has a tight grip on grammar, usage, style, and punctuation. But most importantly, they know you and your style. (More in Chapter 29.)

13. **Read it out loud**. Reading your final draft out loud is the best way to hear your voice, literally. Yeah, you sound like a nutloaf, talking to yourself in the middle of your office. So?

    Mistakes I catch during my own Nutloaf Moment™:

    Countless spelling/grammar errors. Awkward phrasing. Hard-to-understand sentences. Moments when I sound too prescriptive or serious or straight. When I sound like I'm reporting a five-car pileup on the freeway on your local news . . . not writing to one person directly in my own voice.

14. **Eyeball for scanning/scrolling**. Chunky chunks of text feel impenetrable, especially online.

    They don't move the reader along, because bulky text doesn't look like much fun to read. (For more, see Chapter 26.)

15. **Publish—but not without answering one more reader question: What now?** Don't leave your readers just standing awkwardly in the middle of the dance floor after the music stops.

    What do you want them to do next?

    ◆ Check out other resources?

    ◆ Subscribe to hear more?

    ◆ Register for an event or a free trial?

    ◆ Buy something?

    ◆ Leave feedback?

    ◆ Write you back?

16. **Let it go with love**. Your writing is no longer yours. It's out there in the world, standing on its own two pixels.

17. **Recognize both Joy + Regret**.

Those two things happen post-publishing for me, simultaneously. (Yes still—after a lifetime of writing.)

Regret. It's not exactly what you wanted to write. It's not exactly what you envisioned when you planned this in your head.

Forgive yourself. It's the best you can do right now. Take note of any lessons. Vow to apply them. See you next time.

Joy. HIGH-FIVE YOURSELF. You're gorgeous. You're killing it. You're doing GREAT.

Writing—like life—is complicated.

* * *

Those steps are *my* process. They don't happen consecutively. Usually they occur over several days.

You can take them and toss them around and follow them however you like.

Maybe you like to barf your first draft onto the page (step 5) and *then* see what organization makes sense (step 4). Maybe you create fewer drafts.

That's fine. There is no one way to write, remember?

So:

Try this on.

See what works for you.

Trash what doesn't.

Adopt what might.

Adapt as you wish.

8

Embrace The Ugly First Draft

You've figured out what to write. You have a vague idea how to structure it.

So now—just write. Or: Write badly to create a first draft.

Welcome to The Ugly First Draft (TUFD).

TUFD isn't an excuse. It's not a pass we give ourselves to create shoddy work. It's a necessary part of the process of creating work you love.

In Greek mythology, the goddess Athena was the favorite daughter of Zeus. She was born not in the usual way. Instead, she emerged from his forehead fully grown and armed.

Much of writing paralysis is the result of expecting too much of ourselves the first time out. Sowing letters onto the blank page and expecting something strong and powerful and fully formed—the writing version of Athena—is frustrating and impossible. Unless you are some kind of deity, it doesn't happen.

And that's okay. Expecting Athena-mature prose means you're putting too much pressure on yourself.

Very often, the people you think of as good writers are terrible writers on their first drafts.

But here's the secret: They are *excellent editors* of their own work. Writing is editing.

So embrace The Ugly First Draft. As painful and depressing as it might be to write badly—you're writing! You're getting the mess out of your head and onto the page! Then when you get back to it, you can start shaping it into something more respectable.

My own first drafts are like that: littered with typos and half-written phrases, like I'm typing with mittens on.

I constantly have to remind myself that brilliance—or anything close to it—comes on the next draft. The rewrite. The reshape. The polish.

Be brave. Just start.

Let's walk through a TUFD timeline:

1. **Barf up TUFD (Draft 1)**. Think about what you want to say. (*Think before ink!*) Add your guiding bullet points or sentence at the top of the page. (See Chapter 13.)

Adhere bottom to chair. Open up laptop. Affix hands to keys with permanent adhesive. Move them around so the letters form words and the words form longer strings of words.

Full sentences? Structure? Flow? Grammar? None of it exists!

Jot down your key ideas as they come to you in whatever order they come.

Don't worry about forming full (or even coherent!) sentences.

Don't worry about finding the right words.

Lowercased words, misspelling, poor grammar, awkward phrasing, subject-verb disagreements so violent they are practically fistfights . . . Let it all happen!

You can fix that all later. You're writing—even if it feels like a pantomime of writing. Like you're just going through the motions.

If you get stuck, think about what's sticking. Do you need more research? More examples? Another point?

Inserting "need a better example here" or "could use a research stat" or "something-something that supports that point" or "meatier metaphor" is more than legit during this phase.

Reread what you've written only to remind yourself of what else you wanted to say, or to add some flesh to the bones of your terrible writing. (Even if it's rotting walking-dead flesh.)

IMPORTANT >> Forgive yourself. Ban negative talk, self-slander, judgment.

Maybe you're expecting beautiful and graceful gliding across the keys. Maybe you're expecting elegant prose.

Instead you're getting the writing equivalent of a baby learning to walk, but way less cute.

Your writing is stiff-limbed and unsteady, Franken-stepping across the page. About to crash horribly at any moment.

Keep going. Do not move butt from chair until you've got 999 words.

(The exact number I use. 999 feels easier than 1,000. Just like $.99 is way less than $1.00. Ridiculous head games.)

You won't use all those 999 words. Most will be *isht*. That's okay.

Keep those Franken-steps lurching forward.

Did you leave all your awkward baby steps on the dance floor?

You did it! This is The Ugly First Draft.

2. **Walk away**. Feel that? That's the relief of getting the first draft out, as gross and ugly as it might be.

So this is a good time to walk away from each other. Give it overnight, if you can manage it. If not, eke out as much time as you can.

Grab your dog's leash and go for a walk. Meet a friend for coffee. Scroll Instagram. Get lost in the For You page on TikTok.

Whatever. Just put some distance between you two.

When you get back to it, things will look more manageable. Your fresh eyes will notice that this sentence is better there. Or there's a better analogy you might use. Or you can say things more simply.

I'm not sure why a little distance in between drafts is like magic. But it is.

And like actual magic, it can't be explained.

9

Draft 2: Cross Out the Wrong Words

Writing is easy. All you have to do is cross out the wrong words.

—Mark Twain

Here's where we start to make TUFD less U.

Take TUFD from yesterday.

Read it through your head. Feel it in your hands.

Start to help it become a better version of itself.

Revisiting a first draft to rework and rewrite it doesn't sound like much fun, does it? It sounds like drudgery. Tedium. Like alphabetizing canned goods.

But it's not really, because there's a kind of freedom in it.

You've already done the hard part of setting down the words. Now comes the easier (and less anxiety-inducing) part of distilling the text's essence—or, crossing out the wrong words and the unnecessary words, and subbing in better ones.

Revising is my favorite part of writing—because it's when we start to have some fun. To me, the first draft feels more like pure ball-and-chain hard work. The editing is where we get to make some merry.

I'm not talking here about having someone else edit your work, by the way. That comes later.

First, you need to take a first pass at editing and shaping your own work.

There are two approaches to self-editing:

> **1.** *Developmental editing*, which I call editing by chainsaw. It's where you look at the big picture.
>
> **2.** *Line editing*, which I call editing by surgical tools. It's where you look at paragraph and sentence flow, word choice, usage, and so on.

I like to use both on the same piece: first, one . . . and then, the other.

Editing by chainsaw. First, ignore the grammar and specific words you've used. Focus on the bigger stuff.

- **Key idea**. Is the main point there? Is it clear? And right up front?

  You might've gotten bogged down by setting up an idea with too much introductory explanation instead of just getting right into it. (See Chapter 16.)

  Did you? Remove that throat-clearing introductory text, whittle it down, or set it aside to use elsewhere.

- **Pay special attention to the opening**. Your first few sentences are crucial; they invite the reader in. (See Chapter 19.)

- **What can you cut from the team this week?** What doesn't support your main point or further your argument?

  What's a distraction? What's indulgent? What feels too precious, like you're trying too hard? *Nurse . . . Scalpel!* Cut it.*

- **Make every paragraph earn its keep**. Does every paragraph contain an idea that the one before or after it doesn't? Or is it paraphrasing what it heard another paragraph say already?

---

*Sometimes you fall in love with a phrase or word or sentence. You can't bear to cut it, even if you know you should. I have a file in Google Docs for those words. It holds things I wrote that I'm proud of and can't bear to delete forever. The file is titled "Darlings."

Are the paragraphs more like Frankenparagraphs—made up of disconnected sentences bolted awkwardly together, creating a scary mess? The sentences should build on one another, furthering a single idea and creating a whole.

◆ **Make every sentence earn its keep**. Apply the same standard you applied to paragraphs: Does it bring something unique to the table? Or does it simply restate what its buddy before it already said? I call these Parrot Sentences.

If you see a Parrot Sentence perched in your own paragraph: Cut it. Shoo it away. Be ruthless.

◆ **Adopt a less-is-more mindset**. Many writers take too long to get to the point; they use too many words.

Don't be that person.

◆ **Logic**. Does it flow? What do you need to move around to help the flow?

Think of the sentences in a paragraph as a conversation between an elderly, companionable couple. They don't talk over each other; they expand on what the other says.

◆ **What's missing?** Do you have data? A point of view? What information would make your piece feel comprehensive? Fair? Real? True?

Editing with surgical tools. Next, turn off the chainsaw. Pick up your surgical instruments.

◆ **Trim the bloat and fat**. Are you ~~potentially~~ using ~~far~~ too many words to say something you ~~perhaps~~ could say ~~more~~ concisely?

◆ **Shed the obvious**. There's no need to include *in this article, in this post, in regard to, I've always felt that, we are of the opinion that*. . . . Bag up those obvious phrases. Set them on the curb for trash pickup.

◆ **Lose Frankenwords**, word additives, clichés, and words pretending to be something they're not. (See Chapters 33 and 34.)

◆ **Trim word bloat**. Sub in single words for fat phrases.

    A few samples:

    despite the fact that > although

    when it comes to > when, in

    there will be times when > when, at times

    continues to be > remains

    in regard to > about, regarding

◆ **Ditch adverbs** unless they are necessary to adjust the meaning. (Chapter 39.)

◆ **Use the present verb tense** as much as you can. Ditch weakling verbs in favor of stronger, ripped ones. (Chapters 36 and 38.)

◆ **Create transitions between paragraphs**. The best writing flows from paragraph to paragraph, creating momentum.

    Good transitions are like fine stitching: You don't see the transitions; they don't stop your eye. Instead, they stitch writing into a seamless whole. They improve the vibe and reader-friendliness of any work.

◆ **Draw natural connections between paragraphs**. Again, don't rely on clunky high school transitions like *however, thus, therefore*, and so on. Instead, pick up an idea from the previous paragraph and connect it to an idea in the next paragraph.

◆ **Am I painting clear images and using fresh analogies?** Or am I relying on clichés, stereotypes, bromides? (Chapter 40.)

<p style="text-align:center">* * *</p>

Did you notice that I just wrote 700 words on editing but didn't once mention grammar?

That's not because grammar isn't important. It is, as we'll talk about in Part II. But writers tend to equate editing with fixing the grammar, when it's so much more than that.

10

Draft 3: Swap Places with Your Reader

The reader doesn't turn the page because of a hunger to applaud.

—Don Murray

Draft 3 is when you invite you reader in.

One reader. Not *readers*. Not an entire audience. Or list. Or all your fans or followers.

One person. Let's call her Petunia.*

Draft 3 is when you swap places with Petunia. Step into her shoes. Slip on her skin. See through her eyes. It's her point of view.

Thinking about Petunia in Draft 3 makes your writing more personable, less uptight.

You are putting a pillow over the face of anything with a whiff of "Dear Valued Customers."

You're writing to one person at one time—not a stadium full of people turning their faces to a jumbotron, right? (I'm stating this "one person" stuff twice and in two different ways because it's THAT important.)

---

*Or Stuart. Octavia. Mama. Petunia is a proxy for *your* reader here; use whomever you're thinking about.

52

Does Petunia . . .

◆ **Follow your logic?** Are you making her work too hard to understand the main idea, supporting points?

Don't fall prey to the curse of knowledge—a cognitive bias that assumes others have the same background and depth of familiarity we do. A gem from my journalism school days: "Assume the reader knows nothing but don't assume the reader is stupid."

◆ **What questions might she have?** Are you answering them?

◆ **Does she see herself reflected in the text?** Did you deliver an *It's-Me!* minute? (We'll talk more about this in Chapter 12.)

Good writing serves the reader, not the writer. It isn't self-indulgent.

Swap places with your reader. Be a skeptic of your own work. Get out of your own head, and into Petunia's.

Relentlessly, unremittingly, obstinately write from your reader's point of view, with honest empathy for the experience you are giving them.

* * *

Your Customer Signs Your Paycheck

A note to marketers battling internal politics and that one exec who thinks they're a better marketer than you are.

Good writing serves the reader, not the writer.

And good content marketing serves the customer.

Yet often in marketing we put ourselves and our products first. We lead with us, not them.

Often that's not the fault of the marketer. Many organizations—especially those with multiple decision makers or layers of bureaucracy—place other agendas above the interests of the customer or reader.

They hold a spot at the front of the line for the boss. The CEO. Legal. That opinionated exec who thinks they're a better marketer than the entire marketing team.

But holding the first spot for anyone other than your customer is a mistake. The only person your content needs to please is your reader. Because ultimately you serve them—not your boss. The CEO. Or anyone else.

That seems counterintuitive. It's not. Here's why:

If your customer loves your content, so will your boss or client or that exec.

The inverse is not true: If only your boss loves it, it won't get any traction, shares, love. Your customer will not value it. Petunia will go somewhere else. It won't achieve what your organization needs it to.

"Behind every piece of bad content is an executive who asked for it," says marketer Michael Brenner.

So create every bit of content to please just one person: your customer or prospect—not your boss. It's up to all of us to nominate ourselves as the court-appointed advocate for our customer.

Evangelize this point internally as loudly as you can. Make signs if you need to, and hold them aloft:

What would our content look like if the customer signed our paycheck?

11

Draft 4: Humor Comes on the Rewrite

Humor comes on the rewrite. So do the best analogies. The clearest construction. The best writing—period. Draft 4 is where we have the most fun.

Draft 4 adds voice, style, fun, sparkle, and humor.

- ◆ **Count the number of yous**. If you run out of fingers . . . you're doing great.

- ◆ **Consult something like** *RelatedWords.org* to help inspire word choice or lively metaphors. (See Tools in Part VII.)

- ◆ **Create momentum**. Make each sentence earn its keep. Is it a drag on the action? Cut it from this week's lineup.

Make each word earn its keep. *Does it propel Petunia forward?*

- ◆ **Create clear copy hierarchy** through white space, subheads, bullet points, images.

Finally:

- ◆ **Trust Petunia**. Don't overdescribe or overprescribe. Leave room for Petunia's imagination to curl up and settle into your writing.

- ◆ **Relax. Have fun. Loosen up your fingers. Open your heart**. If your writing feels like you're typing with a taser aimed at your sensitive nibs . . . you're doing it wrong.

55

12

Develop Pathological Empathy

Some people are naturally empathic. They easily understand another's point of view. They immediately intuit what another might be feeling in any situation.

Is that you? *Congrats, you!* You're ahead of the game.

The rest of us have to work a little more intentionally to get into another's mindset.

"Good writing (and therefore crafting good experiences) requires us to understand and have empathy for our audience, their situation, their needs and goals," says content strategist Jonathon Colman. "The best content experiences are pitched perfectly in the sweet spot, the nexus of all those human factors."

In other words, empathy for the customer experience should be at the root of all of our content, because having a sense of the people you are writing for and a deep understanding of their problems is key to honing our craft.

Content created only to further a search engine ranking is a massive waste of time and effort. It's also a wasted opportunity. It's far better, long-term, to create useful content that solves customer problems, shoulders their burdens, eases their pain, enriches their lives, creates a connection between you two.

This was true when we wrote *Content Rules* a decade ago. But recent and various Google updates have seemed to finally make it permanent and official. (*High-fives all around!*)

That means we should meet people where they are, with a spirit of generosity and benevolence.

We should help them find answers to the problems they have.

We should make sure they see themselves mirrored in our writing.

All of your content—your product pages, landing pages, customer support text, About Us pages, all of it—"needs to use language to support people's needs and goals," Colman told me.

"And each of those experiences requires very thoughtful writing that's appropriate to what the audience needs from us in those situations. A listicle of 14 Cats Who Look Just Like Elvis just ain't gonna work when someone needs to figure out how our products work."

So how do you know what people need?

That's where enormous, mammoth, almost *pathological* empathy comes in. Start by getting to know your customers.

"It's hard to have real empathy for real people's experiences if we don't really get to know the people themselves," Colman said. "Not just in aggregate, not just as a collection of Web analytics data, search queries, or spreadsheets . . . I mean the real deal: actually talking with them. Or, better still: listening to them."

Empathy—like writing—isn't a gift. It's a discipline. It takes some intentional effort and diligence to develop enormous empathy so that you can apply it to your writing.

"You're not engaging in a one-time action," Colman says. "You're building a long-term relationship."

Here are some first steps toward building pathological empathy for our customers, prospects, readers:

1. **Spend time with your customers or prospects**. Sounds obvious, doesn't it? But it's surprising how few marketers actually interact with their customers; often, only customer service or sales teams do.

    Listen to customer service inquiries. Monitor the chatbot. Watch how customers behave. See what problems they have. Look for patterns.

2. **Understand their habitat**. A focus group in a generic conference room or user experience testing in a lab isn't ideal. It's better to visit people who use your products or services at their homes or at work or while they're waiting in line for coffee.

   "This will give you an entirely new understanding of what people need from you and your content," Colman says. "You can't develop empathy without context."

3. **Ask why**. Never assume you know why people do what they do.

   "You might be great at using analytics systems to measure every nuance of a person's behavior on your site or in your app," Colman says. "But analytics only tell us what people did, not *why* they did it.

   "So ask. And then ask again. And keep asking until you understand the bigger picture of what people value and what they need from you."

4. **Share stories, not just stats**. Many of us have access to dashboards filled with metrics and data.

   Data is useful. But it comes to life when you marry it with feedback from the people who use your site or your products.

   You can build aggregate metrics around this feedback—like sentiment, length, complaints per hour, and so on . . . "It's even more powerful to display people's actual comments," Colman says. "Follow that up by building rapid workflows to solve problems and you're putting empathy into action!"

5. **Use customer-centric language**. Regularly replace *I* or *we* with *you* to shift the focus to the customer's point of view.

   As in:

   Instead of (company-centric): The #1 video platform for virtual conferences.

   Say this (customer-centric): Create virtual events that feel like a Netflix show. (via Goldcast)

   Instead of: Point-of-sale solutions for restaurants of all sizes.

Say this: Built to make your restaurant better. (via Toast)

6. **Aim to deliver an "It's-me!" Minute**. Does your reader feel seen? Recognized? Understood?

   Let's look at a Services page for a Virtual Assistant company.

   This is okay: Outsource your long to-do list to a Virtual Assistant.

   This is way better: You spend evenings and weekends answering emails instead of enjoying your free time. You're here because something needs to change. (via Don't Panic Management)

   The former is okay—the reference to the "long to-do list" is relatable. But the latter takes empathy a step further—slipping on the skin of the reader, packing an emotional wallop for overwhelmed entrepreneurs.

   So the question for you: Are you holding up a mirror to your reader, beaming their reflection back to them?

<div align="center">* * *</div>

Pathological Empathy in Action

Pathological empathy is critical for sales copy, home pages, or marketing landing pages—all places where we need to be very specific about what our value offers *to our customers*—and not just what the offer is, says Nadia Eghbal, co-founder of online cooking school Feast (now Foodist Kitchen).

"Your customers don't buy your product to do your company a favor," Eghbal said. "They're doing it because your product makes their lives better. So if you want to sell something, you need to explain how you're helping them."

Feast shifted from company-centric to customer-centric writing on its home page:

Company-centric: A Better Way to Learn How to Cook.

- This statement was too nonspecific, Nadia said. *Better in what way? And according to whom?*

Customer-centric: Learn to cook without recipes in 30 days.

- ◆ Ah. Much stronger. A clear explanation of the benefits. And an appeal to a buyer's aspirational future self.

That shift in messaging cooked up (ha!) a tenfold increase in sales. And it delivered soul-filling anecdotal evidence, too.

"We regularly get emails from people along the lines of 'Wow, everything on your home page describes me to a T!'—which suggests we're resonating with customers in the right way," she said. ⇐ (That's an It's-me Minute. Right there.)

The best way to keep people engaged is to talk about them. Not you.

13

Think Before Ink

"It's not the ink—it's the think," wrote former *New Yorker* cartoon editor Robert Mankoff[1] in response to a question about the secret to drawing the magazine's iconic cartoons.

"As cartoon editor, I'm often asked how to get ideas for cartoons by people who want to submit them to the *New Yorker*," Mankoff writes. "There really is no trick—you just have to think of them."

Mankoff's *think-before-ink* mnemonic is easily applied to the first and second GPS checkpoints of writing too: distilling an idea, reframing it for your reader. ("Think before ink" would also be the perfect tagline for a tattoo studio.)

Mankoff's deliberately oversimplified answer reveals a fundamental truth about cartoons, and about any content: The more you think about what you want to say, the easier it is to say.

It sounds obvious, doesn't it? Figuring out *what* you want to say before you figure out *how* to say it?

But many of us tend to shortchange that first step. Instead, we charge straight at the water and wade in, slogging through the surf until pretty soon we're out of our depth and flailing about, wondering *how did we end up here?*

"If I'm really struggling, it's usually not about the writing—it's about the thinking: I just don't really have the story down yet," marketer Doug Kessler told me. "So more research or groping with the outline can unstick me.

"If I do know the story but I'm just dopey or sleepy or grumpy (my preferred dwarf personas), I give it a rest, get some sleep or take a shower or pound some Diet Coke or take a walk," Doug added.

Then Doug said this—which I love so much I'm calling it out:

> An hour with a fresh mind is worth five hours of fog.

* * *

Some writers—including me—write as a way to figure out *what* we think. You, too, might develop your thoughts through writing. You might not always have a clear sense of what exactly you want to say until you're knee-deep in the water. In that case, the think-before-ink idea might seem counterproductive.

It's not.

I'm talking about having a general sense of the key point or direction of the piece, even if that general sense is not fully fleshed out in your own head before you start.

Often the flailing comes about because we haven't thought about an idea enough to find that central point. We haven't thought through the supporting arguments we want to make to shore up that point, either.

It helps to first jot down thoughts to try to find a focus and points in support of it.

Think before ink means finding your one key point by asking three questions about every bit of content you're creating:

1. **Why** am I creating this? What's my objective?

2. **What** is my key take on the subject or issue? What's my thesis? My point of view?

3. **And, finally, the critical *So what/Because* exercise**: Why does it matter to the people you are trying to reach?

Then, express the key point as a single sentence.

In some cases, that key point becomes the headline. (Sometimes, during the writing process you might think of something better to use as a headline.)

This approach applies equally well to blog posts or presentations or books. You might have more supporting points in a book or longer piece of content. But you should still be able to describe the key idea in a single sentence.

As I'm writing now, the guiding sentence at the top of my page is this: *A handbook for businesses like yours to create better content with more care and discretion, because we live in a world where we are all writers.*

It's a little boring. It's not pretty. But it's getting the job done.

Shakespeare probably wrote Hamlet with this sentence at the top of his parchment:

> Angsty, brooding Danish prince goes nuts (or does he?) but murders many, including the creepy uncle who had killed his father and married his mother.

Or maybe not.

But it's fun to think he did.

A Side Conversation for Procrastinators

My own *Think Before Ink* moments usually come when I'm procrastinating.

I'm supposed to be writing. But I'm not. Instead, I'm actively avoiding it.

I'm paying all my bills. Catching up on that Netflix series I've never gotten around to watching. Changing the oil in my car.* Investing my time in scrolling Instagram. Committing to make something really complicated for dinner. (Attempt to source something called "katsuobushi" for the recipe?)

---

*Have never actually changed any oil in any vehicle. This is a metaphor.

Is this you, too, my procrastinating friend? I see you.

It might seem like you're avoiding writing with all these procrasti-stractions.

But NO! You are not.

In between all the bill-paying, binge-watching, katsuobushi-sourcing, etc., . . . you've been sorting a few ideas in your head.

You've been thinking about a question this one guy asked you. An experience you had that stuck in your noggin. A conversation.

Some nugget of intelligence or half-scrap of an idea you jotted down.

You were *mulling* during that procrasti-straction-ating.

You were thinking, whether you wanted to or not. Your fetal ideas were starting to sprout limbs and grow tiny, powerful muscles.

So don't feel like you're letting yourself down when you are pro-crastinating. Instead, reframe it as part of the thinking process.

Thinking is prewriting.

And prewriting is fundamental to actual writing.

14

Fifteen Ways to Organize

Good writing is like math.

It has logic and structure.

It feels solid to the reader. The writer is in control, leading the reader on a well-lit path that's clear and accessible and free of gnarled words and knobbly things readers will stumble over.

Good writing does not follow a formula, exactly. But there is an architecture to it.

<div align="center">* * *</div>

There's no single way to structure a piece of writing.

I start with a single line at the top of the page that sums up the main point I'm trying to make.

Then I list some key points that relate to or support my bigger idea.

Then I go back and expand on those ideas in another sentence or two, creating paragraphs.

Then I move the paragraphs around, adding transitions between them to create a smooth flow.

In other words, I make a list.

It feels less intimidating to make a list than it does to write.

Do you ever feel stumped about where to begin a shopping list? A to-do list? A wish list for Santa?

Me neither.

Your approach might be different. Instead of a list, you might use mind mapping, a flowchart, note cards, sticky notes, a pen and paper, a whiteboard and some fat markers.

J. K. Rowling sussed out the first *Harry Potter* novel using graphing paper and a ballpoint pen. Marketer Andy Crestodina writes an outline and then makes the main points its headers. Then he fleshes out the outline in a kind of fill-in-the-blank exercise.

Sometimes great writing isn't written; it's assembled.

Your preferred method for organizing a piece doesn't matter. The point is to keep yourself focused and organized via a set framework so you don't meander all over the place. It also creates momentum, because you can anticipate what's next.

Sometimes the organization of a piece is suggested by its format.

Here are 15 approaches to framing your writing, using online privacy as a sample topic:

Fifteen Ways to Organize a Blog Post or Article

1. **Quiz**. Test Your Privacy IQ

2. **Skeptic**. You Don't Control Your Privacy Anymore

3. **Explainer**. The Online Privacy Debate in Plain English

4. **Case study**. How One Person Got Control Over Privacy

  5. **Contrarian**. Why Online Privacy Concerns Are Overblown

  6. **How-to**. Five Steps to Improving Online Privacy

6½. **Quick how-to**. Three Stupid-Simple Things You Can Do to Keep Your Profile Private

  7. **How NOT to**. Five Ways You're Compromising Your Online Privacy

  8. **First person**. My Personal Privacy Horror Story

  9. **Comparison**. How Privacy Protection Services Measure Up

10. **Q&A**. Five Common Questions About Online Privacy with Mark Zuckerberg

11. **Data**. Are Privacy Problems Worsening? Probably, Research Says

12. **Influencers**. What You Should Do Right Now to Protect Your Privacy, According to These Privacy Experts

13. **Outrageous**. Why Online Privacy Is an Oxymoron

14. **Insider secrets**. The One Thing You Need to Know About Your Online Privacy

15. **Literary treatment**. Online privacy haiku. Epic narrative poem. Comic book. Parable. The sky is your limit!

Note: Adapted in part from "Create Stuff They've Just Gotta Read: How to Write for #SocialNetworks" presentation at MarketingProfs by Paul Gillin.

15

Start with *Dear Mom . . .*

What if you have trouble simply getting off the starting block?

Writer's block is the number-one cliché of writing. It's an easy excuse—tossed out readily over and over and over again. Like tennis balls to an enthusiastic Golden Retriever.

I don't believe in writer's block. "My father never got truck driver's block," as the journalist Roger Simon has said.[1]

A house framer isn't daunted by the pile of two-by-fours. A dog walker isn't intimidated by a leash. My accountant isn't paralyzed by QuickBooks.

More often than not, so-called writer's block is rooted in fear and anxiety about knowing where to start. I get that because I procrastinate, too.

Sometimes our stalling is based in fear. Or anxiety. Or flat-out laziness. Whatever the reason, fear and anxiety can stop us from writing before we even place a single pixel on a page.

So I might not believe in writer's block, but I do believe in writer's evasion. I believe in writer's dawdle and writer's procrastination and writer's *I-wonder-if-there's-any-donuts-left-I-should-go-check-right-now.*

Procrastination looks a lot like avoidance. But it isn't. It's part of the process. (We talked about this in Chapter 13.)

The Writing GPS helps spark the start. But at some point you just have to start writing. You need to leash up the dog. And go.

Writer John McPhee suggests the trick of typing *Dear Mother* to neuter the fear of the blank page. You might adapt it to *Hello Dad, Hi hon,* or *Hey you.*

Later you can think of your actual reader—your Petunia—and not a nameless, faceless "market segment" or "persona" (Chapter 10.). But for now, just think of someone who loves you, warts and all. Someone who doesn't judge you.

It'll relax your claws on the keyboard.

And it'll uncoil your writing voice into sounding natural, loose, and friendly.

16

If You Take a Running Start, Cover Your Tracks

Often we take too long to get into a piece.

We clog up the start with too much background. We fertilize overgrowth with detailed setup. We paw at the ground instead of charging right at it. (*"In this article, I will. . ."*)

In other words, we take a metaphorical running start on the page—before getting to the *actual* starting point.

A running start is a fine way for a writer to warm up to a topic. I do it all the time.

But it's a terrible way to pull readers in. So I usually go back and erase the running start, covering my tracks.

One of my college professors would routinely lop off the first paragraph or two from our printed essays—literally snip them off with a pair of scissors she kept at her desk.

It was alarming the first time or two we got a lobotomized page back. But you had to agree: Her pruning barely affected the meaning. And it vastly improved that important reader first impression.

* * *

Try it with the next piece you write: Can you trim the start? Or lop it off completely? Would that help pull your reader in?

Take a look at an example from MarketingProfs. Here are the unedited first few paragraphs of a submission about using YouTube to market:

> Simultaneous to the modern boom of Web 2.0 and along with the rise of social media, companies have projected their presence by utilizing social media giants (e.g., Facebook and Twitter) in attempts to market their businesses.
>
> And while companies have seen much success in tapping the vein of reaching the masses through the few quintessential social networks, only a fraction have explored the option of YouTube marketing.
>
> Let's take a look at the facts.
>
> YouTube is not only the second largest search engine, but also the third most visited website in the world, only behind Google and Facebook. It receives over 1 billion unique monthly visitors and has about 6 billion hours of videos watched each month. Let that sink in.

Oh boy. (Professor! Can I borrow your scissors?)

That entire first paragraph can be snipped off the top without losing much context.

(Also, the use of "utilizing" here when the simpler "using" or "via" would work makes me wonder if the writer was paid by the syllable.)

(Just kidding.)

(Kind of.)

Anyway, here's the same piece, post-editing:

> Many companies have succeeded in reaching their audiences via social networks such as Facebook and Twitter. But only a fraction have explored the option of marketing via YouTube.
>
> YouTube is not only the second-largest search engine but also the third most-visited website in the world, behind only Google and Facebook. It receives over 1 billion unique monthly visitors, and it has about 6 billion hours of videos watched each month.
>
> Let those numbers sink in for a minute. . .

Let's live-edit another example.

Before:

Putting an End to Assembly Line Marketing

No matter the industry or position in a company, we all want to feel like we're doing work with a purpose. No one wants to be told what to do all the time, or just go through the motions day after day, doing the same thing over and over again. We need to set strategies, make the big decisions, and test what's possible, if we're going to really feel invested.

But, how can we do great work if we aren't masters of our own fate, at least some of the time?

This is especially complicated for marketers. And the fact is, marketing has extended its reach considerably.

I've found myself on teams where it felt like we were just taking orders, marching to the beat of someone else's drum. Or like the requests never stopped, and we just scrambled to fulfill one after the other. Or in instances where we would work for weeks or months to cross the finish line on a massive project, only for it to be revised or even canceled for one reason or another.

I'd imagine my fellow marketers can relate. Do the following scenarios sound familiar?

•A greeting in the hallway turns into questions on why a certain feature or product isn't featured more prominently on the website.
•A design piece is finalized and the feedback is. "Can you make it pop a little more?"
•A colleague comes to marketing strongly suggesting you do a new campaign they've thought up or event they've been to.
•Someone in the company questions why a competitor's site shows up when they google our company. Why don't you reach out to Google and fix this?
•You get asked in a meeting: Have you thought about SEO?
•Or, I need you to drop everything you're doing. This is the main priority now.

That first paragraph doesn't add a lot. The second paragraph is good . . . but is it in the right place?

Putting an End to Assembly Line Marketing

~~No matter the industry or position in a company, we all want to feel like we're doing work with a purpose. No one wants to be told what to do all the time, or just go through the motions day after day, doing the same thing over and over again. We need to set strategies, make the big decisions, and test what's possible, if we're going to really feel invested.~~

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•You get asked in a meeting: Have you thought about SEO?
•Or, I need you to drop everything you're doing. This is the main priority now.

It's not. It's better at the end of the setup.

After:

Putting an End to Assembly Line Marketing

Do the following scenarios sound familiar?

> •A greeting in the hallway turns into questions on why a certain feature or product isn't featured more prominently on the website.
>
> •A design piece is finalized and the feedback is, "Can you make it pop a little more?"
>
> •A colleague comes to marketing strongly suggesting you do a new campaign they've thought up or event they've been to.
>
> •Someone in the company questions why a competitor's site shows up when they google our company. "Why don't you reach out to Google and fix this?"
>
> •You get asked in a meeting: Have you thought about SEO?
>
> •Or, I need you to drop everything you're doing. This is the main priority now.

How can we do great work if we aren't masters of our own fate, at least some of the time?

Ahh (deep cleansing breath) . . . much better.

17

Place the Most Important Words at the Beginning of Each Sentence

We tend to junk up the beginning of our sentences with modifiers and qualifiers, making the reader work harder to figure out what we are saying.

It might sound basic and remedial to say that each sentence should begin with the subject (the leading actor) and verb (the action your actor takes). Yet it's the easiest, fastest way to make your writing more direct and appealing.

The first words of every sentence should make a friendly first impression to encourage the reader to keep going—much the way a favorable first impression at a party encourages conversation (as opposed to, say, desperate glances around the room to find someone else to talk to).

Here's what I mean.

This is the first sentence of an introductory paragraph of a Centers for Disease Control and Prevention style guide: "According to the National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL), released in 2006 by the U.S. Department of Education, 30 million adults struggle with basic reading tasks."[1]

Let's break it down.

The main idea in that sentence is that millions of people are not fully literate; everything else in the sentence is secondary. The main idea—the important words—should be placed right at the beginning. They are the star of the show.

So:

> Thirty million adults struggle with reading, according to the National Assessment of Adult Literacy (NAAL) report, released in 2006 by the U.S. Department of Education.

(The guide is titled *Simply Put*. Ironically, much of it is put not at all simply. Oof.)

Also from *Simply Put* (ignore the weird and confusing use of the semicolon after "remember"):

> It is important to remember; however, that even those with higher health literacy skills want health information that is understandable, meaningful to them, and easy to use.

What happens when we boot out the words at the beginning of that sentence? When we cross out "It is important to remember; however, that . . ."?

We eliminate distractions. We get right into it. We focus on what's important—without changing the meaning:

> Even those with higher health literacy skills want health information that is understandable, meaningful to them, and easy to use.

* * *

Once you realize the power of putting important words first, you'll notice sentences everywhere that could be punchier if they put their best words up front, too.

You won't be able to unsee the way many sentences don't make a great first impression.

Here are some phrases to avoid at the start of a sentence:

- ◆ According to . . .

- ◆ I'm excited to announce that . . .

- ◆ There is a . . .

◆ It is [important, critical, advised, suggested, and so on] . . .

◆ In my opinion . . .

◆ The purpose of this [email, post, article] is . . .

◆ In 2022 [or any year] . . .

◆ I think [believe, would guess] that . . .

You could tack them onto the end, or insert them somewhere in the middle. But often you'll find they don't add a lot to a sentence, and you can wish them well . . . and let them go.

18

Notice Where Words Appear in Relation to Others Around Them

Misplaced modifiers and odd word order are among the most common errors we make. They are also the easiest to correct.

What's a misplaced modifier? It's a phrase or word placed in the wrong spot in a sentence, so that it refers to an unintended action or word. Often that changes the meaning.

Here's an example:

> ***Misplaced:*** Shirley saw a chicken and a sloth on the way to play pickleball.

> ***Not misplaced:*** On the way to play pickleball, Shirley saw a chicken and a sloth.

> *Why:* Because Shirley—not the chicken—was about to play pickleball. And definitely not the sloth. (They're famously unathletic.)

Here's another example:

> ***Misplaced:*** Though often misunderstood, scholars know that anarchy does not mean chaos.

> ***Not misplaced:*** Though often misunderstood, anarchy does not mean chaos, as scholars know.

Why: What's misunderstood is the term *anarchy*, not the scholars. (Although they, too, are often misunderstood. Then again . . . aren't we all, really?)

* * *

Once you start paying attention to misplaced modifiers and confusing word order, you'll notice them everywhere, too. One word you'll see frequently misplaced is *only*.

Ambiguous: Only publish good content.

Super-clear: Publish only good content.

Ambiguous: The Cavalier King Charles Spaniel only ate six pumpkin biscuits.

Super clear: The Cavalier King Charles Spaniel ate only six pumpkin biscuits.

Why? Because *only* needs to modify *good content*, not *publish*. And *only* is modifying the number of biscuits, not the eating.

Two bits of advice to easily remember this one:

1. Think twice about placing *only* immediately before a verb. Is *only* actually explaining the action?

2. Place *only* as close to the word or words it's modifying to make it as clear as possible what's actually going on.

19

Leads and Kickers

Give special love to the first and last sentences of your piece: the opening and closing, or the *lede* (*lead*)[1] and *kicker*—in journalism terms.

Why?

The first line sets the tone and beckons the reader onward.

The last line finishes strong, offering a satisfying sense of completion.

"A good lede invites you to the party and a good kicker makes you wish you could stay longer," says copywriter Matthew Stibbe.[2]

Your opening sentence hooks the reader into wanting to know more. It pulls them into a piece.

Here are some ways to do that:

◆ **Put your reader into the story.** Share a story or anecdote that drops your reader directly into a situation. Invite them to picture themselves at a scene:

   It is a crisp, clear autumn afternoon, about 1:30. A full sun hangs in a bright blue sky. A large crowd mills about.

   Imagine that you are there. You jostle for position. You strain your neck to get a glimpse. You cup your hand behind your ear . . . as the 16th President of the United States steps to the center of the platform and begins his "few appropriate remarks."[3] —Ernest Nicastro, MarketingProfs

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◆ **Articulate a problem your reader can relate to.** Describe the pain. Create an It's-Me Minute.

From a piece on finding the best places to party in cities around the world:

You're on vacation, dammit, and ready to let loose. Check out a museum? Ogle architecture? No thanks. Because you know that true cultural immersion begins (and ends) at a watering hole or epic party, where you can rub shoulders with local drunks.[4] —Thrillist

Or in a professional setting, setting up a problem familiar to hospitals and healthcare organizations:

You write in plain language, use video explainers and apply all the web writing best practices. So your content should be clear to just about everyone, right?

No. Not even close.[5] —Laura Bloom, Aha Media Group blog

◆ **Set a stage.** Paint a picture for your reader. Let them see through your eyes.

From a piece I wrote on a classic marketing campaign:

I'm in a meeting in a Dallas hotel. The drinks station at the back of the room has a few fun retro bottles of Dr Pepper.

Thick glass, not plastic.

Sweetened with "Imperial pure cane sugar," as opposed to—I don't know—crushed candy hearts? The high-fructose sighs of a thousand kittens?

And most curiously, three numbers in an implied triangle formation: 10, 2, 4.[6]

◆ **Ask a question.** Which your piece will answer, of course.

From my quest to sell furniture on Facebook Marketplace (and demonstrate the power of copywriting!):

How do you sell two used couches upholstered in the exact, unfortunate color of the poop emoji?[7]

Or this, from Upworthy: (Side note: I like the use of "kinda" in here.)

What if there were a simple and cheap way to keep kids out of detention and from eventually heading down the wrong path? This school seems to have figured it out, and it's kinda genius.[8]

Use the question lead-in infrequently. It can feel worn-out and tiresome when you overdo it. You want to avoid sounding like a one-note, late night infomercial. ("*Did you ever wonder. . .?*")

◆ **Quote a crazy or controversial bit of data.** Grounding the lead in a surprising stat is a way to shock the reader into sitting up a little taller and paying attention, in a *Wait . . . what?* kind of way.

A recent, widely circulated study found that one-third of Americans who bought a wearable tech product ditched it within six months. So why are companies as diverse as Google, Nike, Pepsi, and Disney pumping plenty of cash—and new life—into the technology?[9] —Fast Company

◆ **Offer a curious point of view**. Plant a small seed of wonder in the mind of the reader. As in:

As a precious creative snowflake, I should probably be shitting myself about the rise of marketing operations and the supremacy of data. —Doug Kessler, Velocity Partners (Yeah . . . why isn't he?)

◆ **Tell a story or share a personal anecdote.** I started a piece on taking off-the-wall risks in marketing with a completely weird scene:

Last week I saw a squirrel eating a slice of pizza.

He was high up in a tree just starting to bloom. I think it was a red maple? It was covered with red, scaly buds—like angry teen acne erupting on a hormonal spring tree.

Not that the squirrel cared. He was focused on his pizza.

He held it in his hands, tiny fingers curled on either side of the pie-shaped wedge. His technique was all wrong—it was like watching someone eat a candy bar with a fork and knife. At least he pointed the pointy end toward his face.

He took tiny bites. Maybe that's how squirrels eat everything. But it was hard not to imagine that Pizza Squirrel was savoring it.

I watched him for a few minutes. I had so many questions.

- *What toppings?*

- *Where does he stand on pineapple pizza?*

- *Did he order one slice or a whole pie?*
     But above all. . .

- *WHO DELIVERS TO A TREE? (Dominoes? UberEats? ToastTakeout?)*[10]

◆ **Set up an analogy or metaphor.**

Lead forms are like eyebrows—you pay attention only if they look really good or really bad. —Michael Brenner, *Marketing Insider* blog

◆ **Start with a quote.** I started a newsletter about sea shanties quoting, well, the shanty:

There once was a ship that put to sea,

And the name of the ship was Bee-Too-Bee. . .

Those are the opening lines of World's First B2B Marketing Sea Shanty, a remix of an old-fashioned sea shanty which had its world debut at the MarketingProfs B2B Forum.[11]

◆ **The fake-out.** Your reader thinks you're talking about one thing, when suddenly you swerve into a different lane entirely. I did that here:

Fall 2020 has been dominated by a contentious, polarizing, absolutely gutting election—where one plumped-up challenger seeks to unseat an overstuffed incumbent.

Social media has been taking sides (it always does)—adamant that their candidate is the most qualified. The most skilled. The only logical choice, you idiot.

I'm talking, of course, about Fat Bear Week.

Fat Bear Week is the annual competition that seeks an answer to the question: Which brown bear at Alaska's Katmai National Park and Preserve is the fattest?[12]

* * *

Your lead sentences are among the most important words you'll string together.

Your closings, or kickers, are a close second in importance.

Finish strong, with a call to action (if appropriate) and a sense of completion. Don't end abruptly, stopping the music and abandoning your reader on the dance floor. Don't merely trail off . . . as if you . . . ran . . . out . . . of . . . steam?

You can pose a question or challenge to the reader, of course: *So what do you think?*

That's an obvious, easy way out. But it's also . . . kind of basic. An option of last resort.

Instead try these techniques:

◆ **Recast the biggest takeaway of the piece.** Restate the main point of your piece—not as pure regurgitation, but as a synthesized summary.

I did this in a post about how to deal with social media haters:

Writing at MarketingProfs today, Carla Ciccotelli offers advice for brands dealing with haters. My favorite line is this: "When dealing with complaints, think of the bigger picture and the effect public complaints will have on your business."

I love the part about a bigger picture—especially when it helps a company make it clear what it stands for. And also—and this is gutsier—what it clearly won't stand.[13]

◆ **But wait . . . there's more!** Invite your readers to explore other content assets for deeper insights. Point them toward relevant templates, checklists, guides. (Gated or not, see Chapter 60.)

Checklist:

Ready to become a better server? Download Toast's free list of 30 Ways to Become a Better Restaurant Server to start earning better tips today.[14] —Amanda McNamara, Toast blog

Related podcast:

Anyone who's ever worked a service job likely has an opinion about the tipping system. It can be a fantastic way to make good money with or without a college education, but the system's drawbacks are starting to be noticed by guests and servers alike.

We covered all this and much more in the Gratuity-Free Restaurants *episode of The Garnish, which you can find wherever you get your podcasts. Subscribe to the* podcast newsletter *so you never miss an episode.*[15] —Dahlia Snaiderman, Toast blog

◆ **Add an element of tonal surprise.** "Turn the story around," suggests Matthew Stibbe. "If you've been formal, go relaxed. If you're relaxed, become formal."

From *Wired*:

It takes a clean digital signal from your USB port and converts it to a warm analog music. And it looks as badass as it sounds.[16]

◆ **Let others have the last word.** If you've interviewed someone for an article or post, you might end with a direct quote from that person.

In a post about an Instagram campaign by the Toronto Silent Film Festival, I gave Festival Director Shirley Hughes the last word:

When I have teenage boys come out [from] a screening of The Black Pirate *[from] 1925 with Douglas Fairbanks and exclaim "that was the coolest!" you know you are doing the right thing.*[17]

20

Show, Don't Tell

Isense I'm being watched. Followed. Stalked, almost.

He's quiet as a ninja. And like a ninja, he seems everywhere at once.

Often I sense him before I see him. I think I've entered a room alone but then turn suddenly, and—*yep*—there he is: his silhouette in the doorway, backlit by the yellow hallway light. "*Oh, hey. You good? Just keeping an eye on you.*"

It would be a little creepy, except for . . . well, look at him.

Let's start with his legs. They're six inches long—too short to scale all the stairs to the second floor without needing a nap. He stops on the landing and cries.

He might be part ninja. But at that moment he looks and sounds more like an oversized Beanie Baby outfitted with a doll's voice chip.

* * *

There's a meme on TikTok: *Tell me without telling me.*

> *Tell me* you've from the Midwest *without telling me* you're from the Midwest.

> *Tell me* how your brain malfunctions *without telling me* how your brain malfunctions.

> *Tell me* you have a pandemic puppy *without telling me* you have a pandemic puppy.

The point is to dramatize, to drop an insider-y clue. To show, not tell.

> *Tell me without telling me* you're from the Midwest: When a trip to run an errand is "only" 15 hours.

> *Tell me without telling me* how your brain malfunctions: When we watch someone make an egg for breakfast and he slips the shell onto a preheated pan and drops the egg into the trash. (#facepalm)

> *Tell me without telling me* you have a pandemic puppy: Well . . . I opened this chapter with that one!

The *Tell Me Without Telling Me* social media challenge (which started a few years ago on Twitter) is—when you think about it—actually the world's best writing advice moonlighting as a social meme.

Tell Me Without Telling Me is the fastest way to give your writing or copy a throbbing pulse. It's the best way to paint a picture in the mind of the reader, to use action, senses, and feelings . . . versus basic, bloodless description.

And it's a modern version of the advice attributed to Russian playwright Anton Chekhov: "Don't tell me the moon is shining, show me the glint of moonlight on broken glass."

(If Chekhov were still around, he'd be *all in* on social media. I like to think his social handles would be @ChekMeOut.)

Tell Me Without Telling Me snaps us out of our tendency to state things as *we* see them.

Instead, it puts us into the mind of the audience: **What's it *like*? How does it *feel*?**

In other words, don't talk about your features, benefits, and shining moons. Tell me—better yet, show me—why they matter *to me*.

Let's look at a few real-world examples.

In Home Page Copy

Tell Me: Ready-to-use Asian sauces and spices.

Tell Me Without Telling Me: Meet your new pantry staple.
(via Omsom)

Why this works: The first simply says what it is; the second invites you to imagine how often you'll use it. Not "item" but "staple."

Tell Me: A monthly customized box of themed dog toys and treats.

Tell Me Without Telling Me: Give your dog exactly what they want.
(via BarkBox)

Why this works: The second suggests that BarkBox has the expertise to know exactly what will make your dog happy (even if your dog can't write out a list of toys and treats they actually want).

Tell Me: Web content strategy services for the enterprise.

Tell Me Without Telling Me: "Well, hello there. You must be here for some content strategy. We can help with that!" (via Brain Traffic)

Why this works: Brain Traffic addresses would-be clients directly in a friendly, conversational tone. In three sentences, you get a sense of what it's like to work with this company. Even when you target enterprise-sized companies, you're still speaking to individual people.

In Blog Headlines

Tell Me: Introducing Our Newest Product Updates

Tell Me Without Telling Me: Introducing Our Newest Product Updates to Help You Sell Globally. (via Paddle)

Why this works: A subtle tweak ("to help you sell") makes a company-focused headline suddenly relevant to the reader.

Product Copy

Tell Me: On-demand demo videos that are quick to create and send.

Tell Me Without Telling Me: Deliver Demo Videos at a Distance. (via Vidyard)

Why this works: What's the real, human benefit of creating demo videos quickly? Vidyard connects the dots for us. Bonus points for the memorable alliteration!

In Email Copy

Liquid Death
MOUNTAIN WATER

Make Covid fight through skulls and switchblades to get to your face.

Get your sanitized hands on this first run of limited-edition Liquid Death face masks. These high-quality masks are equipped with adjustable ear straps and terrifying artwork.
#KillCovid

Tell Me: New limited-edition face mask designs are here!

Tell Me Without Telling Me: Make Covid fight through skulls and switchblades to get to your face. (via Liquid Death)

Why this works: The knife-fight visual is ridiculous in the best way. ("Get your sanitized hands on this . . ." is gold, too.)

Tell Me: The ultimate in helmet safety for skiers and snowboarders.

Tell Me Without Telling Me: You only get one brain. (via Moosejaw)

Why this works: "Safety" isn't something you can really see or feel. "Protect your brain from colliding with a tree"? Oh yeah . . . you can see that. It's real and visceral.

In an Article

Tell Me: Clubhouse is a perfect networking platform for the quarantined professional.

Tell Me Without Telling Me: "Clubhouse feels . . . like everyone is passing around business cards. In short, Clubhouse feels like a space for people who miss attending in-person conferences." (via Adweek)

Why this works: It paints a picture, doesn't it? Everyone passing business cards? Shaking hands? Chatting over drinks? And that is exactly the role the social audio app Clubhouse was playing in 2020.

In About Us

> ***Tell Me:*** Reliable cars at a price you can trust. (via actual billboard on the side of a highway)
>
> ***Tell Me Without Telling Me:*** "I treat customers like adults, not like idiots." (via LingsCars)
>
> *Why this works*: In eight spare words, you learn exactly what sets Lings Cars apart.

In a Letter to Investors

> ***Tell Me:*** Let's look at Berkshire Hathaway's performance.
>
> ***Tell Me Without Telling Me:*** "Let's take a look at what you own." (via Berkshire Hathaway's Letter to Shareholders)
>
> *Why this works*: See how Warren frames that? Not "what I manage" or "what I control." But what *YOU* own.

* * *

All of these examples imagine a person front and center.

So the challenge is this: Pull your audience right into what you're crafting. Make sure they see themselves in it. Don't hold back. Don't expect them to connect the dots.

If dots need connecting between your product and customer . . . get out your Sharpie. And Connect! All! Dots!

Name Names

One way to *Show, don't tell* is to be as specific as possible.

Name names. Give specifics. Offer enough detail to create an image in the mind of the reader.

Specifics paint pictures. Details create action. We imagine things more vividly and robustly. Your writing comes to life.

Said another way:

> **Be specific enough to be believable, and universal enough to be credible.**
>
> Writer Natalie Goldberg describes adding details as giving things "the dignity of their names." (I love that.)

> **Instead of > Say this**
>
> Flower > Poppy
>
> Dog > A fat pug named Carl
>
> Food-service truck > Vietnamese sandwich truck
>
> Dance class > Jazz
>
> Our client > Mabel from Finance
>
> SAAS solution > Pay-as-you-go messaging platform

Naming a specific thing is also funnier. It's all in the name.

We'll talk about this in the next chapter.

21

How to Write Funny

A few years ago, the greatest marketing email ever written popped into my inbox from BARK, a New York-based company. Its BarkBox and BarkShop brands sell dog toys and treats to the dog-obsessed.

The subject line read, "Chew your vitamins, pup."

And the copy read, "We all have needs. That's why we have just the right supplement treats."

None of that is particularly funny. The funny part comes in the "customer profiles" the email highlights. Each describes a creature matched with very human qualities. BarkBox then matches those profiles and personalities with a dietary supplement.

There's neurotic Maris, who seriously needs to chill. Can you feel the alarm in those anxious little button eyes?

Source: BarkBox.

BarkBox says she might benefit from treats that contain 9 mg of a supplement called Colostrum Calming Complex.

Meet Paula: Organized, practical, more prepared than a Boy Scout.

Source: BarkBox.

Paula is that mom whose purse always has a snack in it and whose car always houses a travel first-aid kit.

Paula is your go-to in any emergency—which she knows is going to happen, because life is a train wreck.

Or Cindy: Perky. Wouldn't miss a workout. Promptly in bed by 11 because it's important to get a solid 8 every night.
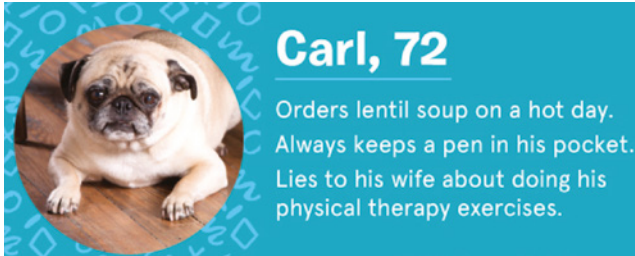
You know probiotics keep this girl as regular as the commuter rail.

Source: BarkBox.

Finally, there's Carl, the grandpa (grandpup?) of the group.

Let his photo speak directly to your heart.

Carl, 72

Orders lentil soup on a hot day.
Always keeps a pen in his pocket.
Lies to his wife about doing his
physical therapy exercises.

Source: BarkBox.

Ah, Carl . . . CARL!

The lentil soup.

The pen.

The little fibs to his wife.

God I love Carl. (And not just because I have a soft spot for senior dogs—at the time this email arrived I had a 13-year-old Cavalier King Charles Spaniel named Abby.)

I picture this pudgy little pug wearing a cardigan as he sips his soup on the hottest day in July.

I imagine him doddering around the house, evading his wife's inquiries. I hear how he keeps the TV turned up too loud.

* * *

But you don't sell dog products. You don't have Supermodel Carl as your talent. So how can you write funny?

Let's set aside the clever customer segmentation BARK is doing here, and instead break down some writing advice the email offers.

> 1. **Humor is based in truth.** These customer profiles resonate because they're real. We all know a Maris. Or a Paula. Or a Carl. (CARL!)

The writeups might be over-the-top, but they aren't cartoon fabrications: They feel palpable and true. They resonate because they're relatable.

2. **Humor is truth, exaggerated to an absurd degree.** BARK imagined dogs as people. With human ailments and anxieties. Living human lives. (Driving minivans. Sipping lentil soup.)

   Then they brought the idea of "what if our pets were humans?" to its absurd, illogical conclusion.

3. **Humor signals belonging.** BARK sells to dog people. Not cat people. Not horse people. Not bird people or llama owners or people who own pot-bellied pigs.

   Dog people. Just dogs.

   You might be thinking: This email isn't funny.

   If you are thinking that, you're probably not a dog person.

   Dog people recognize in the email copy the lovable weirdos that are our own pets. In a broader sense, BARK is telling its customers that it understands just how full of personality and odd their little creatures truly are.

   And it is also signaling something deeper: We understand pets, and we get you, too.

   BARK knows that its customers consider their dogs to be like their kids.

   They are members of the family. Their humans talk to them, make up voices for them, do whatever it takes to give their dogs happier and longer lives. The dogs are pampered, coddled, treasured, loved.

And finally:

4. **Minivan is funnier than car.** We talked about this in Show, Don't Tell (Chapter 20). Choose your words carefully, because humor comes to life in the specific details.

   My friend and comedy writer Tim Washer told me this recently, when I texted him to ask what I knew to be true intuitively: *Why is specific funnier than nonspecific?*

"We need a certain level of reality, even in what we know to be hyperbole," Tim texted back.

Without the details, we as the audience "feel like we're listening to a bunch of made-up stuff, and that won't even begin to pull us into the reality that the writer has created," he said.

Ah! So that's why *minivan* is funnier than car.

Lentil soup is funnier than soup.

Cardigan is funnier than sweater. But "Brooks Brothers cardigan" or "a cardigan from Sears and Roebuck" also carries clues about the character who is wearing the cardigan.

And *Tide stick* is just funny, period.

It's the details that paint the most vivid picture in your reader's heads.

* * *

I started this chapter telling you that this email arrived several years ago. YEARS. And I still think of it at least once a week. I saved it in a folder on my computer—because yes, it makes me laugh. But also because it holds such great insights for us all.

You might be wondering . . . did the greatest email ever written ultimately inspire more than just admiration from me for its marketing acumen?

Did Supermodel Carl actually trigger a sale?

You bet he did.

I bought the hip and joint supplement for Abby. She took it for another three years, before she passed away nine days short of her 17th birthday.

Nearly 17 years is a remarkable age for a spaniel.

I like to think Carl had something to do with that.

22

Use Surprising Analogies, Meaty Metaphors

Metaphors are much more tenacious than facts.

—Paul de Man

I've been working on this new edition of this book for weeks. Which means that I'm watching a lot of Netflix.

I also selected the thickest book I could find from my stash of to-be-read books. It's a good-sized collection, those books. I imagine their hopeful hearts lift a little when I come near, maybe today being the day they'll be cracked open like a walnut, devoured.

The thickest book on the shelf was *Carnival of Snackery* by David Sedaris. It's 576 pages. Perfect. This should take a while.

But within a few pages, David mentions that someone's hair is rough-cut, "as if with a steak knife." Then he peels a shrimp the size of an old-fashioned telephone handset.

Ugh. I'm trying to procrastinate the writing of a chapter on analogies and metaphors. And yet here they are. And they're glorious.

I can't *not* think about metaphors now.

Dammit.

* * *

Analogies help make big concepts smaller and more human-sized. Metaphors and similes are *types* of analogies, but they all have the same job description:

◆ Make confusing ideas more accessible.

◆ Put numbers or data in context.

◆ Make the abstract concrete.

◆ Add color and voice in a spare but powerful (and sometimes poetic) way.

◆ Make your ideas memorable.

In Marketing, analogies pack a lot in a tiny overhead bin space. (Another metaphor.)

They can help us explain convoluted ideas or applications more simply. They can help our audiences understand what we do or what we sell.

And (*importantly!*) analogies can help us be more memorable.

* * *

Here are a few ways to make your analogies stronger, unforgettable, more delightful.

◆ **Roll your own**. *Busy as a bee. Like a needle in a haystack. Happy as a clam*. These are expressions familiar to most of us.

If this were a quiz show and I dangled a 50-dollar bill in your face, you could probably name 10 more analogies straight off the top of your noggin:

Dead as a doornail. Light as a feather. Heart of gold. Key to success. You call me up again just to break me like a promise / So casually cruel in the name of being honest.

Oops. That last one is actually a Taylor Swift lyric. But also . . . analogy! (If Analogy held elections, T-Swift would be voted in as President for Life.)

Challenge yourself to come up with analogies that aren't obvious comparisons or clichés.

How?

Gather your belongings and proceed to the next bullet, please.

◆ **Write an image**. You might say you've acquired 842 new accounts in Europe last year.

Better is to put that into context: If you invited representatives from all of your new accounts to join you in Europe, they'd pack to capacity all the cars in the London Eye.

Remember the example from Chapter 17 that referenced a literacy stat by the U.S. Department of Education? The one that said 30 million adults struggle with reading?

Whoa, 30 million! That sounds like a lot.

But . . . well, is it?

Thirty million is about 12% of the U.S. population (that helps) or slightly more than the total population of Texas. (Much better.)

◆ **Consider context**. One way to spark less-obvious comparisons is to look at context. Location, industry, topic . . . all fair game.

Driving from Indianapolis to St. Louis, David Sedaris writes: "Tim's SUV was the size of a Conestoga wagon, an association that made the land seem even flatter than it was."

Beautiful, that analogy. It conjures up prairies, settlers, westward migration—the Conestoga covered wagon being the Airstream camper of its day.

Would that comparison have worked were David being driven across Romania or Beirut?

Not as well. You need the SUV to be in the Midwest to make "Conestoga" really land.

◆ **Create an element of surprise**. Instead of reaching for a well-worn metaphor, find the connection between two familiar but otherwise disconnected things.

Your job is to explain, sure. But also delight with fresh, unexpected connections.

Instead of: The leaves of the giant pumpkin plant are huge.

Better: The leaves are the size of trash can lids, shading gourds the size of beer kegs.

Why this works: "Huge" is too vague. (Huge like what?) "Trash cans" and "beer kegs" are familiar objects but also just weird enough in a gardening context.

◆ **Extended the metaphor**. If you compare giant pumpkins to beer kegs, work in language that extends the metaphor. Maybe you watch the gardener give the plant a "shot" of fertilizer, like a bartender might serve up a shot glass of Wild Turkey.

Don't overdo it—too many will start to feel heavy-handed and overwritten. But a related callback or two can ground a metaphor.

As in: Fourteen percent of us believe robots will eventually rule the world—that's the entire population of the state of Texas, with a few counties in Oklahoma roped in.

Why this works: "Roped in" invokes cattle, the Southwest, Texas, Oklahoma. The analogy is stronger for it.

◆ **Signal belonging**. "As big as four football fields" is an okay way to describe something big. It's not very inventive—but at least it's more descriptive than a vague "huge" or "gargantuan."

Yet if you're speaking to a Midwest audience (or if Green Bay is in the Super Bowl), then get more specific: "As big as four Lambeau Fields, laid end-zone to end-zone." Name names (Chapter 20.)

Think: What would delight your specific audience? What analogy might signal "*We get you. You belong here.*"?

* * *

A Meatier Metaphor

"Net neutrality" suffers from terrible branding.

The name is boring, techy, faceless. It sounds like something to ignore, especially at a time when we are flooded by the always-on spigot of distressing news.

We tote around limited gallons of rage to pour onto social media. We have to protect our mental health and well-being. It's exhausting to worry and wail about everything, isn't it?

Network (or net) neutrality is the principle that Internet service providers must treat all internet communications equally; they can't discriminate or charge differently based on location, content, platform, destination address, and so on. In the United States, the issue resurfaces periodically as a point of contention between network users and service providers.

Sure—the concept of net neutrality is important. It affects nearly everyone. But it's too . . . big. Unwieldy. Too much. Too hard. Between the Supreme Court and foreign policy and the ice caps . . . it gets shoved to the back of the line.

That's party because the concept of net neutrality is intangible. Consider the powerful image of a face mask, for example. That's a tangible restriction, whereas the restrictions at the heart of net neutrality feel . . . I can't even think of a word to describe them. (That's how much it lacks impact.)

The argument needs a good metaphor.

Enter Burger King.

In a recent campaign, Burger King uses its signature Whopper sandwich to raise awareness about net neutrality.[1]

The setup goes like this: The scene opens in a Burger King restaurant during a busy lunchtime. Customers are standing around for their orders, getting annoyed. It turns out that the wait for Whoppers is absurdly long, Burger King customers are told, unless they pay a premium ($26) to get it fast.

Or! Burger King employees tell confused customers: You could get the chicken sandwich or chicken fries immediately! BK is fast-tracking the chicken.

No one wants the chicken. That's not what they came here for. You sense the customers suddenly super-sizing their outrage.

The bigger story, of course, is what repealing net neutrality could mean for all of us, everywhere. We want the Whopper, but our ISPs are telling us to take the chicken.

Observe the faces of the people who are told they need to pay five times the regular price for a Whopper. Consider the ridiculousness of throttling back delivery times based on an arbitrary restriction.

Revel in the power of a meaty metaphor. If we get this pissed over lunch, can you imagine what might happen when more is at stake?

"Net neutrality repealed: I sleep," one YouTube commenter said. "Whopper neutrality repealed: eyes wide open."

"The Whopper actually taught me about net neutrality," one customer says in the video, his face slightly contorted. "Stupid. But true."

One more thing: A commentary on net neutrality by a fast-food restaurant seems odd.

Maybe so. But when you think about it, you can see how it makes total sense.

A fast-food company commenting on so-called fast and slow access lanes? It's actually perfect.

What's the difference between analogy, metaphor, and simile?

Analogy is a broad term that refers to a relatively elaborate comparison of one thing to another: *"This book is making you a stronger, fitter, more ripped writer. With better lung capacity."*

Metaphor is a type of analogy that makes a comparison directly: *"Your writing would clean up at an Ironman competition."*

Simile is a type of metaphor (and therefore also a type of analogy). It's a phrase that uses the words *like* or as in the comparison. *"This book is like Content Cross-fit."*

23

Add Another Sense

Our default as writers is to communicate only what we see—the way a news reporter might cover interstate traffic during a morning commute. That reporter just notes (colorlessly) the volume of cars—but not how all those vehicles sound. Or smell. Or feel.

Maybe that's a bad example. Because it would be a little weird to talk about commuter "smell."

But it's *not* weird for us to talk about more than what we see.

Better, richer, more colorful writing emerges when you add sensory details. Not just what you *see*, but also anything you hear, smell, taste, touch, feel.

Another sense (or two) gives your text a pulse. It makes your words come alive in a visceral, palpable way, because it immerses your reader more fully in the world you're creating.

My favorite book of all time is E.B. White's *Charlotte's Web,* in part because of its spare but tactile writing. (The book is mis-shelved in the children's section: It's a solid read for adults, too.)

Look at this *Charlotte's Web* paragraph:

> The crickets sang in the grasses. They sang the song of summer's ending, a sad monotonous song. "Summer is over and gone, over and gone, over and gone. Summer is dying, dying." A little maple tree heard the cricket song and turned bright red with anxiety.

The melancholy crickets. The little anxious sapling. The repetition that creates music right there on the page.

E.B. airdrops us into autumn using all his E.B. senses. His is not a dry, colorless weather report.

Marketers: Does all this feel impossibly literary to you?

Well, Marketing: I love you. You're perfect. But we've gotta change, too.

The best marketing writing can easily get more colorful if we add at least *one* more sense.

Two examples:

1. **The bio of Jacoline Vinke (via the travel site Truffle Pig):** "After spending a childhood in the Netherlands plotting her departure for warmer climes from the back of a rain-soaked bicycle . . . Jacoline finally landed in Greece in 1998, with a toddler, a one-month old baby, a Greek husband, and a determination never to go back to an office job."[1]

    ◆ **Can you feel** the cold rain on Jacoline's young, furious face "plotting" as she was strapped into the back of that bike? Props for mixing actual baggage (family) and metaphorical baggage (resolve), too.

2. **@FieldNotesBrand on Twitter:** "THIS WEEK: Pushed a ton of pixels. Eyeballed a kaleidoscope of Pantone chips. Pulled a mess of bezier curves. Ran so many formulas. Kerned a lot of pairs. Plotted one big-ass experiment. Named a thing. Renamed that thing. Tore into packaging ideas. Never stopping shipping. Beer time."[2]

    ◆ **Can you feel** the industry and celebration of a busy week?

Here are your five takeaways for this chapter:

Just. Add. One. More. Sense.

24

Add Obvious Structure to a List

A friend asked me to look at a few chapters of a book he's writing. It's a strong book with a strong premise. But he's struggling with making the writing equally buff.

So together let's live-edit a single paragraph right here, right now. Because the writing takeaway is a solid one you can apply to blog posts, emails, video scripts, landing pages . . . or any kind of writing.

* * *

In a paragraph about a broken business model, my friend had written this:

> So why is it that we cling to a model invented before the first flight? An idea conceived of before the age of the Internet? A framework designed before the invention of rockets, submarines, personal computers, television, and radio?

Very conversational, yes? I like that.

But the list of modern inventions and conveniences (rockets, subs, and so on) is a little muddled, for two reasons.

1. The order is off. Chronologically, radio came before television. PCs came after both.

2. My brain wandered away from the text for a moment: "Wait, when were rockets invented? Or submarines? World War II? World War I? Even before?"

I dunno. Do you?

Unlike radio and TV and PCs, rockets and submarines are not strongly associated with any one period. (At least by most of us. Dear naval and ballistic-missile history buffs: I see you.)

Our brains look for patterns—rhythm, rhyme, repetition, parallel structure, or (in this case) order from disorder. Patterns help us make sense of the world.

From chaos, writers bring order.

In a list of things, add obvious structure.

Each item in a list must relate to the others around it in an unmistakable way.

Why: Without structure, our brains scramble to create order from the disorder. The reader will have to work harder than they should—even if only subconsciously.

I also think my friend is missing an opportunity here. He could be choosing things that might be more personally relevant to digitally savvy business readers—the book's intended audience.

I'd also toss in a little playfulness, because why not?

A better way to convey the idea would be to:

1. **Make the list chronological**, suggesting progress and progression.

2. **Use more commonly known markers** of time.

Then, go one step further:

3. **Exchange the items listed for items that will resonate** with the readers he's writing to, in the context of the story he's telling.

Here's our live-edit:

> So why is it that we cling to a model conceived before Henry Ford's Model T?

A framework designed before the invention of the airplane, television, the Apple IIe?

Before Al Gore and the Internet itself?

Those items (Model T, airplane, TV) aren't the only markers we might use, of course.

But here they work in the broader context of the book and the audience who will read it—the kind of people who have a general idea of when the television was invented and who definitely remember the long, happy life of the Apple IIe.

Plus we added paragraph breaks to give the writing more air. More room on the landing strip to really bring the point home.

Why does structure matter to our writing?

Our brains crave order—structure, patterns, parallelism. Your job as a writer is to create that order.

Your job is to be a tour guide to ideas: self-assured, clear.

Your job is to light the path for your reader and kick debris and road-blocks out of the way.

You aren't a terrible tour guide, zigzagging a band of tourists through meandering, unexplained detours; highlighting irrelevant details; risking twisted ankles in potholed streets.

That kind of tour guide creates anxiety in tourists.

That kind of writer creates anxious readers.

The clearer the writer is, the more secure a reader feels. The more relaxed the readers, the more they're free to enjoy the journey, secure in the knowledge that the writer is capable, in control of the GPS wheel.

Or the tour-guide flag.

Or whatever.

You know what I mean.

25

Approach Writing Like Teaching

I want to drop a short chapter right here—like a palate cleanse in between longer chapters—to call out something important: Good writing is good teaching.

Pathologically empathic writing strives to explain. It tries to make things a little bit clearer. It wants to make sense of our world—even if its job is simply a straightforward product description.

"A writer always tries . . . to be part of the solution, to understand a little about life and to pass this on," says the writer Anne Lamott.[1]

It's easy to embrace the teaching mindset when you're writing a how-to. But it applies to everything we write: Slip on that teacher lanyard to not just explain but also to engage.

Think of your favorite teachers. You loved them in part because they loved the work. They wanted you to learn. They cared.

So yes: Show up with evidence, context, rigor.

But also! Bring your joy. Find the fun. Let your love for the job shine through.

Don't just tell your readers that you feel something; tell them *why* you feel it.

Don't just say what works; tell them *why* it works.

Share your thinking, your mindset, yourself.

Listen, I see you there, marketer for a business-to-business "solution" company or biomedical or engineering or what-have-you company.

Maybe you think you don't have the opportunity to infuse your writing with a little joy? Maybe you wonder if it really matters?

But I'm here to tell you that you do. It matters. You matter.

You are someone's favorite teacher.

26

Keep It Simple—But Not Simplistic

Business—like life—can be complicated.

Products are a lot to explain. Concepts? *Convoluted*.

Good content knows all that. Good content coolly surveys the complexity and chaos and then dons a cape and charges at the challenge like a superhero:

- ◆ **Deconstructing the complex** to make things easily understood!

- ◆ **Sanding off the rough edges** of corporate Frankenspeak!

- ◆ **Reverse-engineering what needs reversing** to find the choicest of concise, simple, accessible nuggets!

"Simple" doesn't mean dumb. It means you're not making your reader work too hard. It means being the customer's advocate.

A bit of wisdom from my journalism days: *No one will complain that you've made things too simple to understand*.

Simple springs from empathy and a reader-centric point of view and all of the things we've talked about already.

But text is only part of it. *How is your content presented and packaged? What's around your content? Who is your content hanging out with?*

◆ **Find the best fit for your message.** Do we need more or fewer words? Would a chart or graphic or visual convey an idea more simply? Do we need to show an executive's face? Could we use a video here, too?

◆ **Slow the scrollers.** A visitor to your website reads only 28% of the words on a page—sometimes as little as 20%, according to a study by NN Group.[1]

It's an old study—from 2008. But given the pace of modern life, I can't imagine we're paying any more attention now.

We can help improve on that 20-ish percent by writing for the scrollers*: Short sentences. Short paragraphs.

And in formatting: Clear copy hierarchy. Subheads. Bolding. Bullets. Text variation (intelligent use of SHOUTY CAPS, italic, bolding, etc.). White space.

Actually, white space is so important let's break that out in a separate bullet. . .

◆ **Let white space give your text oxygen**. Large chunks of text are formidable and impenetrable to read, especially online. It feels hard. Your reader will skip ahead.

White space gives your glorious words the air and light they need to breathe and thrive.

Inhale. Exhale.

Give your sentences and paragraphs room to relax—instead of being stacked on top of one another like backpackers in a budget hostel.

Ironically, the more scannable your content, the more of it gets read.

◆ **Add images like you picked up a year's supply at a BOGO sale.** Blog posts with 10+ images are nearly twice as likely to report strong results, according to an annual study of blogging effectiveness by Orbit Media.[2]

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*"The Scrollers" is also a good name for a monks-only sports team. Or the Rabbi Curling League. Or a support group for Victorian woodworkers.

That sounds like a lot, until we remember that "images" can be anything from charts to video to screenshot to a pull quote to a contributor's photo.

Add a visual at every scroll depth—or every 75–100 words, suggests BuzzSumo. It analyzed one million articles and found that articles with images at that cadence are shared twice as often as those with fewer images.[3]

◆ **Design *with* the words.** Make your words be the hero of a design rather than piped onto a finished layout, like the way a supermarket baker pipes a message onto a prebaked birthday cake.

If your designer suggests they could just "bump down the font size . . ." to accommodate your text, it's too late.

Pasting words into a blank space is called the *lorem ipsum* approach—a name that refers to the nonsense Latin text that printers and typesetters have used since the 1500s as placeholder text.

Content is not secondary to the design. Design is not secondary to content. They are parts of the same process, important partners that together make a stronger whole.

Like peanut butter and jelly.

Pen and paper.

Lock and key.

Tacos and Tuesdays.

Annie and Warbucks.

Glinda and Elphaba.

Rory and Lorelai.

Best friends.

Better together.

27

Find a Writing Partner

There should be a Hinge or a Match.com for writers.

Not a dating app. But a professional forum or community built specifically for finding another writer to brainstorm or collaborate with.

There isn't, as far as I can tell. (Developers: Opportunity!)

Which is disappointing. Because if writing were a sport, it would be a solo game of tetherball. Or you alone playing all the positions of the AFC Richmond Football Club.

It's doable—but it's a little lonely. (And let's be real, only Roy Kent can be here and there and everywhere.)

Having a writing partner is like having someone to train and volley with. Together you prod each other to do your best work.

You might bounce around ideas. Give a new draft a first read. Offer feedback. Create accountability. Get drunk.

Ha. Just kidding about the last one.

(Or not. Your call.)

Until we can connect with other (well-written!) profiles on SwipeWrite* or ScribeDate or PenFrens or what have you . . . here are some places you might find your own writing partner.

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*Credit to Marc Jitab.

◆ **Friends.** This seems like an obvious suggestion. But it's actually the trickiest to make work.

For a friend to also be a writing buddy, a lot needs to match up.

You should be working on something that's commensurate with what your friend is working on: You're both working on a book. Or you're both blog writers. Or you're both junior associates on a content marketing team.

Ideally, you're in the same industry. You're at similar points in your career. You admire and respect each other's work. You're willing to commit to a regular Zoom meeting or check-in. And you'll put in the time to coach each other's work.

So yeah . . . it can be magic. (I have a friend like this. And I wouldn't trade them for the world.)

But it can also make friendships awkward. (Been there too.)

Choose wisely.

◆ **Colleagues and team members.** MarketingProfs used to have an internal program that paired up our marketing team members. They traded papers on a weekly basis—reading each other's work, offering suggestions, collaborating creatively. Every few months we changed up the duos.

For this approach to work, you have to have supportive team members who truly love their roles and respect each other. And you need executive support from someone who prioritizes good writing as critical to career development and the brand.

A lot of well-meaning marketing teams have tried to implement this kind of program. Then everyone gets too busy, and it falls apart. Aspirationally, though? I love a program like this.

◆ **LinkedIn groups, Facebook groups, Twitter chats, Slack communities, and Discord Writing Servers.** Lurk or participate in social networks or online discussions to find like-minded content marketing creators and writers. (There are also plenty of groups on social media that have a literary bent.)

I asked around. A few that bubbled up to the top:

On LinkedIn: LinkEds & writers.

On Facebook: The Write Life Community.

On Discord: #ContentChat Community. The Writer's Factory.
TheTilt. (The latter is geared toward all kinds of creators,
including writers.)

On Twitter: #ContentChat started here. Right now, it's Mondays at
12 PT/3 ET. (Search the hashtag on Twitter for updates.)

On Slack: The Wordsmiths. Lowercases.

On TikTok: #writertok, #authortok are full of writers of all kinds—
from casual to less so.

None of those are matchmaking services; all deliver matchmaking
potential. A content marketing friend found her writing partner via
#writertok. So there's that.

◆ **American Writers & Artists International (AWAI)** offers
member forums. (Plus the community is warm and inviting.) I've
also heard good things about Foster and Superpath.

◆ **NaNoWriMo** (or National Novel Writing Month) (nanowrimo.org)
is a nonprofit with resources for writers, including a Critique,
Feedback & Novel Swaps Forum. This is more of a literary site, but
it has some utility for nonfiction writers.

28

Avoid Hot Dog Writing

Having a writing partner by your side is helpful.

Having an entire committee on your back? Not so much.

Approval from clients or colleagues isn't a bad thing. It's a fact of life for most of us.

The problem comes when suggestions become unreasonable: when they strip all intent or personality out of a message or piece.

Or when input becomes too heavy-handed.

<p style="text-align:center">* * *</p>

Leonardo emailed recently to tell me about his co-worker who had internally floated the draft of an exec's Twitter bio.

(Leonardo isn't his real name. I invited him into my Writer's Witness Protection Program to conceal his identity. Comes with a new passport and Ted Lasso mustache.)

He likes his job, Leonardo said. But the problem is that everything the Marketing team produces is written by the entire group. Everything is written by committee.

The Twitter bio, for example. It should've been straightforward . . . but *nosiree, Ted*: The feedback was swift and harsh.

Everyone had an opinion. Everyone scrambled to voice it. "You'd think she was defending a thesis in our team meeting, haha!" he wrote.

Even through email (and his voice distorted to protect his identity) . . . I felt the pain in his "haha."

How can we avoid Writing By Committee?

* * *

I call this kind of writing Hot Dog Writing: Extruded through so many Messaging Machines and Opinionators and Cogitators that you can't tell what it was originally made of. (Snouts? Intestines? Who knows?)

If your writing is subject to colleague or client approvals ("The Committee"), here's some advice to make the process useful (and permanently unplug that Hot Dog Messaging Machine):

1. **Reinforce the Big 3.** Make sure The Committee understands the intent, the goal, and (most important!) the reader.

   The biggest problems with The Committee often spring from a lack of clarity on the Big 3. That leaves members of The Committee reviewing a piece without context and giving feedback on something they personally like or dislike. ("I don't like that word.")

2. **Use your tone of voice guide as your spotter**—there to catch you, preventing a total face-plant.

   Agreeing on a set of writing and voice guidelines before any work begins will keep everyone on the same page (literally).

   You might need to remind The Committee of your guide's specifics, especially if they aren't routinely tumbling on the mat with your brand voice as much as you are.

3. **Create a monster outline before you start writing.** Stuff that outline full. More is better than less.

   Include the bones of the piece—but also the heart, lungs, central nervous system: the overall approach. Anecdotes. Stories.

Examples. Ideas. Data you'll reference. Experts, influencers you'll quote.

It can be ugly. A real monster. That's okay.

The key organs are there, even if patched together, Frankenstein-style.

4. **Set clear expectations and a timeline for reviewers.** You want to avoid a free-for-all that turns into a week-long Writing-by-Committee Festival. (The most *un-fun* festival of all time.)

   You set the terms: Who reviews what sections? What specifically do you need from each?

   For example: The Client or Marketing VP reviews the overall strategy. Legal gets a say in anything touchy related to compliance. Brand weighs in on overall approach. Your subject-matter expert reads through the technicalities of that complex thing you're writing about on page 2. Keep PR in the loop. (Because that's always a good thing to do.)

   You let them know the hard deadline when the reviews need to be in: by end-of-day Wednesday, say.

   Not New Year's Eve.

   No exceptions.

5. **Seek an okay, not opinions**. "Please approve" is likely to deliver far fewer festival-style edits than will "please tell me if you have suggestions."

6. **Set expectations for the number of approval rounds.** One or two is fine. Five? *Get outta town, Gary from Legal*.

   State it right up front: "Here's the plan, Committee Colleagues . . ."

7. **OWN YOUR ROLE.** Uppercasing this. It's important: *As much as you set expectations for others . . . communicate your own role in the review process, too.*

You might say: "I'll take your comments and incorporate them according to our tone-of-voice guidelines and strategy for this piece."

(But maybe with a bit more warmth and good humor. That sentence sounds like I'm the stressed-out event planner trying to arrange enough boxed lunches for that Writing-By-Committee Festival. You can do better.)

Doing so reinforces your expertise. It also fortifies the role of you—the brave and heroic writer (also good-looking)—as the ultimate owner of the piece.

After all: It's YOUR bottom on the line!

It also kicks to the curb any arguments over specific word choice or phrasing.

Which for most of us is the most painful and heartbreaking part of Hot Dog Writing.

29

Hire a Human Editor

Writers get the byline. So we naturally get a lot of credit for the writing.

But behind the scenes, a good editor is your wingman or wingwoman, someone who flies behind the wing of the leading aircraft and whose job it is to cover you. Someone there to lend support, guidance, help.

Remember what I said previously about the two kinds of people? Those who think they can write, and those who think they can't? And how very often both are wrong?

A good editor teases the most out of self-anointed writers and non-writers alike.

The very best writing—like the very best parts of life—is collaborative. It needs an editor.

You should edit our own work. (We talked about this in previous chapters.) You can also use online tools to help flag problems and better your text.

But you should also work with an actual human editor. Everyone needs an editor—no matter how experienced a writer they are.

An editor has a tight grip on grammar, usage, style, and punctuation. (More detail below.)

But more than that, they know you. Your voice. Your quirks. Your style.

They know you tend to overuse a word like "shenanigans." They know when to push back because you're being lazy and relying on cliché. They know that when you use a sentence fragment it's because it clicks perfectly into the spot where a full sentence would not. And they know you want to use "would not" in that last sentence because "wouldn't" doesn't sound the way you hear that music in your head.

That's why I say "your longtime editor." A great editor is one who doesn't correct as much as call you to your best work.

"Great" takes time to develop. I've worked with the same editor for forever—maybe 15 years? I now have a co-dependency with him: I can't publish anything without his input. ("*Actually, that's not codependency; that's a healthy dependency*," corrects my internal mental health monitor.) (Fair 'nuf.)

* * *

I put editors into three major categories:

1. **Copyeditors/proofreaders** clean up problems and check facts. They wield a push broom around the text: sweeping away messy style issues, punctuation, typos, misspelling, and so on.

2. **Substantive editors** give a piece of writing a high-level read. They offer suggestions on how parts of it might be improved or which parts need to be expanded or condensed.

They offer broad feedback on things like the overall structure, development, the direction of a piece.

3. **Line editors** comb through a piece to check grammar, word choice, and paragraph and sentence flow—while sometimes rephrasing or rewriting as well. The trick is to rephrase when it's needed . . . without completely erasing the writer's voice.

In most organizations, substantive editors and line editors are the same person, editing on two separate passes.

* * *

Copyeditors and proofreaders are easy to find. Increasingly, robots or artificial intelligence tools help (at least for a first pass). (See Part VII: Content Tools.)

Substantive editors and line editors are more difficult to find.

An editor needs an ability to think conceptually and logically. They need to see the big picture (the concept) and also see how the specific parts should be organized to fit into that picture (the logic of it).

They need to understand the writer. But they also think about audience.

It can be a tall order for someone who probably majored in English Lit in college (LOL).

<p style="text-align:center">* * *</p>

There are other types of editors. Your organization might use one or more of these people, depending on the nature of your business.

- ◆ **Sensitivity editors** (also sensitivity readers) check for inclusivity. They flag offensive writing, unintentional bias, stereotypes, misrepresentation, tone-deafness, and so on.

- ◆ **Technical editors** watch for technical accuracy in documentation, instruction manuals, and the like. They excel at translating jargon and tech-speak into something more easily understood.

- ◆ **Fact checkers** verify sources and . . . well, facts. Usually this role is folded into the copyeditor's job. One exception is large media companies, where fact-checking is its own thing.

30

Set a Goal Based on Word Count (Not Time)

You can't improve what you don't measure is the old management maxim highlighting data's key role in any operation.

It's sometimes attributed to Peter Drucker and sometimes to statistician William Edwards Deming. (Neither actually said it—but the Internet still wants to fight about it.)

Setting metrics and goals is just as useful for writing as it is for a modern-day Peter or William or whoever.

Clocking a daily metric lets you track and celebrate and feel proud of your progress.

Think of setting a daily writing goal as setting a step goal in your Fitbit. Over time, you'll become a fitter, stronger writer.

And similar to Fitbit, measure your output—words—rather than time. Said another way, but in bold:

Track the number of words you write. Not how long it took to write them.

It doesn't do much for you to stare at a blank page and blinking cursor for 30 minutes. It's depressing. It's useless.

It's far better to keep your hands moving. Keep writing. Keep going. Do not stop your fingers from choreographing their own improvised tap dance as they move across a keyboard or across a page.

Your exact word goal is your call; you set your own benchmark.

My own daily goal is 999 words. (I talked about why 999 in Chapter 8.)

Not too long ago, author and photographer Dane Sanders wrote two books in the same year for Random House. Both books became best sellers.

Dane had always made writing a daily habit. But the grind of churning out two books in 12 months made writing feel like a death march, he said. He quit for a while.

Then he started to miss it. To reignite his routine, he began clocking a daily word goal. He started with a low word count—a small, fun-sized goal, like a miniature candy bar from a Halloween bucket. Dane wanted it to feel easily doable—like he could manage it in one sitting.

"If you're just beginning your writing routine, make 50 words a win—that's about a tweet's worth of content," Dane says.

Over the next few weeks, up your production to 250 words or 500 words, he suggests, "but keep working until you can get a minimum of 750 words completed in every sitting without too much pain."

A word count of 750 totals about two pages of text. In writing circles, it's a magic number traced back to Julia Cameron's idea of writing daily Morning Pages from her book *The Artist's Way*.

Dane now maintains a pace of 1,000 words daily. "I don't ever feel good about a day unless I have a minimum of at least that many words," Dane says. "Every time I do that I give myself credit . . . and all is right in my writing world."

Over the course of a year, Dane has produced roughly 1,500 pages. "I do that two years in a row. . .and I have a greater word count than Tolstoy's *War and Peace*."

Which is, Dane said, "not bad."

31

End on an I-Can't-Wait-to-Get-Back-to-It Note

It's tempting to push through writing so you can finish a piece by the end of the day—just to be done with it.

But instead try to leave something undone—to give you direction and momentum to spark the next day's work.

I like to end a writing session when things are going well for me. *I'm feeling good! All is right with the world!* And I have a clear sense of what needs doing next.

Ending on a high note gives you a place to start—which increases the likelihood of an *actual* start, and decreases the likelihood that your momentum will flop on the couch and scroll TikTok until dinner.

32

Deadlines Are the WD-40 of Writing

In Pixar's *Toy Story 2*, Woody's kidnapper, Al McWhiggin (the owner of Al's Toy Barn), calls The Cleaner to repair Woody when the toy's arm falls off.

Al asks The Cleaner: "So, uh, how long is this gonna take?"

The Cleaner replies: "You can't rush art."

It's true enough—until it's not. At some point, you *do* have to rush your art. Otherwise, your art sits on its butt on the couch eating chips and salsa.

However many words you write per day, however many rounds of drafts, however many metaphors you think of . . . at some point you've got to be done. Really done. No going back.

"Art is never finished, only abandoned," as Leonardo da Vinci said.

* * *

I understand The Cleaner's point of view—that impulse to not rush art. I too am an endless tweaker, editor, tinkerer . . . The Cleaner of my own work. I'm also an excellent procrastinator and perfectionist.

That's the thing about writing—a thing both frustrating and awesome. You can always polish. You can always correct. You can always think of ways you could make it better, or more elegant, or funnier, or wait I just thought of a new way to intro Chapter 4 ...

But here's the only thing that works for me and for others like me, including marketer Doug Kessler, who lent me this mantra: "Deadlines are the WD-40 of writing."

Meaning: A deadline unsticks what's sticking, because it makes you deliver.

So give a piece a hard curfew. And then strictly enforce it.

Be stern with yourself: Don't allow yourself to kick the deadline further out, or treat it as a mere suggestion, or pretend to forget about it entirely. (You might pretend, but you know the truth in your heart.)

Do the best work you can by the deadline you've set. And then consider your project finished, and let it go with love.

Part II

Writing Rules: Grammar and Usage

Most people think that "good writing" equals "good grammar."

No. It does not.

Good writing is more about thinking, rewriting, having fun, sharing a bit of joy, and keeping your focus relentlessly on your reader than it is about knowing your *affect* from your elbow. (And your *affect* from your *effect*, too.)

Not that grammar and usage aren't important. They are. But they are secondary. Which is why this section is . . . well, second.

Grammar and usage are a bit of a rabbit hole. You start talking about word choice and *who* and *whom* and active and passive voice and the next thing you know you and I are both exhausted and overwhelmed— and it seems easier to just give up entirely rather than risk breaking a grammar rule.

So let's not go there.

What's included in these next few chapters are rules of grammar and usage curated for a business and marketing audience. They are based on my experience of what issues tend to cause us the most trouble, grammar-ily speaking.

That is, if *grammarily* is a word.

(It is now.)

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33

Use Real Words

Real words are still harder to come by than we might think.

To understand why . . . let's travel back to 2000. (*Walk with me . . . .*)

In 2000, Instagram and LinkedIn didn't exist. Facebook wouldn't arrive for another four years. Steak-Umms was just a sliced beef product—not a satisfyingly weird Twitter feed dispensing both wise truths and absurdist commentary. And tweeting in lower-case text, as if e.e. cummings was available in the freezer section. Case in point:[1]

Steak-umm ✔
@steak_umm
...

humans need society and connection. anyone who is truly self sufficient is either a monster or a deity. that's why it's so important to try to be kind and make existence somewhat bearable for us all

steak-umm bless

Yet the foundation of all of our current social platforms, from Tumblr to TikTok, was there in 2000, in the form of email lists, news groups, web pages, blogs, and chat rooms.

Marketing began to shift. For the first time, the Internet enabled—at scale—conversations between brands and people, and between people and people. "Markets are conversations," wrote the authors of *The Cluetrain Manifesto* in 1999.

Suddenly what William Strunk and E. B. White had written decades earlier had new relevance: "Write in a way that comes naturally . . . Prefer the standard to the offbeat."[2]

In other words, write for real people. Use real words. Quit the brand-speak. Soften the standoffish formal tone. Lose the clichés and buzzwords.

Yet here we are, decades later, and our writing and content are still littered with deep-dive revolutionary, value-added, growth-hacked, impactful, cutting-edge, best-of-breed, go-to ideated words designed to leverage and incentivize and synergize the living daylights out of the current paradigm.

If I had a nickel for every time I saw text trashed with jargon like that, I would be writing this from a penthouse in Monaco, wearing slippers made from hundred-dollar bills.

<p align="center">* * *</p>

Jargon is like cholesterol—there's a good kind and a bad kind.
Sometimes jargon and buzzwords can signal belonging: You understand your audience, and you are using insider terms familiar to them. That's the good kind.

But too often we use the bad kind of jargon. We rely on it as lazy short-hand. Or to mask incompetence or insecurity. Or because we think it's the language of business, especially if a company sells to other businesses rather than to consumers.

No business truly sells to another business; we all sell to people.

<p align="center">* * *</p>

Jargon and buzzwords are the chemical additives of content: You can use them from time to time. One or two used sparingly might help. But add too many of them and the whole thing becomes toxic.

I'm an optimist. I believe that most of us try to avoid buzzword bloat. We want to be understood. We want in our heart of hearts to sidestep non-words and clichés and jargon.

Better writing comes from that place of goodness. It means using the best words, choosing real words, and avoiding the temptation of buzzwords.

34

Avoid Frankenwords and Words Pretending to Be Something They're Not

Avoid Frankenwords—words stitched awkwardly together to create something of an ugly, monstrous mess.

Such words often have extra parts fused to the start or end of them to create weird or unrecognizable versions of themselves.

You see them bulked up with *–ment, -tion, -sion, –ance, –ism, -ize* or *-ization*. They usually don't need the extra padding.

The simplest version of a word is the strongest version of a word. This is especially true of verbs: Not all words with those suffixes are terrible. But we can usually find a simpler version of a word not camouflaged by the extra letters and syllables.

An actual sentence I read in my inbox this morning:

> The prioritization of the people our candidate represents focuses on the revolutionized future, free of commercialization.

It hurts just typing that. *Prioritization, revolutionized, commercialization* . . . all Frankenwords. All unnecessarily bulked up.

That's an extreme example. Yet sometimes Frankenwords creep in more quietly.

◆ **Franken-creep**: "Rudolph *made an application* for the job of lead reindeer." *De-Frankened*: "Rudolph applied for the lead reindeer job."

◆ **Franken-creep**: "There is no *differentiation* between a sweet potato and a yam." *De-Frankened*: "There is no difference between a sweet potato and a yam."

Also, run as far as you can from words pretending to be something they are not:

◆ Nouns masquerading as verbs or gerunds. As in: *workshopping, journaling*. Also: *leverage; incentivize, bucketize*.

◆ Verbs or gerunds disguised as nouns. As in: *learnings*, or (I also just read this one!) the *solvings* to a math problem. Ew.

35

Don't Use Weblish (Words You Wouldn't Whisper to Your Sweetheart in the Dark)

Would you tell your love that you "don't have the bandwidth" for something? Or would you say you "don't have the time"?

Would you say, "Let me ping you on that"? Or would you say, "I'll get back to you"?

Would your Valentine's Day card read, "You're my top resource, Valentine"? Or would it say, "I love you to the Death Star and back"?

Would you put something on his or her "radar screen"? Or "execute on" a promise or commitment?

You get the idea.

Weblish words sprout from technology and have no business being applied to people. They sound as if they were being uttered by a robot in a flat, mechanical voice—not a human being with a brain and soul and actual blood pumping through an actual beating heart.

36

Default to the Present Tense

Write in the present tense as much as you can. The easiest, most direct, strongest form of a verb is its present tense:

Just do it.

Look at what happens when we rewrite that using conditional tense:

You would just do it.

Or future tense:

You will just do it.

Or past-perfect continuous tense:

I have been just doing it since feet were invented.

See what's happening in your brain? Your brain now is trying to clear those qualifiers and conditionals like hurdles on a reading racetrack. (One sponsored by Nike?)

Text written in the present tense is more clear, direct, and immediate. It feels less complicated.

I know I'm cheating a little bit with that Nike example. Verbs come in three tenses—past, present, and future—to tell us when things happened/ are happening/will happen.

I hear the principled pedant in the back of the room, waving their hand in the air with a question.. . . *"Am I suggesting we time-travel? That we bend time to our own will?"*

No, my principled friend.

Instead I'm suggesting that you look to the present tense as a default, when it makes sense to do so.

Two approaches:

1. Can you rewrite in the present tense and not change meaning too much?

◆ **Instead of**: Zero-party data *has changed* everything about collecting vital marketing data. (present-perfect tense)

Try: Zero-party data *changes* everything about collecting vital marketing data. (present tense)

Why this works: The second version is both shorter and more direct. Swapping "changes" for "has changed" changes the meaning slightly, but not enough to make a difference overall.

◆ **Instead of**: We have noticed that four-day workdays have become a standard perk, more prevalent than the foosball table and on-site dry cleaning.

Try: Four-day workdays are now a standard perk, more prevalent than the foosball table and on-site dry cleaning.

Why this works: The shorter version of this sentence eliminates the wasted words at the beginning of that sentence (*we have noticed*), and makes the action more immediate. Shorter workdays *are* a perk. Full stop.

◆ **Instead o***f*: Our research *showed* that 60% of us love an airport massage.

Try: Our research *shows* that 60% of us love an airport massage.

Why this works: Is the research current and still relevant? Then it's fine to say it actively *shows* even if the actual research happened in the past.

2. If the present tense doesn't work, use the simplest version of a verb you can.

   ◆ **Instead of**: The Morton Salt Umbrella Girl *was created* as a mascot for Morton Salt in 1914.

Try: Morton Salt created the Morton Salt Umbrella Girl as a mascot in 1914.

Why this works: The first version uses the passive "was created." The second uses a simpler active verb.

   ◆ **Instead of**: She *was redesigned* several times over 100 years. Each time, her outfit *would become* more on-trend.

Try: Morton redesigned her several times over 100 years. Each time, her outfit *became* more on-trend.

Why this works: Again, we're swapping the passive voice ("was redesigned") for active ("designed"). We're also simplifying "would become" by subbing "became."

37

Choose Active Voice Over Passive Voice

Verbs in a sentence are in either active voice or passive voice. Usually.

Active means the subject of a sentence is doing the thing the verb describes. *Passive* means the subject is receiving that action—something is being done *to* the subject. (*Passive* does not mean the past tense, as some believe.)

An example of passive voice:

> *TikTok is a popular social media channel for pizzerias, and now many videos of pizzas* are being posted.

The same sentence written in the active voice might read something like:

> *TikTok is a popular social media channel for pizzerias, and now* restaurants are posting *videos of pizzas*.

The former doesn't tell you who is posting all those pizza videos to TikTok. (Who is it . . . ? UberEats customers? The *pizzaiolo* or pizza slinger himself? Little Caesar?)

The latter makes it clear that the pizzerias themselves are posting.

Usually you want to use the active voice, or active writing, instead of the passive voice. Why:

1. Active voice makes clear who is doing what. It avoids the ambiguity that passive voice creates.

2. Active voice sounds zippier and more alive. Passive tends to sound a little stilted and awkward, as if you're just learning a new language.

* * *

Passive voice isn't flat-out wrong. Use it:

1. When you don't know who is responsible for the action ("My lunch *was stolen* from the break room fridge"); or

2. When it's irrelevant because the action is what matters most. A famous example: "The president *was sworn in*."

Of course, you can also use passive voice to skirt blame. My favorite example of this came years ago from my own son, then age 5.

"Your sunglasses were broken," he said.

I asked him: "Did you accidentally break them?"

He stared at me blankly. Said nothing, in either passive or active voice.

For the record: I'm pretty sure he did it. But he never fessed up.

38

Ditch Weakling Verbs

Ditch weak "thinking" verbs in favor of bold "action" verbs.

"Thinking" verbs are scrawny weaklings like *thinks, considers, knows, understands, realizes*. The action is invisible because it happens inside a brain.

"Action" verbs describe actions you can more readily see in the outside world.

◆ **Instead of**: If there was one thing last year *required*, it was a need to reset our bodies, our brains, our hearts, our expectations for ourselves.

Try: If there was one thing last year *delivered*, it was a need to reset our bodies, our brains, our hearts, our expectations for ourselves.

◆ **Instead of**: Our founder considers himself a change-maker.

Try: Our founder stirs the boiling kettle of change.

◆ **Instead of**: We *understand* how critical metrics are to your success.

Try: We *lean into* analytics dashboards like tweens lean into TikTok. (via VelocityUK)

What's more: Use strong, expressive verbs when you can—when you are describing actions people take or events that occur—because they paint a memorable picture in the reader's mind. Your sentences come alive; they throb with a pulse.

◆ **Instead of**: It seems genius, but it's probably not wise to *put* a QR code on Aunt Betty's tombstone.

Try: It seems genius, but it's probably not wise to *carve* a QR code on Aunt Betty's tombstone.

◆ **Instead of**: The ladder *moved*. In the scramble to regain his footing and keep control of the vibrating chainsaw, he *cut* his leg clean off.

Try: The ladder *wobbled*. In the scramble to regain his footing and keep control of the vibrating chainsaw, he *sliced* his leg clean off.

You should strike a balance here. The trick is to avoid overdoing it with so many action verbs that you give the reader whiplash as they try to follow what's happening. You can paint *too* vivid a picture.

That's overwriting—writing that's too involved, elaborate, or crammed with too much information. Your text will feel like a painting done only in neon paint.

39

Adverbs Aren't Necessary (Usually)

Adverbs are like sweaters on small dogs. Some people think they're stupid. But done right? The effect is charming.

And sometimes, that sweater is needed.

Let's break it down.

<div align="center">* * *</div>

But first: What's an adverb?

An adverb is a part of speech that tweaks the meaning of another adverb, a verb, an adjective, or a phrase. It often (but not always) ends in *-ly*.

The adverb's job is to give your reader more information—like how, when, where, or in what way something occurred.

Writing rulebooks generally disrespect adverbs. Some consider them as useless as litter ("cluttery" and "annoying," sniffs my beloved *Elements of Style*). Or say they are a crutch for lazy writers.

This writing rulebook says sheesh. That's a bit harsh, rulebook colleagues. Lighten up.

Sometimes, adverbs should be shelved. At other times, adverbs are useful because your sentence needs a little warmth and personality—like that fetching sweater on a Chihuahua.

Ditch an adverb when:

◆ **You can use a stronger verb.** Instead of an adverb + weakling-verb combo pack, use a stronger, more robust verb . . . and cut the adverb completely.

Instead of: production *increased quickly*

Try: production *surged*

Instead of: Aspen *walks confidently* into the board meeting. *Unexpectedly*, no one else was wearing a top hat and tails. Not even that little prig, Dawson.

Try: Aspen *struts* into the board meeting only to realize that no one else was wearing a top hat and tails. Not even that little prig, Dawson.

◆ **Axing it doesn't much change the meaning of a sentence.**

Really and *very* fall into this category. You can usually lose them and no one misses them. An apocryphal bit of advice is this: "Substitute *damn* every time you're inclined to write *very*; your editor will delete it and the writing will be just as it should be."

Instead of: The pangolin's *really* scaly body looks *very* much like an oversized pinecone.

Try: The pangolin's scaly body looks like an oversized pinecone.

On the other hand, consider using an adverb when:

◆ **You want to intensify an action or description, especially when the context doesn't make it clear.**

As in: *Clearly*, we're going to need a bigger boat.

Why we need the adverb: *Clearly* modifies the whole sentence. Without it, the sentence ("We're going to need a bigger boat") is declarative. With "clearly" at the helm of the sentence (ha!), it's uh-oh rueful and wry.

As in: *Gone with the Wind* wouldn't have this classic movie line: "Frankly, my dear, I don't give a damn."

◆ **You want to change the meaning of an action or a sentence or to add surprise, irreverence, playfulness.**

As in: From a law firm's website: "*Uncommonly creative* legal solutions." (via HertzSchram)

As in: The playful subtitle of this book: "Your go-to guide to *ridiculously good* content."

◆ **You want to create rhythm, alliteration.**

As in: When you want to row a boat *merrily merrily merrily merrily* . . . because life is but a dream.

As in: The children's book *Slowly, Slowly, Slowly . . . Said the Sloth* by Eric Carle

◆ **You *simply* want to.** The reason we have this chapter at all is because it's easy to toss fistfuls of adverbs into our writing willy-nilly, like candy tossed from a parade float.

The key to using an adverb well is to think strategically about its placement. A sweet little adverb might be the exact thing you need to warm your sentence up a little, just like that small sweater on a *chilly* little dog.

As always: You make the final call.

40

Use Clichés Only Once in a Blue Moon

The language of business is a cliché landfill.

Lazy communicators drive dump trucks full of clichés, releasing loads of business platitudes into text to create mountains of trash phrases like these:

- Move the needle

- A *ready, fire, aim* approach

- Boil the ocean

- Take a 30,000-foot view

- Open-door policy

- At the end of the day

- Drink from the fire hose

- Peel back the onion

- Where the rubber meets the road

- Open the kimono (which isn't just a cliché; it's also sexist and offensive)

Maybe "lazy" isn't fair. Maybe "unaware" is a better word. We tend to insert clichéd phrases almost reflexively, without much forethought or intention.

In either case, the effect is the same. Their use is often redundant and vacuous: They don't add a lot to sentence. (Make each word earn its keep!)

Our writing is stronger when we avoid clichés in favor of real words (Chapter 33) and original metaphors (Chapter 22).

"Never use a cliché?" you ask. "Never-ever?"

Never is strong word, friend.

At times, a well-worn phrase can work. But before we get to that: What is a cliché exactly?

* * *

A cliché is an overused simile or metaphor. It's an unoriginal thought. A trite comparison. A trope.

You already know the clichés of business. But they're everywhere in everyday life, too: a billionaire who is *rolling in money* and *laughing all the way to the bank*. Probably because they *climbed the stairway to success*. Or climbed a *ladder*. Or traveled a *rocky road*. They did it by *thinking outside the box*.

Many clichés we use today originated in the King James Bible or they were coined by Shakespeare, Milton, Dickens, and others. ("Nay if our wits run the wild-goose chase, I am done," Mercurio tells Romeo in *Romeo and Juliet*; "Once in a blue moon" meaning "rarely" comes from nineteenth-century British writer Pierce Egan.)[1]

Clichés were fresh and original once, and writers used them with the out-of-control abandon of . . . well, kids in a candy store. To save time in production, printers in nineteenth-century France pre-assembled blocks of type for the most popular phrases. (The word *cliché* is believed to come from the French verb *clicher* ("to click")—an echo of the sound the blocks made when they struck metal.[2])

But, over time, clichés become as mushy and old as a bunch of overripe bananas on the kitchen counter.

* * *

A well-worn phrase *can* add succinct, colorful, timeless charm or wisdom. If a cliché is used sparingly, it can capture a universal truth. So yes, use them once in a blue moon.

When exactly is that blue moon phase? When these two stars align:

1. You use them sparingly—more as seasoning than main course.

2. They signal an insider view or understanding your specific audience.

As in: Describing a restart as *going back to square one*, an unexpressed problem as *the elephant in the room*, or the discarding of good ideas along with the bad as *throwing out the baby with the bathwater*.

We've been talking about phrases that are clichés. A related problem is the clichéd concepts used in marketing writing:

Content is king.

_____ is the new black.

_____ is dead . . . long live _____.

But that's a chapter for another book.

41

"Mistakes Were Made." Avoiding These Simple Mistakes Will Make You Look and Feel Smarter Instantly

I've been editing the writing of marketing and PR professionals and other business executives for more than two decades. I just did the math. At a conservative rate of an article a day . . . that's close to 5,000 (!) articles.

All that editing has helped me develop my Spidey senses about common writing problems that plague us all. Too often we sacrifice clarity on the altar of sounding "professional." And the next thing you know, wordiness, conformity, clichés, take a running start.. . . All the things we've talked about so far all pile into the canoe and swamp our writing completely.

A while ago, I began keeping a list of the more common mistakes. Here are the top 18 followed by their anti-wordiness, anti-fuzzy-thinking, pro-brevity, pro-clarity equivalents.

Swap the word(s) on the right for those on the left and you'll feel instantly smarter and more succinct:

1. Ways by which > Ways

2. Continues to be > Remains

3. In order to > To (especially at the beginning of a sentence)

4. There (are) will be times when > Sometimes, At times

5. Despite the fact that > Although, Though

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6. At which time > When

7. In spite of > Despite

8. When it comes to > In, When

9. The majority of > Most

10. A number of > Some, Few, Several, Many, Various (or often you don't need to use any word at all)

11. When asked > Asked

12. Leverage (as verb) > Use (or Put to use), Harness, Apply

13. The same level of > As much

14. While (if not being used to mean during or at the same time as) > Although or Though, Whereas

15. Moving forward > Later, In the future, From now on

16. Centered around > Centered on

17. Try and [verb] = Try to [verb]

18. Should of > Should have

Other common issues and errors:

◆ **Keep your verb tense consistent.** Avoid time traveling—or switching around between present, future, past tenses.

◆ **I versus me.** "I" sounds highfalutin and "correct." It's often not. How to know which to use: Eliminate the other person's name. Does the sentence still make sense?

   Instead of: Annie went to get ice cream with Daddy Warbucks and I.

   Try: Annie went to get ice cream with Daddy Warbucks and me.

   Why this works: Pretend Warbucks wasn't with Annie. "Annie went to get ice cream with I" is weird. Use *me*.

◆ **However and independent clauses.** If you use however to join two independent clauses or sentences, use a semicolon—not a comma—before "however."

As in: Annie loves Chunky Monkey ice cream; however, she wonders if those stomach cramps signal a lactose intolerance.

Better yet, keep it simple: Annie loves Chunky Monkey ice cream, *but* she wonders if those stomach cramps signal a lactose intolerance.

◆ **Not only [this] . . . *but also* [that].** *Not only–but also* are connecting phrases used in pairs—otherwise known as correlative conjunctions.

They work best when the two things match—in other words, when [this] and [that] are the same kind of thing. They are both verbs, nouns, prepositional phrases, and so on. If they aren't the same, your reader will be confused.

Why? Our brains look for patterns—rhythm, rhyme, repetition, or (in this case) a parallel structure. Patterns help us make sense of the world.

Instead of: Not only will your writing educate readers, but it will also entertain them.

Try: Your writing will not only educate [verb] readers [object] but also entertain [verb] them [object].

Why this works: In this case, you need a verb and its object to directly follow *not only* and *but also* to create a parallel pattern.

◆ **Be sure the verb can do what you're asking it to do.**

Instead of: Warbucks Industries *saw* a 10% jump in the market share of both artillery shells and cat food.

Try: The market share of Warbucks Industries *jumped* 10% in both artillery shells and cat food.

Why this works: Can a product or company actually see anything? Does it have eyes? No, it doesn't. But we do, so we can see how silly it is to write that an inanimate object saw something.

◆ **Increase/Increase by.** *Increase* 10% and *increase by* 10% mean the same thing. Use the shorter version unless it sounds awkward to your ear.

◆ **In terms of.** Cut this one completely. Rethink what you want to say, and then recast the sentence to eliminate those three extra words.

Instead of: Lactose issues aside, that ice cream cone is a good deal, in terms of the $3 price.

Try: Lactose issues aside, that ice cream cone is a good deal at $3.

◆ **This, that, these, those.** The use of these words can often create confusion: Which "this" or "these" are we referring to?

Avoid using *this*, *that*, *these,* or *those* at the beginning of a sentence, especially, because they can cause total chaos. If you use one of them, add a clarification or reference. I did it at the beginning of this paragraph "the use of *these words*."

Instead of: What credible source supports your theory? Are there examples, data, real-world stories you can cite? *Those* are crucial for building your argument.

Try: What credible source supports your theory? Are there examples, data, real-world stories you can cite? *Those sources* are crucial for building your argument.

Why this works: It's not clear what *those* in the first example is referring to. Is it the kinds of sources mentioned? Is it the questions themselves?

◆ **Hyphens after adverbs ending in -ly.** If your adverb ends in *-ly*, don't use a hyphen after the adverb. You don't need one. (Unless you're British, in which case you have your own ideas about the English language.)

Instead of: This is an extremely-simple mistake to fix.

Try: This is an extremely simple mistake to fix.

* * *

Wouldn't your editor catch these mistakes anyway? Probably. But eliminating them first makes you look and feel smarter—and 42% more attractive.

It also allows you to turn your piece into your editor saying something like . . . "The piece is ready for editing. But please do be kind enough to review the antecedents and correlative conjunctions."

Why I imagine you speaking like a hostess at a country club . . . I don't know. But that's the voice I imagine you use when you boast about your error-free text that sparkles with its parallel constructions and verb tenses that match like mixed-doubles tennis outfits on the court.

42

Words We Always Get Wrong

Some words seem interchangeable with others because they sound similar. Others are abused because their meanings are confused in everyday speech.

Here are some of the most commonly misused words in marketing writing.

First let's sort out 20 pairs of similar sounding words. (They seem interchangeable but often aren't.)

Then we'll clear up usage confusion. For example, *can* you sub *bring* for *take*? Or *may* you sub *bring* for *take*? Or should we all rephrase the whole question to avoid revealing our inability to tell the difference?

Similar or Seemingly Interchangeable Words

- ◆ **Disinterested:** Impartial or unbiased.

- ◆ **Uninterested:** Don't care.

    You'll notice this confusion in news headlines. I saw this headline the other day: "Woman Goes Missing; Disinterested Police 'Guess' She Eloped, Shut Case."[1]

    That same day, I noticed this: "Eight in Ten SMEs [small and midsize enterprises] Disinterested in Seeking Finance."[2] Both the police and the small business owners were actually uninterested— not disinterested.

◆ **Accept:** Agree to receive.

   As in: "Joakim Noah Reluctant to Accept Praise."[3]

◆ **Except:** Not including, excluding.

   As in: "Two Charts That Will Enrage Everyone (Well, Except Bankers)."[4]

◆ **Historic:** Having importance in history.

◆ **Historical:** Having taken place in history or in the past.

   "Historic" means something significant and important happened, so important that it's worthy of being recorded in history.

   As in: David Meerman Scott's book *Marketing the Moon* tells the backstory of a historic undertaking.

   "Historical" suggests something that just, well, happened—that it's a part of history or the past.

   As in: John Glenn was the first astronaut to drink Tang in space, creating a historical relationship between the powdered drink mix and the U.S. space program.

   A simple way to remember to the difference: "Historic" ends with the letter *c*, which stands for *crucial* or *critical* events. "Historical" ends with *l*, which stands for "long ago."

◆ **Discreet:** Respecting secrecy or privacy; careful, cautious, diplomatic.

◆ **Discrete:** Separate and separable; distinct, detached, countable.

   Math geeks might remember that a discrete variable is one that can take on only finite, countable values; it can't express values in between the finite values.

   You can give your favorite burrito place a 4-star or 5-star rating on Yelp, but you can't give it a 4.9-star rating for that one time they ran out of guacamole (because 4.9 is not in the range of discrete rating choices).

◆ **Bated:** Put in suspension, reduce the intensity of, restrain. As in: *tax abatement* or *bated breath*.

◆ **Baited:** To entrap, entice, tease.

A simple way to remember the difference: The *i* in the middle of *baited* looks like a worm skewered on a hook. It's literally bait.

◆ **Canvas:** Strong cloth (as in what TOMS shoes are made of).

◆ **Canvass:** To examine closely or to ask around (what happens door-to-door every election season).

◆ **Illicit:** Naughty, illegal, or illegitimate.

As in: "Silk Road 2.0 Was Hub for Illicit Trade. . ."[5]

◆ **Elicit:** To draw out, extract, or evoke.

As in: Ironically, it was also a handy place to elicit Tesco Clubcards.

◆ **Phase:** To schedule in sections (as in *phasing into*), or a specific time period (as in *my foreign-film phase*).

As in: You can't pay for an onboard gin and tonic with dollar bills, because airlines have phased out cash.

◆ **Faze:** Throw for a loop, or disturb.

As in: News doesn't faze cats. (Then again, what does?)

◆ **e.g. (from the Latin *exempli gratia*):** Used to introduce an example. You might've learned this in school as *egg*sample, as a way of remembering it.

As in: To improve your email newsletter, use a flexible email service: e.g., AWeber, ActiveCampaign, Get Response.

◆ **i.e. (from the Latin *id est*.)** Use *i.e.* when you want to clarify or to specify what you were just talking or writing about.

As in: To improve your email newsletter, use the favorite email service of writers—i.e., AWeber.

P.S. I used to think i.e. was shorthand for *in essence*. It's not.

◆ **Flaunt:** To make a showy display.

◆ **Flout:** To disregard a rule or authority.

As in: Citizens flout the government's ban on kite-flying by flaunting kites printed with the president's face.

◆ **Insure:** To arrange for compensation in the event of death, injury, litigation.

As in: The company is insured against harassment complaints.

◆ **Ensure:** To make certain that something happens.

As in: Attorney Frieda Convict *ensured* that her client receive an easy sentence. (Think of it as *make sure*.)

◆ **Loose:** Not fixed in place.

As in: "Adult tip" from @HonestToddler on Twitter, "Never pick up a toddler without asking. We're people, not loose change."[6]

◆ **Lose:** Unable to find or detect, to misplace.

From "How to Put a Toddler to Bed in 100 Easy Steps": "Adult Tip #93: Tap toddler's back until you lose feeling in your arm and your toddler seems tired."[7]

◆ **Flounder:** To have difficulty doing something.

As in: Writing a first draft of anything can make you feel like you're floundering; you're not! The thrashing about and floundering is part of the process.

◆ **Founder:** To fail.

As in: The golden retriever's career as a data entry clerk foundered for obvious reasons. But especially: No thumbs.

Flounder and *founder* are confused as verbs, not nouns. No one confuses the fish called flounder with the founder/entrepreneur or the founder/blacksmith.

◆ **Adverse:** Harmful or negative.

   As in: FDA warns of adverse effects of new cholesterol drugs . . .

◆ **Averse:** Opposed to, or having an intense dislike of.

   As in: . . . which makes some heart patients averse to taking them.

◆ **Amoral:** Not having a sense of whether behavior is right or wrong.

   As in: Are robots truly amoral or can they be expected to do the right thing, like WALL-E did?

◆ **Immoral:** Knowing behavior is wrong, but doing it anyway. Dark, evil, not moral.

   As in: Hans seems charming and chivalrous, but he is the most immoral character in *Frozen*.

◆ **Nauseous:** Nausea-inducing, poisonous, or gross.

   As in: A nauseous dumpster of trash.

◆ **Nauseated:** How that dumpster of trash makes you feel: wanting to gag, or vomit.

   Many people say they are feeling *nauseous* when they mean they feel *nauseated*. Technically, it's wrong. But let's pause here and reflect: Perhaps this is one of those rules that needs to evolve to reflect current usage? "Language is fluid," you argue.

   Well argued, you. If I were a dictionary writer, I'd take your comments under advisement.

◆ **Further:** Refers to figurative distance.

◆ **Farther:** Refers to actual, physical distance.

   A tricky one, eh? Here's a way to remember the difference:

   If the kind of distance you're referring to is murky, opt for *further*. (Both share the letter *u*!) If it's actual, use farther. (Both share an *a*!)

◆ **Orient and Orientate:** Both of those verbs mean essentially the same thing: to align or position.

I've always hated the clunkier *orientate* and assumed it was wrong. But apparently I'm like a lot of people in the United States who consider *orientate* incorrect, whereas people in the United Kingdom think Americans are wrong in our preference for *orient*.

Fine.

I still think *orientate* sounds unnecessarily clunky. Use it at your own risk. At least around me.

◆ **Horde:** A group of animals or people.

◆ **Hoard:** A stash of something (or *to* stash something, as a verb).

Another tricky one. It's commonly confused even by the pros.

In a story about a California couple who found more than $10 million in coins on their property, a reporter quoted a source speculating on the theory that the coins were possibly stolen from a San Francisco mint:

The stolen coins "would have all been mint state. . .," he said. "But only some of the coins in the Saddle Ridge horde are."[8] *Oops.*

On the other hand, author Austin Kleon (*Steal Like an Artist*) uses *hoard* correctly when he frames sharing as a social currency:

> "Almost all of the people I look up to and try to steal from today . . . have built sharing into their routine.

> "They're cranking away in their studios, their laboratories, or their cubicles, but instead of maintaining absolute secrecy and hoarding their work, they're open about what they're working on, and they're consistently posting bits and pieces of their work, their ideas, and what they're learning online."[9]

◆ **Pore:** A tiny opening; to study something closely.

As in: Patrons pored over the pub's menu of 72 beers.

◆ **Pour:** To cause to flow.

As in: Beer poured from the taps like water from a garden hose.

◆ **Poor:** Lacking possessions or wealth; provoking pity.

As in: Some poor souls nursed a serious hangover the next day.

Usage Confusion

◆ **Fewer versus less.** Use *less* in relation to a single, noncountable item, and *fewer* in relation to more than one countable item.

If you can count the thing you're referring to, use *fewer*. If not, use *less*.

As in: The sofa has less fur on it now that Anita has fewer dogs.

◆ **They're versus their versus there.** You'll see *they're*, *their*, and *there* tossed around incorrectly all the time. Here's a quick guide:

● *They're* is a contraction for *they are*. Substituting the full phrase before you shorten it will keep you on the right path: *They're* (they are) happy people.

● *Their* shows possession: They're happy people because they have *their* whiskey.

● *There* is a place, either actual or nonspecific. They're happy people because they have their whiskey over *there*. (Tip: *there* looks like *where*—as in place.)

◆ **Bring versus take.** The verbs *bring* and *take* both involve carrying or conveying something. Usually *bring* refers to something moving toward the speaker or writer (*Bring it to me*) while *take* suggests movement away from that person (*Take it to school*).

When you order tofu lettuce wraps to go from Ming's, do you order *bring out*? No, you do not. It's take-out, because you are carrying it away.

A good shortcut: Add *go* or *come* to the sentence to figure out whether you should use *take* or *bring*.

For example, should you say *bring it to my house* or *take it to my house*? Either can be correct. It depends on whether the person is coming or going to the house.

If Lola is *coming* to the house (coming to you, because you're there), she's *bringing*. If she's *going* to the house (where you aren't), she's *taking*.

Go pairs with *take*, and *come* pairs with *bring*.

◆ **It's versus its.** *It's* is a contraction of *it is* or *it has*. *Its* denotes possession, but not by a person (in other words, not *his* or *hers*).

Maddeningly, technology (like MS Word or your phone) will often autocorrect *it's* to *its,* and vice versa, undermining you even when you have it right to begin with. (MS Word is doing that to me right here and right now, forcing me to recorrect the autocorrect and now I am *FURIOUS*.)

If you're not sure which to use, substitute *his* (which has no apostrophe) for *its* to see whether using an apostrophe is correct.

As in: The car must have its (his, if the car were a dude) steering wheel in the right spot—preferably, in front of its (his) driver.

◆ **You're versus your.** Similar to the *it's–its* confusion, *you're* and *your* get confused everywhere and all the time, as well as autocorrected by the robots seeking to undermine civilization. (Now I'm just salty.)

You're is a contraction of *you are*. Can you substitute *you are* in a sentence and still have it make sense?

No? Then use *your*, which shows possession like *their*, *its*, *his*, *hers*, and *ours*.

◆ **Than versus then.** *Than* is used in comparisons.

As in: "There is no passion to be found playing small—in settling for a life that is less than the one you are capable of living."
—Nelson Mandela

As in: "I'd rather regret the things I've done than regret the things I haven't done." —Lucille Ball

Then relates to time or consequences.

As in: "I want my children to have all the things I couldn't afford. Then I want to move in with them." —Phyllis Diller

As in: "If I'm going to sing like someone else, then I don't need to sing at all." —Billie Holiday

◆ **Can versus may.** *May* connotes permission.

As in: May I drive your vintage Shelby?

Can usually denotes ability (more on that below).

As in: Maybe. Can you drive a stick shift?

Some say that using *can* to seek permission is wrong and that it should be used only in reference to ability. But it turns out that *can* is fine in both situations of ability and permission.

I wish I could go back and show my ninth-grade English comp teacher that last paragraph. She was a real *can*-versus-*may* extremist, which made those of us in her classroom sound like British Parliament members when we were just asking for a bathroom pass.

◆ **Who versus whom.** Use *who* when the word is the subject of a verb.

As in: Who is the baby-daddy?

Use *whom* when the word's the object of a verb.

As in: This is my boss, *whom* I respect. Usually.

How to remember which to use: Substitute *he* and *him* to test whether you should use *who* or *whom*. *He* would pair with *who*, and *him* (ends in *m*) would pair with *whom* (ends in *m*).

As in: Is it *whom do you love* or *who do you love?* Substitute he and him and rearrange the words.

Him do you love rearranged becomes *do you love him*?

H*e do you love* rearranged becomes *do you love he*?

In this case, use *whom*.

◆ **That versus which versus who.**

Use *who* for people.

Use *which* for things.

Use *that* for either people or things.

You'll notice this trio abused and confused all the time. Often people refer to companies or organizations as *who*.

As in: I once worked for a company who manufactured grommets.

Not okay, Internet, not okay.

As for whether you should use *that* or *which* in the grommet-manufacturing example, it doesn't much matter. You'll get heated arguments from the proponents of each. But I'd say don't worry about it—just don't refer to a nonperson as a *who*.

◆ **Whether versus if.** Use w*hether* to denote a choice (*whether or not*).

Use *if* to refer to a condition, real or imagined.

As in: "I'll do whatever it takes to win games, *whether* it's sitting on a bench waving a towel." —Kobe Bryant

As in: "One day, the people who work in my kitchen stir-fried chopped Napa cabbage to serve with some meat or fish for their own dinner. I got to thinking: 'What *if* the cabbage was the most important thing on the plate?'" —Nobu Matsuhisa

43

Grammar Rules Made to Be Broken

High school composition classes tend to lump a lot of rules into writing—many of them telling writers what *not* to do.

But we're not writing to please our teachers anymore. Many of those prohibitions refer to so-called mistakes that occur naturally in speech.

This is the chapter that empowers us to boldly and fearlessly crush those rules! Embrace these "mistakes" in writing—but only when embracing them adds clarity, readability, or voice. Or when it makes a sentence less clumsy overall.

1. **Never start a sentence with** *also, and, because, but, or, so.*

And why not put any of these words at the beginning of a sentence? Because Ms. Frizzle didn't like it? But what if she was wrong?

So why should we start a sentence with any of these words? Because all three can add energy and momentum to a piece. Also they keep the action moving from sentence to sentence.

2. **Avoid sentence fragments.** It's perfectly fine to sparingly add sentence fragments for emphasis.

At least, sometimes. (Like that.)

And that too.

And this.

3. Never split infinitives. An infinitive is the word *to* and the simplest form of a verb. *To be, to breathe, to live* are all infinitives.

There's supposedly a rule that says you can't let anything come between *to* and its verb. The two are a single unit that together express one idea.

Or so the thinking goes.

But that is fake news. Consider, for example, *Star Trek*'s famous directive "to boldly go where no one has gone before." The *Star Trek* writers could just as easily have written, "to go boldly where no one has gone before," says Mignon Fogarty at Quick and Dirty Tips.[1] But they didn't.

It's okay to happily split away.

And sometimes, splitting an infinitive delivers a less awkward construction:

◆ *As in*: Mr. Darcy's vast wealth is expected *to more than double* in the next fortnight.

◆ *As in*: Fitzwilliam used *to secretly admire* Elizabeth.

◆ *As in*: He'd like you *to carefully consider* his proposal.

One caveat: Be careful you don't unintentionally change the meaning or create ambiguity by splitting an infinitive.

Consider these two sentences:

1. Uncle Homer decided *to immediately construct* a new barn for Wilbur.

2. Uncle Homer decided *immediately to construct* a new barn for Wilbur.

Did Uncle Homer decide to begin construction immediately? That's what the former says.

Or did Uncle Home just decide quickly? That's what the latter says.

Keep your wits about you.

4. **Don't end a sentence with a preposition.** After an editor changed his sentence so it wouldn't end with a preposition, Winston Churchill allegedly countered: "This is the kind of impertinence up with which I shall not put."

Awkward, was Winston's point. "This is the kind of impertinence I will not put up with" is fine—even if it ends in a preposition.

A preposition is a word or group of words to show time, direction, place, and so on. Some examples are *above, across, against, along, among, around, at, before, behind, below, beneath, beside, between, by, down, from, in, into, near, of, off, on, to, toward, under, upon, with, within*.

Sometimes a preposition plays a key role at the end of a sentence.

As in: Count Chocula doesn't know what he's talking *about*.

As in: Flo from Progressive isn't sure where she came *from*.

One big *unless*: Don't end a sentence with a preposition when the sentence would mean the same thing without it.

Instead of: Where are you at?

Try: Where are you?[2]

5. **Never write a paragraph that's only one sentence long.** Many of us were taught to write paragraphs with no fewer than three sentences and no more than seven. (See Chapter 4.) Reading online has pretty much choked this one dead, because white space boosts online readability.

But it bears emphasizing: one sentence, set apart, is a great way to make an important point crystal clear.

Seriously.

I would not lead you astray.

6. **Never use sentence fragments.**

Each sentence must have a subject and a verb. For the most part? Yes. But not always.

I'm writing this on Microsoft Word. The program is arguing with me on almost every page, calling me out on my use of sentence fragments.

In the third paragraph of this chapter, for example, Microsoft is having an aneurysm over "Or when breaking rules makes a sentence less clumsy overall."

It's also mad at me for the second paragraph here: "For the most part?" And: "But not always."

But I'm overriding your decisions, Microsoft. The fragments stay, because the context is clear. And because it works with my voice. (Another fragment. MS Word and I might need couples counseling after this book.)

You can use a fragment if:

◆ It works with your style and voice, and

◆ The context is crystal-clear.

44

Limit Moralizing

Avoid beginning sentences with words that you'd hear from a pulpit, a parent, or a professor.

Lose the excessively prescriptive and the moralizing; they can come off as condescending. Watch the use of . . .

Don't forget . . .

Never . . .

Don't. . .

Remember to . . .

Avoid . . . (LOL)

And one so awful I can barely type it:

Always remember to . . .

I know, I know . . . I've broken this advice many times in this book. I broke it in the first line of this very chapter, 80 words ago.

Warning you of danger without using *never* or *avoid* is hard to . . . uh, avoid.

That's true whether you're warning someone of the possibility of actual danger (*Never use this curling iron near a bubble bath!*) or a metaphorical one (*Avoid Weblish!*). (I see you, Chapter 35.)

Prescriptive, how-to instructional writing is one thing; dogmatic, bellowing copy is another.

The line between helpful/preachy and educational/flat-out bossy isn't easy to define.

But in our own work, let's be aware that a line does exist. And try—as I have tried here—not to cross it.

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Eggcorns and Mondegreens

"Who sang *Rock the Cash Bar?*" queried a post in an online forum. (Maybe ironically.)

The mutated Clash song title (from 1982's "Rock the Casbah") is a mondegreen—a term that results from the mishearing or misinterpreting a word or phrase.

Well-known examples of mondegreens are everywhere:

> *It doesn't make a difference if we're naked or not* (for Bon Jovi's *It doesn't make a difference if we make it or not*, in "Livin' on a Prayer")

> *I'm farting carrots* (for Selena Gomez's *I'm fourteen carat*, in "Good for You")

> *Cross-eyed bear* for *cross I bear*

And perhaps the granddaddiest of all mondegreens:

> *Scuse me while I kiss this guy* (from Jimi Hendrix's 1967 lyric in "Purple Haze," *Scuse me while I kiss the sky*).

Which is classic in more ways than one.

<p style="text-align:center">* * *</p>

Mondegreen was coined by Scottish author Sylvia Write, when her misinterpreting of a Scottish ballad was mentioned in a 1954 article in *Harper's Magazine*. She misheard *They hae slain the Earl o' Moray and laid him on the green* as *They hae slain the Earl o' Moray and Lady Mondegreen*.

A subcategory of the mondegreen is the eggcorn.

An eggcorn is also a mishearing or mutation of a phrase, but one that makes sense. Examples might be *coming down the pipe* (instead of the actual phrase of *coming down the pike*) and *butt naked* instead of *buck naked*.

Other kinds of wordplay are malapropisms and spoonerisms—which are mostly spoken-word phenomena and (unlike mondegreens or eggcorns) typically intentional.

A malapropism is when an incorrect word is used in place of a word with a similar sound: Having only one spouse is called monotony (vs. monogamy).

A spoonerism (named for an Oxford professor) is when you switch letters around in a term: Rindercella. Nucking futs. Is it kisstomary to cuss the bride?

But it is the eggcorns—so named by linguist Geoffrey Pullum in 2003 after noting a substitution of *eggcorn* for *acorn*—that seem to be growing in number more than words in other categories. Maybe that's because many of us writing online are using words and phrases we've heard but have never seen in print, suggests Evan Morris, who writes at the Word Detective website.[1]

So why am I sharing all this with you?

To underscore that language is a growing, fluid thing. In other words: One day you're an eggcorn. Next day you're. . . well, a tree.

And because words are fun and playful as puppies. We need a reminder of that as a chaser to the grammar-heavy Part II! Let's wrap up this section with a little light-hearted joy!

* * *

Many of the growing number of eggcorns are surprisingly common.
(The eggcorn comes first, then the correct phrase.)

◆ For all intensive purposes > For all intents and purposes

◆ You've got another think coming > You've got another thing
   coming

◆ Nip it in the butt > Nip it in the bud

◆ To the manor born > To the manner born

◆ Abject lesson > Object lesson

◆ Bad wrap > Bad rap

◆ Far be it for me > Far be it from me

◆ Upmost > Utmost

◆ Pot marks > Pock marks

◆ Deep-seeded > Deep-seated

◆ When all is set and done > When all is said and done

◆ Signal out > Single out

◆ Cold slaw > Cole slaw

◆ Duck tape > Duct tape (This one is controversial in eggcorn
   circles.)

P.S. You can wander through acres of eggcorns at the old-school-looking
but fun-to-browse The Eggcorn Database (eggcorns.lascribe.net). It has
648 of them.

Part III

Voice Rules

I saw *Toy Story 4* in theaters one blistering hot day in Maine, where I was on vacation. We just couldn't take the heat anymore that day, so we escaped into the local Cinemagic.

Inside, the AC was turned up way too aggressively—as usual everywhere in July. So while I lay supine and motionless in the deep pillows of my Cinemagic power recliner—flanked by a barrel of popcorn and a pail of soda nestled in its pail-sized soda holder—I felt a chill settle in.

Suddenly, this was Maine in February.

If you're a fan of the Toy Story franchise—and I am—you should watch the movie. Especially if you're in marketing and especially if you love words.

* * *

New to the Toy Story characters in this film is Gabby Gabby, a talking pull-string doll from the 1950s. A defect in her pull-string voice box makes her sound un-doll-like: weird, gravelly. So she has spent more than 60 years forgotten in the cruddy depths of an antique store.

Gabby Gabby is hoping that if she can just repair her voice . . . a child will love her forever. *(Set aside the troubling notion that you have to be perfect to be loved. We're in the middle of a story here . . .)*

To be loved by a child is the highest calling for any toy, of course—a theme that runs throughout the Toy Story franchise.

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I don't want to give too much away. But, eventually, Gabby Gabby's voice box is fixed. And that gravelly voice is now just like every other pull-string voice.

Fine.

But what does Gabby Gabby say, when finally a child lifts her up and pulls her string?

What words does she call forth from her newly perfect voice box when the moment comes—the moment she's been hotly anticipating for 60 years . . .?

The one chance she finally has when a girl named Harmony lifts her up, stares into her plastic baby face, and waits for what Gabby Gabby has to say . . .?

Honestly, I don't remember. Something like "Hi, I'm Gabby Gabby. Let's be friends."

I don't remember because what she said and the voice she said it in weren't unique or memorable or any different at all.

And that's my point.

<div align="center">* * *</div>

Of course I'm having some fun overstating things here. . . . *Toy Story 4* is a fun, simple movie, not an *Everybody Writes Part III* parable.

But we *could* look at it through a marketing lens.

Gabby Gabby has seconds *(seconds!)* to convert her "prospect."

But that's not what happens. She says something boring in a typical way. And Harmony shrugs and tosses Gabby Gabby aside, 1000% unimpressed.

Whoopsie. That's a spoiler. Sorry.

I see it all the time: People, brands, companies, organizations, shops, nonprofits, libraries, realtors, tech leaders, dolls that pay more attention to how they look than what they're actually saying and how they're actually saying it.

We sand off the interesting, rough parts so we can sound like everyone else.

We say the expected stuff that defines us most broadly, instead of honing the great, weird story that makes us unique.

* * *

Your story sets you apart. And how you tell it in your own gravelly brand voice is your single biggest opportunity.

Story and voice are a powerful combo pack: like a barrel of popcorn flanked by a pail of soda.

So let's get into it.

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Sweat the Smallest Stuff

Not too long ago I visited a new but unremarkable medical office building set in the middle of an unremarkable development on the side of a highway. It was built for function, not beauty—the sensible shoe of the architecture world.

It was my first time there; my doctor had referred me to an orthopedic surgeon for a torn rotator cuff—the result of a tumble I took on a snowy Boston street.

As I approached the building, it was the sign that got me. "Northeast Orthopaedics," it read. Well, that was remarkable . . . that "ae" in the middle of the word is an old, British spelling of "orthopedics."

It was a curious and unexpected choice, especially on such a modern building in a sterile location.

Was it just a misspelling? A random choice? Or could this medical specialist actually be something kinda . . .well, *special*?

Maybe something akin to Ye Olde Orthopaedics Shoppe?

"Will the good doctor greet me in a topcoat and breeches?" I thought as I walked into the lobby. "Perhaps with a top hat—like Anthony Bridgerton? Or as a life-sized Jiminy Cricket?"

"I say, my dear woman," he'd query. "What unfortunate happenstance brings you here this fine day?"

"My shoulder has been vexing me, good sir," I imagined myself replying. "Might you offer some satisfactory resolution?"

Then he'd use his quill to pen a prescription to the apothecary—maybe a wormwood potion.

Or perhaps he'd refer me for some bloodletting?

* * *

But once inside the building, I saw right away this was no different from any other medical office. A sign directly inside the door told me the Wi-Fi password is CALCIUM.

Wi-Fi! In Olde England! Pray tell! If there is to be Wi-Fi, good people of the Orthopaedics—might not the password be more *on brande*?

Maybe BOILED_RED_NETTLE?

Or LEECHES?

I sighed and took my place in the check-in line. I stood waiting my turn, just behind someone wearing tube socks that read FIRST CLASS BITCH.

When I was called to see the doctor, he in fact *was* on the short side.

But nowhere near as tiny as a cricket.

* * *

I'm having a little fun, of course. But only just.

Orthopaedic vs. *Orthopedic*: Such a small thing to sweat.

Or is it?

It's often the smallest things that set the tone for that high-minded concept we call "brand voice." It's the smallest things that signal a brand. A personality. A point of view.

The throwaway things are often the very things that shape a customer's experience the most.

- ◆ **The first screen** or landing page they encounter.

- ◆ **The greeting** in the first email they open.

- ◆ **The language in the first bill** they get from accounting.

- ◆ **The first Wormwood prescription** they fill.

Ha. I really am just kidding you now.

* * *

Your brand's tone of voice sets you apart. It differentiates you from competitors. It signals what you're like to do business with. It's key to creating and sustaining customer relationships.

Brand tone of voice is not a small, throwaway thing. And yet most companies treat it that way.

If they have tone of voice guidelines at all, they're often buried in *design* guidelines—focusing on the logo, color palette, fonts, and other things we think of as "branding."

Or their brand voice guidelines focus too much on grammar. Or they sit in a metaphorical binder on a shelf somewhere—ignored, forgotten, lonely.

Very few take the time to consider the branding boost that an approachable, relatable, friendly voice can give a company.

But not you. Because you're going to embrace this big, beautiful, enormous advantage!

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What's Brand Voice?

"Back up," you're thinking. "What's 'brand voice'? And what's 'tone of voice'? That thing I studied in Humanities?"

Yes. And also no. In literature, the voice expresses a narrator's or an author's attitude and point of view through their word choice, style, and more.

In business, tone of voice is how we speak to one another. It's how our writing or copy sounds in a reader's head.

And it's a powerful signal, especially in a world of content overload.

Let's say that you walk into my Wormwood Shoppe. I welcome you in: *Good day to you there, fine buyer of goods!*

Immediately you'll start to form an opinion about who I am—my likability, character, trustworthiness.

You'll take in my body language. The expression on my face. My clothes. The way I speak and its cadence: *Am I rushed or perturbed? Warm or friendly?* You'll hear not just *what* I said . . . but *how* I said it.

You'll take in all that . . . without really thinking about it.

Now let's say that you don't visit a physical store. Instead, you fill your potion prescription online, at something like YourWormwoodShoppe.com. How will you assess my character and trustworthiness then?

Through the design, yes. Through the usability. But also through the voice I use in my text and other content.

Tone of voice is how your marketing channels and assets "talk" to a customer online.

It's how we shape the relationship across all our marketing and communications—website, blogs posts, emails, scripts, social channels, press releases, product brochures, presentations, call-center scripts . . . and, well everything else not in this list.

* * *

Tone of voice isn't *what* you say. It's *how* you say it.

You can express the same thing in different ways. If you have a grilled sausage, for example, you might ask for a condiment by saying. . .

> *"Hand over that mustard."*

> *"Can you pass me the mustard?"*

> *"Pardon me. . . might you have any Grey Poupon?"*

The difference between those is the tone of voice.

The same is true for how our companies communicate.

A challenge: Mask the logo on your site. Read the words out loud. Do you sound different, unique—like yourself? Or do you sound like everyone else . . . including your competitors?

If the label fell off . . . would you recognize your own voice? Would your boss or client?

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How to Develop Your Brand Voice

Freaker USA manufactures and sells one-size-fits-all beverage insulators—also known as can coolers, beer koozies, coolies, and (in Australia) stubby holders or stubbies.

Bottle and can insulation is a pretty straightforward category (despite its many nicknames). There are a few high-end makers (like Yeti, which makes three sizes of a stainless insulator that's at least three times the price of most insulators).

Most of the can koozies sold in the United States are flexible foam sleeves, sometimes printed with company logos or funny sayings for drunks. ("*Let's Get Ready to Stumble.*")

Here's an example of how one company describes its product:

> *This drink insulator keeps your bottled beverages colder longer, plus folds flat for maximum pocket portability.*

And another:

> *It fits your bottle or can like a glove and is classier than a brown bag.*

And this is Yeti:

> *[The] double-wall vacuum insulation is how your drink stays icy cold, so you can enjoy a cold craft brew even when the sun's blazing.*

Now let's hear from Freaker USA:

> **Hello, I'm a FREAKER!** *There's elastic knit throughout my BEAUTIFUL body, giving me the ability to stretch and fit BEER, SPORTS, WATER & WINE containers! I protect your hands from icy-sweaty beverages, keep your drinks COLD and you looking snazzy!*

Well. That's different. The exclamation point! The SHOUTY CAPS proclaiming its glory! The anthropomorphized Freaker narrating its own description in the first-person. ("*I* protect your hands . . .")

The product description of a basic beverage insulator is packed with personality, isn't it? Already you get a sense of the quirky little manufacturer that is Freaker.

Let's navigate over to the Freaker About Us page:

> *Established in 2011 . . . Freaker USA quickly grew to be the global leader of preventing moist handshakes and sweaty beverages. They aren't just selling you their fit-everything product, they're giving you an invitation to their party—a starter kit for a new lifestyle. The Freaker isn't a strike-at-the-wind attempt to get rich, it's the background music to a never-ending journey.*

Now let's opt in to its email "insider" list. This is the confirmation email that just landed in my inbox:

> *Hey Ann, now imagine us hugging and me holding on just a little too long and whispering in your ear "Welcome to the Freaker Team."*
>
> *So, what can you expect that now you're an insider. . .?*

Every brand on the planet wants to be recognized for its voice, so that if you stripped away everything else (logos, colors), you would know exactly who they are.

<div align="center">* * *</div>

What can we learn from Freaker's brand voice?

You don't sell stretchy bottle insulators that prevent moist handshakes. Your brand might not be freewheeling like Freaker.

But the broader point is to define . . . well, who are you? And: Who are you *not?*

<div align="center">* * *</div>

Voice is not about grammar. Instead, it's about how the personality and character of your business come through in the words you use.

Voice reflects your culture. Voice communicates with empathy with people you want to reach.

It reflects who you are and what you're like to deal with.

Done right, your unique brand voice will attract the like-minded and at the same time repel those who aren't a good fit for you and your business.

Here's how to tap into and document your own brand voice.

1. Define Your *You*ness

Your brand voice grows out of your own brand. It's your personality in words.

What makes you uniquely *you*? Are you sophisticated? Accessible? Playful? Buttoned-up? Serious? Snarky? Reliable? Helpful?

Brainstorm four characteristics that best describe you.

You can freewheel it—choosing adjectives that align with your personality. But I recommend giving it a little structure.

Research and consulting group Nielsen Norman Group identified four primary dimensions to tone of voice.[1]

1. **Funny vs. serious:** Does your brand attempt to be funny? Or do you communicate in a more straightforward and serious way?

2. **Formal vs. casual:** Are you arm's-length formal, or familiar? Are you a trusted source for high-level insight? Or more of a go-to source for hands-on, practical advice that feels more like recommendations from a friend?

3. **Respectful vs. irreverent:** Do you communicate in a courteous, respectful way? Or are you a bit saucy, spirited, quirky?

4. **Enthusiastic vs. matter-of-fact:** Would you ever begin an email with *OMG friend*s! Or are you more straightforward?

Decide nearer which end of the scale you fall into for each of the four dimensions. Then, pick four adjectives on each dimension that best define your brand and the way you communicate.

Get specific. Find words that reflect who you really are and how you want to be perceived.

Write them down.

My company, MarketingProfs, is a marketing training and consulting company. Our four words are:

1. Enjoyable

2. Accessible

3. Affiliative

4. Smart |

A few brand voice don'ts:

◆ Avoid picking words like *friendly, reliable, or honest*. Those are table stakes because all businesses should be as much.

◆ Avoid pulling out the thesaurus. You don't need to overcomplicate things by tossing aside a perfectly fine word like *unusual* and subbing in something like *preternatural*. You don't get extra points for longer words with more syllables. Keep it simple.

◆ Avoid meaningless buzzwords like *cutting-edge, revolutionary, proactive*.

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2. Translate Those Words into a Style

Attributes in isolation don't mean that much. So develop some detail around them. Make them real and practical: How are you "accessible"? How does that help your customers?

Flesh out those words with a few sentences or anecdotes.

Again, at MarketingProfs:

◆ **Enjoyable**: We aren't funny, but we aren't exactly serious, either. We want people to smile when they read our words or experience our website.

◆ **Accessible**: More casual than formal, because MarketingProfs seeks to help marketers understand complex ideas. But still . . .

◆ **Affiliative**: We are marketers marketing to marketers . . . so we want to be relatable in every way we can. That means we're okay with some jargon that signals *we understand you, Marketer . . . because we* are *you*.

◆ **Smart**: This is matter-of-fact expressed in an accessible manner.

3. Document It

I almost wrote "create a style guide," but I worried I'd lose you there and you'd flip to the next chapter. A "style guide" feels grueling to compile and boring to read. But it doesn't have to be either. We'll keep it simple.

But first, a style guide pep talk: You *do* need to document your brand voice. It's critical for larger companies, where content isn't produced by just one or two people.

And it's also important for growing, scrappy companies—even if you might think reading a voice guide is about as appealing as reading *History of Trigonometric Functions* (volumes 1–34). (Side note: Keep going! Volume 35 is a page-turner!)

At smaller companies and startups, a brand voice often grows organically out of the founder's personality and values. But what happens when the company grows and a marketing team takes over the writing of the emails the founder used to pen herself? That's when you'll be glad you bothered to write all this stuff down.

Most companies spend shipping containers full of time documenting the visual attributes of a brand and a shot-glass-full on documenting voice. Skype, for example, published a 66-page PDF detailing the use of speech bubbles and Pantone colors . . . yet dedicated a mere two pages to voice.[2] *Okay*.

What Goes in a Style Guide?

Start simply with the basics. Add to it over time. Revise and refresh as you need.

Take the pressure off yourself: Your style guide isn't chiseled into stone tablets. It's a living, breathing document. Actively manage it; check in on it every quarter or so: *You good, Style Guide? Need anything?*

A Google Doc works fine—and it's easily updated. Or create a simple chart. (See the box on the following page.)

Some things to put into your style guide:

- ◆ Your four words.

- ◆ A description of what your four words mean.

- ◆ Your four words in context.

See? Simple and straightforward.

We keep the MarketingProfs brand voice guide in an internal Google doc. It's brief and written in the style our brand voice, not gross arm's-length brand-speak. It includes lots of examples and references to how we describe various products.

Other brands publish them publicly, which is handy for inspiration. A few of my favorites include The University of Leeds, Mailchimp, Uberflip, and Monzo.[3]

Other possible additions to your style guide:

- ◆ **Pronouns.** Too small a thing to consider? No.

  Companies tend to be all over the map with pronouns—using the first-person "we" and "us" in one sentence and the third-person ("Abbading Incorporated") elsewhere.

  The first-person tends to be warmer and create a more accessible tone, while the third-person tends to feel more detached and formal. Pick one based on your brand voice, and stick with it.

  The same goes for your audience. Use "you" or "customers." Don't swap them in and out so they pop up unexpectedly and startle you.

- ◆ **Accepted jargon.** I used to take a hard line against jargon and insider-y language, in that I used to say, *don't use it*. But I've rethought the hard line: Jargon can signal a shared mindset or convey a depth of knowledge.

Spell out what jargon and phrases your company embraces and which it does not.

◆ **Build on a classic:** Adopt a well-known style guide like the *Chicago Manual of Style* or the *AP Style Guide*. Then add your own brand style guide to it. The benefit is that you'll have the style basics covered ("email" vs. "e-mail") while being able to address things that are more important to you.

A tone of voice chart is a handy at-a-glance way to illustrate your brand voice. Here's how we illustrated the MarketingProfs voice.

Attribute	Description	Like This	Not Like This
Enjoyable	We want people to smile as much as possible.	"You've earned a prospect's email address. Huzzah! Nothing can stop you now! Except Spam traps. And temp emails. And bounce rate. And . . . well, that's why you need email list validation."	"Cleaning obsolete data from your B2B marketing email list is a best practice if you send mass emails. Here are some reasons. . .."
Accessible	Clear language. Shorter sentences. Buzzword-free. Casual, not formal.	"Come for the ideas; stay for the shenanigans."	"Bringing together the top ideas in B2B marketing for education and networking."
Affiliative	Warm. Relatable. From a person to a person. Jargon used sparingly. Use "you" vs. "customer" or "client."	"What are you doing Thursday? Wanna swing by this event?"	"MarketingProfs invites B2B market-ers to a special program. . .."
Smart	This is matter-of-fact expressed in an accessible manner.	"If you work for a global brand, you know you need to market to audiences that speak different languages."	"Global companies know that localized content is a key part of a customer experience strategy." (Standoffish and complex.)

4. Look for Nonobvious Opportunities

Apply your voice consistently everywhere.

Not only in the most obvious places—like your website copy and social channels page—but also in places we don't typically think of as "marketing." On your 404 page, your mobile updates, mobile notifications, your email confirmation, your post-purchase Thank You page, About Us page, FAQ page, product descriptions, and microcopy.

Is your brand voice baby-new? Are all those locations overwhelming to consider all at once . . .?

It's okay. Let's next look at four places brand voice matters most.

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Four Powerful Places to Apply Brand Voice

Here are four important places to let your brand voice sing out as clear and strong as Lady Gaga.

Microcopy is the small bits of copy that offer context, instruction or explanation to your readers and visitors. The tiny print at the bottom of an email. The error messages. The captions, terms and conditions, loading screens, footers, disclaimers, button copy, or the persistent message that *this website uses cookies are you okay with that?*

Microcopy is a powerful place for tone of voice that sings because it's unexpected. It's the throwaway copy that most companies ignore.

But it's an outsized opportunity to showcase your voice, because it suggests something important to your reader: *If this company pays attention to small things like the footer of an email . . . they must really care about delighting me.*

About Us tells a site visitor about how you value your own people—an important bellwether for how you'll value *them* as visitors and customers. Take that excellent opportunity to introduce yourself, and to show how you are different from your peers.

First touch. What's your customer's first touch? First glimpse? First interaction? You never get a second chance to make a first impression, as the Greek philosopher Pinterest might say.[*]

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[*]Pinterest was not a Greek philosopher. But it's a great name for one, isn't it?

"First touch" is less prescribable a place—because it will vary depending on the visitor and what path they took to reach you. But some obvious places to consider: your email signup form, email onboarding sequence, landing pages, home page, social channels.

Last touch. The last interaction a customer has with you—post-purchase, post-signup, post-conversion (however you define "conversion"). "Last touch" is another opportunity to leave them feeling good and happy about the interaction they had with you.

It's also less prescribable as a place. But consider post-purchase Thank You pages, confirmation landing pages, footers of web pages or emails, FAQs.

* * *

Start with these four locations and interactions. Build from there. Word by word.

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Voice Doesn't Change, Tone Does

Your brand voice reflects who you are. It's consistent, constant, and doesn't waver in any circumstance.

But your tone should change depending on what you are trying to convey.

Your brand voice might be upbeat and quirky. But if a customer is annoyed because of a service issue, "a cheeky email that may come across as cute in one situation may be a major turnoff in another," points out content strategist Ahava Leibtag.

Here's an example of how Gogo Inflight maintains the same voice (fun, friendly, accessible) but adjusts its tone to handle two very different situations.

Gogo addresses how its mobile in-flight service works—with a fun, friendly voice and hyperbolic, cheeky tone ("you're about to witness the birth of the world's first wireless broadband network"):

Gogo's FAQ page keeps the friendly voice. Yet it drops the cheeky tone in favor of a helpful one (we can help!).

Gogo understands that people who visit this page are likely annoyed and frustrated by an inability to connect. In this case, cheek would only antagonize.

Your own communication tone might also change in response to world events, movements, or a public relations issue of any kind. In those situations, your tone should convey a chosen course of action with sincere honesty and empathy.

How Gogo works

Watch how Wi-Fi takes flight

Congratulations, you're about to witness the birth of the world's first wireless broadband network for inflight connectivity. Watch as a series of simple cell towers are transformed into a revolutionary new form of entertainment — Gogo® – In air. Online.

Technical specifications

Is Gogo fast? Is the sky blue? The Gogo experience is best compared to mobile broadband service on the ground — except with a whole lot more altitude. All you need is a Wi-Fi enabled device, a Gogo account, and a burning desire to access exclusive in-air experiences available only on Gogo.

Related Frequenty Asked Questions

What are the minimum requirements to use Gogo? »

How do I know if my device is Wi-Fi enabled? »

Is it safe to use Wi-Fi in flight? »

How secure is the Gogo Inflight Portal? »

FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS **?** COMMON TOPICS ↓

Ask a question or search our FAQ's below. →

▼ I bought a Flight Pass on my smart phone. Can I use it on my laptop or tablet?

Flight Passes which have been purchased while on your smart phone cannot be used for laptop or tablet access. If you want to be able to switch between 2 or more types of devices, you will need to purchase your pass from the tablet, laptop, or the ground. If you're in flight and would like to upgrade your pass, <u>chat</u> with us - we can help!

Drizly is an online liquor ordering and delivery platform—like an Uber for alcohol. Its brand voice is direct, real, and irreverent; its tone generally playful and lighthearted.

Yet, during April's Alcohol Awareness Month, the brand shifted its playful tone in an email to its list.

"As we enter Alcohol Awareness Month, we wanted to reach out and make sure all Drizly customers are aware of support resources should they ever need them for themselves or a loved one," read the email, signed by Team Drizly.

"This probably isn't the kind of email you'd expect from us, but our purpose at Drizly is to be there when it matters."

Drizly then shares a few resources that aim to build understanding around alcohol abuse and the stigmas associated with alcohol addiction. The first item on its resource list? A way to disable your Drizly account or intervene on behalf of a loved one.

The voice has the same real-talk vibe that matches all Drizly products. But the tone is much more empathetic and self-aware. By offering resources and recourse, Drizly owns up to any role it might inadvertently play in someone's addiction battle.

* * *

Put yourself in the boots of your customer: What's their likely mindset when they're navigating various pages or components of your website? Of your business? When they're reading your emails or updates?

What are they feeling? Adjust your tone of communication accordingly.

Part IV

Story Rules

Story and *storytelling* are two words that might seem impossibly squishy in a business context. They often conjure up thoughts of art, not commerce.

But here's the truth: Marketing is art plus intent. And stories are how we connect emotionally with people who are our prospects and customers.

Storytelling in business isn't about spinning a yarn or a fairy tale. Instead, it's about showing how your business (or its product or service) exists in the real world: who you are and what you do for the benefit of others; how you add value to people's lives, ease their troubles, help shoulder their burdens, and meet their needs.

Your brand stories give your audience a chance to view your business as what it is: a living, breathing entity run by real people offering real value.

Your content is not about *storytelling*, it's about telling a true story well.

It's a subtle difference. But the creators of the best content contemplate not just *what* story is worth telling but also *how* to tell it.

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The Six Elements of a Marketing Story

I'm tempted to insert something here about how stories stir our souls. They draw us in. Connect us in a shared experience. Shape our point of view.

But you are human. You know that already, right?

You've binge-watched a billion hours of Netflix. You know how compelling a story can be: how part of you is willing to rationalize maybe just one more episode . . . even as the rational part of you knows you need to sleep.

("*Go to bed! Tomorrow morning is going to be rough!*" Rational-You says. Irrational-You counters: "*But here comes the next episode! It's already buffering in! Maybe just 10 minutes. . .?*")

The best marketing has figured out the power of story, too.

Powerful storytelling stirs emotions. It can shape beliefs and change behaviors. It can help complex ideas or concepts become more accessible.

Storytelling helps make us memorable, because humans remember stories more than facts or figures or concepts.

And, of course, the explosion of marketing platforms and channels now offers us exponentially more ways to tell and share stories.

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Which is why in the past few years we've seen a bounty of inspired brand storytelling. But we've also seen some terrible efforts. Because telling a true story well is about "as easy and pleasurable as bathing a cat," as the writer Anne Lamott puts it.

So the challenge for us all: *How do we bathe the cat?*

How do we pull compelling stories out of our own organizations? How do we tell a brand story or a more specific product story in an interesting way that relates to our customers?

We've got this. Let's start by understanding the six characteristics of a compelling marketing story:

1. **It's true.** Make truth the cornerstone of any story you create. That means real people, real situations, genuine emotions, and actual facts. Write with integrity and accountability: Be honest with your readers.

   As much as possible, your story should show, not tell. It should explain—in terms people can relate to—how your company or product adds value to the lives of customers.

   "True" also means that you credit original sources. Ground your stories in data. Acknowledge any bias that may compromise your point of view. Link to sources generously. Cite reliably. Disclose all connections, sponsors, conflicts, or potential biases. And finally: Limit the number of anonymous sources. (There is more on all this in other sections of this book.)

2. **It's human.** Even if you are a company that sells to other companies, focus your story on how your products or services improve the lives of actual *people*. Or (better yet!) an actual *person*.

   Again, a good rule to remember: Be specific enough to be believable, and universal enough to be relevant. (That's a nugget from my journalism school days.)

3. **It's original.** Offer a new, fresh perspective.

   What's interesting about your company? Why is it important? Is it uniquely you?

Again: If you covered up your logo on your website or video or blog or social channels or any content you've produced . . . do you sound unique? Would people still recognize it as coming from you?

4. **It makes your customer the hero.** Your product might be as revolutionary as an escalator to the moon. But your story isn't about that: It's not about what you do or what you sell; it's what you do *for others*.

   How does your product help people? How does it shoulder their burdens? How does it ease their pain? Answer their questions?

   How does your product live in the world?

   Your customer is your hero—the protagonist or main character in your story. Put them smack at the center it.

   Will your reader or viewer feel a flash of recognition in your story? Do they see themselves in it?

   Brand stories that don't revolve around a customer-protagonist feel corporate-centric. They come across as indulgent (at best) or boring (at worst).

   Focus on how your products or services touch people's lives— even if you sell something that some might consider inherently boring (like technology, toasters, or tongue depressors).

   Paint a picture of why people should care about your tech.

   Or toast.

   Or depressed tongues.*

5. **It makes people feel something.** Does your story ignite real emotion in hearts and minds?

    And finally . . .

6. **It's aligned with a long-term business strategy**. The best stories grow out of your brand positioning (what you do and for whom)

---

*Now picturing emotionally distressed tongues.

and your unique value proposition (what you offer better than or unlike others). They're developed and designed to fuel your marketing goals.

Said another way:

Your Brand Positioning
+
Your Unique Value
+
Your Marketing Goals

Your True, Human-Sized, Original, Soul-Stirring Customer-As-Hero Stories

* * *

Did you notice that the goals piece came last in this list?

That's not because it's not important. It is. But it's last because a strategy-first story tends to be about as compelling as an instruction manual.

Start with people.

Infuse with emotion.

Align with strategy.

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Your Brand Story: Tell the Story Only You Can Tell

Avoid Messaging Karaoke

This is actual copy, cut and pasted from the home page of an actual public accounting firm:

> *<Name> is a full-service, certified public accounting practice located in <city> whose objective is to provide timely and accurate professional services. The firm was established in 2002. <Name> is a growing firm and has the capacity available to professionally service new accounts.*

This is a press release that landed in my inbox five minutes ago from a Fortune 500 . . . uh . . . "solution":

> *Released today, <name> enables businesses to monitor consumer online chat about their brand and competition, and take action to improve their performance and provide a differentiated customer experience.*

And another press release:

> *We have a proven ability to deliver highly impactful results for our clients by leveraging a variety of data sources and advanced analytic approaches.*

One more. This is from a LinkedIn company page profile:

> *<Name> is a contemporary, future-focused consulting services company equipped for the next era of business with the latest in management*

thinking and enabled by cutting-edge Web technology and services. We are building innovative next generation business models and performance improvement capabilities for large corporations highly differentiated by a commingling of new and emerging specialized competencies.

All those buzzwords make me feel sad for the poor copywriters. They were likely browbeaten into corporate conformity by a wrongheaded stakeholder.

The worst part of all of those examples isn't just the buzzword bouillabaisse. The worst part is they could be describing a hundred different companies, rather than one unique company.

It's what I call Messaging Karaoke: a bunch of companies singing the same exhausted words and tired phrases.

What sets you apart? What's unique about your story?

Don't tell me *what* you do.

Show me *who* you are—and then show me *why* you matter to *me*.

How to Avoid Messaging Karaoke

"What if . . . there were a law firm that made life easier for you?" asks the home page of Levenfeld Pearlstein, a Chicago law firm.

Right away you see that Levenfeld Pearlstein is not like other law firms. It seeks to build business relationships with clients as trusted strategic advisers—not just as guns-for-hire lawyers.

And it weaves that client-centric story throughout everything the firm does—from the home page copy to hiring to case work and more.

There's a lot to love how LP tells that lawyer-as-your-partner story throughout its marketing.

I love the brand voice on its website; for example: "We offer the same level of skill and expertise without the bitter big-firm aftertaste." Professional—but relatable.

But I particularly enjoy its About Us page. LP calls it "Our Talent," as if the attorneys have side hustles as supermodels.

The firm noticed that the attorney profile pages were the most visited on its site. That makes sense, right? If you want to hire an attorney, you want to know exactly whom you are hiring.

So the firm created a series of partner profile videos to elevate the attorney bios. But here's the interesting part: The firm interviewed its attorneys not with usual questions, like *Tell me about a recent case* or *Where did you go to school?*

Instead, it asked unusual questions about unconventional topics: *What did you want to be when you were little? If you could time-travel, where would you go? What is your most prized possession? What's your personal motto?*

"My personal motto is *Lead where you are*," Angie Hickey says in one video on that Our Talent page. She's a strategic adviser and former CEO of the firm.

"Leadership" isn't a job title, Angie says, adding: "I believe everyone has an opportunity to influence those around them."

The video is nicely shot. But it's not scripted or overly produced: There are a few *umms* and *ahs*. But it's real. And it's perfect because Angie speaks from her heart. She's showing you who she is and (by extension) who the law firm is.

That approach is unusual for a professional services firm. And that's intentional. LP's Our Talent page extends the overall story the law firm tells:

- ◆ They are here for you in extraordinary ways.

- ◆ They obsess over relationships.

- ◆ They're showing—not telling—who they are, and what makes them different.

And all of that rolls into how they do their work.

* * *

Your own story is like Miracle-Gro, fertilizing whatever content marketing or social presence you ultimately create.

Articulate yours. Write it down. Apply it like Levenfeld Pearlstein does.

Your story will align marketing externally, and align writers and content creators internally.

It'll get everyone on the same page, in that every person creating content on your behalf will look through your story lens, metaphorically speaking, and ask: *Is this telling our bigger story? Is this content steeped in our larger mission?*

Ask yourself these questions as a starting point to avoid Messaging Karaoke and instead craft *your* story:

1. What is unique about our business?

2. What's interesting about how our business was founded?

3. What's interesting about the founder(s)?

4. What problem is our company trying to solve for others?

5. What inspired our business?

6. What *aha!* moments has our company had?

7. How has our business evolved?

8. How do we *feel* about our business, our customers, ourselves?

9. What's an unobvious way to tell our story? Can we look to analogy instead of example?

10. What do we consider normal and boring that other folks would think is cool?

11. What's our vision? How will our company change the world?

That last question is especially salient, because it's central to your bigger story:

How will you change the world . . . even a little bit?

How will you make it better for all of us?

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Product Story: Make Your Customer the Hero

To understand how to structure our own product stories, let's look at a beloved American children's classic, *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer*.

You might know *Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer* as a stop-motion animated special that streams on various networks around the holidays. Or maybe you know the words to the song that plays on loop in elevators and in retailers from Thanksgiving to New Year's.

But before Rudolph became famous through television and his theme song and a verified Instagram account (just kidding about that last one) . . .

Before *all* that: *Rudolph* was a content marketing program for a major U.S. retailer.

* * *

Here's a quick recap of the *Rudolph* story:

Rudolph is a young reindeer buck born in the North Pole with an unusual superpower: a red nose that glows as bright as a headlamp.

No one celebrates Rudolph or his headlamp of a nose, however. He is mocked by his peers. His flight coach casts him out of the squad. His parents are embarrassed by him.

Only a hot young doe named Clarice shows him any kindness.

Then one Christmas Eve, heavy fog threatens to ground Santa and his sleigh full of toys. A skinny, cranky Santa gathers together the community of North Pole elves and reindeer, intending to deliver the bad news: The reindeer can't fly through the fog! Christmas will be canceled!

Yet as he starts to address the group, Santa is annoyed by a glow . . . *Of what? What is that?*

It's Rudolph's bright nose, burning Santa's retinas like a welding torch. Santa lifts his scrawny arm to shield his eyes. But as he does, he realizes that the nose—Rudolph's nose!—is bright enough to cut through the fog! Rudolph could lead the reindeer sleigh team! His nose will be the beacon lighting the way!

"You in?" Santa asks.

"Sure," Rudolph responds.

Rudolph saves Christmas for Santa and for children worldwide.

(Side note: The story of an adolescent deer who is shamed and bullied by his community until he had something everyone wants is problematic, when you think about it. But set that aside while we talk through the structure.)

There are other details. There's a side story of how Rudolph finds acceptance for unwanted, "misfit" toys and other characters who don't quite fit in with the North Pole community—which is as haughty and judgmental as old-money New York. (Another problematic detail.)

But that's the gist.

I'm sharing the Rudolph origin story with you for two reasons:

- ◆ First, because it's an exceptional and lasting bit of content marketing written by one of our own—a marketer by the name of Robert L. May.

- ◆ Second, because it's a perfect framework for telling our own brand stories.

* * *

Robert L. May was a copywriter working at Montgomery Ward & Co., a Chicago-based department store. Montgomery Ward exists today only as

an online retailer. (It closed its last store in 2001). But in 1939 it was as nearly as ubiquitous as Target is today; it had 556 locations scattered around the United States.

One day early in 1939, Robert's boss beckons him to his office at Montgomery Ward headquarters. Marketing wants an in-store giveaway to boost foot traffic during that year's Christmas season, he tells Robert.

Families visiting the Montgomery Ward in-store Santas would get a copy for free, the boss explains; Marketing hopes the allure of the story and the free-book promotion would boost holiday sales more than the generic coloring books Montgomery Ward Santas usually pass out to kids.

The story should be special, Robert's boss tells him. It should be a heart-warming, feel-good story . . . and maybe it's centered on an animal? And maybe the animals in it talk? (Robert recounted all this years later.)[1]

* * *

Marketing's request came at a hard time for Robert. His wife was dying of cancer. (She would pass away later that same year.) He had young children at home. He was mired in medical bills and steeped in sadness.

But more than that, Robert just . . . wasn't inspired.

He'd taken this job at Montgomery Ward thinking it was going to be a temporary role. Robert wanted to be a writer—not a marketer. Yet here he still was. In 1939, he'd already been there three years.

He later said about this period of his life: "I was heavily in debt at age 35, still grinding out catalogue copy. Instead of writing the great American novel, as I'd always hoped, I was describing men's white shirts."[2]

* * *

Still, Robert wrote the book, working on it throughout that spring and summer, reading passages to his failing wife. And that Christmas season, his original story about the underdog (underdeer?) named Rudolph went viral, at least in 1939 terms: 2.4 million copies of the book were distrib-uted for free to 2.4 million shoppers.

I repeated the 2.4 million number twice in that last paragraph to under-score an important point: this wasn't a PDF that was downloaded

2.4 million times. Amazon didn't deliver 2.4 million copies directly to our doorsteps.

Shoppers in 1939 literally had to walk into one of Montgomery Ward's department stores to get their copy. And they had to wait in line to visit Santa! Who is in the back of store! (Passing the 100-acre Sock Department, Necktie Land, Pajama Town . . . and bedsheets, cosmetics, small appliances, sofas, refrigerators, a hectare of toys until . . . FINALLY! SANTA! You found him!)

So yeah . . . 2.4 million. That metric is inspiring.

What's equally inspiring is that Robert L. May's work as a *marketer* is what put him on the map as a *writer*. He thought his copywriting job was in some way misguided—it wasn't helping him become the writer he wanted to be.

But he would be wrong about that.

* * *

Montgomery Ward promoted the *Rudolph* story as a Santa giveaway for the last time in 1946. On January 1, 1947, it transferred copyright on the story to its author, Robert L. May.

Robert eventually published the story on his own. For the first time, his "content" would be sold—no longer a marketing giveaway. And his name would be on it—not Montgomery Ward's.

He partnered with songwriter Johnny Marks to adapt the story to music. Today, hundreds of artists—from Dolly Parton to Destiny's Child—have recorded their own takes on the original.

He worked with Rankin/Bass Animated Entertainment to create a stop-motion animated special. Released in 1964—the 25th anniversary of the original Montgomery Ward giveaway—*Rudolph the Red-Nosed Reindeer* would become the longest continuously running Christmas TV special in American history.

And Robert would eventually produce merch—from T-shirts to toys.

Rudolph made him rich. "It's the only reindeer I know that ever put six kids in college," May later said.

Robert died in 1976. But his family still retains the copyright to his work. Which means that every time you see a Rudolph reference—Microsoft search engine Bing and Aflac have both cast Rudolph in holidays ads, Denny's offers a Rudolph Pancake Breakfast (its antlers are bacon strips)— the May family gets paid.

So yes: Robert L. May wanted to be a writer. And what eventually put him there . . .? It was Marketing.

<center>* * *</center>

So why do I say the Rudolph story is a perfect product storytelling framework for all of us today?

Let's look at *Rudolph* through a marketing storytelling lens.

The problem. It might seem at first that the "problem" is Rudolph's bright, cursed headlamp of a nose. Rudolph is bullied, cast out, excommunicated from the community because of it.

But it's not the red nose that's the real problem: It's the fog on Christmas Eve. The fog is the real, immediate problem—and it's Santa's problem. Not Rudolph's.

>> *Every story needs conflict. What's the audience's problem?*

Why now? What's the incident that brings the conflict to life? Fog any other night isn't a big deal. But on Christmas Eve . . .? When North Pole Air Traffic Control grounds all reindeer? It's a very big problem.

>> *What makes your story relevant and in need of a solution right here, right now?*

The solution is Rudolph, of course. Yet resolution of the problem is framed not in how perfect the *solution* is on its own, but in the good it does worldwide.

>> *How does a solution help an immediate problem for the benefit of others?*

The community. Rudolph is a hero to Santa and the North Pole elves, of course. But also he lifts up a bigger community: The Island of Misfit Toys

is Siberia to all the weird and psychologically broken toys that aren't perfect enough to be delivered by Santa. Herbie is the Christmas elf who wants to reject his elf toymaker genetics and become a dentist. The Abominable Snowman isn't really mean—just misunderstood.

All of those creatures together are a powerful metaphor for community, where like-minded people live and thrive. In the story, Rudolph becomes everyone's hero, saving Christmas while also inviting acceptance of misunderstood misfits and lovable weirdos. (And of course, we are all a little weird.)

> >> *What's the story you can tell that elevates an entire community?* What's a specific story that chronicles one person or idea, but nonetheless has broader, universal appeal?

Resolution. Rudolph saves Santa. He saves Christmas. He changes people's minds about scary snowmen and dentists. And Clarice kisses him.

We root for Rudolph the underdog. That's why we need to see the kiss Clarice gives him.

Celebrate the real hero. The story is about Rudolph, but it's Santa who is the real hero. Santa gets all the credit for recognizing Rudolph's special skill and tapping it. Santa makes children worldwide happy when they wake up on Christmas morning to a ridiculous bounty—once again!

The "product" here is Rudolph.

The "customer" is Santa.

The product makes the customer the hero.

<p align="center">* * *</p>

Mapping this story more simply:

> *Once upon a time, there was Rudolph.*

> *He has the capacity to light up a room.*

> *Some people doubt it because he's not like the others.*

But one day, there's a terrible fog.

Which means Santa needs him.

To help the kids believe in the magic of Christmas.

And that matters because Christmas would otherwise be canceled.

Which brings together a community of misfits and North Pole elves.

Someone gets a kiss.

* * *

We can apply the Rudolph Framework to our businesses, too.

It can help us tell a product story that's framed in a larger lens.

It can help us identify our own "foggy Christmas Eve" moment: Why is your product or service so critical now?

And most important, it reminds us of the true hero.

The hero of our story is not our product. It's our customer.

How to Apply the Rudolph Framework to Your Business or Marketing

A fill-in-the-blank template

1. Once upon a time, there was _____ (your product).

2. It has the capacity to _____ (your product's superpower).

3. Some people doubt it because _____ (what the doubters might claim).

4. But one day, _____ (something happens).

5. Which means _____ (your would-be customer now needs this).

6. For _____ (whom does your customer serve?)

7. And that matters because _____ (how your customer becomes the hero).

8. Someone gets a kiss.

How might a niche company apply this product framework to boost brand affinity and grow sales? Let's take a look at that next.

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The Rudolph Framework in Action

Let's say you run Marketing at a business-to-business company that sells industrial floor-cleaning equipment.

You want to amp up awareness and demand among your audience of institutional and municipal facilities managers.

You want to engage them even if you don't sell directly to them. (You sell through retail distributors.)

And you want to connect with them emotionally! But it's . . . well, industrial, floor, and cleaning.

What would your tactic of choice be?

Let's look at how the Tennant Company's Marketing team approached this challenge. And let's explore how the Rudolph Framework would've helped them identify the hero of the story.

* * *

Minneapolis-based Tennant manufacturers floor scrubbing equipment, including hand-pushed and manned vehicles that look like the cleaning equivalent of a backyard ride-on lawnmower.

The institutional floor-cleaning equipment sales process is a complex labyrinth of multiple decision-makers, difficult purchasing procedures, government contracts, and distributors. (As it is for many B2B products.)

That's especially true at educational institutions, a key market for Tennant. School principals, superintendents, and facilities and business managers typically think of floor cleaning only as an expense line item. It doesn't help that Tennant's machines are priced at the higher end of the floor-scrubber scale.

What's more: There is very little brand affinity, since *Isn't one ride-on floor cleaning machine the same as the next?* And a final problem: Tennant doesn't often sell directly to the end user; instead, its machines are sold through a web of distributors.

So the challenge for Tennant was threefold:

> **1.** *How can we drive brand affinity among decision-makers?*
>
> **2.** *How can we open the door to a conversation so we can explain why our machines are different?*
>
> **3.** *How can we engage decision-makers emotionally while respecting distributor relationships?*

And because Tennant sought answers to these questions in early 2020, another question emerged:

> *What's the right approach during a global pandemic . . . when the world feels infected with havoc and uncertainty?*

<div align="center">* * *</div>

Let's plot Tennant's challenge on the Rudolph Framework:

> **1.** Once upon a time, there was __a floor scrubber__ .
>
> **2.** It has the capacity to _____clean floors better than other machines_____ .
>
> **3.** Some people doubt it because ___every floor machine is like another; and this one is more expensive than its competitors_____.
>
> **4.** But one day, ____Covid___.

5. Which means __janitors and custodians are under pressure to disinfect and clean schools exceptionally well__.

6. For ____ to keep the whole school community safe ____ .

7. And that matters because __superintendents and municipal leaders want to know they can safely reopen_____ .

8. Someone gets a kiss!

A custodian may be the hero.

But how can our hero connect to the decision-makers or other influencers in the purchasing path?

Here's where things get fun!

* * *

Let's go back to the original question: How would you tell that story?

Pick one:

1. **Point a camera at your CEO** in a weekly fireside chat to demonstrate how the brand is there for you in these trying times.

2. **Hire an Instagram influencer** and their family to literally eat off a scrubbed, sparkling, Covid-free floor.

3. **Launch an old-school, year-long essay** contest to find stories about janitors.

If you're the Marketer at Tennant Company . . . you go all-in on #3.

And I love it.

It speaks my love language: Writing. B2B. Storytelling: telling true stories of actual people in their own words.

It celebrates the true Santa-hero of the Rudolph framework: the school janitor.

And it uncovers the *why now* moment of the foggy night.

And it delights me from a creative standpoint, too: embracing the *most-outlandish-idea-wins* brand of marketing. Not just thinking outside the box, but shredding the box and recycling it into something new. Like maybe paper to write an essay on.

You might say this program . . . *wait for it* . . . floored me.

* * *

Tennant's Custodians Are Key contest invited anyone to nominate a K–12 school janitor who is making a difference. The winning custodian would receive $5,000; the school, $10,000.

More than 2,000 U.S. teachers, administrators, and other staff nominated custodians in 2020, each writing an original, 500-word-ish essay on their favorite janitor and why they matter to their school.

The winner that year was Kris Kantor of Hayes Elementary in Lakewood, Ohio. Kris was nominated by school health aide Maureen Yantek, who wrote: "Kris makes a lasting impression about the importance of doing a good job while showcasing kindness and decency to everyone."

Kris knows the name of all 300 students at Hayes Elementary, Maureen said. And he created a lunchtime woodworking program ("Kids with Kantor"), supported by the local Home Depot and a local independently owned hardware store in Lakewood—partnerships Kris initiated.

* * *

How well did this B2B storytelling program . . . well, *clean up*? And what can we learn from it?

Tennant's senior marketing manager Bryan Smith generously shared with me five components of the Custodians Are Key program.

1. B2B storytelling works best when a human hero is at the center.

"Custodians are much more part of the community than in other verticals," Bryan said. In office buildings or other institutional settings, "cleaners work at night or at off hours and are not really seen as part of the team," he said.

Not so school custodians, Bryan added, "who are not always recognized for what they do [but] the rest of the school community knows them, knows what they do, and has a higher degree of appreciation for them."

Your story tip: Your Santa is not always obvious. Who is the true hero at the center of your story?

2. Triggers to sharing. This program delivered an unprecedented amount of earned media and social sharing for a company that struggles to generate either.

Your story tip: If people don't want to repeat your story . . . it's probably not a story.

3. Customer intelligence. Because the floor-cleaning equipment sales process is so complex, Tennant Sales and Marketing sometimes struggled with understanding whom they sold to. This program offered insight into the end user, their motivations, their perspective, their world.

Your story tip: A great story gives back to you as much as it gives to your customers. What resonates? What doesn't? Mine the reaction for customer insights and clues.

4. Buyers as influencers. Principals, superintendents, and business managers typically think of floor-cleaning only as an expense line item. A story well told helps to drive brand affinity among decision-makers.

Your story tip: If you don't sell directly to the end user, find a way to engage them emotionally in your marketing while respecting distributor relationships.

5. This is the ROI bullet. Custodians are typically not decision-makers or influencers in Tennant's world, but many of the nominators are. So Tennant's business-development reps (BDRs) were able to nurture nominators into sales leads: "A very warm lead to call to thank them for recognizing a colleague and then steer that into a sales conversation. We have seen very strong call-to-MQL conversion—north of 30%," according to Bryan.

Takeaway for you: HOLLA. That's not just a drop in the bucket, is it? (These puns are just writing themselves.)

* * *

The inaugural Custodians Are Key program launched in 2019. Its most recent program, for the 2021–22 school year, attracted 4,000 submissions. It's now become an annual program for Tennant.

You might say . . . its versa-*tile*. (And now the puns are done.)

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Hermit Crab Content

The Tennant essay contest is an example of Hermit Crab Content: Taking an existing format (an essay contest) and repurposing it in a new way. It's Hermit Crab Content because . . . well, that's what hermit crabs do.

A hermit crab makes its home in shells discarded by other creatures. As the crab grows over its (potential) 30-year lifespan, it continually abandons smaller shells and upgrades to roomier ones—making it the trade-up homebuyer fueling the crustacean real estate market.[*]

In the wild, for example, you might find a hermit crab that's moved into an abandoned snail shell. Or—in the absence of shell inventory—they'll sometimes move into literal trash: A sardine tin becomes as snug as a doublewide; a Coke can becomes a Contemporary with an open floor plan.

I like to imagine that the crabs make their trash homes feel homier by accessorizing with a few accent pillows and perhaps stringing up some twinkle lights.

* * *

Hermit Crab Content uses the habits of these crustaceans as inspiration: You adopt the format of another piece of writing, and move your own story into it.

Maybe you take your brand story and move it into a new "shell"—maybe an old-school essay, like Tennant did. Or an infomercial, a recipe, an Rx

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[*]If it had money and could apply for a mortgage.

prescription, an instruction manual, a meme, TikTok sound, a Craigslist ad, Hinge dating profile, or what have you.

The term "Hermit Crab Content" is itself adapted from "hermit crab writing," a term authors Brenda Miller and Suzanne Paola coined in their book on creative nonfiction.[1]

Consider how you might borrow a shell to tell your own brand story.

Some examples:

- ◆ **DemandBase** created *Thrilling Tales of Smarter GTM* (Go To Market) comic book to launch its rebranding and a new strategy focus. The marketing software company recruited "superhero" influencers to battle the diabolical "Mister E" (*mystery*—get it?!) of murky data that undermines bad marketing. The best part was the custom-drawn superhero suits.

- ◆ **HubSpot** borrowed a page from *People* magazine for its annual report. HubSpot presented financial performance and data in an accessible, stop-the-scroll way. There were candids of new hires at the software company, and staff "stars" got the same treatment that celebrities get in *People* in a lighthearted section titled *They're Just Like Us!* ("They play with their dogs! They take selfies!")

- ◆ **ON24** adopted a game show "shell" for a virtual event called Marketing Game Day. The all-day event produced by the webcasting company focused on how to "compete" with the "goal" of attracting and keeping new customers. The "half-time show" was a *Family Feud*-inspired quiz show keynote, with marketing leaders battling for the win.

- ◆ **Your Hermit Crab Content** celebrated here! Give it a go!

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Innovation Is About Brains, Not Budget

In a bid for the Massachusetts Fifth District congressional seat, Carl Sciortino was one of seven Democrats running in a special election in December 2014, the result of a sequence of events that were set off when John Kerry became U.S. secretary of state.

Sciortino is openly gay (he married his partner 10 days before the election), and the story in his ad plays with the idea of Carl coming out to his conservative Tea Party father. Not as a gay man . . . but as a Massachusetts liberal.

In other words: Gay? NBD.

Liberal? Ouch.

"He's been this way for 35 years," Pops grouses in the video, in a kind of mock despair.

Sciortino was a dark-horse candidate and ultimately came in third, with 16% of the vote. Still, the effort received national attention (the *New York Times*, the *Daily Beast*, *Hardball*). The *Washington Post*'s Aaron Blake called it "one of the more interesting campaign ads we've seen in a while." MSNBC's *All In* host Chris Hayes tweeted about it to his then-250,000 followers.[1]

At the time, political pundits praised it for the way the ad sets up Sciortino as principled but loveable, in the vein of former Massachusetts senator Ted

Kennedy: People might disagree with him, but they still seem to respect him.

At the heart of the video is a compelling narrative (and not just a political slogan). A son and father disagree; somehow, they make it work.

Think about this: Sciortino could've created a typical ad outlining what makes him different. He could've listed his progressive values, outlined his belief in the right to choose, and so on.

Would that have been compelling?

Nope. It wouldn't get people emotionally invested. It wouldn't make Sciortino relatable. It would've lacked heart.

The real "product" here is Sciortino's character. The video gives you a richer, fuller sense of who he is as a candidate. And the "why now" moment subtly suggests that Sciortino is a person who can work for constituents within a structure where people don't agree with him—even if they aren't related to him.

Instead of relying on the typical formulas of political campaigns, Sciortino scripts his own story.

One more thing, as it applies to Sciortino (and more generally, too): Innovation is more about brains than budget. Sciortino's video didn't have a big budget behind it. Yet it was effective because it told a true story well.

Part **V**

Publishing Rules

Not long ago a company lifted some content that we at MarketingProfs had created. The thieves pinched it straight from our website in the dead of night, scrubbed it free of our branding and byline, and passed it off as their own.

That sort of thing happens all the time online: bots and meme accounts lift content and republish it wherever they please—with zero regard for copyright or author.

The increase in the number of channels and algorithm-driven platforms has made it both more tempting and (in some ways) confusing for creators.

It's hard to know when a podcast might be used as uncredited source material for a video, for example.

And: If content is freely available, does that means it's free to use? What's the difference between jumping on a social trend and outright plagiarism?

The MarketingProfs situation felt a little different to me. The stolen piece was something our team was particularly proud of: We had invested long hours in creating what we thought was nothing short of brilliant. (Our community loved it, too.)

The theft felt more like an ethical violation than straightforward copyright infringement, in other words.

And it *felt* personal because it was the theft of an idea and execution that we had spent long hours crafting—rather than just, say, a cut-and-paste of a one-off social post.

Content marketing and social media are an opportunity for brands . . . a huge opportunity to build trust and affinity. But when marketing is done sloppily (as it was by those thieves), it's a huge fail that will tick people off. It will also erode trust in you and damage your brand and your reputation.

Many companies are chanting the *we're-all-publishers-now* mantra—yet without a clear understanding of the ground rules of publishing and the ethics of journalism.

Thinking like a publisher isn't enough; we also need to *act* like one.

What does "acting like a publisher" really mean in a post-truth world, where objective facts are often tossed aside? When institutions we once trusted implicitly are no longer the trusted gatekeepers?

It means that we must cultivate our own brand credibility.

We should actually adhere *more strictly* to standards than mainstream journalists do, because people are naturally skeptical of something produced by a brand, says content management platform Contently.

"Content marketing should seek to adhere to stricter standards of reporting than traditional journalism, due to its different legal position and increased commercial motivations," Contently cofounder Shane Snow writes in a kind of code of ethics manifesto.[1]

Shane implores us to adhere to journalism's foundational values of "honesty, integrity, accountability, and responsibility."

Honestly, integrity, accountability, responsibility. Even in a fractured post-truth world, journalism offers us a foundation for how to ethically build trust with our audiences.

I'd also add *generosity* to Shane's list.

Generosity is a necessary mindset for modern-day creators. Sure, we need to freely and generously provide content that has real value for our audiences. That makes it easy for people to trust us and believe us—and also rely on us. You want your content to be so useful that they *thank you* for generously producing it.

And we should also generously acknowledge and credit source material.

Part V of *Everybody Writes* offers guidelines on how to act like a publisher by adopting some best practices from traditional journalism, including a broader awareness of the responsibility and privilege that come with building an audience. It also offers inspiration from how media companies tap into cultural trends to stay relevant and relatable.

Think of this part as Journalism School for Marketers, adapted for a digital age.

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Share News That's Really News

We need to have a candid conversation: Not everything that happens at your company is newsworthy.

I speak to you with love in my heart, but my inbox and social feed is stuffed silly with non-news trying to masquerade as news-news. Maybe you've seen it too? An organization . . .

- Spins a rebrand as worth reporting on

- Announces a minor product upgrade

- Hires a new executive[*]

- Does something else so unremarkable that I can't even think of another bulleted example right here

Are those kinds of things news to share in your all-hands staff meetings and on your intranet? HECK YES.

Are those kinds of things news outside of your all-hands and intranet? HECK NO.

I'm not sure exactly why companies do this, or why writers like us go along with it . . .

Are we trying to placate an executive with a massive ego yet minuscule marketing sensibility? Are we paying PR agencies based on the volume of press releases issued?

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[*] Usually, with some exceptions. Is your new CEO high-profile? Is your new VP Michelle Obama? Beyoncé? Oprah?

I don't know. But I do know this: Don't do it. Think of your audience first.

In his seminal book on journalism, *Writing to Deadline*, Donald Murray offers a pointer on how to find the focal point (or lead) in a story: "What would make the reader turn and say to her husband, 'Now listen to this, Ira. . .?"[1]

Murray isn't talking about how to decide what's worth sharing and what isn't. But it's a good filter to use. You might not be targeting Ira's wife as your reader, but consider her a proxy for your own reader by asking, *would the reader find this useful to know?*

If the answer is *yes* . . . Boom. Share it.

If the answer is *no* . . . well, issue a press release if you must. But your mission as a marketer is to make sure it stays off your company blog. Stash it in the Press or Media section of your website as background for journalists, researchers, analysts, or your mom.

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Biased *and* Balanced

"There's a name for something with a single point of view: It's called a press release," marketing veteran Joe Chernov once told me. (Joe is now the CMO of software company Pendo.io.)

Invite multiple perspectives into your content. At the very least, acknowledge that other points of view might exist; ignoring them makes your reader not trust you.

You can be biased *and* balanced. It sounds paradoxical, but it isn't.

Biased and balanced coexist even in traditional journalism.

"The *New Republic* was always a biased magazine," author and journalist Dan Lyons said in an email interview. And so was *Forbes*, where Dan worked as senior editor.

"At *Forbes* we were not allowed to write stories that said, '*On the one hand this, on the other hand that,*'" he said.

"We were under orders to have an opinion, to take a side and defend it. But we were also expected to 'fight fair,' meaning you should be honest, and acknowledge all the facts, and then say why you believe what you do."

One hypothetical example might read something like this, Dan said:

> Apple stock is a bargain right now, and you should buy it. Why? Apple is about to release a bunch of great new products in the second half of this year and when it does the stock will soar.

[The] counterargument is that Apple's growth has slowed, and some critics think it will never be a growth stock again. However, I think the new iWatch could sell XX number of units at XX dollars, and this would be a huge shot in the arm to Apple's revenues.

<p style="text-align:center">* * *</p>

Does balanced and biased mean you should mention your competitors?

Sounds crazy, right?

It's not crazy. Comparing yourself with your competitors in an open, transparent way is a way to catapult trust. Your audience knows your competitors exist; they've probably been researching them, too.

So why not compare your products, services, or approach with that of your competitors? You explain the pros and cons. You show your audience what sets you apart in a balanced way.

It's a bold move. But a strategic one.

It'll build relationships. It'll earn you admiration. It'll set you apart. It says you know precisely who your ideal customer is. It says you recognize you aren't for everyone. And (bonus!) it just might save you time, because you'll repel the customer who is *not* a good fit for you.

Trust is everything. If there's a bolder way to tell your audience that you're watching out for them . . . I can't think of it.

P.S. Mentioning a competitor does not mean calling out a competitor for a misstep. Criticizing a competitor is most definitely a bad idea. Don't do it. It might momentarily feel good. But you will look small and petty, with a mean little heart of stone.

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Brands as Media Companies

I just stopped in at *GE Reports* and got lost for a few minutes in a story about something called ZeeWeed Membrane Bioreactor, a GE-developed filtering membrane that is saving a New Zealand volcanic lake from gross algae explosions.

I don't live in New Zealand. I don't have a particular interest in algae or volcanoes. At least, I didn't before I read the piece. Yet the story held my attention.

Algae explosions are fascinating? *Who knew . . .?*

GE Reports is an online magazine that shares stories and ideas about science and technology innovation—for example, a recurring feature is The 5 Coolest Things on Earth This Week.

It looks and feels not unlike, say, *Popular Science* magazine in that it seeks to make science and technology more accessible and meaningful for a general audience.

The award-winning *GE Reports* is published daily by GE itself, a global conglomerate that's been around since 1892. *GE Reports* is the hub of a content strategy that extends into various assets, all largely centered on creating awareness and advancing the idea of GE as innovator, and doing so in a neutral, vendor-agnostic way.

GE Reports is not trying to sell jet engines or wind turbines, in other words. There is no call to action with a pop-up order form inviting you to reserve and customize your own airplane.

Instead, *GE Reports* tells the stories of GE.

It shows how its innovations are helping people globally. It narrates those stories in a human, accessible way. It sparks social conversation and press coverage about the company, its customers, and its employees.

It follows and reports on the stories of its own innovations much like a trade publication might. By doing so it supplements the work of mainstream media and, in some case, replaces it.

GE Reports is a media company, funded by and operating within GE. It *feels* independent, even if it's not. It *feels* independent because it brings a reporter's sensibility to its content—an editorial approach to building the GE brand.

There are countless other examples of brands as media companies. Some of my favorites:

◆ **Marriott Bonvoy Traveler** inspires travelers to consider new destinations.

In "Ghana Rising," for example, Marriott tells the story of Ghana's dark history as well as its current renaissance. Sure, Marriott has a hotel in the capitol city of Accra, but the focus is Ghana's artists, entrepreneurs, restaurant scene, culture, and national parks.

◆ **AKC.TV** features dog-related programming produced by the American Kennel Club.

AKC.TV is an outgrowth of the AKC's education and resources for pet owners, trainers, breeders, and others. (My dog Augie was glued to AKC.TV's recent livestream of its Cavalier King Charles Spaniel Specialty Show, live from Ohio.)

◆ **The Federal Reserve Bank of Cleveland's multimedia storytelling** makes the bank seem less . . . well, like a bank. It tells the stories of real people living and working in Ohio communities.

For example, the Cleveland Fed tells the story of Dayton, Ohio. Dayton was once a thriving city—it's where the cash register was invented, and it has been the center of innovation in aviation and auto.

> More recently, Dayton has struggled with poverty and high crime rates. Local leaders and activists are working to change that, attracting new business and money to revive the city.
>
> The Federal Reserve Bank of Cleveland showed up to document the city's turnaround. Through text, photos, and video, *Finding Solutions in Dayton* doesn't feel like marketing. It's feels like a documentary. And it's great stuff.

In all of these cases, creators like videographers, photographers, and writers are working inside the company—sometimes in Marketing, sometimes in Communications or PR. Their job is to mine an organization to unearth stories, and then publish or produce them in any number of forms: from podcasts to research reports to streaming services to print magazines.

Brands as media companies offer opportunities to do a few things:

- ◆ Cover a business and industry with the same depth a trade publication might.

- ◆ Advance its thought leadership—to establish itself as a trustworthy source of information and news.

- ◆ Be its own PR.

- ◆ Spark social conversations.

- ◆ Keep investors and analysts in the loop.

- ◆ And sometimes generate ad revenue, fuel brand partnerships, and generate valuable data about their audience.

An editorial approach to building a brand is especially useful in a post-truth era, when we all need to place the needs of our audience first. When we need to abandon our corporate-centric messaging to build trust. And when we need to adopt the mindset of a journalist who seeks the best way to tell a story, because journalists hear a little voice in the back of their heads reminding them: *Nobody has to read this*.

"Facts are the pillars of any good reporting," said Jesse Noyes, a former reporter for the *Boston Business Journal*. He worked as a writer at Eloqua (now Oracle) and is now VP of Marketing at Unsupervised.

Inside a company, "what you're after is a story that connects the fact-finding process in a visceral, meaningful way," Jesse told me. "That means digging up the facts, but also shining a light on the decision-making, the personalities involved, the raw human emotion that goes into any fact-based story."

That kind of pressure on our content-creation efforts can only benefit our brands. Sure, it can enhance our integrity. But it also makes our content truly gripping, like GE's algae story: It's the way stories are told that makes them so good.

* * *

Brands have always been publishers. John Deere has published *The Furrow* magazine since 1895. The Michelin Guides series of guidebooks have been published by the French tire company since 1904—the same year Jell-O started printing Jell-O recipe books. The Sears department store launched its own radio station in 1924.

But brands' hiring of journalists and reporters started to gain momentum more recently. In 2004, Larry Light, then McDonald's chief marketing officer, said in a speech at an industry event that McDonald's adopted "brand journalism" as a new marketing tactic.

The term has evolved since then, as have the approaches, capabilities, and goals for the media that are created inside a company. Traditional news companies have gotten in on it, too, launching their own in-house studies to work with brands directly to create journalistic content for them.

But the basic idea of customer-driven versus corporate-driven marketing remains, no matter the size and scope of your own media publishing.

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Should You Ungate Your Content?

Let's say you walk by a storefront. From the outside, you like the vibe of the place. The products on the shelves look . . . promising.

As you step inside the door, a foot-tall robot jumps out of nowhere: "HI WANT TO CHAT? I'M HERE TO HELP YOU FIND YOUR WAY."

You kick him aside. You browse the aisles. Something catches your eye.

As you reach out to look closer, a salesperson slides directly in front of you. "TONY," his name tag reads. He has a tattoo of an onion on his neck.

"Not so fast, sister," TONY says. "You want to touch it? Look closer? See if it's right for you? Give me your email address first." His neck veins bulge. The onion pulses.

Before you can respond, a voice crackled over the PA system: "THIS WEBSITE USES COOKIES TO ENSURE YOU GET THE BEST EXPERIENCE. DO YOU AGREE!"

"Yes . . .?" you murmur. Not sure exactly what you are agreeing to.

Sweet Cheez-Its. The robot is back.

"WHAT WOULD YOU LIKE TO DO?" it shouts from somewhere by your knees. "LEARN ABOUT PRODUCTS? LEARN ABOUT PRICING? GET EDUCATIONAL CONTENT?"

Then: "CAN I GET YOUR EMAIL ADDRESS IN CASE WE GET DISCONNECTED?"

* * *

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Should You Ungate Your Content?

Is it possible to grow your email list and get better leads by giving away your content—without asking for an email address? Without forcing a data shakedown?

Without harassing people? Without keeping your content locked up—like the shaving razors behind lock and key at CVS?

Not too long ago, Ahava Leibtag removed the lead-capture forms on her agency's website.

That means when you visit Aha Media Group, you don't need to fork over an email address to download an ebook. There is no data shakedown to access a whitepaper; no coercion to get that planning checklist. She ungated it all.

See something you like? Take it! It's yours! TONY is nowhere to be found.

That shift was radical for Aha Media Group, a D.C.-based agency of 50. It had used lead-capture forms for most of its 16 years in business.

Covid changed the game for a lot of companies—challenging conventions on how work gets done and delivered. And convincing forward-thinking companies to laser-focus on helping the people they do business with.

Not segments. Not leads. PEOPLE.

Ahava works with healthcare organizations (among others). During Covid, hospitals have needed her help more than ever. So she ungated—partly as an experiment.

"We're in the middle of a pandemic," Ahava wrote on her blog.[1] "Our resources can help healthcare communicators do their jobs better. We want you to have access to those resources."

Her plan was to ungate everything for 90 days.

So 90 days later . . . what happened?

- ◆ Pageviews increased 143% between Q1 2020 and Q1 2021.

- ◆ Social media followings increased 45% for the same period.

◆ Email newsletter signups increased 55%.

◆ One prospect she'd been talking to for four years finally became a client. This last bullet is anecdotal, Ahava says. But still.

* * *

Gated content is the default in B2B marketing. But when the world changes, you need to rethink everything. Even TONY's job description.

"Our marketing changed because my mindset changed," Ahava says. "I wanted people to trust us. To see us as a healthcare communications and content resource. To be in service to people who needed our services more than ever."

* * *

Does this now mean you should ungate all the content on your site?

Not necessarily. But Ahava's story suggests you take a more nuanced approach.

Marketing used the presence of a gate to communicate value: *"This is so valuable that I need something in exchange for it."* And the email address was a fair trade.

The problem is that too many bad players have exploited that exchange. And people (you, me, our customers) are hyperaware of the value of our data now.

Instead of hiring TONY as your front-line salesperson, ask yourself:

1. **Are you putting humans and relationships first?** Will ungating your content help you build trust and meaningful relationships?

   ◆ *Trust is everything.* Gates and lead forms at the first touch don't communicate trust.

2. **Do you need a gate at first touch?** Or does it make sense further into the relationship? Can TONY get a desk job somewhere? Perhaps in Procurement, closer to the sale?

◆ **Might you use a combination of other nurturing techniques**—scoring leads, profiling progressively instead of all at once, taking a tiered approach that gates only content that's closer to a sale?

3. **Are social shares and brand awareness important?** What about search engine optimization?

"No matter how great a piece of content is, it's unlikely to gain traction on social media or get forwarded if it requires people to give up their information," Ahava points out.

4. **Might you give *before* you ask?** If you still want those email addresses, test asking for them *after* you've provided the content.

5. **What about yes/and versus either/or approach?** Can you ungate your long-form content pieces . . . but also offer them in PDF packages that can be downloaded in exchange for an email?

6. **What business are you in?** Ungating makes more sense in demand gen (like Ahava's agency) than others (like MarketingProfs, which relies more on a publisher's model).

7. **Can you try a 90-day experiment like Ahava's?**

Finally: A word to TONY. Thank you, TONY, for your years of service.

Now that's talk about growth opportunities for you: *Where do you see yourself in five years . . .?*

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Memes, Trends, Newsjacking

When the world's second-largest software company, Oracle, acquired content management company Compendium, I first heard about it when Jesse Noyes emailed me an hour after the news broke, asking me for commentary on the acquisition for a piece he was putting together.

Jesse, a former journalist, headed up content at Kapost—then a competitor of Compendium.* That morning, he also took the opportunity to let me know that his boss, CEO Toby Murdock, had already formulated and published his early thoughts on the acquisition on the Kapost blog.

See what happened there?

Kapost broke the story to me and to others less than an hour after it happened. Understanding that this news was a big deal in the content marketing world, Kapost mobilized to . . .

- ◆ Use news of a competitor to insert itself into the heart of a story that it essentially had nothing to do with.

- ◆ Use the news to be a thought leader literally: to lead people's thoughts by expanding the immediate news story into a larger trends piece with broader appeal.

- ◆ Capture early social love from influencers by connecting with them and with industry analysts and offering them an opportunity for further commentary.

- ◆ Potentially earn attention from mainstream media looking for perspectives on the news.

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*Kapost was acquired by Upland Software in 2019.

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There's a great lesson in there for all of us in marketing: Content moments are everywhere. You just have to train your eyes and ears to look for them.

That means watching for breaking news, like Jesse did. Or tapping into broader trends, social media chatter, and pop cultural moments—all opportunities to piggyback on hot topics to divert attention to your brand, reach new audiences, boost your relevance, create connections with your audience, and sometimes . . . just have some fun.

Author David Meerman Scott coined the term *newsjacking* a decade ago to describe how we can tap the news cycle to insert ourselves into a breaking story. Now social media and a hyperactive news cycle give us more and more opportunities to become part of trending topics, memes, social movements, political issues, or pop culture moments . . . in addition to news stories.

But how do you find opportunities to tap into? Which stories when? How do you decide which news stories and cultural moment make sense for you?

And should you weigh in on difficult or polarizing social issues?

Let's break it down.

How do you find opportunities to weigh in on stories?

- ◆ Use Google Alerts or similar tools to monitor topics or keywords relevant to you.

- ◆ Follow influencers, publishers, trade journalists, content creators in your space: What are they talking about? Posting about?

- ◆ Monitor relevant social media hashtags and trending stories. On TikTok, hashtags like #trending or #TikToktrend can clue you in to what's next.

- ◆ Be a student of pop culture.

Maybe that last bullet feels a little . . . general? Too obvious?

There's no magic here. Listening more than we talk, and being students as well as teachers, is helpful for fueling a pop culture IQ. (Or any kind of intelligence, actually.)

Which stories make sense for us to weigh in on? And when?

Ask yourself four sets of questions about an issue or story that piques your interest:

1. Is the issue or story within our domain? Or do we want it to be? Will it help us reach new audiences?

2. Do we have something new to add? Do we have a nuanced or different angle? Can we make it our own?

   Me-too commentary that doesn't offer a helpful or specific point of view for your unique audience is just noise.

3. Does what we have to say answer the audience's questions—either directly or indirectly? Will our audience love it? Start with audience insights. Layer on fun. Not the opposite.

4. How quickly can we mobilize? Timing is key. It's important to catch a news story or meme just as it's developing, not as it's dying. Ideally, you want to time your own commentary as public excitement or awareness is still growing and well before the idea is played out.
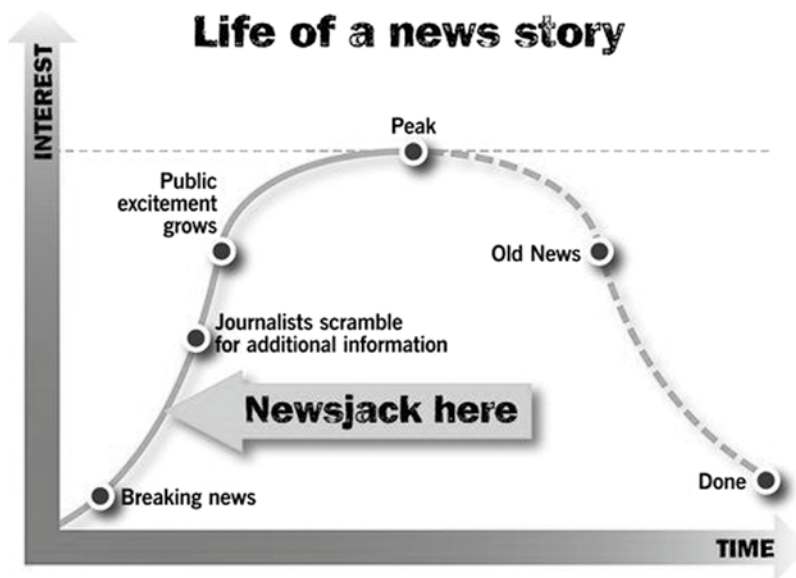
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Let's look at a brand that checked all those boxes successfully.

Let's travel back to 2019 . . . when the luxury exercise bike Peloton launched a holiday promotion called *The Gift That Gives Back*.

The video told the story of a man gifting the high-end bike to his partner—we find out later her name is Grace. She films herself using the bike throughout the year, narrating in a nervous, needy voice.

That next Christmas season, Grace shows her husband the video. "A year ago, I didn't realize how much this would change me," she says. "Thank you."

Judgment was swift.

The Internet hated it for its sexist, dated approach and the weird, creepy vibe. One headline read: *Peloton's Terrifying New Ad Is the Best Horror Movie in Recent History*.[1]

As the holiday ad was still circulating online, still fresh in our minds, actor Ryan Reynolds hired the actress who played Grace, Monica Ruiz, to star in a new commercial for his gin company, Aviation American Gin.

The new ad, titled *The Gin That Doesn't Give Back*, had nothing to do with the Peloton product. But still it feels like a sequel to the Peloton ad: Now Ruiz/Grace sits at a bar with two friends. They're drinking martinis.

Ruiz/Grace is glum; the friends are trying to cheer her up. When she comments on how smooth the gin is, her friend ventures, "We can get you another?" The mood shifts. Ruiz/Grace and her friends toast: "To new beginnings!"

Grace chugs the martini as the second friend comments, "This is gonna be a fun night."

The Aviation Gin ad was produced in just 36 hours. Ryan Reynolds tweeted a link to the ad with the caption, "Exercise bike not included."

Trolling? Newsjacking? Maybe a bit of both. But hilariously perfect.

* * *

A few other favorite examples of tapping into trends:

◆ Every March, the New York Public Library's literature-inspired March Madness smackdown on Instagram pits famous books or book authors against one another in a series of "tournament" brackets. The effort mirrors the annual men's college basketball tournament, known and branded as NCAA March Madness.

Followers of the NYPL vote via Instagram Stories for their faves (Judy Blume vs. Beverly Cleary, *Harry Potter* vs. *Percy Jackson*, and so on); the winners advance toward the finals. Since the NYPL launched the program a few years ago, libraries around the world now offer their own version of #LiteraryMarchMadness.

◆ FNB Community Bank regularly uses trending TikTok and Instagram Reels sounds to teach financial literacy. Its most popular post is a very short video of Assistant VP Julie Waddle reminding followers not to leave balances in their Venmo accounts. It's set to an audio clip of Nicki Minaj's *I Get Crazy*.

◆ The Dover Public Library in Dover, New Hampshire, took the popular TikTok sound *I'm at the Pizza Hut I'm at the Taco Bell* to answer the important question: What would happen if these classic book titles hooked up and had a baby . . .?

In a series called If These Books Had Kids, the library asks: Who would be the love child of *The Very Hungry Caterpillar* and *Star Wars*? (It's *Dune*, by the way. Because Worms + Space = Space Worms!)

I know I just shared two library examples and an example from one small bank.

You might think that the place to go for marketing inspiration would be the go-to big brands. The ones with big teams and big budgets that kill it at everything digital.

Like Zappos.

American Express.

Every single pixel Ryan Reynolds has ever exhaled into digital glory.

Sure, there's plenty of inspiration happening inside big brands. But I'm more impressed with the creativity from the most unlikely categories. Local institutions. Small organizations. The ones with a part-time person who handles marketing in between doing a million other things. The ones with a budget of 15 cents.

Great content is more about brains than budget, remember?

* * *

Should you speak out on social issues or causes?

The data says yes.

Most consumers want business to play a larger role on climate change, economic inequality, workforce reskilling, and racial injustice, according to the most recent Edelman Trust Barometer, which measures how much people around the world trust various institutions, including government, media, NGOs, and business.

We buy from and invest in brands that align with our values and beliefs, Edelman says. We choose which companies to work for based on shared values. We expect the CEO to take a stand on social issues.[2]

The Edelman numbers are a clear sign that consumer expectations are changing. But inside companies, the actual decision is often more nuanced.

"Tapping into cultural zeitgeists helps brands stay relevant and many take advantage of newsjacking as a smart PR tool," says Katie Martell, a marketing consultant and creator of the forthcoming documentary and book, *Woke-Washed*.

But when those cultural moments are social movements such as feminism, LGBTQ+ equality, or racial justice, "marketers must tread carefully," she adds.

Even something like a tweet in support of women on International Women's Day comes with important implications, because it "signals

allyship in the way that everything we do as marketers makes a promise for our brand to live up to," Katie says.

Can your brand live up to the promise it's making to be an ally to the social movement you are about to comment on?

Is your tweet the only way you are showing up as an ally to these social movements? Do your words align with your actions?

If not, Katie says, "your marketing runs the risk of being performative if it follows the minority-of-the-month thinking."

For example, Katie tells me about a Big 4 accounting firm that launched a major ad campaign around their support of a women's golf tournament. It featured tropes like glass ceilings breaking in the courtroom, boardroom, and laboratory—a metaphor for the "invisible barrier" women face as they progress in their careers.

The end spot positioned the firm as an ally to women "in golf and everywhere else."

When that spot ran, the firm was the subject of a $400 million class action lawsuit from over 1,000 women at the firm who alleged a pattern of gender discrimination, including denying promotions to women and penalizing them for taking maternity leave.

Your marketing is performative allyship if it:

- ◆ Is an empty promise. If you use vague words like "condemn" or "stand with" without any measurable, meaningful impact on the social movement.

- ◆ Is opportunistic. It supports a cause publicly only while it is trending. (This is so-called hashtag activism.)

- ◆ Passes the blame. It names a "villain" who is "out there" rather than acknowledging any internal work as a best first step.

- ◆ Perpetuates hidden agendas. Some brands actively donate to politicians who stand in contrast with the values of the social movement the brands claim to support, Katie says.

So back to our original question. Should you speak out on social issues and causes? Yes. But only if:

◆ You can back up your words with actions and ownership.

"Actions over ads, practice over policy," Katie says. "Center your decisions on the values of your organization and how they align to the values of these social movements. Can you live up to the promise you are making?"

◆ You can measure your efforts. "Accountability happens through transparency," Katie says, "and quantifiable goals are what we use to make sure we hit our revenue targets." The same thinking applies to social movements and causes.

Marketing has enormous power to create perception, Katie says. Marketers like us have a choice.

We can co-opt, pander to, and exploit the social movements that define our time.

Or better: We can choose to contribute to social movements in a courageous and meaningful way, and earn all the benefits that come with that alignment.

It takes courage to take a stand.

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Better Interviews with These Nonobvious Tips

In my first job right out of college, I was a staff writer covering the banking and real estate industries for a weekly newspaper in Boston.

Because I was so fresh and inexperienced and the topics I was writing about felt foreign to this English major, I tried to fake a level of knowledge so I wouldn't seem stupid.

I'd ask a banking executive my carefully constructed question about the lingering aftereffects of the housing boom, for example. He'd answer, and his response would sound utterly alien to me—he might as well have been telling me how to resolve a vector into Cartesian coordinates.

Maybe he was?

I had no idea what he was talking about. I would be too embarrassed to ask for clarification. Because of that fear-of-looking-stupid thing.

I've learned since then that it's better to embrace your ignorance and admit what you don't know. There's no shame in it. If you don't understand it well, you can't explain it to your audience.

If you've ever been tasked with interviewing someone who has deep expertise in a subject, you might have a sense of what I'm talking about here. It's a little scary to admit, "*Wait, you lost me there . . .*" But you are far better off being up front about it. And (as I ultimately realized), subject-matter experts usually love to explain what they know.

Before we get into interviewing tips, I'm going to assume that you've got the basics already covered:

You've googled the person.

You've scanned their LinkedIn.

You've researched what they have previously said or written on the topic.

You understand the gist of the issue at hand.

You've prepared, in other words.

Right? *Right!* So here are 11 nonobvious techniques to help hone your interviewing skills to get the best out of a conversation.

1. **Be a tour guide for your audience.** What are you trying to get out of the interview for the benefit of your audience?

   If it's something specific, make sure you open with a question that sets up an answer to the biggest question you want answered on behalf of your listener or reader.

   Your number one goal is to be useful to your readers or listeners. You are their advocate: Get them what they need.

2. **Be an instigator, not an expert.** Don't worry about being an ignoramus. Admitting your ignorance is a strength, not a weakness. I said a minute ago: Ask for clarification about what you don't know.

   If you're dealing with a highly technical or nuanced issue, it helps to say, *Help me understand this.* Or ask, *How would you explain it to your mom or dad?* That's not to say Mom and Dad are stupid. But they are a handy stand-in for an audience that needs a simpler explanation.

   Another good question to ask is something like this: *Could you give me an example of how this might play out with a customer?*

3. **Go for one-on-one conversation.** Phone, video, or in-person interviews feel natural and loose when it's just you and the expert—with no PR reps or assistants or note-takers listening in.

   Having a silent participant is just weird, even if that person has a job to do there. Their silent presence hinders the back-and-forth flow of conversation and often makes the expert feel self-conscious. That makes the whole exchange feel forced and unnecessarily inhibited.

   The same goes for group interviews. The conversation can easily degenerate into one-upmanship or posturing. Or it can turn more formal and restrained than a one-to-one chat would be.

4. **Get the spiel out of the way first.** Experts who have had corporate PR training sometimes rely too much on canned, prepared responses. In those situations, it's best to just let them get it out of their systems—and then ask follow-up questions to elicit less practiced, less wooden responses.

5. **Converse, don't interview.** The best podcast hosts converse with their guests instead of interviewing them.

   They start out with a planned question or two and then let the response dictate the conversation. They pursue "interestingness," as show host and author Jay Acunzo calls it: unexpected moments that pique your curiosity.

   "Be prepared, but don't read off a script," suggests podcaster Kerry O'Shea Gorgone. "Conversations aren't scripted, and you want an interview to feel like a conversation."

   If you're trying to get specific information out of an interviewee—for example, for a bylined article or a blog post—you'll want to guide the conversation a bit, of course. Don't just let it wander off into a tangential rabbit hole.

   To keep things on track but still free-flowing, practice what former MarketingProfs podcast host Matthew T. Grant calls *laser listening*: listening for threads of the response to naturally pick up in a subsequent question. Don't just jump to the next question on your list just because, well, it's on the list.

6. **Ask about moments or events that your interviewee might've forgotten about.** Finding and exploring those moments makes your interview subject feel seen. They appreciate your effort. It makes them lean in and put in a little more effort, too.

7. **Avoid the word "usually" when you ask a question.** It's better to ask about a very specific time or instance. Specific questions make better for more robust answers.

8. **Superlatives can make for great interview fodder, too.**

   Questions like, "What's the best/baddest/most controversial/greatest/worst. . .?" can give you some great material to work with.

   Other favorite questions of mine: *How did you get interested in this line of work/program/etc.? . . .* or *How did you wind up here?*

   People's journeys are always interesting—both to themselves and to others. And they can reveal some interesting color about a person.

9. **Avoid yes/no questions. If you get a yes/no answer . . .** ask *Why do you feel that way?* Or: *I'd love to hear more about that.*

   It's better to invite your interview subjects to share stories or examples. Stories offer color. And they also show how the person thinks or views the world.

10. **Shut up already.** Your job is to draw the interviewee out. Speak less. Let the expert speak more. Try not to interrupt.

    "An interview show isn't about the host, it's about the guests," says Kerry O'Shea Gorgone. "Interjecting without having something truly worthwhile to add can disrupt the flow and cause the guest to lose her train of thought."

    What's more: Don't hurry to fill the silence. Sitting in silence can be uncomfortable for some people (if this were a video book, you'd see me pointing at myself here). But leave room for the interviewee to reflect on details or add a bit more. Give them space. Breathe through the uncomfortable.

On the other hand, you might have a chatterbox of an interviewee. They will not shut up, yet they aren't giving you what you need.

In that case, you'll have to steward their end of the conversation more aggressively. You are there as an advocate for the reader or listener, remember: *You are the tour guide.*

11. **Confirm the spelling of their name, company name, title—** even if they seem obvious. Ask for their preferred pronouns.

12. **Record your interviews. But also take notes by hand.**

Writing down someone's words with your own hand captures a bit of the mood, the vibe, the details that bring an interview to life. How does something smell? What does it feel like? (We talked about adding sensory details in Chapter 23.)

Taking notes by hand also allows you to quickly jot asides in the margins that you can refer to later—as follow-up questions, or as ideas you might want to include in a final written post or article.

Plus, you'll love the visceral feeling of it. I promise. ☺

Thanks to Kerry O'Shea Gorgone, Jay Acunzo, and Stanford's d.School for some of these interview tips.[1]

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Check Your Facts

Fact-checking sounds about as much fun as scrubbing potatoes.

Tedious? *Yep.* Necessary? *Also yep.*

Accuracy is the root of your credibility. You want your readers to trust your content, and (importantly) to share it with all the confidence that what you say is true.

I'm imagining your retort: *But we aren't a news organization.*

It's not only news organizations that need to get the facts straight. Mistakes undermine your brand's credibility in the eyes of any reader, no matter the subject.

What facts need checking?

◆ Spelling of proper names

◆ Job titles

◆ Spelling of company names (I've seen *Linked In*, *LinkedIN*, and *LinkedIn* all within the same article.) (It's the last one, BTW.)

◆ URLs/links that lead to where you expect them to

◆ Sources: Use primary sources over secondary sources. Link to the original research whenever possible, not the repost or analysis on another site or on social media.

- Every statistic and number

- Dates

- The math on any reported increases/decreases

Slip-ups happen. Mistakes occasionally slide through.

That's okay. Correct them in the text, and then add a footnote to the piece letting your readers know that you screwed up.

That public acknowledgment piece is important: Fixing the mistake is one thing—but owning it can only enhance the trust your community has in you.

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A Mind-Like-Water Mindset

A lifetime ago, I was a newspaper reporter for a small city paper, covering local town planning board meetings.

This was just as the Internet was starting to transform newsrooms around the world, allowing reporters to file their articles from anywhere.

But local papers like the one where I worked still required writers to type their articles directly into on-site terminals—hulking machines with a single blinking cursor on a tiny screen. It was like typing on an iPhone the size of an Army Jeep.

One night after a planning board meeting, I arrived in the newsroom very late. I told the night editor that there wasn't a single thing to report on because the planning board had reached no specific decisions. They'd made no rulings. I wanted to let him know I had nothing to write.

My editor—gruff as a sleep-deprived grizzly working the night shift—corrected me. There's always a story there, he growled, even if it's not the one you were expecting to write.

I think about that moment in the newsroom at least once a week. I think about what the bear said: *There's always a story there . . . even if it's not the one you were expecting to write.*

So your boring technology product? Your services firm? Your regulated industry that precludes you from talking about this or that or certain specifics?

Adopt a mind-like-water mindset. Watch for the crevices that the stories flow into. Splash around in them.

We so often fear that we don't have anything interesting to share. In truth, every one of us has a great font of inspiration right in front of us, if we only train ourselves to see it:

◆ What's commonplace to you that might be interesting to others?

◆ What events outside our industry or in the larger world might serve as inspiration?

◆ Get out of the office: Trade shows, clients, and partners all offer content opportunities.

◆ Draw offbeat analogies from your own life or interests. Copywriter Tom Bentley wrote a piece for MarketingProfs titled "Mark Twain's 10-Sentence Course on Branding and Marketing."[1] Marketing strategist Jason Miller frequently draws from his love for metal music: "5 Rock n Roll Quotes to Inspire Content Marketing Greatness."[2]

And by the way: What you sell or market can't possibly be as dull as local planning board meetings. And I found plenty to say after my grizzly encounter that night.

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Seek Out the Best Sources

Journalists go to the scene of an incident to report what happened; in the business world, you should, too. Metaphorically speaking.

Are you blogging about a new technology? Talk to the guy who developed it, not the PR or marketing person promoting it. Find the person standing closest to the center of a story.

Be aware of the difference between *on the record*, *for background*, and *off the record*:

◆ **On the record** means you can quote sources freely and use their full names for attribution.

◆ **For background** (also called unattributable) means you can use the material but not attribute it to a specific person or source.

◆ **Off the record** means you can't write about the details or quote the person sharing them. The information you're given is confidential.

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Beware of Hidden Agendas

If you interview someone for a story or use them for a source, be clear about the agenda that might be fueling their point of view.

Follow the money. Who butters their bread? Who syrups their pancakes?

Are they a competitor? Investor? PR professional retained to maintain a specific point of view?

The person might still be credible as a source—in fact, PR folks can be helpful background sources—but you need to be aware of agendas.

And if you decide to use the material, disclose the source and potential vested interests or conflicts of interest.

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Credible Data

Data puts your content in context and gives you credibility. Ground your content in facts: data, research, facts.

Your ideas and opinions and anecdotes might be part of a story. But the more credible content is rooted in something in addition to your own thoughts and beliefs.

Data before declaration. If you are going to tell me *what* you think, walk me through *why* you think it.

What's been said before? Why do you agree or not agree? What evidence supports your point of view or influences your counterpoint? What data supports your ideas?

If external research is part of your story, cite reliable sources. Who or what is a reliable source will vary based on your organization—in other words, it's a bit of a judgment call.

But one thing is certain: That friend of a friend on Facebook is not a reliable source.

Here are some good examples:

- ◆ A major media outlet, because they generally have internal fact-checkers checking . . . well, facts

- ◆ Government agencies

- ◆ Research reports

◆ Recognized experts

◆ Authoritative nongovernmental organizations (Pew Research, for one)

Three Google Data Sources

1. **Google Trends** allows you to see what others have been searching for over time, graph how often a term has been searched for via Google, and pinpoint where those searchers are located (www.google.com/trends).

You can also browse searches by date or see the top searches in various categories via its Top Charts tab (www.google.com/trends/topcharts).

Its Explore tab lets you see how a search term has trended over time and the direction it's trended in (www.google.com/trends/explore).

2. **Google's Ngram Viewer** is more obscure, but it lets you search and graph words and phrases from a vast number of books that Google has scanned in public libraries to populate its Google Books search engine (https://books.google.com/ngrams).

It's a useful (if quirky) tool for finding trends over a much longer time frame than measured in Internet time.

3. **Think with Google** is geared toward marketers and is intended to be a one-stop hub that aggregates information, insights, and tools to grow your business (thinkwithgoogle.com). It's a place to poke around for insights, but I wouldn't rely on it solely.

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Cite as You Write

A citation gives credit when credit is due.

Citing sources is how you let readers know that certain information or ideas came from places other than your own head. It also invites them to explore the original source of information should they wish to.

Think of a citation as a giant *thank you* to the people who said something before you did, or who helped advance your own thinking.

We might not be scholars who need to format citations according to a specified style. But do I have advice around crediting sources anyway? Of course I do.

Here's how writers and creators like us can cite sources:

◆ **Seek out primary, not secondary, sources.** A primary source is the originator of an idea, statement, research, or any other material. A secondary source quotes the original source but is not the originator of it.

Maybe this bullet feels like a big *duh*. But I'm always surprised by how often assets link to a secondary source (another site or writer who's sharing an article) instead of the original.

Track down the primary source! For two reasons: (1) The credibility you gain is worth the extra click or two, and (2) your information will be more accurate since it will not have been inadvertently misinterpreted.

Let's say you post in infographic on your site, for example. Cite the original source and link to it, even if you first discovered it elsewhere.

If you create that infographic based on someone else's data, say that too.

Or if you interview someone and use what she says either directly or indirectly, attribute the ideas to that person, even if you don't use her exact words.

◆ **Freshness matters.** The more recent research is, the more accurate and appealing it is. Recency is less of a factor in the social-behavioral sciences, but it does matter in business.

Try to avoid any business research older than four years, since it's likely to be stale. In some fast-evolving industries—technology or social media, say—avoid anything older than two years.

◆ **Wikipedia is not a credible source**—even according to Wikipedia itself![1] But it's great for anecdotal or background information, and it can be a handy place to find links to other sources, including original ones.

◆ **Formal citation does have a place in content creation.** If you're creating a heftier content asset—say, a book like this one, an ebook, an annual report, a research paper, or a white paper.

You have loads of citation styles to choose from (including those recommended by the *Associated Press Stylebook*, the *Chicago Manual of Style*, and so on).

Which one you use isn't all that important; what matters is that you pick one and use it consistently. A tool like Citation Machine (citationmachine.net) delivers a properly formatted citation after you plug in some basic information about what you're referencing and where you found it.
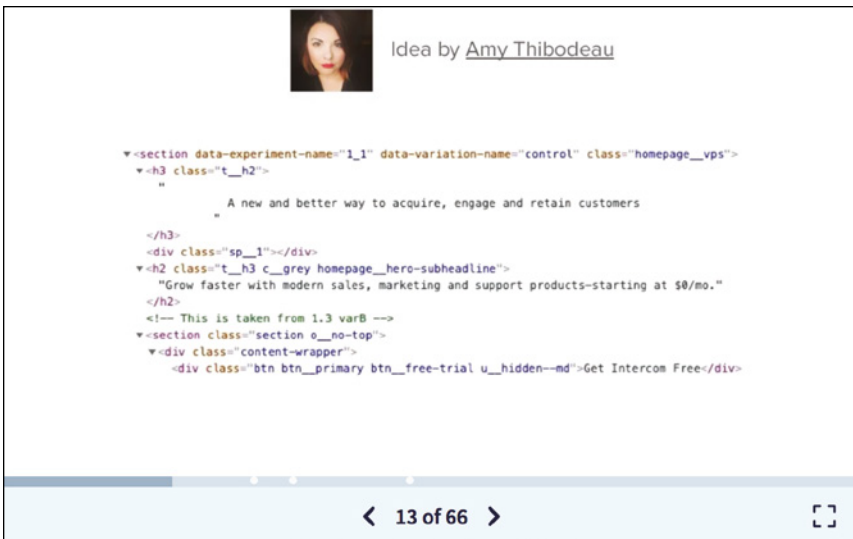
◆ **Citing sources more casually**—for example, in a blog post or article—means you link somewhere to the name of the original source (the publication, website, magazine, and so on). You can do it as an aside. But link to the specific post or asset, not just a site's home page.

As always, make sure you have permission to use any intellectual property you're using. **Make sure you have permission to use any intellectual property you're using . . . now in bold.** It's that important.

In slide presentations, cite the author right alongside the content any time you use someone else's ideas, text, or images on your slide. As always, make sure you have permission to use them. A single slide at the end with references doesn't cut it.

I know what you're thinking: *Won't that junk up my gorgeously crafted slide?*

It doesn't have to. See how Jonathon Colman references his colleague Amy Thibodeau as the originator of an idea in his presentation on content design:

Source: Jonathon Colman, Slideshare.net[2]

Here's how I gave Doug Kessler at VelocityUK credit for an idea (I also linked to him in the subsequent blog post):
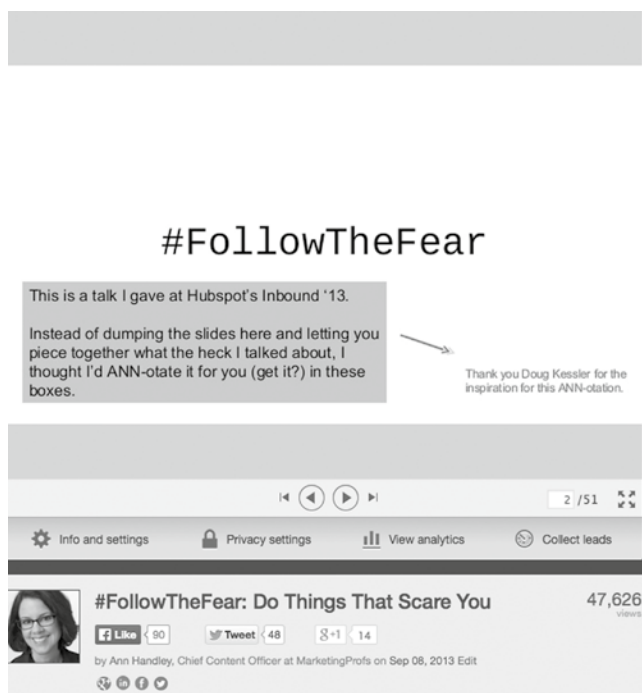
And finally . . .

◆ **Cite as you write.** It's surprisingly easy to forget what idea is your own original work and what you sourced—especially if you let too many hours creep in between the writing and the citing.

This type of memory lapse is actually a thing—psychologist Dan Gilbert calls it *kleptomnesia*, or an accidental plagiarism or belief that an idea you generate is your own when in fact it was someone else's. (A famous example is George Harrison's 1970 hit "My Sweet Lord," which a judge later ruled was accidentally similar in both melody and harmony to "He's So Fine" by the Chiffons, a song produced seven years earlier.)

Having access to jillions of sources online is a double-edged sword: It's both liberating and dangerous.

Keep careful notes as you research your work, and mark the origin of excerpts of nonoriginal text in the text itself. Keep in mind that many online tools can instantly crawl through millions of records to see whether your writing is actually yours. (See Part VII.)

One final word on citation: You'll notice that in those two presentation examples I gave, what's cited is actually the source of *inspiration* for an idea.

Calling out the contributions of others, even if it's merely inspiration, isn't just a good business practice.

It's a good practice, period.

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Curate Ethically

Content curation is an ugly phrase, isn't it?

It suggests an uncharming factory on the side of the highway where blobs of colorless content are plopped onto conveyor belts and dropped into websites for mass consumption. It sounds 100% automated and 100% uninspired. Like we're assembling a school cafeteria lunch tray.

The truth is that the best curation has a human element to it. It might be harvested and organized via technology, but it feels fresh-picked. Its real value materializes when actual people add something new to it: when actual people add context.

If you curate without adding your take, that's not curating—that's aggregating. A robot can aggregate, but only a human can curate. Only a human can share *why it matters* to another.

Said another way: Your curated content might not be original, but you can deliver an original *experience* by adding unique value.

* * *

Curated content is content created by others that you share with your own audience on your blog, social media accounts, or in your newsletter. It might look like a news round-up, a collection of selected quotes from thought leaders, a repost of a tweet or LinkedIn post . . . among other things.

Curating is an opportunity to diversify and augment your own content creation efforts while also signaling your expertise, your personality, your point of view.

* * *

One of my favorite curated newsletters is *The Marginalian* (formerly *Brain Pickings*).

Twice a week, Maria Popova curates a collection of articles, books, poetry, music, and more. She connects ideas, concepts, art.

Maria explains why Ross Gay's *Book of Delights* reminds her of poet Mariahadessa Ekere Tallie's picture book, *Layla's Happiness*. She links David Bowie with Jane Goodall. She tells me why these comparisons and more make sense. She expands my thinking.

Reading Maria's newsletter is like wandering through a really great art museum that is also somehow a quirky independent bookstore, with Maria as our docent/shopkeeper.

Curators are "our curiosity Sherpas, who lead us to things we didn't know we were interested in until we, well, until we are," Maria wrote.[1] They uncover "the interesting, meaningful, and relevant amidst the vast maze of overabundant information, creating a framework for what matters in the world and why," she adds.

Maria sees curation as a "valuable form of creative and intellectual labor, a form of authorship that warrants thought."

I love that last part about "a form of authorship," because it reframes curation not as an add-on or a rip-off or an easy way to plop content into websites to fulfill a blog post quota.

Instead, it respects curation as an important, foundational piece of any content marketing program.

Plus, her reframing makes us sit a little taller.

The next time you share a meme with your Twitter followers, you can feel some pride at knowing that you aren't just tweeting, are you? No you are not! *You are a gifted curiosity Sherpa doing valuable creative and intellectual labor!*

* * *

Content curation done well is like a gummy vitamin—a fun, valuable supplement to your publishing. But curation done poorly is toxic to your brand's credibility and potentially leads to copyright and legal issues.

Some stern wording for anyone who needs it: *Taking someone else's content and pasting it as your own into a post is terrible curation, because you effectively steal all of the search engine benefit, traffic, and credit from the original creator.*

Don't do that—even inadvertently.

Seems obvious, right? Yet it happens with disheartening frequency:

◆ My books (including this one) have been scanned and repackaged by other organizations that have sold them for their own gain.

◆ My ideas have been repackaged by others without permission and with barely a passing nod to me.

◆ Verizon ran an entire article that Kerry O'Shea Gorgone had written as a columnist for Mark Schaefer's blog, *{grow}*, but they credited neither Kerry nor Mark. Mark wrote a post about the experience on his high-traffic blog, and Verizon came off as a sloppy curator (at best) or a copyright infringer (at worst). How much goodwill did Verizon lose because it didn't cite and link?

Here's how to curate ethically (and well):

◆ **Tap a variety of sources.** Relying on one or two curation sources isn't just boring for your readers, "it also violates the spirit of good curation because it could well mean you're profiting off of the original creator's work," writes Pawan Deshpande at MarketingProfs.[2]

◆ **Cite the original source (not the secondary one).** We talked about this already, so to reiterate: If someone else has created valuable content that you know your audience will love, they've done you a favor, right? Do them a solid in return and help them achieve the recognition and search engine boost they've earned.

◆ **Say it loud and proud.** Attribute front and center. Don't be one of those unscrupulous sneaks who bury links at the bottom of a post,

disguise links in the same color font as the rest of the article, or use a minuscule, flyspeck font. And don't link to their Twitter but not, say, their website.

◆ **The sections you create in your own words should be longer than any sections you're quoting.** Quote short passages or a short section of the original piece only—don't reprint the whole piece, an entire framework, or someone's ideas wholesale without their permission.

   You're curating small parts. You are not reprinting the whole.

   The idea is to give your readers the gist of another piece so you can share your take on why it matters, or why it's important, or what else to consider. Do not repost or lift anything as a whole. Extensive quoting will also blur the line between fair use and copyright infringement, says Pawan.

◆ **Add context and point of view.** Forget about the law for a minute and consider what you're aiming to do to begin with: telling your readers why it matters to them. So add relevant context and value, and (maybe) brand-appropriate keywords that may not have appeared in the original.

◆ **Add your own voice, too.** A reminder that your point of view also means adding voice and style. I mean, if a sewer utility can curate with a voice . . . what's our excuse?

◆ **Write a new headline.** You'll want to anyway, to reflect your spin on the topic. But it's also a good idea to further differentiate your piece from the original.

Source: NE Ohio Regional Sewer District on Twitter[3]

◆ **Avoid no-follow links.** No-follow links are those with a rel="nofollow" HTML tag tacked on. That no-follow tag tells search engines to ignore a link like it's a villain. Using no-follow links in curating or citing robs the original content creator of any search benefit. Let's not snub our fellow creators!

◆ **Two links = extra generous.** Links can change. A generous move is to double-link an author or work so that someone in the future could easily find it if the original link breaks. This is specific to some situations—an article, blog post, or website content. It's total overkill on social posts, of course.

For example, if I were linking to an article that Mr. Peanut wrote on his own site, I could link his name to his main URL at MrPeanut.com. Then I'd separately link to the individual post he wrote as well.

Why? Because even if in the future Mr. Peanut moves his content around (or if he's lured away to work for Skippy?), he likely won't change or lose his domain name. So a reader could still click on Peanut's name, arrive on the site, and search for the article there.

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Seek Permission, Not Forgiveness

Sometimes it's okay to seek forgiveness, not ask permission. Misunderstanding copyright isn't one of those times.

Copyright infringement is like smoking weed: People tend to think that because it's common it must be legal everywhere. It isn't. (Yet.)

Here's the bottom line: Using other people's intellectual property in your marketing is not okay. So in matters of copyright, seek permission, not forgiveness.

Even if it's "just" a social repost.

Getting permission for any kind of content—text, audio, images, video—means you follow these three steps:

1. **Ask.** Make sure that you're asking the correct person or company for permission. Ownership of copyrighted works can get confusing, particularly in the case of sound recordings and other works in which multiple parties may have a stake.

2. **Get permission in writing.** Some people forget conversations; others may develop amnesia if there's money at stake. "Written" permission can be a simple email. Go beyond a phone call or an in-person conversation. Get documentation.

3. **Honor the terms.** If you receive permission to use someone's audio as your podcast introduction, don't assume it's okay to use it for YouTube video, too. The permission will be specific to the proposed use.

View permission requests as an opportunity to build relationships. People will appreciate that you admire their work, which is a great way to begin a conversation. Talking with other creators in your industry builds your network, and it can lead to partnerships and connections.

None of those relationships can develop if we lift the work of others without express permission.

What If Someone Steals Your Content?

What if you discover unauthorized use of your content? Here are steps to take:

1. If a site is using your content without permission, send the site owner written correspondence (email or letter) letting them know you've discovered the use and that you'd like it taken down. (Or maybe you'll accept credit and/or a link back, if that's sufficient for you? Your call.)

   In many instances, people don't realize that they've done something illegal. Some people think a writer is simply flattered to have his or her content used.

   Weird. But true.

2. If the owner doesn't respond or take action, your next step is to have an attorney draft a cease-and-desist letter that explains the law of copyright as it applies to your work on the site, and lays out the potential legal penalties for not respecting your intellectual property.

3. If the owner ignores your attorney's letter, well . . . that's disappointing.

   You have a few options:

   a. Litigation (expensive, time-consuming, and likely frustrating). "Unless you registered your copyright in advance and the person who stole your work is rich, it's not worth it to go this route," says attorney Ruth Carter, adding, "Every company should have a discussion with an IP lawyer about what IP they have and how they should protect it."

b. Contacting the host company of the infringing website and detailing the theft.

c. Reporting the site to Google and social networks for copyright infringement. Basically, complaining anywhere the content appears.

Getting someone's site de-indexed by Google can be more effective than the threat of a lawsuit. For details on how to report a site to Google, see Removing Content from Google at bit.ly/ContentThieves.

4. Send a bill and a license. You or your lawyer could send a letter to the thief that says some version of, "By using my content, you've agreed to my licensing terms. Here's a copy of the license and your bill!"

This idea comes from Ruth, who suggests that if you want to try this option, you should publish your licensing terms or information about licensing on your website.

Thanks to Ruth Carter and Kerry O'Shea Gorgone for sharing their expertise in this chapter.

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The Basics of Copyright, Fair Use, and For Attribution

Let's call in an expert for some help with this one.

Kerry O'Shea Gorgone is a content creator and also an attorney. (Even so, keep in mind that what follows shouldn't be considered legal advice, which only your attorney can give you.)

What's the difference between *copyright*, *fair use*, and *for attribution*?

Kerry O'Shea Gorgone: *Copyright* is actually a bundle of rights held by the owner of a creative work. For example, if I write a book, I alone hold the right to reproduce it and distribute copies, publish the book, perform or display it publicly, or create derivative works based on it.

Fair use is a *legal defense* against a claim of copyright infringement. The most important thing to realize about fair use is that it won't prevent you from being sued: You only raise the defense once you're already involved in litigation.

The court in a copyright infringement case uses four factors to decide whether your use of the copyrighted work is fair:

> **1.** The purpose and character of the use, including whether such use is of commercial nature or is for nonprofit educational purposes
>
> **2.** The nature of the copyrighted work

3. The amount and substantiality of the portion used in relation to the copyrighted work as a whole

4. The effect of the use on the potential market for, or value of, the copyrighted work

Figuring out which uses are fair from a legal standpoint can be tricky, and ultimately your best guess might be wrong. That's why brands should err on the side of caution and get express written permission before using someone else's content for marketing.

For attribution allows use with credit to the author or creator of the work. It's ethical (and nice) to provide attribution, but it will not protect you from a claim of copyright infringement, unless the author of the original work released it under a Creative Commons license.

These types of licenses permit the free use of creative works, provided certain conditions are met. Different license types have different restrictions. The least restrictive is an Attribution license, meaning you may use the work so long as you credit the original author.

Can I Just Link?

What about reprinting online content in an offline publication? Or quoting in social media—say, in an Instagram image? Do I need to let the author know or seek permission or can I simply link to the original source?

KOG: Any time you reproduce content in its entirety (or even reproduce a large portion of it), you should get permission.

When quoting in social media, so long as the quote is accurate and doesn't amount to a huge portion of the original work, you should be okay if you cite and link to the original source.

If you can't link to the original source (for example, if the source is an out-of-print book), provide all the information you possibly can so that your readers can find the book. Also, avoid using too much of the source information in your own post. In this instance, I'd probably make an effort to include details like full title, publication date, and publisher.

Always ask for permission before reproducing someone's content (online or offline), because fair use is nearly impossible to determine in advance

of a lawsuit, and because if the owner says yes (gives you permission) you're in the clear.

Do get permission in writing, however. Memories fade and a verbal okay may not be enough to clarify the terms of your use.

What About Images?

KOG: It can sometimes be risky to use a photo that you find tagged with a Creative Commons license (creativecommons.org/licenses) because it's possible that the person who posted it was not the copyright holder. Google offers a reverse image search, which can be helpful if you want to make sure that the original owner of a photo you want to use has in fact released the rights.

Copyright applies to all different kinds of creative works (musical compositions, motion pictures, works of literature, paintings, sculptures, etc.). Consequently, most types of content are subject to the same rules. Applying these rules can be tricky, though, because you can't really introduce a photo the way you can a literary work.

You often need to display an entire image to illustrate your point, which is, by definition, reproducing the entire picture. If you must do this, I'd recommend embedding the original creator's Instagram post, tweet, or social update on your website (using the embed code provided by the relevant social platform). That way, all the information and context are available to readers.

I would not upload someone else's image to my website, even with attribution, unless I had express written permission. Given the mushy definition of fair use, it's just not worth the risk.

How About Logos and Screenshots?

KOG: Trademark law protects logos in a way similar to how copyright law protects creative works. You're covered by fair use if you're displaying a logo or trademark for purposes of commentary, comparison, and so on, but you must be very careful not to make false or defamatory statements about that brand.

If your content is educational in nature and you are using logos to make a point about effective logo design, or, say, the role color plays in consumer buying behavior, you're less likely to meet an objection from the brand.

By contrast, if you display a company's logo above text that details why the company is irresponsible and how you are a better choice for people who care about the environment, you are more likely to find yourself embroiled in a legal tug-of-war, even if you ultimately prevail in court.

Lawyers generally recommend exercising caution in the use of others' trademarked property, and using logos or screenshots only when it's absolutely necessary to make a point.

<div align="center">* * *</div>

What about TikTok sounds? How can creators use copyrighted songs and snippets on the app for free but we often can't use those same songs on YouTube?

TikTok has agreements in place with the major music labels and many media companies (like Disney) that allow TikTok to host music, lyrics, character voices, and other copyrighted sounds on its app. YouTube does not.

You could still receive a copyright infringement notice from TikTok, though, if you upload a copyrighted song from outside the platform. Do that too many times, and TikTok might even shut down your account.

Ditto for putting other types of copyrighted work into your TikTok videos—like art or movie clips.

The songs offered on TikTok are licensed. So as long as you don't start uploading outside music, you should be good. Of course, licensing agreements could always change.

But for now . . . we can all lip-sync to *The Little Mermaid*'s Ursula: *"No more talking, singing."*

One Final Point

I like the advice that Kerry shared as an aside: *Don't be an asshat.*

Taking something that doesn't belong to you? Asshat.

Taking credit for someone else's work? Definitely asshat.

Entire sites are devoted to hating on people who have plagiarized or stolen other people's copyrighted work. You don't want to end up on one of them.

Part **VI**

20 Things Marketers Write

Parts I through V of this book deliver pretty much everything you need so you can create content that will make you ridiculously proud of yourself.

But because marketers are often tasked with specific kinds of writing, in Part VI I've taken up some of the most common writing tasks that land in our laps.

The previous sections help you set a strong foundation for your writing skills. These 20 chapters shore up the specifics, so your content is as sturdy as a Jenga tower with its blocks hot-glued together.

Keep this section handy. It will make you look decisive and informed when the others in your Zoom meeting stay on Mute and wait for someone else to answer.

Turn here to Part VI when Stella the CEO asks you for a video script for that new product launch.

Use it when your team decides to remake the company email newsletter and you sense it's already going off the rails. Or when something gets goofed up and you need to address it publicly.

Thumb through it when your client needs a boilerplate or wants help winning a speaking spot on a big stage.

Speaking of thumbs, keep in mind that the guidelines here are, well, rules of thumb.

There is no one way to write. And there is no one way to write an email or an infographic or an About Us page, either. "Anyone who says differently is selling something," as the Man in Black tells the Princess Bride.

You are welcome to adapt and amend and reject these guidelines as you wish—as you discover what works for your audience and for you.

But at least you have a place to start.

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The New Ideal Length for Every Piece of Content

"How long should a blog post be?"
"What's the ideal length of an email newsletter?"

Iget these questions a lot. Maybe you do, too.

In the first edition of this book, I was prescriptive about it: I gave you data from studies that analyzed the high performers, based largely on how well things performed for search engines.

Eight years ago I told you exactly how long a YouTube video should be (3½ minutes!) and how long a podcast should be. (An average 22 minutes, because that's the average commute!)

Here in the second edition, things are less straightforward. There's no "right" length anymore. (Also: In a post-Covid, hybrid-work world . . . what's a "commute"?)

The question *"How long should a <insert your content asset> be?"* is harder to answer, because it is no longer the best question to start with.

In a very few cases: Word count matters. (See box at the end of this chapter.)

In most cases: Your reader doesn't care about word count.

Sure, there is sometimes a correlation between search engine performance and length. But what Google *really* rewards isn't length, it's how helpful something is. How much it resonates because it answers the right questions with genuinely useful detail. If you're doing your job right, you will rank.

That's why puffing up a 500-word piece to 1,000 words just to hit a "perfect length" word count is useless.

Ultimately, content ranks because "it goes deep into the subject matter, answers questions from every angle, and makes a sincere effort at producing the best page for the topic," says marketer Andy Crestodina.

You know what word I love paired with "marketing"? *Sincere.*

We don't hear "sincere" and "marketing" paired often enough. We need to.

Two more points about the "perfect length" issue.

Your audience does not care about length. I'm repeating this again because I said it as an aside above. It deserves its own paragraph. (Or two.)

Your reader will love a 2,000-word email newsletter if it doesn't feel like 2,000 words—if it feels instead like a fun, useful inbox romp.

Your prospect will watch your 30-minute video if it's interesting to them.

Your 12-part tweet thread gets tagged and saved because it's wise and good . . . not because it's a certain number of parts.

All this is why the advice you've already read in this book is more helpful than any number of best-practice guidelines around length I could give.

Search ranking and page views are overrated. It's far more important to be loved by a few than to be familiar to many, says Andy.

For most of us, size truly doesn't matter.

Length Guidelines for a Few Fundamentals

◆ **Website text line**. The ideal length for a line of text on a website is 12 words. We mentioned as much earlier.

If a line of text is too long, it makes readers work too hard: Their eyes have to travel back and forth, back and forth. . . like your sentences are a FitBit that's making readers' eyeballs get their steps in.

"Readers are more likely to lose their place," Andy adds, which "slows reading rates and comprehension."

◆ **Paragraph**. The ideal length for a paragraph is three to four lines. But as we also talked about earlier, even one line is fine. *White space is oxygen.*

◆ **Title tag**. The ideal length for a title tag is 55 characters. The title tag is what becomes your link text—the first line, in large typeface—in Google search results.

◆ **Meta description**. The ideal length for a meta description is 100–150 characters (not words). Google usually cuts off descriptions that exceed 150 characters. The meta description shows up in search results; it's the snippet of descriptive text that appears right below the title tag.

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Writing Direct Response Email

Email is the Rocky Balboa of Marketing.

The original Rocky—the iconic underdog everyone underestimates yet who always wins—not so much the retired Rocky of later films who runs an Italian restaurant.

You can't wander around the Internet without tripping over a headline saying that Email Is Dead. Or Email Isn't as Effective as TikFace. Or that no one reads anymore.

All clichés. All untrue.

Like a young Rocky, Email always pummels the other guys. Some studies have shown that for every $1 invested in email, there's the potential for a $38 return.[1]

And yes, "potential" as a descriptor is as tall and wide as Philadelphia's Rocky Steps—the 72 stone steps Rocky runs up in that iconic scene in the original movie. Still, email as a channel generates the highest ROI for marketers.

So how do we get in on that potential?

Let's focus here on how to write better direct response emails.

Some guidelines:

◆ **Short email versus long email is a false choice, like being given a choice between fries or a salad.**

   Neither is better than the other: They're just *different*.

   A better question is: What's your purpose?

   Want to inspire a click or direct response? Go short (fries).

   Want to nurture a relationship and create a connection? Go long (salad). (We'll talk salad in the next chapter; this chapter is about fries.)

◆ **Lift up the A in your CTA (Call to Action)!**

   Make your call to *action* literally *actionable*.

   Use active verbs you can "see" versus "invisible" verbs that happen inside your head. Active verbs carry more energy and inspire more activity.

   Instead of > Try:

   ● "Shop now" > "Wave Goodbye to Winter"

   ● "Access the ebook here" > "Grab your copy"

   ● "Register" > "Tune into the Convo"

◆ **Infuse your CTAs with your voice.**

   Use CTAs as a way to underscore or extend your brand personality, tone of voice, quirk, whimsy, love of life itself.

   Instead of > Try

   ● "Download the guide here" > "Get your mitts on your own copy."

   ● "More info" > "Peep the details."

● "Learn how you can avoid burnout" > "Say Buh-bye Burnout!"

◆ **Ditch words that imply a lot of work** on the part of readers and don't hint at an outcome. (We are all a little lazy.)

● See how *becomes* Discover.

● Learn *becomes* Finally understand.

● Analyze *becomes* Accurately predict.

◆ **You can use words like "free" or "save dollars."**

We marketers used to be cautioned to avoid using words in the subject line that would trigger a spam filter, like *fast* or *free* or *lifetime* (or *fast and free lifetime Viagra*).

ISPs now rely on advanced filtering and authentication, so the specific words you use in subject lines are now less worrisome, says April Mullen, senior director of brand and content marketing at Sparkpost.

Such words shouldn't affect your deliverability, April says, if you have a strong sender reputation.

In other words, if you are following deliverability best practices and good list-acquisition and hygiene practices, you can freely use free!

It's probably best to avoid Spam triggers like SHOUTY CAPS, excessive use of punctuation!!!!!!!, YOU KNOW WHAT I MEAN????? They may not be flagged as spam, but they still look spammy.

◆ *Your rhyme can change the paradigm.*

Your readers are more likely to remember and trust information when it's delivered as a rhyme. Marketer and author Nancy Harhut taught me that.

There's a lot of science behind why rhyming works. One is a study titled "Birds of a Feather Flock Conjointly"—which makes the point in a meta way that rhymes are more memorable.[2]

Nancy taught me the Eaton-Rosen Phenomenon, or Rhyme as Reason Bias: People judge rhyming phrases to be more truthful/accurate.

Trust. . .? Why, exactly?

"The brain has an easier time processing them, so they feel right," Nancy says. "When something feels right, it's not a big leap to think it is." (Think of the iconic Johnnie Cochran line from the OJ Simpson trial: *If it doesn't fit, you must acquit.*)

Rhyming is useful when you need to trigger an action or a click: email subject lines and direct mail calls to action, but also ad copy, landing pages, headlines.

Recommended tool: Word Hippo (wordhippo.com). It can be tricky to prompt that clicky. So try Word Hippo. The tool does other things, too, but I like the rhyming feature. *Type in a word you want to rhyme; Hippo comes through every time.*

◆ **The preheader text is your side commentary. Everyone strains to hear the side commentary.**

A preheader is the little sentence that shows up next to or below the subject line before an email is opened.

Let's challenge ourselves a bit with you, Preheader!

Source: SparkPost.

Above: Home Chef puts the *actual offer* in the preheader (and in the email itself too). It uses the subject line to simply tease the offer. *Baller.*

Source: BarkBox.

Above: BarkBox includes the name of the Super Chewer pup himself: Alfred. ("Alfred" means "he of the strong jaws" in canine etymology.)

(I just made that "canine etymology" business up.)

◆ **Personalization isn't entirely a tech solution.**

Let's pause for a sec here and think about that word "personalization." The root of the word is "personal"—something made or designed to be used by one person. Marketing took "personal" and hot-glued on the suffix "-ization."

We know personalization is a scalable ability, through the use of technology and data, to tailor email messages and experiences to people in our audience. That's all well and good. (Love ya, Big Tech and Data.)

But that definition is a little bloodless, isn't it?

If you DO have a tech stack and internal resources that allow you to segment and create lovely and specific messages to the very best companies/people at the very most optimal time based on when they indicate through their actions and behavior and choices that they are perfectly primed to hear your human voice . . . then 1,000%. Go for it.

But if your marketing team is small and overworked (or maybe you're even an email team of one), then rise up!

Today personalization is a tech solution. But personalization is also a human concoction. A potion of creativity and care optimized with empathy and only THEN infused with technology.

Ultimately, "personalization" means "relevance."

"Personalization" means "I care."

Stop sounding like a marketer. Sound like a person.

◆ **One metric cannot possibly measure your success.**

Email is a relationship, not a single acronym. Patterns over time in several metrics are more useful than any single, specific one. That's especially true now that open rates are a hot mess.

Every direct response email metric should have a buddy—a Sam to a Frodo, a Charlotte to a Wilbur, a Kendall to a Kylie. Your email measurement needs a buddy system.

This insight is inspired by Avinash Kaushik, the digital marketing evangelist for Google, who calls a focus on a single metric "the tyranny of a single KPI."[3]

A buddy-metric system keeps your content on the right path. For example, if your goal is a 5% conversion rate, you might get there if you cherry-pick channels, offers, and targeting, or offer crazy deep discounts, he says, adding: "I can give everyone $50 off, I can decide not to go after competitive customers, I can ignore incrementality, and on and on. The business gets 5% yet loses long-term."

But if you pair conversion rate with, say, revenue, you get better, healthier long-term results. Pairing up the right buddies creates balance for the overall business—not a narrow single team or channel, Avinash says.

(I talk about rolling your own metrics in the newsletter chapter to come.)

Idea for a Nonresponsive Email List

If you've been in the email game for a while, you might find yourself with a list made up of people who routinely ignore your messages. Is all hope lost? Not necessarily. Try freshening up the relationship by doing something unexpected, suggests D. J. Waldow, coauthor of *The Rebel's Guide to Email Marketing*.

Segment your list to send a dedicated message to those who haven't opened an email recently, and make the content slightly offbeat— oddball, humorous, or whatever fits your brand best. "Whatever you normally do, do the opposite," Waldow says. The idea is to ignite a reaction.

It's tempting to hang on to those unresponsive addresses—it can be painful to think of purging names. But, as Waldow says, "Email messages work best when you speak to those who really want to hear from you."

So if all your protracted attempts fail, host a purge.

CAN–SPAM Basics

I can't talk about email without mentioning that the only true hard-and-fast rules that exist in the United States are those defined by the Controlling the Assault of Non-Solicited Pornography and Marketing Act of 2003, otherwise known as the CAN-SPAM Act. (And to be precise, this is a law, not a rule.)

CAN-SPAM is the legislation passed by Congress to regulate commercial email.

In very simple terms, spam is email you didn't request—and don't want—from companies you might or might not know, selling products or services you might or might not want.

So if you are sending email to people on your list who didn't opt in to receiving them, and you don't respect the wishes of recipients who don't want to receive your email (i.e., those who opt out of receiving them), you're breaking the law, not just flouting a rule. So the best shortcut to avoiding problems—and, just as important, treating your email recipients with respect—is to make sure you have permission from recipients to email them.

By the way, someone handing you their business card at an event does *not* constitute permission to add them to your email list.

You know who you are.

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Why You Need an Email Newsletter

Email newsletters deserve a big group hug.

Some call them unsexy. Some mock them as old-school. Some flat-out dismiss them in favor of newer, shinier options. (*I see you, Livestreaming!*)

But email newsletters are a key component of any high-performing marketing strategy. You need one. Here's why.

<center>* * *</center>

Dear Email Newsletters: How much do we love you? *Let's count the ways ...*

Loves me #1: Human. An email newsletter is the only place where people—not algorithms—are in control. Gmail's algorithm does try to throw its weight around in your inbox, bullying you into what to open first. But, for the most part, email remains the place where **we** opt in to see what *we* want to see.

Loves me #2: Personal. Most organizations today use their email news-letter as a *distribution* strategy. They use it as a way to share other content.

But the email newsletter is inherently personal. It's a way to cultivate and nurture a relationship through your words and language. It's a letter *from* someone *to* someone. From *you* to *me*.

The most important part of a *newsletter* is the *letter*, not the *news*.

<center>*289*</center>

Loves me #3: Money. We talked about email's 38:1 return in the previous chapter. I won't quote the stats again. But I really want to remind us all: Email as a channel generates the highest ROI for marketers.

Loves me #4: Ownership. I love social media as much as any one of you. More, maybe. But we are vulnerable to the whims and vagaries and shifts in the business priorities of social platforms.

You *do* own your email list and database. You *don't* pay to access a database owned by someone else as you might on Facebook. You *can* swap email service providers whenever you want to, and pack all your customers into your carryon bag when you do—because You. Own. The. Data.

I just said that last point three different ways. But it can't be restated enough. Which leads to . . .

Loves me #5: Anarchy, in the sense that no one "owns" email—unlike, say, Facebook or LinkedIn or YouTube. With email, there is no single corporation or entity standing guard at the gate, charging you whatever they please to allow you to proceed.

It's like this:

If we want to drive on the social platform's digital roads, their tollbooth collectors charge us varying and arbitrary amounts based on how fast we want to drive. Those who pass for free can still drive, *technically*. But they have to drive in the slow lane where the speed limit is 2 mph.

In theory, you eventually get to where you're going. But most of us would give up out of sheer frustration.

Loves me #6: Democratic. Okay . . . one final comment about email versus social media: Businesses pay email providers for the service they sell. In other words, the email business model is cleaner, more straightforward, more transparent. That feels like a relief these days, doesn't it?

Loves me #7: Brand. Your email newsletter is a direct connection between you and your customer. Everything about it (voice, visuals, vibe) is all you. And only you.

Those who read your post on LinkedIn are on there interacting with LinkedIn. But when they read what your words in your newsletter, they are interacting with YOU.

Loves me #8: Trust. The cornerstone of an email relationship is trust. Subscribers opt in because they trust that you'll deliver something of value. If you break that promise, they'll unsubscribe. You cannot darken their doorstep ever again.

Brutal. But fair.

Love me #9: Reciprocal. We can send letters to our subscribers or customers, and they can hit reply and write back to us. (In most cases. NoReply@, I'm giving you a massive side-eye right now . . .)

Love me #10: Right where you left it. Ever see a post on a social platform and then try to find it later? I think that person published it Tuesday? Or was it Wednesday? Wait. Maybe it was last week? Email, of course, is always right where you left it. *(Waves hello!)*

And, finally, this is the most important . . .

Loves me #11: "Slow-cial media." In the past few years, I've spent less and less time on Facebook. Newsletters have become my way of staying connected to the kind of information I used to get in my Facebook feed. My consumption of news has become slower. But that's been good: It gives me time to formulate my own thoughts and feelings without bias from the commenters and likers on social media.

I might ultimately share my thoughts on social media, but the difference is that I am able to first think about how I feel about an issue. I can swim around in the deep pool for a bit, alone, without being splashed by that opinionated guy who decides to cannonball right off the diving board.

The ability to think before speaking is embedded in email. That's almost impossible to experience on social media, especially with hot-button or political posts. Which is why I call email "slow-cial media."

Loves me not . . .

Listen, I'm a realist. Email is imperfect. As much as I can count the ways that email loves me, there are also ways that email loves me not . . .

In some ways email can be frustrating and disappointing. For one, we send dump trucks full of email. Too much, really.

But that's why you and I are here, to figure out a way to consistently up our game.

Let's talk next about how to create must-read email newsletters.

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Writing an Email Newsletter

The most important part of the newsletter is the *letter*, not the *news*.

I've been obsessed with email newsletters since January 28, 2018, when I relaunched my newsletter *Total Annarchy* (annhandley.com/newsletter) to 2,111 subscribers. Now, close to 50,000 people receive a letter from me every other Sunday morning.

Those 2,111 people were subscribed to blog post triggers at AnnHandley. com. I can't even really call them "subscribers"—because an email alert and a newsletter are not the same thing.

The former is auto-generated. Soulless. Bloodless. More like a ping that it's time to change the batteries in your smoke detector.

Let's do the math: 2,000 to 50,000 is a 2,400% increase. Yet I've grown the list with a focus on engagement, not size.

Size is a byproduct, not a goal.

Here is my approach to creating and writing a newsletter as well as growing an engaged audience—because the two go hand-in-hand.

Let's talk about what worked, what didn't—all with a focus on ideas you can steal.

I have a lot to say on this topic. Empty your bladder. Grab a drink. Settle in. Here we go.

1. **Create what you wish existed.** For years I searched for a marketing newsletter that focused on writing and storytelling. That walked the walk—meaning, the writing was fun and engaging. Writing I wanted to read.

   Why doesn't it exist? I used to muse, stroking my metaphorical ascot. More musing: *How can Marketing see the power in writing?*

   Like . . . duh. Do it then, I told myself. *Be your own best fan.*

2. **Feed yourself first.** I get as much joy out of writing a newsletter as I hope subscribers get reading it.

   No good writing is created with dread in your heart and a pit in your stomach. If writing the newsletter felt to me like I was getting a root canal . . . you'd feel that.

   Weird metric I use: I try to make myself laugh in every issue.

3. **Say no.** *What don't you write about?* is as important a question to answer as what you *do* write about.

   Marketing is big, broad, complex. I leave Rev Ops to the people who are passionate about that kind of thing.

4. **Have a clear niche.** Specific bests sweeping.

   In the age of content abundance, your niche is already covered. No problem. Add your point of view.

   Your voice is the only thing no one else can copy.

5. **Set a schedule you can manage.** "*I'll write only when I have something to say*" doesn't work. It'll instead just give you an excuse NOT to publish.

   Set a schedule. Stick to it. Every week, twice a week, once a fortnight . . . doesn't matter. Just show up when you say you will.

   Let your audience learn to anticipate you. Do not break the chain. You've got this.

6. Purpose defines goals. My purpose with my newsletter is to build relationships and have fun. That keeps me focused on what matters. I glance at the open rate and click-through rate (CTR).

But I invented my own metrics to track:

◆ **OSR (Open to Save Rate):** Do your customers save your emails?

◆ **OWBR (Open to Write Back Rate):** What percentage of people start a dialog with you? Especially on that critical Welcome email.

◆ **RR (Resub Rate):** When people change jobs, do they resubscribe with their new email?

◆ **TUPER (Trust U with my Personal Email Rate):** How many subscribers find you so valuable that they invite you into that protected personal inbox? (We all have one.)

Did I make these metrics up? Yes I did.

How do I "track" these? Anecdotally.

How do I do that? I proactively ask in my Welcome email. I watch what people say on social. People write to tell me.

7. Do unscalable things. Because over time . . . unscalable scales.

A better header might be "Think Small and Grow Big." But that feels like a book you'd see in an airport Hudson News.

The point is: Slow down. Invest where it matters.

◆ **Spend a lot of time on craft.** Writing my newsletter takes me eight hours, on average. Crazy? To some maybe. Worth it for me? Yes.

◆ **Obsess about voice.** Your email is reaching one person at one time. Use your honest voice. Your personality. Your point of view. That's what I mean by "letter" versus "news."

You are showing *who* you are and *how* you think—not just *what* you think.

Sharing *what you think* might attract an audience, but sharing *who you are* and *how you think* will build a lasting relationship between reader and writer, between you and me.

By the way, your voice can take a while to emerge. Your first issue will probably be awkward and self-conscious and not good. That's okay.

Think about the first seasons of your long-running favorite shows: At first the characters can seem wooden and weird; it takes a while for the actors to spread out and fully relax into their roles. The same is true of newsletter writers.

◆ **Spend time on building subscriber relationships.** Connecting with subscribers individually matters. More on this in a second.

◆ **Spend time on building influencer relationships.** I hate using the word "influencer" here because it feels transactional. But it's good shorthand for other newsletters, companies, marketers, writers.

Call out the good work of others. Share the love. Don't expect and ask for reciprocity—that's not friendship, that's coercion.

("Actually it's *quid pro quo,*" some pedant shouted from the back. Whatever, Pedant. No one likes it.)

8. **Ditch the forced opt-in, lead magnets, popovers.** Yes, they work. No, they aren't for everyone.

If you use them, make sure you're clear on your goals versus you just read a Best Practices article on how to grow your newsletter list. (I guarantee *THAT* was behind a popover.)

For a hot minute I once implemented an email signup popover on my site. I took it down a hot minute later. It wasn't me. I'm more interested in the quality of the list than the size of the list.

I want a reader's relationship with me to be, ultimately, the trigger than would grow the list.

That line above was a revelation to me. And it made me realize . . .

9. **Your From line matters more than your Subject line.**

    There are a ton of tools that help you optimize your Subject line.

    There's no shortcut to optimizing a From line. That's all on you and the value you provide.

10. **A relatable "emcee" for your newsletter.** It should come from a real person. Not "Marketing@ThisDomain" or "Newsletter@ ThatDomain" and absolutely not from "DoNotReply@ TheOtherThingDomain" (I hate that guy).

    I see you there, B2B tech company, countering: "But we're a B2B solution."

    All the more reason for you to anoint an emcee, because it'll make your company more human-scale and accessible.

    That's why the *New York Times* sends its morning newsletter from senior writer David Leonhardt. That's why CB Insights sends its daily email newsletter from CEO Anand Sanwal. And that's why technology company Toast sends its email newsletter *On the Line* from Tyler Cumella—a real person who is really a member of the Toast demand-gen team.

11. **Snuff out anything with a whiff of "Dear Valued Customers."** Replace it with "Dear You." You're writing to one person in one inbox—not a roomful of people. We talked about this in Part I. It's critical here.

12. **Lots of *yous*.** Count the number of *you*s in an email newsletter. (From Part I: If you run out of fingers, you're doing great.)

13. **Context for curation:** "Here's why I'm sharing this useful thing with you; here's why I believe it's important."

14. **Mostly insights; some promotion.** Never flip that script.

    You need numbers? Fine: 90/10.

    No: 95/5. (You *should* flip that script for straight-up direct response email, as in Chapter 73. But we're talking newsletters here.)

15. Obsess over onboarding. You'll never get a second chance to make a first impression, as our Greek god Pinterest tells us—and sells as a frameable poster in his Etsy store.

Pay attention to that first touch. What does a subscriber get when they sign up for your list? What's the vibe you're giving off? The tone you set?

◆ **High-five!** They should get an immediate, friendly, human Welcome high-five message from a real person.

Write it in your voice and tone. Do not use your email provider's default. "That's a wasted opportunity," Greek god Pinterest warns.

◆ **Set expectations.** When will you mail? What will you promise to deliver?

I learned this by realizing what didn't work (again): One woman unsubscribed via hate-mail when she received her first issue of my newsletter early on a Sunday morning. "I don't want to think about work on the weekend!!!!!" she wrote.

Yes! With five! Exclamation! Points!

A little aggressive with the punctuation. But fair enough.

Now I make sure new subscribers know exactly what they'll get. And when.

Pro tip for Marketing (and Life): Setting expectations neuters rage.

◆ **Create an easy ask.** Invite subscribers to write back and tell you a bit about themselves. When they do, you get great information about who is on your list—and also help ensure future deliverability.

I aim for 50% response rate to this specific Welcome email—in other words, I want half the people who get it to answer me. About 30% tend to hit reply and answer. Working on that.

16. **Prompt subscribers to share.** In each issue, subtly invite your current subscribers to share your newsletter easily with others. I say *subtly* because if you sell too hard, you'll come off like you care more about your next subscriber than the one right in front of you. Nuance is your comrade here.

17. **Create reading momentum.** Don't make 1,500 words FEEL like 1,500 words. (Don't make salad feel like salad!) Build momentum.

    ◆ Short sentences

    ◆ Short paragraphs

    ◆ Pattern breaks

    ◆ White space

    ◆ Same template and format every week to set familiarity and continuity

    ◆ Strong, relatable writing voice

    ◆ A "scroll magnet" at the bottom that invites your audience to *wonder what's at the end of this email?* (even if the rest of the email that week doesn't capture their attention). A scroll magnet might be a joke, a pun, a bit of insider-y info you regularly include that trains your audience to scroll down.

18. **Create momentum outside each issue, too.** Your newsletter is not a tower; it's a bridge to your other marketing. Your social media, especially.

    Do you have a LinkedIn or Facebook group? Highlight questions or discussions in the newsletter.

    Have an Instagram? Share its images in the newsletter.

    This goes both ways, of course: Let social show your newsletter some love, too.

19. **Promote on social, but . . .** Important: Share the value, not the event. Another mistake I've made. (I talk about this later in this section, in Writing for Social Media.)

20. **Use other list growth tactics.** There are lots of trickling feeder tributaries that together flow into a steady stream. Like:

◆ **Direct referrals** from current subscribers who pass it along to friends

◆ **Social referrals** from current subscribers who share it on social channels

◆ **Soft sell in speeches, podcasts, etc.** ("If you've liked what I've had to say . . . please subscribe . . .")

◆ **Referrals from people** whose work I celebrate

◆ **The most unlikely places.** My favorite example came a from then-new subscriber Avi, who wrote me in an email: "I actually first heard about you from, of all people, my chiropractor, who, when I hinted at the possibility of writing for him told me he does all his own copywriting and no way was he gonna spend money or time on someone to write for him! His source of writing knowledge? *Everybody Writes* by Ann Handley!"

But! The biggest trigger to growth: happiness, joy all around.

21. **Make something no one else does. And then deliver more value than an audience would reasonably expect.**

If you do this, you will get more out of your newsletter than you give.

You will become a better writer. You'll know your audience more deeply. You'll understand the value you provide at almost a cellular level. And you will become more attractive with 12-pack abs and a tighter bottom.

That last one is aspirational maybe.

But why not?

Should You Publish a LinkedIn Newsletter or a Traditional Newsletter?

Every week I get a half dozen invitations to subscribe to various LinkedIn newsletters. Published by my LinkedIn connections, the newsletters have names like *Marketing Trendz* or *Shrek's MarTech Update*.

You probably get them, too. The invitations arrive in the same spot we receive connection requests, which makes it one-click simple to opt in.

Many have massive subscriber numbers, in the tens or hundreds of thousands.

Which makes me wonder . . . as the self-appointed captain of Team Newsletter: Am I missing out? Should we all be publishing newsletters via LinkedIn?

Publishing an email newsletter via a social channel runs counter to the sound maxim of *Never build a house on rented land*. But is that logic sound here, too?

Let's take a closer look.

* * *

Twitter also lets anyone start their own newsletter for free—via Revue, a Substack competitor Twitter acquired in 2021.

You can showcase your newsletter on your Twitter profile page and encourage followers to subscribe directly within the platform. You can also convert your subscribers to a paid newsletter, if that's your fancy.

And although the newsletter publishing function is integrated with your Twitter account, Twitter doesn't own the list: You do.

Facebook also has a newsletter publishing program, called Bulletin—but right now it's invite-only, to a select few (Malcolm Gladwell, Jessica Yellin, Tan France).

But let's focus here on LinkedIn's newsletter program, because Twitter's functions mostly like a traditional newsletter. And because most of us are not Tan France.

(Of course, either Facebook or Twitter could change the rules at any time.)

* * *

You know my philosophy on growing your own newsletter. I spent 900+ words in the previous chapter persuading you that a newsletter for your brand is like pumpkin spice and autumn: You can't imagine one without the other.

Should we also sprinkle that newsletter pumpkin spice on LinkedIn— where you might already have an audience of potential "subscribers"?

Yes . . . **IF** these two things are true:

1. **You have the resources** to run your own newsletter program AND a LinkedIn newsletter.

2. **You have a plan** for converting "subscribers" on LinkedIn in some way that benefits you directly.

I am using "subscribers" in air quotes to underscore the biggest downside to your LinkedIn newsletter:

You don't own the data.

You don't own the list of subscribers. You can't export it. Port it over to a new platform. Segment it . . . or do any of the things you can do with an actual subscriber list you own.

If you choose to leave or you get booted off the platform for whatever reason . . . your newsletter gets shut down, too. Again: *You don't own the data!*

Sooooo considering all that. . . How do you best use a LinkedIn newsletter?

1. **Give your LinkedIn newsletter a different tone and content.** Give it its own identity.

   For example:

   LinkedIn Marketing Solutions publishes a regular newsletter that takes a broad approach to marketing. But the newsletter it publishes via LinkedIn dives deep into one topic per week and highlights a lot of third-party content, says Alex Rynne, senior content marketing manager at LinkedIn Marketing Solutions.

   Orbit Media publishes a twice-monthly newsletter that focuses on new marketing ideas and tactics. But Orbit also publishes a LinkedIn newsletter with a "super boring but very descriptive name," Digital Marketing Tips, says Orbit's Andy Crestodina.

   That's because "clear is better than clever," Andy says. And since LinkedIn lets people subscribe with one click, he wanted to make the value of the newsletter self-evident. It's grown to 100,000 subscribers in 10 months. (I mean . . . "subscribers.")

   So get specific: *Lord Farquaad's Castle Decorating on a Budget* versus *Home Decorating Ideas*.

2. **Use your LinkedIn newsletter as a way to reimagine other content.**

   Orbit Media in part uses older, evergreen blog content for its LinkedIn newsletter content—deep cuts that are forgotten but still solid, Andy says.

   Most of the article is in the newsletter itself. But readers need to click through to the Orbit Media site to access the content in its entirety.

   * * *

LinkedIn newsletters can have a ton of visibility, Andy says, "especially considering the effort, which is like 10 minutes per week.

"These articles often get 40k views, which is double the average weekly traffic on our entire site!"

A LinkedIn newsletter is "just another relationship building tool in the box," adds LinkedIn's Alex Rynne. "If you have a strong following on LinkedIn, it can be a great way to further develop your relationship with your audience and boost reach."

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Writing a Home Page

We Get You

It's apt that we use the very human *home* to refer to the main page of a website.

Home evokes warmth. Belonging. The place where your Wi-Fi connects automatically.

That's exactly the mindset to get into when write your own business's home page—the web page that is rendered when your business's domain name is typed into a web-enabled device.

The home page is the threshold of your business.

You want visitors to feel welcomed as soon as they step in—to feel comfortable, to sense that you're happy to see them.

And because this is your business, you want them to get a sense of their surroundings in the blink of an eye: an idea of who you are and what you do and why it matters to them.

There's no one way to write. There's definitely no one way to write a home page.

There are many variables—related to the nature of your business and its goals—that will define success for your home page. So as with many chapters in this section, this is a general approach, not a prescription.

◆ **Who's in, who's out?** Who is your audience? Whom do you want to attract? And—just as important—whom do you *not* want to attract?

All good content is rooted in a clear understanding of your audience.

That sounds obvious, doesn't it? But it's surprising how often we overlook our audiences and use our home pages to talk only about us.

You might be tempted to use your home page to say you are "The world's leading business-to-business sales training and research firm." That might be true, but where is your audience in that description? Why should they care?

Try instead: "You will make smarter sales decisions and grow your business faster with the help of our training and research." That tells people what's in it for them.

I'm using *audience* and not *customers*, by the way. That's because your home page should appeal to those who might not yet know who you are, not just your current clients or customers.

◆ **Just like me.** Part of understanding your customers is knowing what motivates them. How you can help them.

The home pages should murmur: "We get you. You belong here. We understand your challenges, your fears, your pain, your hopes, your needs. We shoulder your burdens. We've got your back. We'll give you a helping hand. A leg up. A nudge in the right direction." All the body parts.

The main headline on your page should communicate that customer-centric value. (The biggest wasted opportunity is to merely say, "Welcome.") Remember: Your value is not what you do or what you sell, it's what you do *for your customers*. That shift may seem subtle, but it's everything.

Even better if your home page subtly eases objections.

For example: video is hot. But a big problem for marketers is to prove that there'll be a return on investment. Right on its home page, video marketing platform Vidyard (vidyard.com) makes its value clear with the customer-centric headline: "Get 5x More Responses from Busy Buyers."

Beautiful, because it immediately tells us not just what Vidyard does, but also how it helps us and our businesses.

Or this home page copy from Knak, an email provider:

"Codeless email and landing page creation for enterprise marketing teams."

Then, as if to ease unspoken fears (like *That sounds hard!* or *Will my email and landing pages look like other enterprise companies'?*), Knak adds a subtitle:

"Build in minutes. Collaborate in real-time. Always on brand."

◆ **Keep it stupid-simple.** Don't be tempted to fill space with lots of copy and graphics, especially above the fold—the part of a web page that first appears in web browsers when it's opened.

This message takes up the entire screen above the fold on the Dropbox home page:

"Keep life moving—and work organized. All in one place."

There's more below that elaborates on "your stuff, anywhere." But it's so simple, so calming, so Zen. And it feels like an antianxiety prescription—which, incidentally, is in a sense what Dropbox is all about.

Your own product or service might warrant a little more explanation, or it might be a little more complex.

That's okay. Pare your statement of value to the stupid-simple essentials. Squelch the impulse to explain all you are and all that you do right away and up front. That's too overwhelming.

◆ **Use words your audience uses.**

Use words familiar to your potential customer—not the words you might internally.

Did you notice that Dropbox uses *stuff* instead of *files, data, photos*, and so on?

It could've come up with a more sophisticated-sounding word (maybe *assets? property? resources? content?*). But *stuff* really does cover *all the things* we all have stored on our computers, phones, and tablets. And that's how many of us refer to all that . . . stuff.

◆ **Use *you* promiscuously.** On your home page, use *you* more than you use *us* or *we*.

◆ **Let your quirk flag fly.** The home page of freelance writer Margo Aaron (thatseemsimportant.com) features a large photo of Margo with this headline: "They Say If I Have a Photo Here It Will Increase My Conversion Rates."

I love that so much, for three reasons: (1) Because it's self-deprecating and true. (2) Because clients considering hiring her immediately understand that Margo takes a fresh, fun approach. And (3) because there's not a best practices article anywhere that told Margo to use that headline. It's all her. (More on that idea in the box below.)

* * *

The World's Best Home Page

You see two calls to action when you get to North Carolina's Currituck County Economic Development home page. The button on the left is standard; the one on the right is extraordinary:
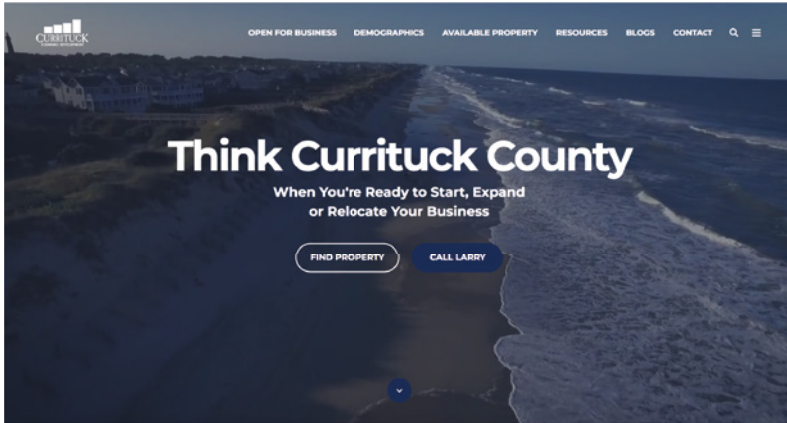
Let me restate that:

The "Call Larry" CTA would be extraordinary for almost any company. But this Larry button is *extraordinarily* extraordinary. Because this is a county government agency we're talking about. And "Larry" is Larry Lombardi, Currituck's economic development director.

"It's a sea of sameness in that category—nearly every municipality talks about 'quality of life,' their outstanding workforce, and state and local incentives to get companies to move to their location," says Douglas Burdett, who runs a marketing agency in Norfolk, Virginia, just 36 miles north of Currituck.

Doug worked with Currituck on its new-site launch, and the idea was suggested as a joke, he told me.

I picked up the phone and I called Larry. He answered.

He told me he gets about 15 calls a month from people, most of whom aren't just randos like me. Larry's last call was from a woman asking about how to get a business license.

"I'm happy to chat," he said. "Even if it's not an actual opportunity, I might learn something."

Why should Larry and his home page CTA matter to you and your business? Let's break it down.

- **The copywriting.** Look, you can read every blessed blog post on the Internet about best practices in copywriting and call to action buttons. Not a single one is going to tell you to write "Call Larry" on your CTAs. Not. One.

  The most effective copywriting reflects who you are, not just what you sell.

- **The A in the CTA.** We already talked about lifting up that A. Look at how Currituck does it here: "Call." Not "Contact." Not "Text." Not "Fax" (LOL). There is no robo-Larry chatbot that pops up.

  No one calls anymore—it's old-school. Takes too much time. Too random. Too interruptive.

  Right? Maybe not.

  You know who wants you to interrupt him? Larry.

  In part because it builds trust and affinity. And precisely because it is folksy and old-school—not unlike Currituck itself.

  From Larry: "People know what you do. You have to sell them on who you are."

- **The CTA copy doesn't thrive in solitary confinement.** That "Call Larry" button in isolation would come across as weird. It works because it's expressed implicitly and explicitly across all that the agency does.

  The back of Larry's business card reads "Call Larry." The agency's collateral and display ads feature the same copy and approach. The newsletter is (you guessed it) a literal letter from Larry.

  No one thrives in isolation. ThinkCurrituck.com is one of the highest-traffic websites among its competitors, Doug Burdett said.

What's your Call Larry opportunity?

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Writing the About Us Page

When About Us Is Not Really About Us

The secret to a successful About Us page sounds paradoxical. The best About Us pages aren't really about the company; instead, they focus on relaying who they are *in relation to the visitor*.

Our About Us pages give us a chance to talk about ourselves. But always in the context of what we do for our customers.

Have you noticed that's a theme of every chapter in this section so far. . .?

The About Us page can be a handy place to show some personality, to differentiate ourselves, to tell a story.

From Innocent Drinks: "We started innocent back in 1999 with a dream to make it easier for people to do themselves some good."

Yes, it's about the juice. But they've embedded *what they do for you* right into the first sentence of its About Us.

One of my favorite About Us approaches is the video narrative approach taken by Chicago law firm Levenfeld Pearlstein (lplegal.com), because of the way it uses the opportunity to differentiate itself as a friendly, approachable law firm. (We talked about LP Legal in Chapter 52.)

Here are some other guidelines to follow on your About Us page:

◆ **Show a human, accessible side.** Write with a voice and a tone that match the rest of your site and your other properties. You

might be tempted to include superlatives like *best in class* or *world-renowned* or *cutting-edge*.

Resist! Temptation can be strong! But so are you.

Here's Innocent again:

"Welcome to a whistle stop tour of our best (and worst) achievements. There's even a picture of a guy called Barry who decided to tattoo our logo on his arm. Nice one Barry."

◆ **Show your people as real people.** Levenfeld Pearlstein shows the relatable side of its lawyers very well via video narrative. But you have many other options—photos, links to social profiles, favorite quotes, what your staff members do in their spare time, what music they listen to, their favorite place to travel, what kind of Pop-Tarts they like. All fair game.

◆ **Include an Easter egg.** Surprise visitors to your About Us page with something unexpected. An Easter egg from video company Wistia allowed visitors to the About Us page to type "dance"—and then watch their employees get funky.

That function on Wistia's About Us page is no longer active . . . but BRING BACK THE FUNK, Wistia!

◆ **Invite your customers into your story.** Why do your customers care about what you do? How have you helped them? Customer testimonials are great here.

They're even better if they pulse with life: Can you get them on video? Or can you create a video that highlights what people say about you?

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Writing Landing Pages

Less Is More

One rainy afternoon when my son Evan was three or four, I took him to one of those cavernous beachside arcades. I thought the flashing lights, buzzing action, and acres of games (*Frogger*, *Galaxian*, *Donkey Kong*, and so on) would thrill him. I thought we'd pass a happy few hours there.

Instead, he stood tentatively in the middle of the arcade, bewildered and overwhelmed. After halfheartedly tossing a few skee-balls up a ramp, he turned toward me and asked, "Is that enough, Mom? Can we go?"

Website landing pages often look and feel like an arcade floor. Rather than inviting visitors in and directing them toward a specific action, landing pages confound visitors—who, of course, then act like my son did and *can we go. . .?* (by way of the back button).

A landing page is where visitors often end up after being lured there by a specific, targeted campaign—an offer delivered via email, social media, or ads. The page often places that compelling offer behind a lead capture form, with the idea of converting visitors into leads who can then be followed up on.

There is an art (and science) to creating a targeted landing page.

A highly effective one contains enough information to inform a visitor without making them feel as if fireworks are going off in their face.

Your landing page should convey five simple things:

1. Where your visitors are (where they've landed after their travels from wherever)

2. What you're making available to them (and whom it's for)

3. Why now

4. Validation and proof from others

5. Your call to action (CTA)

It's tempting to go overboard—and arcade-ify your landing page by adding bells, whistles, an air hockey table.

But don't. Go for simple and clean, with a hyperfocused experience and obvious navigation. Less is so often more.

Here is how you can put together the bones of an effective landing page—one that will convert your browsers into buyers (or subscribers), or further your relationship.

1. **Where they are**.

   Match the headline message to the promise. If your pitch promises something your prospect or customer wants (a buyer's guide to your product, a free ebook), make sure that the visitor receives precisely that—immediately.

   "Message mismatch" is an all-too-common occurrence. Don't send someone to your home page to access a specific offer. I just clicked on a sponsored post on Facebook for a continuing ed program and ended up on the institution's WELCOME TO OUR SCHOOL home page that said essentially, WELCOME TO OUR SCHOOL. (*What?*)

   I felt like I'd missed a step. I hadn't.

   If you lure someone with a promise, make sure that the first thing they experience after taking action based on that promise is what they expect. Don't drop them in the middle of a whole other planet.

2. **What you're making available.**

   Frame the value for them, not you. Benefit-driven, not product-driven.

   No: Join today and get access to SmartTools: Social Media Marketing

   Yes: Create Wildly Successful Social Media Campaigns in Just 10 Minutes

   (That example is an actual test we ran at MarketingProfs; the second offer converted 26% better than the first, product-focused page.)

   Avoid TMI. Don't stuff too much information onto the page. HubSpot's Scott Brinker calls the tendency to weigh down a page with lengthy text and explanations "sagging page syndrome."

   "Trying to cram as much as possible onto one page puts the burden on the respondent to sift through it," Brinker says. "Unfortunately, most of the time they're just not that into you yet."

   Subheads and copy. Be brief (mostly). A subhead beneath the headline is a good place to explain the key benefits of your offering. *"Lots of words versus very few words"* is a richly debated issue in marketing. I'm a fan of fewer words on landing pages, preferably in an easily scannable bullet form with perhaps a video or supporting graphics.

   A word of caution: Don't set video or audio to play automatically as soon as the page loads. It's not just annoying: The sudden volume can scare the bejeezus out of us. And by "us" I mean "me."

3. **Why now: Neuter objections.** What makes someone not want to buy, click, download?

   No: *See how we help you become a better gardener.*

   Yes: *You don't have to have a green thumb to grow the tallest sunflowers on your block.*

Keep things simple. For lead generation, solicit only the most relevant information via the form you ask your visitor to fill out. Eliminate friction.

"Simple" also means breaking up chunks of text. Prune words and images on the page down to the essentials. The less content you have on the page, the more you'll be able to feature above the fold, the important space that page visitors see without having to scroll down.

4. Validation and proof from others.

Use trust signals to reduce anxiety. Establish credibility by including signals to your trustworthiness: testimonials, social proof, third-party trust, security verification, satisfaction guarantees, influencer endorsements, and so on.

Use specific numbers. Specifics are more believable.

No: Around 2 million

Yes: 1.9 million, as in this example from lending platform Kiva.org:

Our community has funded over $1.6 billion in loans.   Kiva borrowers have a 96% repayment rate.   The Kiva community spans 77 countries and 1.9M lenders.

5. What next: Your call to action.

Once visitors land on the page and opt in to your offer, make sure they know what to do next. Put a call to action in an obvious place.

Now Let's talk language.

Use second person plus active verbs. Someone who lands on a landing page is leaning forward—in other words, they have had their interest piqued. So speak to landing page visitors directly

(lots of *you* and *your*) and use active verbs to match your tone to theirs. Something like *Get* or *Go* or *Start* or *Try* as opposed to the more generic *Submit*.

Be specific:

No: *Get a quote*

Yes: *Start saving today*

Speak to aspirations:

No: *Learn how to stream*

Yes: *Become a streamer in 30 days with Tyler "Ninja" Blevins* (via MasterClass)

TEST!

Your product and services are unique, and so is your audience.

Test what works best for you—and with your people and products. The most straightforward is a simple A/B test, in which you try two versions of an offer to see which performs better.

Start by testing apples versus oranges, then refine your approach.

Once you determine whether an apple converts better than an orange, determine whether a Honeycrisp, say, converts better than a Granny Smith.

Metaphorically speaking.

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Writing Headlines

Learn How to Effortlessly Write an Intoxicatingly Irresistible Headline—And You Won't Believe What Happens Next!

BuzzFeed became one of the fastest-growing sites in the history of forever in part by mastering the writing of irresistible, weird, curiously grabby headlines that we are collectively too weak to resist—like the one heading up this section.[1]

Like "36 of The Absolute Worst Things That Could Ever Happen to You." Or "People Are Sharing 'Unwritten Rules' of European Culture and as an American, I'm Low-Key Shocked at Some of These."

Love the approach? Hate it? A little of both?

For many reasons, we can be grateful to the headline revolution sparked by BuzzFeed (and Upworthy, which more recently has shifted its content strategy away from its clickbait origins and toward feel-good news stories).

They've helped underscore the idea that the best headlines are those that humans (and not just search engines) love.

They've ushered in a more conversational approach to headlines.

They've elevated the job of the headline: from *telling what a piece is about* to *telling what's in it for me*. Headlines have 97% more empathy* for the reader than they did pre-BuzzFeed.

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*A made-up statistic. But that doesn't mean it's not true.

They've helped propel us to a place where brands see the value of creating headlines that we want to share with our friends.

The storytellers in us might also appreciate that such headlines give a little more context and personality to a post.

A headline from BuzzFeed such as "This Guy Is Painfully, Cringe-Inducingly Bad at Wheel of Fortune" paints a more vivid picture than a more straightforward headline might ("Man Loses at Wheel of Fortune"). And the use of *this* modifying *guy* inserts a specificity that subtly humanizes the story around a single person.

Most of us don't need our content to go BuzzFeed-viral. Our content marketing goals are more modest—but also more lasting, because we seek to fuel relationships not merely clicks.

Our goal is to help the people we are trying to reach and create value for them. To create things so useful they'll thank us for it. To build audience and relationships.

But we can join the headline revolution regardless! Here's the best approach for headlines that inspire connection and sharing . . . without wandering into uncharted clickbait territory.

◆ **90% clear and concise, 10% clever.** What's your piece about? Can your headline stand alone without the context of its story?

"Copywriting Counsel from an Unbearable Campaign," I wrote a year or two ago. It is the headline for a piece on copywriting advice from the National Park Service's Fat Bear Week.

The piece is useful and fun—but it didn't do as well as I expected. The problem is that "unbearable campaign" makes no sense without the context of story: the Katmai National Park's effort to crown the fattest bear in an annual competition each October. (Fat bears have the greatest chance of surviving the Alaska harsh winters.)

Unbearable . . . get it? Yeah. Readers didn't either. Without context, "Unbearable Campaign" is confusing. It sounds like a terrible campaign, not one about Alaskan bears.

The key is this: Spend as much time on the headline as you do on the writing itself. Respect the headline. The headline is not the metaphorical cherry on top, the dot over the *i*, the cross on the *t*, the icing on the cake, or the finishing flourish.

◆ **Create a curiosity gap, but with moderation.** BuzzFeed and Upworthy built their businesses creating headlines with enough seduction in them to inspire a reader to click through to find out the rest of the story. Upworthy terms that a *curiosity gap*.

The key for you and me is to pique curiosity but avoid hyperbole. Don't overstate. Deliver on the promise.

"14 Surprising Ways You Can Grow Pumpkins" works only if the 14 ways might actually be surprising to your audience.

"14 Different Pumpkin Plants That Will Grow in Ridiculously Small Containers" will work only if the grow-pots are . . . well, ridiculously small.

One of the top-performing headlines I wrote on my blog does this: "The Best Marketing CTA (And Why It Worked So Well)."

◆ **Place your reader directly into the headline.** "14 Kinds of Pumpkins" is a boring title because it doesn't hold a hand mirror up to your readers' face so they see themselves reflected back.

But "7 Kinds of Pumpkins You Can Grow on a City Balcony" speaks directly to them. "*You can grow"* beams a clear reflection right back.

"Company Offsites Are Back: Here's How to Use Them to Unite Your Hybrid Teams" (via Salesforce). *Whose teams?* Yours.

◆ **Be specific.** Numbers set expectations for readers. I like oddball numbers (like 3½, 19, 37) because they're unexpected. As in a piece I published on my site: "17 Non-Negotiable Things Your Email Newsletter Needs Right Now."

◆ **Think:** *Why now?* We've talked about this a lot. It's important in headlines, too. The newsletter example above is stronger because of the urgency of the "right now."

That doesn't mean you thumbtack "right now" onto every post you write. (I'm now imagining the confusion of . . . "16 Ideas to Freshen Up the Apartment You've Lived in for 2 Decades Right Now"—*What?!)*

But it does mean you think *Why does a reader need to know this now?* (Better would be: "16 Ideas to Make the Apartment You've Lived in for 2 Decades Feel Like You Just Moved In.")

◆ **"The" right articles and modifiers give specificity.** An article is a word (a, an, the) paired with a noun to make it specific. In headlines, prefer "the." Use "the" apartment. Not "an" apartment. Because "the apartment" is yours—the reader's. "An" apartment is generic and nonspecific.

For the same reason, modifiers like "those," "their," "that," "this," and so on are stronger than "some," "a/an," and so on.

"This example" is stronger than "an example."

"Their" is stronger than "Someone's."

"These" is stronger because it's specific.

As in:

"Don't Be the Best. Be Their Favorite" (via Jay Acunzo)

"Try Browsing These Photos Before Writing Copy" (via Eddie Shleyner)

◆ **Paint a picture.** Nouns. Active verbs. Paint a picture in the mind of your reader.

"North Korea says Covid has been spreading 'explosively' in the country." *The New York Times* paints a picture with the adverb "explosively" here, while avoiding hyperbole by attributing it to the source, directly in the headline.

◆ **Ask a question. Or better yet—answer a question.** "Is Everything More Expensive These Days?" is compelling. But better is something that hints at the outcome, creating curiosity: "No, Not

Everything Is More Expensive These Days." (Your reader: *I just paid $40 a pound for bananas. What* isn't *more expensive?*)

Similarly: "Yes, You Could Say the Pandemic Made Me a Homebody."

◆ **Add a specific detail.** "The Pandemic Made Me a Homebody— Just Ask My Best Friend, Philodendron."

"What I Learned About . . ." or "What This CEO Said About Marketing" is specific, focused.

◆ **Front-load your headline.** Especially important for SEO and mobile, where the end of the headline might get lopped off.

That's why "North Korea says Covid . . ." is stronger than "Covid Has Been Spreading in North Korea." The most important part of that headline (North Korea's Covid rates) is at the start of the headline.

◆ **Give prominence to keywords and key phrases.** Keywords matter. But again: people matter more. Your headline should delight humans first, and Google second. Sure, getting found is important. But being loved is more important.

◆ **Write seven headlines** in various formats. Pick the best. Why seven? Because it's enough to get your brain working to come up with various formats and approaches, but not so much that it's overwhelming.

◆ **Read your headline out loud.** Does it sound naturally conversational? Yes? You're doing great.

Do Headline Generator Tools Actually Work?

Headline generator tools can help you write better blog posts and better headlines.

Do they work?

Sort of.

They can be fun for brainstorming approaches and ideas because they use automation to deliver headlines based on various approaches that work across various platforms.

They're free (more on this in a sec)—so they might reconstitute creativity that feels like frozen concentrate.

But they can also be ridiculous.

Just now I plugged keyword "Miley Cyrus" into a dozen or so of them and got results like "The Top Reasons People Succeed in the Miley Cyrus Industry," "Why You're Not Miley Cyrus (and What You Can Do About It)," and (my favorite) "Do You Recognize the 9 Warning Signs of Miley Cyrus or Think Of Her As Hannah Montana?"

The last one makes no sense but I kind of want to write a post about the Miley warning signs (?) now.

And of course, tools like this don't know your audience like you do—and empathy for your audience is the best tool for writing headlines.

Some headline generators will ask for a little more context around your keyword/key phrases in an attempt to be more useful. Some ask for audience, goal, how you'll measure success.

Finally . . . about that free thing: Some headline generators are built as lead-generation tools for various marketing services companies. So you can't get your results (or all of them) without giving up your email address. That's not a bad thing. But be aware.

Three to play around with:

1. **SumoMe's Kickass Headline Generator** (sumome.com/kickass-headline-generator)

2. **CoSchedule's Headline Analyzer** (coschedule.com/headline-analyzer)

3. **Answer the Public** answerthepublic.com (which calls itself a "search listening tool," but it also suggests approaches/titles)

80

Writing Infographics

Infographics are shareable and portable. They are your marketing party favors that encourage an audience to repost them liberally—spreading your message for you.

An *infographic* is what it sounds like—information expressed graphically, via drawings, pictures, maps, diagrams, charts, or similar elements—all held together with a coherent visual theme and typically published as an image file. Infographics are also produced as videos.

Infographics are the ultimate in utility. The best of them express rich, objective data in a way that's more accessible and engaging than a dense spreadsheet or ho-hum pie chart.

They usually take one of four shapes: an illustration of the "state of" some business sector or function; a checklist or resource; a compare-and-contrast study; and the evolution of a movement, demographic, or industry. (Thanks to Joe Chernov for the breakdown.)

Infographics are so ubiquitous that it feels like they've always been there—like heaven.

Like Earth.

Like a Starbucks on every corner.

And in some ways, they have: Charles Joseph Minard in 1869 produced *Carte figurative des pertes successives en hommes de l'Armée Française dans la campagne de Russie 1812–1813*, a flow map depicting Napoleon's disastrous Russian campaign of 1812.

Later, scientist and inventor Étienne-Jules Marey said Minard's infographic "defies the pen of the historian in its brutal eloquence." (Thanks to Josh Ritchie, cofounder of data-design company Column Five, for that gem.)

I love that "defies the pen" part.

Popularized in the 1930s and 1940s for editorial use in magazines (though they've been around much longer), infographics have found a second career in business for research findings as well as for content marketing.[1]

When they're done right, they're useful and beautiful; they're "expertise in a blink," Joe Chernov says.

Let's break down infographics into their constituent parts:

◆ **Utility.** The best infographics are entertaining, educational, and intrinsically useful. Ask yourself: How will this help my audience? Will they find this applicable to their business? Will they be fascinated enough to spend a few minutes with it, then pass it around?

◆ **Data.** Infographics should be based on fact, not merely opinion. So use credible data (as you should for all content, but it's especially true here). Your ideas might emerge as part of that story, but credible infographics are rooted first in reality.

Remember: *If you are going to tell me what you think, give me a solid foundation for your reasoning*. Your infographic should tease a larger story out of facts, not feelings.

What's a credible source? A research report from a reputable analyst or industry association is a good source; a blog post, less so. (See Chapter 63.)

◆ **Story.** The best infographics have a hypothesis and narrative at their core.

That sounds high-minded, doesn't it? But it just means that you need to home in on the key idea you want your data to express. Write your thesis statement. Then outline the main data points you want to use that support your thesis.

Resist the urge to cram too much into an infographic. Distill the essence of your message; if you still have more to say on the subject, link to a full report that has more information.

Cisco did that with its video on cloud computing, "Consider the Cupcake," which used a baking analogy to forecast the enormity of cloud computing. Cisco had a lot to say on the topic, so it linked to a landing page that allowed visitors who wanted more to download an entire research report on the subject.

◆ **Logical sequence.** Lay out the narrative with an eye toward information architecture. Does it flow logically, without unnecessary complexity? An outline that highlights your key ideas in a narrative form helps here.

You might be tempted to skip this phase and go straight to design. But mapping is the critical step to creating an infographic that tells a meaningful story and doesn't read as a jumble of numbers and drawings.

◆ **Great design.** The best infographics use color, typography, illustration, animation, video, charts, and text to convey their data story. Hiring a designer or agency is one option. But there are resources for DIYers as well. (See The DIY Infographic Tool Belt feature at the end of this chapter.)

◆ **Quality control.** Make sure your infographic is error-free. Check and double-check figures, source lines, and text. Unlike other forms of content, it's hard to issue a recall of an infographic once it's out in the world.

We get a depressing number of infographics in the MarketingProfs inbox containing typos or math errors. To paraphrase *The New Yankee Workshop*'s Norm Abrams' mantra of *Measure twice, cut once:* Check twice, create once.

The DIY Infographic Tool Belt

Google Public Data Explorer

The Google Public Data Explorer tool lets you choose from numerous (neatly organized) public data sets pulled from the U.S. Census Bureau. Or create your own infographics by uploading your own data (google.com/publicdata/directory).

Canva

Canva's infographic tool is free and simple. Choose from a bunch of template options (canva.com/infographics/templates).

Piktochart

Piktochart offers a free DIY infographics tool with lots of fun, flexible templates. Even more templates come with the modestly priced paid version (app.piktochart.com).

Hohli

Hohli is an online chart builder that allows you to create Venn diagrams, bar graphs, scatter plots, and other charts—with the flexibility to customize their look and feel (charts.hohli.com).

WordClouds

Not quite an infographic, but a fun and colorful way to create a picture of how the brand looks (literally)—based on the language it uses (wordclouds.com).

Venngage Infographic Maker

"Not a designer? No problem," Venngage says boldly (venngage. com/features/infographic-maker).

infogr.am

The tool allows you to create infographics easily and fairly quickly based on one of several predesigned templates that allow for various kinds of customization (infogram.com).

Source: Thanks in part to Joe Chernov and MarketingProfs.

81

Writing for Video

I've always hated Video.

I hate having to put my dumb face on camera.

I hate the way I apparently need special equipment to create Video, including something called a "ring light." (*Ugh. What's a ring light?*)

I hate the improv of Video. When I'm at a conference and someone points a camera at me and asks me to respond to a question, I choke. I always think of a better, wittier, more succinct answer after I'm back in my hotel room.

(There's a phrase for that, by the way: It's called *esprit d'escalier*—the regret of thinking of the perfect reply too late. Literally, it means "wit on the staircase." In my case, it's "wit in a Marriott with a view of the HVAC system.")

I'm intentionally capitalizing Video like it's a proper noun, by the way, because it has felt like Video and I have been locked in a toxic relationship. The therapist/BuzzFeed quiz I consulted ("Should You Ditch or Stay?") confirms as much:

◆ *When you spend time together, do you feel uplifted, relaxed, and confident? (No.)*

◆ *When you're apart, do you feel certain and at peace about your relationship or do you feel confused and anxious about it? (The second part.)*

◆ *When you think of your relationship, do you feel depressed, nervous, and unsure? (Bingo.)*

So I had two choices: Clutch my writerly black No. 2 pencil with the sure grip of the righteous, refusing to step out of my comfort zone. Or, *for the love of Pete . . . just work things out with Video, already!*

(BuzzFeed Therapist: *Try to communicate your concerns without judgment using "When you . . . I feel . . ." statements.*)

I chose the *love-of-Pete* path.

And you know what. . .? I'm glad I did.

Because I realized that my beef with Video was actually fear. Not hate. (Then again, hate and fear are two sides of the same coin.)

And it turns out that the key to successful video actually *is* writing. (*Duh*. Scripts.)

What's more, good video and good writing share the same DNA. All the stuff I talk about. Literally. All. The. Time: Relentless focus on the audience. Offering value. Connecting in a real, accessible, human way. An engaging tone of voice.

What's that line about making the blind see? Was it from Isaiah? Or a lyric from *Frozen?*

All I know is that the BuzzFeed Therapist said in our last session that real progress has been made and she's proud of us.

But writing for video is different from writing generally, says Andrew Davis, who produces a weekly video show called *The Loyalty Loop*.

Some guidelines:

◆ Spoken language is not as buttoned up as written language.

◆ Grammar rules—already flexible for me in writing—should be Simone Biles-flexible in video.

◆ Write your script without typical punctuation . . . intentionally use fragment sentences . . . insert ellipses for pacing . . . because here's the thing . . . it'll sound a little less like a Driver's Ed training

manual and more like the way people actually . . . you
know . . . talk? (Thanks, Andrew Davis, for this one.)

◆ Write your message as a story. Video is show-me media. If your
plan is to aim a camera at an exec ticking off a checklist of talking
points, that's not the best use of video. Find ways to show, not tell.

◆ Write your script in the present tense. This is especially important
with case studies, testimonials, and explainer videos. You might be
talking about something that happened in the past, but make it
relevant to the now.

◆ Delay your reveal. Invite curiosity. So many testimonials, case
studies, and corporate videos reveal the resolution of a problem
right up front—sometimes in the title of a video itself.

No: "How FreshSmackerz Software Saved Hair Salon Curl Up &
Dye Approximately One Million Dollars in Accounting Fees."

Yes: "Where One Hair Salon Unexpectedly Found One
Million Dollars."

It strikes me that the toxic relationship I let develop between Video and
me isn't unlike what adult-onset writers share with me about writing:

◆ It's complicated. (Meaning: *I am unsure about grammar.*)

◆ It's scary. (*I worry people will judge what I have to say or how
I say it.*)

◆ I don't know where to start this article. (*Writing is the ultimate
improv: There is no template.*)

This isn't news to you, maybe. And even to me, writing this now, it's
staring me in the face. But it's more than I fully understood not
too long ago.

It's the difference between thumbing through a Fodor's travel guide entry
highlighting Lilac Sunday at the Boston Arnold Arboretum, and actually
visiting the Arboretum that Sunday and experiencing how the air smells
exactly like a detour through Macy's perfume aisle.

It's the difference between knowing something intellectually and then
suddenly experiencing it yourself.

82

Writing for Social Media

It's tricky to write this chapter. Social media evolves so quickly that by the time I get to the end of this sentence . . . Twitter has introduced and already killed another four features.

One certainty is this: The more social media ages and evolves, the closer the major platforms start to look and act alike—twinning like old married couples. (But less wholesome.)

Twitter, Facebook, and LinkedIn have rolled out newsletter publishing capabilities.

The tone and vibe of LinkedIn are starting to feel more like Facebook.

My Instagram Reels is full of TikTok reposts.

Twitter threads are basically listicle blog posts.

Twitter Communities mimics Facebook Groups.

Twitter Spaces looks a whole lot like other social audio apps, like the erstwhile (?) Clubhouse. (Which may or may not still be erstwhile by the time this chapter is done.)

All that happened . . . when all we ever wanted was that Twitter Edit button.

It's tricky to write this chapter, then, because it's tricky to know what future-us needs to know.

So here's where I've landed, after thinking (and overthinking) this chapter: What follows is perspective about writing for social media. It's a point of view and a mindset you need. It's how to show up if you want to find communities on social media.

Here we'll talk mostly about Twitter and Facebook. Later chapters talk about Instagram (writing captions) and LinkedIn. Here especially, it's less prescription and more ethos. It's less specific and more the spirit of social media.

("The Spirit of Social Media" sounds like a very noisy and well-documented cruise ship. But it isn't.)

* * *

Social media is intended for conversation and connection—sometimes with strangers. That means posts work best as a dialogue because dialogue establishes rapport and encourages interaction.

You could simply post a news story with a headline and a link to the original source (in this case, *Newsletter Glue*), like this:

"10 Beloved Email Newsletter Examples to Learn From," https://newsletterglue.com/blog/build/email-newsletter-examples/.

Instead, here's how I shared the article as @marketingprofs on Twitter (I'm also @annhandley there). I put the story in context. I explained why I liked it and why I considered it worth sharing.

How: Add at least one more detail. Explain why you like something. How it delights you. Or conversely, why you might disagree.[1]

Earlier in the book I talked about using Donald Murray's filter for news ("*What would make your reader turn and say, 'Now listen to this, Ira. . .'?"*).

It's a perfect filter for social, too: Will a customer love it? Will an influencer repost? Will that would-be client share it?

You might be talking to strangers on various social platforms. But you're still talking to individual people.

So pen a post as you would speak it to your Ira: your girlfriend, boyfriend, partner, cat, dog, turtle in its terrarium, goldfish wandering around its tank—or whoever you can imagine in the room with you.

Here's what else to consider . . .

1. **Establish who you are.** What's your point of view as a business or professional? What do you stand for? How do you improve your world?

    That perspective can help you decide what to share and what conversations to participate in.

It can also guide you to share a bit of yourself beyond what your business does—to give your followers insight into who you are, and what you offer them.

I like how HubSpot cofounder and CTO Dharmesh Shah says who he is right on his profile page—but (this is important!) framed as why his followers should care.

See the line below his title on Twitter? "Follow me for lessons learned on startups and scaleups."

◆ **Unite an audience with what you stand for.** You might be the owner of a cupcake truck, but your bigger story might be that you are passionate about locally sourced food or community-centered activism. Or maybe you're just an advocate of embracing the simple joys in life. It can be anything as long as it's authentic and true.

Prep Obsessed is a retail store with an active Facebook community of 23,000—up to 500 show up for its Facebook and Instagram Lives, which co-founder Corey O'Loughlin leads 20 times a week.

PrepO sells accessories, housewares, and clothing. But its bigger story comes through in the content it posts to social media—quotes and images that Corey describes as "rallying cries that unite the audience."

Like this one it posted for International Women's Day:[2]

when women
support each
other, incredible
things happen.

#internationalwomensday

PrepO's online voice and tone are important.

Social posts address the audience as *ladies*, because it suggests a wholesome refinement that this audience connects with, Corey says. Corey and co-owner Nina Vitalino sign each post with *xo* because it suggests friendship and camaraderie.

◆ **Share the why and who, not just the what.** Remember: dialogue, not monologue.

Social sites are often condemned for encouraging banal and useless noise, such as "Eating a burrito for lunch." But they provide a rich opportunity to share updates that offer context or reveal character.

So rather than posting "Spent the day reading" (boring), try "Spent the day reading the new memoir from Viola Davis. Unplugging after last week's insanity."—which provides both context (why you're doing what you're doing) and a sense of your character (who you are).

◆ **Social is not a direct-response channel.** Notice how my previous example didn't say, "Spent the day reading the new book from Viola's new memoir. Unplugging after last week's big shipment! Order our new shipping-thing today: www.dontdothis.com."

That's not social sharing—that's a social pitch-slap. Remember, you're building relationships, not running a direct-marketing channel.

Lead with your expertise and personality. Share. Solve. Show your personality.

The best way to sell is not to sell.

◆ **Personalized, not personal.** True, social platforms allow you to showcase the people behind a brand. But there's a fine line between sharing yourself and sharing a little *too much* of yourself, especially if you are posting on behalf of your company.

Think of it this way: Personalize your company or yourself, but don't get personal.

The former means showing that you're a real human being, with actual blood flowing through actual veins—you have a point of view, a personality.

The latter means sharing details that are intimate or too specific to you to have relevance for the larger community you are trying to build.

Exactly where that line is varies, depending on your own brand and that of your company. But here's a broad example: It's one thing to mention feeling under the weather. It's another to say you have an irritating rash in a sensitive spot.

◆ **Personalized, not perfect.** Feature real employees, real customers, real moments. Use their words as much as possible.

An over-polished, perfect image feels like an ad. An over-scripted caption feels like a marketing/PR message. Real and authentic builds trust.

◆ **Be cautious with automation.** Many tools are available to help you manage and scale your social presence. For growing companies, those tools can be handy timesavers.

But a word of caution: don't rely *too* heavily on automation tools. Use them to extend and ease your social media efforts, not supplant them.

For example, robosending automated direct messages to greet each new Twitter follower or LinkedIn connection is annoying. I got one this morning. (Do you do it? Stop.)

If your followers sense that you are phoning it in, you'll damage the credibility you are trying to build. What's more, such perfunctory, uncommitted practices run counter to the spirit of social networking—which is, after all, inherently about relationships.

In social media (and in life, I suppose), true engagement—person to person—trumps technology.

◆ **Use social as a spawning pool for other content and audience research.** Social is a rich research tool: You get likes, retweets, shares, comments immediately.

Author David Meerman Scott floats ideas on Twitter to see what resonates.

"I use what I call a 'writing ladder,'" David tells me. "If a tweet resonates—it gets a bunch of RTs and *at* replies—then I consider it good blog post fodder.

"If a blog post resonates, I'll explore it with a riff in a speech and maybe another blog post or two. If a series of posts on the same topic resonates, that's my next book."

* * *

"But I just want tactics!" I hear you, person shouting from the back of the room.

FINE. Here are my top four social media tactics.

1. **Reimagine your content.** Post a blog post or newsletter content as a Twitter thread. Summarize your podcast on LinkedIn. Use a clip from a speaking engagement as an Instagram post.

2. **Share the value, not the event.**

   No: "The latest issue of my newsletter just dropped > LINK." (Who cares?)

   Yes: "Learn how I finally learned to avoid writing by committee > LINK."

3. **Move followers to subscribers at every opportunity,** whatever social platforms you use. Make growing your email list your top priority, for all the reasons we talked about in Chapter 74.

   And finally: We started talking about how social media is . . . well, social. That means keeping your voice loose and accessible. So always:

4. **Read your social posts** out loud. Sing 'em out! Sound stiff and wooden? Rewrite until they're warm and wonderful.

83

Writing Image Captions

I just had a full-on argument with myself.

"This chapter should be Writing for Instagram," Opinionated Me said.

"No! It's Writing for Pinterest!" countered Riled-Up Me, getting agitated.

"What about writing captions for Facebook photos?" piped up Devil's Advocate Me.

"Wait. Should it be a broader chapter on Writing Captions that includes it all?" suggested another part of Me (the part who puts the *Me* in *Mediator)*.

Then again: Should this be a separate chapter at all? Might it work better as a boxed addition to the previous Writing for Social Media chapter?

* * *

I heard them all out. In the end, Judge Me ruled that . . . well, you know how I ruled. You're reading this as a separate chapter with a broader Writing Image Captions header.

Here's how to write stronger captions for your images published as standalone posts on the social platforms of your choosing.

Captions give critical context. Don't tell me what's in the photo, tell me why I should care.

Four questions to prompt better captions:

1. What's going on outside the frame? (*hat tip Erin King*)

2. What's going on inside your head?

3. Add a second sense, besides sight: What's something smell, feel, taste, sound like? (As in Chapter 23, but critical here.)

4. Humor thrives in the absurd (as we noted in Chapter 21): Can you take something to an improbably ridiculous conclusion, like I did here with my baby-dog Augie in front of my Tiny House Studio?
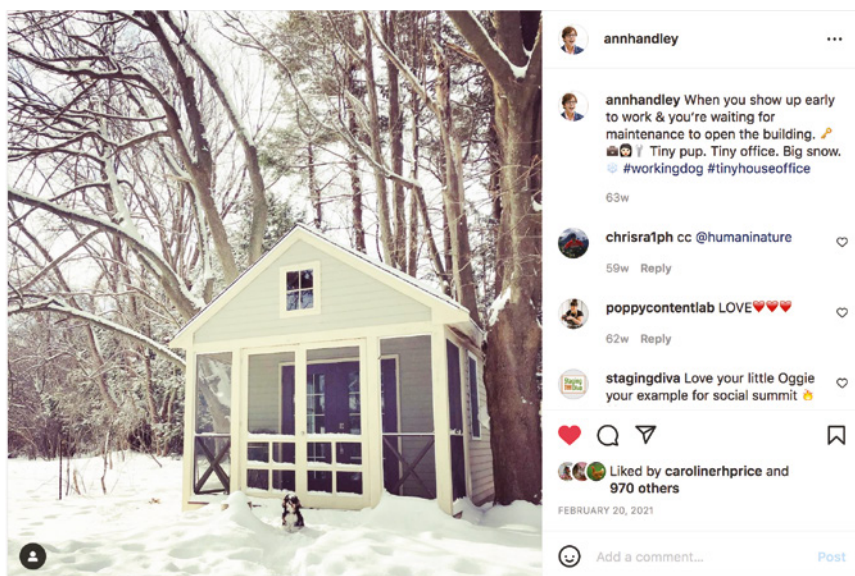
Source: Ann Handley, Instagram[1]

Let your image be the visual punchline or last word to the text—the bit that completes the story.

"One time I was working on a pin that showed a girl in a room with a flamingo and fake snow all over the floor. I was a bit stumped," says writer Tiffany Beveridge, author of *How to Quinoa: Life Lessons from My Imaginary Well-Dressed Daughter.*

Tiffany's book grew out of a Pinterest board Tiffany created for "Quinoa"—a fake daughter and fashion-forward icon.[2] It pairs over-the-top photos of trendy models (wearing haute couture and aloof expressions) with hilarious captions.

"My [then] 10-year-old son was walking by my desk and I stopped him and asked, 'If that isn't snow on the ground in that picture, what could it be?' Without missing a beat, he said, 'Parmesan cheese,'" Tiffany recalls.

Source: Used with permission of Cleo Sullivan.

"I go back to that experience a lot," Tiffany says. "It could have been a funny pin if I'd included snow in the caption," but it became hilarious when suddenly it was Parmesan cheese as the visual punchline.

Write your audience into your story. Who do you sell to? Think 1-1-1: One idea to one person at one time. Answer these questions:

1. What will resonate the most with your ideal customer?

2. What signals to your prospect/customer "*I get you. You belong in here*"?

3. *Why now?*

Look at how photographer Allison Tyler Jones captioned this family portrait:

> *The older your kids get, the faster time seems to fly.*
>
> *Preschool to 3rd grade is a leisurely stroll, but once they hit 7th grade it's like they've got one foot on a banana peel and the other on their Senior Year!*
>
> *One day this mom will blink and ALL of her kids will be grown.*
>
> *That's why we are document the NOW (as Edna Mode would say;).*
>
> *It may seem sad to let them go, but watching my kids tackle adulthood and parenthood has been one of the most fulfilling parts of my life.*
>
> *Parenting is not only about raising good kids, it's about raising damn fine adults. . ..*

Source: ATJ Photo, Instagram[3]

Allison sells to primarily to moms in the Phoenix area. Let's break down what Allison is *actually* saying in this caption specifically (as well as her captions on her Instagram and Facebook generally).

◆ **Whom she sells to:** You're a mom? "I'm a mom, too!" she says. Family is everything to her. And to you.

◆ **Neutering objections 1:** What might make someone NOT book her? Price? Maybe . . . she's not JCPenney Portraits. But she's worth it. She gets shots JCPenney can't.

(That's why some of Allison's behind-the-scenes photos show Allison shooting families while she's literally lying on the floor—her body as contorted as a ballpark pretzel. Send chiropractor.)

◆ **Neutering objections 2:** Your photo shoot will be painless. Zero awkward. Fun! Because Allison is funny! EDNA MODE, dahling!

◆ **Why should you book now:** Because life moves fast. Blink and your kids are grown. Banana peels are real. She knows this. She's lived it.

◆ **Group hug:** Don't worry. The best chaos is yet to come.

The biggest takeaway is this: Use your words to flesh out your images. They'll be stronger, punchier, funnier.

"They'll tell a better story!" pipes up Mediator Me—again trying to be helpful. Always.

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Writing with Hashtags

Justin Timberlake and Jimmy Fallon mocked the ridiculous overuse of hashtags in a hilarious sketch on Fallon's late-night show.

Their "Twitter Conversation in Real Life" was littered with the excessive verbal hashtagging (my favorite: *#el-oh-el-oh-el-oh-el-oh-el-oh-oh-el-oh-el-oh-el-oh-el-oh-el-oh-el-oh-eh-oh-el-oh* ... which goes on and on and on for a spoken mile.[1]

The sketch skewers what happens when companies—and all of us!—get a little too carried away with tacking a hashtag onto every social media utterance.

But you know what? Hashtags don't have to be gratuitous and silly. And while they've Fallon out of fashion (LOL) in recent years (more on that below), hashtags *can* serve a purpose. Tell your story. Share your history. Align you with an audience. Show your character.

It all depends on how strategically we use them.

On social media, the pound symbol (or hash) turns any word (or group of words) that directly follows it into a searchable link or keyword. A hashtag becomes a handy shortcut: a way for people to categorize, find, and rally around topics and conversations.

So it you want to wish the latest Batman a happy birthday on Twitter, you could wish #RobertPattison a #HB.

Hashtags began as a feature in 1988 on Internet Relay Chat (IRC) channels, a precursor to instant messaging and chat rooms. IRC users discovered

channels by searching a hashtag with a topic or keyword—as in #CavalierKingCharlesEnthusiasts.

Almost 20 years later, IRC users ported over the symbol to Twitter to help organize conversation on the mewling newborn network.

Twitter began hyperlinking hashtags to search results in 2009. Eventually other social platforms adopted them as a way to find and connect content and audiences.

And that's why we now regularly see #WokeUpLikeThis. It's why every March 23 we see #NationalPuppyDay and why every conference or event has its own hashtag. And why you might follow the #ContentChat Twitter chat on Mondays.

Here are some ways you might consider using hashtags in your own organization.

Create your own hashtags. The more general the hashtag, the less useful it is for marketers like you and me.

A few years ago, the New York Public Library (@nypl) tweaked the notion of the #selfie and asked book lovers to post "#shelfies" on Twitter and Instagram. The library asked book lovers to tag photos of their personal bookshelves or favorite library shelves to show their love of books, and celebrate the role books play in our lives.

The response was impressive: More than 1,500 people posted on Instagram and another 1,800 posted on Twitter. Entries came from 14 countries and 28 U.S. states.

Now, the #Shelfies hashtag is flooded with non-public library shelves. Fun? Yes! 100%! But useful for any one library? Not so much.

Eos used the hashtag #MakeItAwesome on TikTok to rally its audience around its beauty products. TikTok users hijacked the hashtag, using it to tag unrelated videos. An attempt to gain more exposure? Or just be . . . well, awesome? Unclear.

Better is to create your own hashtags that are hyper-relevant to your brand.

Nestlé-owned frozen pizza brand DiGiorno claims that its frozen pies are better than your local pizzeria's. So it includes #itsnotdelivery or #itsnotdeliveryitsdigiorno on almost all of its Instagram posts as a way to remind us that its frozen rivals fresh.

Language learning app Duolingo celebrates learners who haven't broken their daily learning streak in #StreakOfTheWeek.

Duolingo ✓
@duolingo

In honor of #MothersDay in the U.S. yesterday, our #StreakOfTheWeek celebrates those who are re-learning their "mother" tongue!

If you're studying the language of your childhood, share your streak with us and tell us how to say "Happy Mother's Day" in the language! 🌸

Share your history. That doesn't mean that generic hashtags are useless. They can be a fun way to connect with your existing audience—even if the more general hashtags won't likely attract new followers.

#ThrowbackThursday (or #tbt) began organically, as a way for people on Instagram to share pictures of themselves as kids, or to call back to historical events, movements, or occasions.

People magazine (@people) celebrated its 40th birthday by using Instagram to flip through the pages of its first issue, dated March 4, 1974. That issue of *People* featured a dewy Mia Farrow on the cover. Inside, Prince Charles was young again.

The Cincinnati Art Museum uses #tbt on Instagram to celebrate the people and projects that have been part of its history—like Alice Bimel, who in 1972 became the first female member of the art museum's board of directors.

Hashtag personality. Writer Susan Orlean notes that hashtags can also function as a kind of muttered aside: purely entertaining commentary that conveys deadpan humor, sarcasm, or context. Hashtags like #kidding and #fail #sorrynotsorry fall into this category. Or, as Susan offers: *"I just made out with your husband! #kidding #hewishes #likeIwouldadmititanyway."*[2]

Using hashtags in this way conveys personality through social voice and tone. A couple of good examples:

1. Duolingo's TikTok presence centers on its mascot: the sassy, feisty Duo the Owl who is obsessed with singer/songwriter Dua Lipa.

   The whole account is unhinged in the best possible way, in part because its use of hashtags is on point. In one post, Duo the Owl lip-syncs to a trending TikTok sound with a curse word in it, then uses the hashtag #theywontletmecuss as a whispered aside.

2. Steve Grieg adopts senior dogs that no one else wants. He has a dozen or so senior dogs at any one time. (He also lives with Bikini the pig, Betty the chicken, and Cranberry the turkey.) Steve has 1 million followers on Instagram, where he posts as @wolfgang2242 (i.e., one "word").

   Steve's posts are wholesome and heartwarming: When I'm having a bad day and feeling overwhelmed by the doom of the news, I scroll over to the @wolfgang2242 feed to remind myself of the good in the world.

   His writing is *_chef's kiss_* . . . but I especially love his use of hashtags: When he adopted an 11-year-old white poodle named Cat, he introduced him on Instagram with a story and added #iveaddedapoodletothecaboodle.

It's a small thing, that throwaway aside by Duo or Steve. But also a quirky extension of personality, as told in a single hashtag.

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Writing Your LinkedIn Profile

Buzzwords Are Buzzkills

Does your LinkedIn profile say that you are a "strategic, creative, passionate expert skilled at leading innovative and effective programs driving impact across the organization"?

Please say no.

If that *is* you, you sound like a million other professionals (literally!) on LinkedIn: The world's largest professional network has more than 830 million members—about the same number of miles Saturn is from Earth.[1]

We've talked about using words that best describe *you*, and not just words that could describe anyone else, in previous sections of this book. That includes being more intentional with the words we use in our social media bios—and especially our LinkedIn profiles.

LinkedIn sporadically releases a list of the top buzzwords and phrases culled from LinkedIn member profiles. The most recent U.S. list includes these gems: specialized, experienced, leadership, skilled, passionate, expert, motivated, creative, strategic, and successful.[2]

Don't sound like everyone else. Instead, let's seek out bold words that differentiate us from others. Let's then tie those attributes to tangible results.

"Differentiate yourself by uniquely describing what you have accomplished . . . and back it up with concrete examples of your work by adding photos, videos, and presentations to your LinkedIn Profile that demonstrate your best work," writes career expert Nicole Williams, adding:

"Providing concrete examples to illustrate how you are responsible or strategic is always better than just simply using the words."[3]

Here are three more suggestions:

1. **Use active language, citing tangible outcomes**. Be specific about what you've done, and use active language to describe your accomplishments.

    Instead of saying you are "responsible for content marketing programs," you might say you "increased blog subscribers 70% over three years, resulting in a 15% increase in leads generated and a 30% decrease in the average length of a sale."

    Or instead of saying you are "responsible for chucking wood" at Woodchuck Industries, you might say you "hit the quarterly goal of chucking more wood than a woodchuck chucks if a woodchuck could chuck wood."

2. **Mirror the language of the companies you want to work for or with**. Tailor your profile on LinkedIn by selecting the right words for specific opportunities, based on an aspirational role in a company you'd love to work for.

    One of the best ways of standing out is to mirror the language of the organization you're applying to, Nicole says in an email interview.

    "Follow the company you want to work for on LinkedIn and you'll not only discover what their business goals and priorities are, but also the words and phrases they use to describe these objectives," Nicole suggests.

    "Companies want to hire people who have an understanding of who they are and what they do," Nicole says. "If you already sound like them they'll be more apt to reach out to you if you're already talking their talk."

    Go to the source. Adopt its language.

3. **Use your job title as more than a title**. Stephanie Tilton is a freelance writer. But her LinkedIn title reads: "Arming B2B

companies with buyer-focused content that drives engagement and revenue." I love how Stephanie recasts *what she does* as *what she could do for you*.

Nina Interlandi Bell is a marketing manager at a B2B technology company. But she uses her title as a rallying cry that shouts out what she's all about. The title on her profile reads: "B2B Marketing does NOT have to be boring. Servin' up demand gen with flair."

What else reinforces the story: Nina's *we-ride-at-dawn* rallying cry is accompanied by a profile photo of her dressed as Freddie Mercury for a B2B rock music video she and I made together.

Other tips:

◆ **Turn your summary into a narrative.** Write from the first-person *I,* not the weird third person.

Not: "Jefference Applecockles is an award-winning customer-obsessed sales executive who possesses an uncanny ability to brag about his top skills in the third person, as if this paragraph might've been written by his international fan base and miraculously appeared here on his LinkedIn profile."

◆ **Claim your LinkedIn custom URL.** Basic advice. But I see noncustom URLs with surprising frequency. It's easy. It's free. Just do it.

◆ **Consider the keywords you want to be known for.** Polish and optimize your profile by including those words in your headline and summary.

◆ **Customize your profile** rather than using the LinkedIn defaults. The LinkedIn profile format is a standard template, of course. But you *can* move parts around, embed examples or other media, and include descriptive headlines.

Let's sum up:

The key to a more engaging profile is to take one giant step back and look at your LinkedIn profile holistically: Are you telling a consistent,

compelling, audience-centric story about who you are? When I come to your profile, do I immediately understand WiiFM? (What's in it For Me?)

Does the header image speak to what makes you unique, or is it the LinkedIn default image that looks vaguely like an extreme close-up of a blue-green rainbow—what I call the "Header of Nope"?

Does your description broadly frame what you do in terms of the customer/prospect/audience?

Does each job listing or description frame your accomplishments not as a giant high-five to yourself but as what you did for others?

Sweat the small stuff. It adds up to be big stuff.

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Writing for LinkedIn

The nature of the LinkedIn has changed. In the past few years, LinkedIn has become less buttoned-up: Less skinny jean, more relaxed-fit.

The vibe is looser, more freewheeling.

"Chunky or Smooth?" asked one of my connections in a LinkedIn Poll recently, apropos of absolutely nothing.

My friend does not work for a peanut butter manufacturer. She doesn't work for a jelly company, either. I voted Smooth.

Why is that?

I mean why is LinkedIn becoming more relaxed . . . not why did I vote Smooth. (That answer is obvious: Smooth is better.)

Is LinkedIn more relaxed because all of our collective stress over Covid means it's not just okay to be vulnerable . . . it's necessary? Have the rules eroded around what's considered "professional"?

Is it because we've destigmatized things we never used to talk about— mental health challenges, for example? Because we're more willing to take a public stand on social issues? (See Chapter 61.)

Is it because LinkedIn represents an alternative to Facebook for some of us?

Is it because the nature of communication itself has changed, as I said in the Introduction to this book?

Is it because Marketing has changed, especially in B2B? Do we have more understanding of the need to create emotional connections between brands and people? (See box at the end of this chapter.)

It's a mix of all those things, I suspect.

* * *

LinkedIn's transformation from a digital Rolodex to a looser, daily content destination has made it more valuable, interesting, useful, personal . . . but also *holy wow is it busy.*

We all have individual profiles. Your business might maintain a Company page. Maybe we follow influencers. Scroll the newsfeed. Sponsor posts or ads. Go live. Look for jobs.

Post photos, videos, articles, maybe a poll. Access training. Get harassed by irrelevant sales pitches or relentless invites to subscribe to newsletters published via the platform . . .

It's a lot. So let's take a step back.

What's *Truly* Important to Do on LinkedIn?

I asked Jason Miller what our priorities should be there.

Jason headed up global content marketing at LinkedIn for five years. He's also held leadership roles in marketing at Microsoft and ActiveCampaign and is a self-described Slayer of Mediocrity. (It's true. It's in his LinkedIn bio.)

Ann Handley: *Everyone on LinkedIn should have . . . what?*
Jason Miller: Three things:

> *1.* **An optimized profile.** Keyword-rich descriptions, standout headline, link-backs to blogs, Twitter handle, and (most importantly), a profile that is actively sharing relevant content on a consistent basis.
>
> It's not only great for building a personal brand. It's a fantastic way to increase organic reach for a company's most important content.

2. **A robust company page.** First and foremost make sure your company page is accurate and has a complete description. Next add a compelling banner and be sure to be actively sharing relevant content.

3. **A habit to curate useful news or insights via company pages.**

AH: *What are your favorite tactics to make each more effective?*

JM: Be consistent and track your results. Find out what's working from your Company page analytics and scale your efforts with sponsored posts or updates.

And don't forget about your employees; empowering them to share news and updates and teaching them how to optimize their profile can have a significant impact on both awareness and lead gen.

AH: *Is it better to share content as an individual or through a Company page?*

JM: The short answer is both. While I think that the Company page is the hub for your company messaging, encouraging employees to share relevant updates with their network is a very powerful way to increase both reach and engagement.

AH: *How often should we post?*

JM: Based on my own experience with managing Company pages and Showcase pages, I would recommend three to five times per day. If you have an international presence, then I would also recommend targeted messages overnight as well. Once you find the messages that are resonating, try running a sponsored post to reach beyond your initial following.

Consider which segment your target consumers are likely to fall into and plan the timing of your company updates accordingly.

For example, if your target audience works in highly regulated or scheduled environments that make it hard for them to read while at work (e.g., finance or healthcare industries), try posting

company updates in the morning, evening, and on the weekend. If they are likely to commute on public transportation (e.g., professionals who live in New York City, Chicago, etc.), try posting during morning and evening commute times.

AH: *How has LinkedIn's evolution changed how we should use the platform?*

JM: It's all about the content, and more specifically professional content. We have observed that professionals act very differently on a professional social network; in addition, they consume content differently while on LinkedIn.

People spend time on other social networks, but they *invest* time in LinkedIn. In fact, content pages on LinkedIn receive seven times the views compared with job activity.

Our members are seeking professional content that inspires, educates, and ultimately helps them be great at what they do.

The companies and brands that are finding success are doing so by mixing it up. It's going to take a bit of trial and error to see what resonates with your audience, but once you do find the types of posts that work well for your brand, it's time to scale.

I think the most important thing to keep in mind is to not only talk about your company or brand, but instead share content that is helpful and ties back to what your product or service does.

Change your mindset from "always be closing" to "always be helping." This is a great place to build relationships with an audience and earn their trust.

AH: *What kind of specific writing advice can you offer?*

JM: It really depends on your business goals and marketing objectives. Here are a few tips for driving results:

◆ Optimize introductions and headlines and add your
point of view.

◆ Think like a journalist by using concise intros and snappy
headlines for higher conversion.

◆ Always include a clear call to action, such as a link.

◆ Include an image or some type of rich media. Images generally
result in an 89% higher comment rate.

◆ Align content to your members' needs and interests.

◆ Make your content snackable and valuable.

◆ Manage your updates by measuring engagement and following
up on comments.

AH: *Do you think effective writing on LinkedIn updates is different
from writing on any other social network? Or are the rules
different there?*

JM: I think there are certainly some differences. For example, when
writing your updates on LinkedIn, it's important to keep in mind
which audience you are targeting. Is your message crafted to
reach the C-suites, the director-level marketers, managers, etc.?

With the targeting capabilities on LinkedIn, there is a great
opportunity to cater your messaging to a certain audience for
better engagement.

* * *

And while Jason didn't mention this, let's take some inspiration from our
Peanut Butter Poll: Sometimes, it's perfectly okay to just relax and
have some fun.

Is B2B Less Emotional Than B2C?

Business-to-business sales and marketing has a reputation of being less emotional than consumer sales and marketing. But it's not true.

B2B is MORE emotional, not less. The stakes are higher: a job on the line, a reputation at risk.

No one ever got fired for buying a jar of chunky peanut butter instead of (the superior) smooth.

But that B2B tech solution that didn't quite live up to its hype. . .? Someone advocated for that. Someone stood in a conference room or on a Zoom call and made the case for it over its competitor. Someone put their reputation on the line.

Maybe that advocate wasn't fired . . . but they might've lived to regret it more deeply than they would the wrong peanut butter choice.

That means the best B2B marketing is equally creative as B2C marketing.

"Creativity isn't just fluff; it builds more mental availability and long-term brand growth," says LinkedIn's Alex Rynne.

"Marketers are writing to build relationships, catering to emotion rather than focusing on cold, transactional content," Alex adds, citing a LinkedIn study that demonstrates how powerful creative can be 10 to 20 times more effective than the mediocre stuff.

Engage the heart, the brain follows happily. Connection before conversion.

———

Source: "Cashing In On Creativity: How Better Ads Deliver Bigger Profits," B2B Institute at LinkedIn, June 2021, https://business.linkedin.com/content/dam/me/business/en-us/marketing-solutions/case-studies/images/pdfs/Cashing_In_Whitepaper_FINAL.pdf.

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Writing About Hard Stuff

How do you write about Difficult Topics?

How do you message to an audience about the Hard Stuff? At a time everything is wildly in flux for everyone literally everywhere?

If there were an awards show for Top Issues that have challenged all of us in Marketing and Communications these past few years, I'd nominate "How to Message Hard Stuff When We Haven't the Foggiest Idea What to Say" to take home the Golden Globe.

There is no one perfect way to message the Hard Stuff.

But I liked an approach I saw recently.

It comes in the form of a 125-word intro to an email from Kristina Halvorson, CEO of Brain Traffic, in Minneapolis.

I'm going to share it with you. Then let's together break down what we can learn and lift from it after the dinkus . . .

(A dinkus is that three-asterisk symbol right below this sentence.)

<div align="center">* * *</div>

First, an important point: Kristina is writing about Confab, her agency's in-person event in May 2022. She's detailing how they will safely hold an event when *sweet Cheez-Its who knows what Covid will feel like doing with itself then?*

Will Omicron decide to spawn Son of Omicron? Will it decide to stay here permanently? Buy a house in a leafier suburb? Will it start to pay taxes? Who really knows?

But don't read "event" and "Covid." Instead, look at this message more broadly.

We can sub in almost any topic for "industry event." We can sub almost any issue in for "Covid."

Use this as a template for customer-facing communication that requires a deft touch and empathy around a shifting topic.*

*(My Microsoft Word wants to change this to "sh*tting topic." Part of me wants to let it, LOL.)

<p align="center">* * *</p>

On the next page is an email Confab sent with the subject line:

<p align="center">**"A personal note from Kristina."**</p>

The version reproduced on the next page was posted on LinkedIn.[1]

The three points Kristina offers for consideration are:

1. **Refund policy:** Will you get your money back if things change after you register?

2. **Vaccination/testing requirements**

3. **A CTA to register,** because Confab's still gotta sell tickets

Kristina Halvorson
Founder and CEO, Brain Traffic • Producer, Confab and Button • Author, Content Strategy for the Web • Host, The Content Strategy Podcast
5mo · Edited

So ... we had a bunch of "Register for Confab!" email campaigns scheduled to go out today. But after reviewing everything, I asked the team to hold off on sending them.

No matter how we try to spin it, there is an Omicron-sized elephant in the room. And trying to market an in-person event feels impossible.

Folks, I am REAL SICK OF COVID. I don't want to hear about it, talk about it, or worry about it anymore.

However. I can't not talk about it. Confab is coming in May, and people are buying tickets. And—if you're thinking about coming, which I hope you are—we want you to buy one, too.

All that said, I offer you the following three points for consideration.

#1: If COVID- or Confab-related circumstances change after you register, you can feel confident about getting your money back. Check out our terms and conditions: https://lnkd.in/dfenSKVH

#2: Onsite at the event, we will be requiring two things for every single person, with no exceptions:
• Proof of vaccination (or negative test result within 48 hours of entry), and
• Full compliance with all in-effect CDC and Minnesota State Health Department guidelines for large gatherings.

Read more about our COVID-19 planning: https://lnkd.in/dYSV5bhE

#3: If you're thinking about registering, now's the time to do it. Prices will jump on January 20, and you can save $300 before then.

Friends ... we can't predict the future. But we can promise that no matter what, we've got your back. So if you're excited about Confab, go ahead and register. I can't wait to see you there.

Confab
The content strategy conference
Minneapolis, MN • May 9–12, 2022

Here are six reasons I like her email as a model, whether we are talking about Covid or any crisis at hand:

1. **The subject line delivers on the promise.**

   "A personal note from Kristina" reads like it actually is from Kristina. She told me she wrote it at her kitchen table. You can tell.

   So often we get emails from execs that claim to be "personal" but don't read that way. They read like the over-extruded Hot Dog Messaging we talked about in Chapter 28.

2. **Does not ignore our collective reality.** Look at this empathic, human, exhausted language:

   "I'm REAL SICK OF COVID." (SAMES!)

   "I can't *not* talk about it."

   "No matter how we try to spin it . . ."

   Maybe you can relate to this: You look at your sales/marketing communications all teed up and a tiny bit of yourself feels the disconnect between what's going on in the world and what your marketing messaging says...?

   Haven't we all been inside Kristina's Midwestern shoes when she says, "I looked at everything ready to go out. And . . . ick."

   I'm paraphrasing. But that's the vibe.

3. **Even serious messages don't have to feel like they're written by a minister delivering a graveside eulogy.**

   I love Kristina's playful image of the "Omicron-sized elephant in the room."

4. **No candy-coating.** The best way to talk about Hard Things Policies is to be direct. Straight-talk clarity.

   "If you can't make it you will get a refund."

   "Proof of vax or negative test. No exceptions."

"We will comply with government health guidelines."

Simply stated. There you go. It is what it is.

5. **Your own point of view.** Conversations about vaccines and gatherings are difficult. But Confab wraps the requirements for attending the event as "for your consideration."

    You have a choice. Confab's organizers have made theirs. Ball's in your court.

6. **Clear call to action.** This email is, of course, a sales and marketing message with a clear CTA of "register now because . . ."

    The CTA works *only* because it comes after the other stuff.

    Context is everything. How differently would the message have played if Kristina had simply said, "Prices are going up! Can't wait to see you in May!"

Your CTA should come after all your reader's unasked questions have been answered.

I'm bolding that because it's important.

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Writing a Bolder Boilerplate

Boilerplates aren't usually celebrated for their creativity. But why couldn't they be?

Boilerplate text is a one-paragraph, high-level overview description of a company. It lives at the bottom or end of a press release, report, white paper, and other types of corporate communications.

It's intentionally written to be an asset-agnostic and easily portable description—epoxied to the tail end of various things.

Yet boilerplates are mostly ignored by readers. Because most of the time they're unoriginal, boring, uninspired.

Here's a basic template for a boilerplate:

> *<Your company name>* is that *<what you do/offer>* to help *<your desired audience>* *<do a thing/ solve a problem>* with/by *<your specific approach or solution>*. *Want to learn more?* *<Here's a link and/or email address.>*

You add some detail—number of clients, years in business, key recognitions or awards. But that's the gist.

Yet does a boilerplate have to be so straightforward? Does it have to feel like a fill-in-the-blank Marketing MadLib?

To answer those questions, let's turn to convenience store chain 7-Eleven.

Here's the boilerplate at the bottom of a press release 7-Eleven issued about its collaboration with Froggy, the riot grrrl punk rock band out of Doylestown, PA, who wrote the song "7-Eleven Nachos."

Boilerplate:

> *Are you still reading this? Awesome. Most people stop when they get to the small print. But not you! You get to read the cool stuff. 7-Eleven, Inc. is the premier name and largest chain in the convenience-retailing industry. They don't like to brag, but they invented convenience stores. For real. Google it. Based in Irving, Texas, 7-Eleven operates, franchises and/or licenses more than 77,000 stores in 17 countries and regions, including nearly 16,000 in North America.... Also, they trademarked the word "Brainfreeze." No lie. Thanks for sticking with this. You're unstoppable.*

There's more; I condensed it. (You can see the full glorious paragraph in the footnote.)[1]

I also reached out to 7-Eleven headquarters because I HAVE QUESTIONS! Questions like:

> *How did this glorious piece of writing get approved?*

> *Can I hire the writer?*

> *A song about nachos?*

Still waiting for answers.

Most of the press releases on the 7-Eleven corporate site take a more straightforward approach. But this one inspires me to rethink how we might use our own press releases to deliver a little more memorable enjoyment.

* * *

Is the 7-Eleven boilerplate is a little too freewheeling and unhinged for you?

There are more subtle ways to make your boilerplate your own.

From lululemon:

> *lululemon athletica inc. (NASDAQ:LULU) is a performance apparel and footwear company for yoga, running, training, and most other sweaty pursuits, creating transformational products and experiences which enable people to live a life they love. Setting the bar in technical fabrics and functional designs, lululemon works with yogis and athletes in local communities for continuous research and product feedback. For more information, visit* lululemon.com.[2]

"Other sweaty pursuits" is a fun way to describe the lululemon audience. This boilerplate also takes the opportunity to highlight its local outreach efforts. All in a spare 64 words.

From CVS:

> *CVS Health is the leading health solutions company, delivering care like no one else can…. Wherever and whenever people need us, we help them with their health, whether that's managing chronic diseases, staying compliant with their medications, or accessing affordable health and wellness services in the most convenient ways. We help people navigate the health care system and their personal health care by improving access, lowering costs and being a trusted partner for every meaningful moment of health. And we do it all with heart, each and every day. Learn more at* cvshealth.com.[3]

I condensed this one a bit. But look at the focus on what CVS does for others . . . not just what CVS is.

* * *

A boilerplate is called "boilerplate," by the way, because at one time news organizations would distribute ads, syndicated columns, and other prepared text to local newspaper via metal printed plates. The "boiler" portion of the word refers to the roiling heat needed to roll the plates.

Boilerplates at one time were (literally) hot. Over time, "boilerplate" came to refer to any text that could be used over and over again without changes. And now, "boilerplate" is used as a diss referring to stale or banal writing.

But! You are not a stale or banal writer.

So here's my challenge to you and us all: Let's return some heat to the boilerplate! Nachos optional.

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Writing Speech Descriptions

First let's talk about how to write a description or abstract for a conference or event that gets you (or your boss) a prime speaking spot.

Then let's live-edit one together to take it from insipid to inspiring.

There are six parts to a stellar speech description. Those six attributes apply no matter the goal of your speech—whether you are seeking a breakout session to function as marketing for you or your company, or you're looking to further your own speaking career.

First few sentences: Set the stage for the audience by being empathetic to the status quo, or the current state of things. "This is how things are," you're stating.

Second: State why the status quo doesn't have to be the status quo.

Third: Pose the question: What if there's a new, different way of thinking about the problem?

This is where you can also customize a description for the audience or industry. "What if *<hair salons>* like yours had a new opportunity?"

And if you are part of the audience—if you're a writer speaking to other writers, for example—you also should create that affiliation by using "our" and "us" versus "you."

As in: "What if there's a different way for corn hole enthusiasts like us?" Or: "Could we rubber duck manufacturers rethink our strategy?"

Fourth: State what your audience will get out of your talk. Tease the takeaways, the possibilities, the vision of the new reality.

Fifth: Ask a rhetorical question that invites your audience to come to your session. Something like "*Who's in?!*" or *"Who's ready to rethink HVAC marketing?"* This is your call to action to get attendees fired up!

Sixth: One of my favorite things to do is include a memorable phrase and unique word. It's an unexpected bit that sticks in the brain of the conference organizer because it's surprising. Let it mirror your own voice.

Now let's put that all together.

What follows first here is The Ugly First Draft of a keynote description we at MarketingProfs wrote for a talk on marketing training and education. The speech was to be based on our State of Marketing Training research report, and it was to be delivered at the MarketingProfs B2B Forum by my then-colleague Jen Smith and me.

The State of Marketing Training

Ann Handley, Jen Smith

Since 2002, Ann Handley's mission has been to help B2B marketers feel empowered, effective, and part of a community.

In 2021, Jen Smith at MarketingProfs was looking for data on B2B Marketing Training for an article. She found none. Because of her background in sales training, she googled "The State of B2B Sales Training." She found lots. She thought, "In this time of GTM, ABM, and sales and marketing alignment, how can it be that organizations aren't investing the same effort in training their marketing teams?" A mission to share this ginormous gap in organizational thinking was born.

In this keynote, Ann and Jen will share:

◆ *The (sometimes shocking) results of the first (and only of its kind as far as we can tell) State of B2B Marketing Training Report*

- *What marketers without organizational support can do to be more effective and grow*

- *What organizations can do to support their B2B marketing teams*

It's bad, right?

Yes. It's bad. (I'm acknowledging that to give you permission to nod out loud on how hideous it is.)

What makes this TUFD speech description awful:

- The focus on the speakers, not the audience

- The focus on the research report, not what's in it for the audience

- Too much background on how the report came to be that has no relevance for the audience

- That uninspired title

Here's the rewrite, using our six-part framework.

The Future-Proofed Career: How You (and Your Team) Can Thrive in an Unpredictable World

Ann Handley, Jen Smith

If there's anything we've learned since 2020, it's that anything is possible. The unimaginable can happen. Unpredictable is the norm. And Marketing needs to be prepared for it.

But . . . say what? How? How can you be ready for anything in a world of Extreme Everything happening . . . and all at once?

The questions here at the MarketingProfs B2B Forum become:

How can you future-proof your career to adapt to almost anything?

How can we lead teams that are happy, fulfilled, and that are throwing a collective See Ya to the Great Resignation? (Not on your watch!)

*It turns out that the secret to a future-proofed career and a happy,
successful marketing team is one and the same.*

*In this debut talk based on brand-new proprietary research,
MarketingProfs' own CCO Ann Handley and CMO Jen Smith will:*

- *Break down what B2B marketers need to do in 2022 (and beyond) to
  be more empowered and effective in their roles*

- *Share an inside look at what the most successful marketing leaders are
  doing to nurture marketers, grow capabilities, and counter the Great
  Resignation*

- *Offer true insights based on real research with marketing leaders in
  North America (not hunches or vibes)*

*Plus! There'll be lulz and trivia about modern marketers and marketing
teams. (Will there be trivia prizes . . .? Well, does MarketingProfs excel at
bringing the fun? ☺)*

*Who's ready to hear the secrets of Marketing's success in crazy,
unpredictable times?* Join us!

The new version is about the audience. It tells them what they'll get out of
the talk. And it promises a bit of fun while learning.

The "memorable phrase" in this talk, by the way, is the "lulz," an informal
way of saying for fun or laughs.

And the CTA (*Who's ready . . .?*) makes your speech a gotta-be-there!

<p align="center">* * *</p>

Massive thanks to Andrew Davis for his help with this section.

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Writing a Sales Letter

Joe Pulizzi launched an in-person conference in 2022. For the first time in more than a decade, Joe found himself in sales—selling sponsorships for the brand-new Creator Economy Expo.

Joe is the founder of Content Marketing World, which he sold in 2016, within five years of its founding. So he knows about marketing and selling.

"I've got this," he thought. *Easy? Peasy!*

He wrote this cold-outreach email to select companies:

> Hi FNAME,
>
> Wanted to make sure you were aware of our event, CEX - Creator Economy Expo. This is an exclusive event for 500+ content creators at the Arizona Grand Resort in Phoenix (May 2–4, 2022).
>
> I founded this event because I believe there is a real gap in the event space for true content entrepreneurs . . . those full-time creators trying to build a substantial business.
>
> Our attendees are experienced entrepreneurs and content creators who spend, on average, $10k per year on technology solutions to run their content businesses.
>
> Companies already sponsoring CEX include HubSpot, Rally.io and MarketMuse. We are limiting sponsors to just a few dozen this year (for obvious reasons).
>
> We just announced our first round of amazing speakers, including Roberto Blake, Ann Handley, Jeremiah Owyang, Jordan Harbinger, Kaleigh Moore,

Wally Koval (Accidentally Wes Anderson) . . . all some of the most amazing content entrepreneurs in the world.

I'd love to get you involved in some way. Here is our prospectus just to see what we are offering, but I'd love to create something that helps you grow your business and help our attendees at the same time.

Five minutes to chat about it?

Best, Joe

So what happened?

Did Joe's phone ring off the hook? Did his inbox explode? Did the companies on Joe's contact list throw all their budget dollars at him?

Not exactly.

Let's be honest. You probably stopped reading Joe's letter after a paragraph or two. At best, you skimmed. From Joe: "That's okay. I wouldn't either."

Joe's outreach got . . . crickets. NO response.

Zero calls. Zero emails. Zero budget dollars came Joe's way.

"I should have known better," Joe told me. "It's too long. And they really don't care about why I founded the event."

Like your customers, Joe's recipients care about themselves. They care about their own needs. They don't care about you. Devastating. But true.

"How quickly I forget," Joe said.

Take Two

Joe rewrote, with an eye toward brevity, utility, and empathy for the people and companies on his list. He reworded. He cut most of the words. He made it feel more like a personal request—just a quick note—than a formal ask.

Here's the second version of Joe's sales letter:

> *Hi FNAME. . .*
>
> *We have a new IRL creator economy event, called CEX: Creator Economy Expo. 500+ creators that could use your services. I believe there is a fit here. Would love to chat with you for less than 10 minutes about it if possible.*
>
> *Or if interested . . . I can email you a few ideas.*
>
> *Check it out here ---> https://cex.events/ - May 2–4, 2022 (Arizona Grand Resort)*

That was it.

Before we talk results, let's break it down:

◆ **Brevity**: 65 words versus the original 195 words. And he gets right to it. He says what he wants in the first line.

◆ **Useful**: Joe writes that the creators attending at his event *need* the services of the companies he's reaching out to.

Also I like how he says "I believe" in a way that incites curiosity. You can't help but wonder as the recipient: *I wonder how Joe sees a fit here? I'd love to hear more.*

"Every person I'm reaching out to has a sales goal," Joe says.

◆ **Empathy**: It's about the customer, not Joe.

What's more: Joe will not waste your precious time. All he asks for is 10 minutes.

"Everyone has 10 minutes, especially if it will help with their jobs and lives in some way," Joe said.

So what happened? Roughly 25% of the people he reached out to responded—some wanted a call, some emailed for ideas.

Twenty ultimately opted to sponsor Joe's new CEX event.

* * *

What I love about Joe's revised approach is its simplicity. The lessons are powerful, spare, and apply to any kind of sales opportunity.

You don't need to sell *to* people; you need to instead consider how you can help them. THAT'S your message.

You might not be in Sales. But think of Joe's letter anytime you have an ask: whether you're looking for money or a promotion, or you just want the shelter to consider your family for that cute Shih Tzu mix you saw on their feed.

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Ghostwriting

The Old English epic poem *Beowulf* is thought to have been written by ghostwriters. So are portions of the Bible.

Author Ann M. Martin wrote the first three dozen books in the Baby-Sitters Club series herself. But then Ann turned over the series to ghostwriters who wrote the rest of the 1 jillion titles in the series.[*]

And though Robert Ludlum died in 2001, he's still publishing new Jason Bourne novels—because ghostwriter Eric Van Lustbader and later Brian Freeman took up the franchise.

Still publishing new books posthumously—*well done, Robert Ludlum!* This is true Author Goals.

* * *

Ghostwriting is writing anonymously, for someone else. In Marketing, we might ghostwrite for a boss, client, colleague, or sometimes a customer. The final piece has their name on it, not ours.

It's called ghostwriting because you—the actual writer—are as invisible as a ghost. Yet, like a real ghost—say, Bruce Willis's Dr. Crowe in *The Sixth Sense*, Marvel's Ghost Rider, or Casper—you still sense their presence.

Why would a book that declares everybody writes (literally! It's the name!) coach you on how to write for anyone else? To use their voice and not yours? To become as invisible as Casper?

———

[*]Just kidding. There are only 213, including spinoffs. (*"Only."* LOL)

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Well, I may be an idealist. (Everybody can write!)

But I'm also a realist. Executives and companies rely on writing contractors and in-house staff to help them write more effectively, efficiently . . . with a little more color, beauty, flair.

And though I might not be a fan of ghostwriting for my own work (my own writing loses its luster when others have tried to write for me), it's useful for those who like a more collaborative approach.

Here's what it takes to edit or write for others:

◆ **Fluency in the language of your expert or exec.**

Content strategist and writer Liz Murphy helped Marcus Sheridan with the second edition of his book, *They Ask, You Answer* (Wiley, 2019). She worked closely with Marcus as both writer and editor—helping him reshape The Ugly First Drafts into a new and expanded version of the original.

To understand Marcus's communication style, Liz read the original book. But she also read all of his blog posts. She watched video of him speaking.

Liz studied his word choice, the cadence of his sentences. How he structured a story.

She developed a vocabulary list for Marcus-isms: He calls everyone "Bud." He asks lots of rhetorical questions. He says "Now, you might be thinking to yourself . . ." and uses "specifically" like they're unlimited breadsticks at Olive Garden.

Liz put herself through a kind of Marcus language immersion program. (When she told me this, I pictured Liz downloading the "Learn Marcus!" module from Rosetta Stone.)

In the end, Liz says, "I emerged with full fluency in Marcus."

◆ **Tuning your ear for signature words, phrases.** I worked with someone who often prefaced her thoughts or ideas with *Here's the thing*—a lead-in that became her own catchphrase, like Homer Simpson's *D'Oh!*

Adding a spoken signature phrase or two can personalize the voice of a piece—it's like a thumbprint that stamps the piece as their own. Side note: This is helpful in interviewing, too (Chapter 62).

To be sure she'd seamlessly woven in Marcus's signature words and phrases, Liz told me, she'd stand and gesture, like she'd seen Marcus do, as she read the chapter aloud—as if she were literally inside Marcus's skin.

"It was the only way I could catch in the early stages that I had gotten it right," she says.

◆ **Therapist skills.**

If you interview your expert or exec for a piece, restate their answer back to them—like a therapist clarifying a patient's answers. "*So what I hear you saying is . . .*" is useful to ensure you fully grasp not just what's said but also *how* it's said.

Sometimes, an exec will give you the company line or communication-speak.

"In that case, ask: '*What's that mean to you?*'" Liz suggests.

 Followed by:

"*Can you give me an example?*"

"*If I'm [the audience], will I understand what that means?*"

"*Why does that matter?*"

Your number-one job is to cultivate a relationship of trust with your expert, Liz says, to encourage open and accessible language rather than the party line. "I want them to buy into *me* as much as anything," she adds.

So yes, help translate their thoughts for the audience. But in a way that makes it clear that *you* are looking to make *them* look good.

◆ **A first draft that's simple and straightforward.**

Polishing the first draft too much is tempting—because you want the expert to love its perfection.

"But it's best to keep it simple while you work out the kinks," especially if you're ghostwriting for someone for the first time, Liz says.

Otherwise they'll focus on the language and not the substance. "I wouldn't say it like that" versus "This is a key point."

◆ **Setting expectations with early drafts.** "If it takes them longer than 15 minutes to give margin edits on a document, I suggest we hop on a call, because we've got bigger issues," Liz says.

◆ **Securely checking in ego at the door.**

Remember, you're writing for someone else—not yourself. "You will undoubtedly work with folks who have style choices built into their voice that run completely counter to how you communicate," Liz says.

"Use your skills to refine and polish so their voice *shines*," she adds. There is a fine line between polishing so someone else's voice comes through with greater clarity and suffocating it with editorial overreach based on your own personal preference. Where that line is will vary based on your and your expert . . . but remember that there is one.

One final point . . .

Don't let your voice be permanently corrupted. One of the challenges Liz had was slipping back into her own writing skin after embodying Marcus's for months.

After his book was done, Liz deliberately had to reconnect with her own voice. She started a daily journal practice, volunteered left and right to write under her own byline at her agency, and also studied comedians to see how they slip into roles while also maintaining their own timing and personality.

"It's easy to forget your own voice, after writing for someone else," Liz says. "That surprised me. I had to be very intentional in getting it back. I had to make writing fun for me again!"

Part **VII**

Content Tools

Whabout tools will help you produce your best work?

John Steinbeck reportedly used 300 Eberhard Faber Blackwing pencils to complete *East of Eden*. He used another 60 to produce *The Grapes of Wrath*.

The Blackwing 602's performance (expressed in its famous slogan, "Half the pressure, twice the speed") gave the pencil a cult following that continued even after it was discontinued in 1998.

Who wouldn't want to use the same tool that Steinbeck and Vladimir Nabokov and Joseph Finder and Stephen Sondheim used?

Other writers have been equally finicky about their writing tools. Here are Hemingway's requirements: "The blue-backed notebooks, the two pencils and the pencil sharpener (a pocket knife was too wasteful), the marble-topped tables, the smell of *café crèmes*, the smell of early morning sweeping out and mopping and luck were all you needed." (From his Paris memoir, *A Moveable Feast*.)

Neil Gaiman and Stephen King reportedly use fountain pens because they both like to write more slowly and with more intention.

"I also discovered I enjoy the tactile buzz of the ritual involved in filling the pens with ink," Neil told the BBC.[1] (I like that he says he changes the ink color each day so he can see how many pages he produced the previous day.)

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Jane Austin wrote on sheepskin with a quill pen, using a special kind of ink made with stale beer. The *Palimpsest* blog has her recipe:[2]

> *Take 4 ozs of blue gauls* [gallic acid, made from oak apples], *2 ozs of green copperas* [iron sulphate], *1 1/2 ozs of gum arabic. Break the gauls. The gum and copperas must be beaten in a mortar and put into a pint of strong stale beer; with a pint of small beer. Put in a little refin'd sugar. It must stand in the chimney corner 14 days.*

When I built my Tiny Writing Studio in my backyard, I thought of Jane Austin beating her ink ingredients in a mortar. And for a hot minute I thought maybe I'd ditch the laptop and Wi-Fi connection. Maybe I'd try to write longhand with a fountain pen, using ink I might learn to mix myself.

"Oh that?" I'd say to my visitors, following their gaze to my mortar and pestle resting in the corner. "That's just where I *pound my inks.*"

But . . . Who would I be kidding? I'd last a long four or five minutes before I'd break down and attempt to hack into the neighbor's Wi-Fi. (I'd already tested its signal strength anyway.)

I suppose there's nothing magical about Blackwing pencils and fountain pens and pounding your own inks.

Unless maybe there is.

<center>* * *</center>

Throughout this book, I've listed a few writing and content tools related to specific tasks.

What follows in this section are some other writing and creativity tools, including those that help us organize and plan our writing or creative projects.

These are not the tools and processes of the celebrated literary greats (no mortars, no Blackwing pencils). But they are the tools of ordinary people like you and me who nonetheless have greatness within us.

These recommendations came from my own preferences, along with friends, marketers, book authors, and businesspeople I polled with one question: *What's a content tool you can't live without?*

Because, you know, *everybody writes*!

Research and Knowledge Management Tools

These tools allow you to research, capture, and organize notes and other things (photos, audio notes, handwritten notes, screenshots, web pages, etc.) and sync them between devices.

There are some nuances relating to the performance and capabilities of each. But generally these tools provide you with a more workable approach to research than, say, Post-it notes and highlighters or scraps of paper that you dig through the trash to retrieve later because you accidentally purged them from your desk. (Just me?)

Knowledge management sounds a little high-minded. But I couldn't think of a better term with the same precision. *Brain organizer? Concept planner? Welp.* Knowledge management it is.

◆ **Evernote** (evernote.com) gets top billing because almost everyone seems to love it. I've never gotten the hang of Evernote, but clearly I'm missing something. Several people I trust tell me I need to keep trying. My mother told me the same thing about Swiss chard when I was eight. I now eat Swiss chard. So maybe they're right.

Also:

◆ **Diigo** (diigo.com)

◆ **Microsoft OneNote** (onenote.com)

◆ **Notion** (notion.so)

◆ **Workflowy** (workflowy.com)

◆ **Pocket** (getpocket.com)

◆ **Zoho Notebook** (zoho.com/notebook)

◆ **Google Keep** (keep.google.com)

Writing Tools

It's interesting how many of the writing tools we modern writers like aren't very modern at all. Many of us rely on basic things such as notebooks, sketchpads, pens, and pencils—especially for The Ugly First Draft.

And many of us use things like oversized sticky pads, whiteboards, and rolls of butcher paper to tackle and organize massive writing projects like books.

Why is that?

Maybe because using offline tools eliminates friction between the writer and the writing. Or maybe because it delivers the "tactile buzz" Neil Gaiman describes. Or maybe because writing by hand improves our thinking because it slows us down and gives our brains a chance to think.

Sometimes I'll use an old-school typewriter to write a first draft. A typewriter forces me to keep moving forward. Plus, I like the clacking sound of the typewriter key striking the page—it's like a small cheer that goes up with every letter . . . *You! Did! It! Keep! Going!*

A typewriter doesn't offer me endless opportunities to go back and rearrange the words and paragraphs before I've got it all down. I don't interrupt myself with second-guessing and self-editing.

Slower can be faster.

Eventually I move to a laptop. Here are some favorite online writing tools from me and others.

- ◆ **Scrivener** (literatureandlatte.com) is writing software that is especially great for composing, structuring, and manipulating long and difficult documents—like books, ebooks, manuals, or lengthy white papers. It's overkill for smaller writing tasks.

- ◆ **yWriter** (spacejock.com/yWriter5.html) is similar to Scrivener.

- ◆ **Ulysses** (ulyssesapp.com).

- ◆ **Mellel** (mellel.com).

- ◆ **Pages** (apple.com/mac/pages).

- ◆ **Text editors**, of which there are many—TextEdit (iOS), MS Notepad, and Byword among them. All are stripped-down, simple

platforms preferred because of their Zen qualities and because they don't throw lots of extra code and characters into text the way (for example) MS Word does when you import a document into a content management system like WordPress.

I like how marketer Michael Brenner writes his blog posts as draft emails and pops them into WordPress, effectively hacking a text editor by using something that's more familiar to most of us.

◆ **Draft** (draftin.com) was started by engineer Nathan Kontny to help people become better writers. I like the on-demand copyediting feature (which is kind of like an Uber for editing). I also like the Hemingway mode, which doesn't allow you to delete anything you've written.

◆ **Microsoft Word** (office.com) and Google Docs. I feel a little silly listing these two here—it's a little like listing *water* and *bread basket* on a restaurant menu. But I'm doing it so that I don't get emails.

Productivity Tools

Writing seems to trigger a latent ADHD condition in almost everyone. Procrastination and distraction are permanent handicaps. You start writing and pause to look up the definition of a word and the next thing you know you're watching the top 20 Betty White TV moments on YouTube.

The struggle is more than real: It's actual. Which is why this section reads a little like the self-help shelf at your local bookstore.

The goal of all of these productivity tools is to make you a more efficient, productive, and less frustrated writer.

◆ **Write or Die** (writeordie.com) bills itself as putting the *prod* in productivity. It allows you to set a time limit and attaches random consequences if you quit typing (sirens, pop-up boxes, heart attack-inducing unwriting). It's either motivating or anxiety producing, depending on your temperament.

◆ **750Words** (750words.com) delivers points and badges based on output. It's based on the idea from *The Artist's Way* of writing three pages (or 750 words) daily.

◆ **Ommwriter** (ommwriter.com) offers a clean, minimalist writing experience for focused, distraction-free writing. Similar are: *Zen Writer* (beenokle.com/zenwriter.html) and *ZenPen* (https://zenpen.io/).

◆ **Cold Turkey** (getcoldturkey.com) allows you to blacklist or block certain sites or servers for a set period of time if you are powerless against the compulsion to check ALL THE THINGS.

◆ **SelfControl** (selfcontrolapp.com) is similar to Cold Turkey, but only for Mac. Its logo is a skull, which tells you everything you need to know.

◆ **Google Docs** offers a distraction-free writing feature. Toggle it to make the writing page go full-screen minimalist.

◆ **StayFocusd** (chrome.google.com) is a Chrome extension that allows you to limit the time you spend on websites you consider irresistible time sinks.

◆ **LeechBlock** (addons.mozilla.org) is the same as StayFocusd, but it's for Firefox.

◆ **Pomodoro Technique** (pomodorotechnique.com) is more of a time management and productivity technique than an actual tool—unless you count the cute 25-minute, tomato-shaped timer as a tool.

Two Tools to Limber Up Atrophied Writing Muscles

Here are two little-known but uber-practical tools that help me when my creative wheels get stuck in the mud.

Both of these tools are also quirky-fun. Writing words shouldn't feel like entering numbers into QuickBooks.

ilys (ilys.com) is a distraction-free writing tool that could go in the section above. But calling it that is too clinical.

ilys is Disney's Space Mountain of writing: It's pitch-black and you have no idea where you're going and it feels like maybe you shouldn't have agreed to this ride because GET. ME. OFF. NOW!!!

But you can't. All you can do is buckle up. Hang on. Keep going.

How it works: At ilys.com, input a number of words you want to write. *(Be brave. Don't say like 10 because you are Not. A. Softy!)*

Start typing. All you see on the screen is the letter you just typed flash in front of your face. Then—poof—GONE. If you know you made a mistake and reflexively hit the back button, you get a punitive buzzer sound that wishes it could deliver an actual shock to you.

You can't see the text in its entirety until you reach your word goal. Only then does ilys deliver your document. It's a frakkin mess.

But your first draft is THERE.

And that feels pretty great.

Fun fact: ilys stands for "I Love Your Stories." And if that isn't the positivity our writing needs, I don't know what is.

Splasho's Up-Goer Text Editor (splasho.com/upgoer5/) challenges you to explain an idea using only the dictionary's 1,000 most-used English words.

The Up-Goer Editor is a kind of writing mullet: mostly for fun, but with a business utility to simplify your writing.

How it works: Type your text in the box. The editor boots out uncommon words, kicking to the curb anything that whiffs of jargon, buzzword, or complexity.

It's a great exercise to reframe your thinking in the simplest, most straightforward terms. It also helps you *combat the curse of knowledge*. The tool is especially useful if you work in tech, science, or any other complex industry. It helps you frame your writing in common language for readability and SEO.

Finally, try it for *short descriptions or teasers*. I sometimes use this tool to get out of my own head when I write descriptions of my talks and speeches.

For my international friends, it's also available in Norwegian (splasho.com/ upgoer5no/) and Spanish (https://splasho.com/upgoer5es/).

Editing Tools

Word choice. Readability. AI writers. They're all here. (Some of these are mentioned elsewhere in this book.)

None of these tools should be substitutes for human editors (we talked about this already, but I'm compelled to repeat it here). But they can provide excellent first passes before your text journeys to your editor.

◆ **Grammarly** (grammarly.com) is a cloud-based typing assistant and personal writing coach. It's been around for a while, but rapid advances in AI-based technology have catapulted Grammarly beyond its grammar-fixing roots. It now judges your tone and word choice, and it checks for plagiarism.

  Grammarly Business can help organizations establish style guides for use in different contexts. Grammarly for Developers enables programmers to embed the service in their products.

  I expect that eventually Grammarly Home* will walk my dog and put a tuna casserole in to bake. (*Grammarly Home is not a thing . . . *yet.*)

  I use Grammarly daily because it's a great writing partner. But as I said elsewhere, it's occasionally satisfying for me as a writer to reject its suggestions. Know your own voice! Believe in it!

◆ **Hemingway** (hemingwayapp.com) is an app that flags limp sentences in favor of writing that's stand-up sharp.

  It's fun to play with. But keep in mind that when I ran part of Hemingway's own *Farewell to Arms* through the tool, it flagged instances of overly complex prose, passive voice, and too many adverbs. That doesn't mean it's a bad tool; it means that Papa knew his voice, too.

◆ **Analyze My Writing** (analyzemywriting.com) is a fun one. Paste your text into the field and feel judged.

  The tool assesses many things—from readability to passive voice to something called "lexical density," which sounds like it's measured by submerging your paragraphs into water to see if they can swim . . .? IDK.

One odd thing: The "Analyze Text!" CTA button is weirdly small. Took me a minute. You've been warned.

◆ **ProWritingAid** (prowritingaid.com) is an online writing coach and mentor. It flags spelling and grammar errors, clichés, and redundancies; it also checks for plagiarism and readability.

◆ **Autocrit** (autocrit.com) and SmartEdit (smart-edit.com) are similar to the two previous tools.

◆ **Wordcounter** (wordcounter.com) checks for redundancies in your text by ranking the most frequently used words (helpful if everything is a *solution* or *service*).

◆ **Cliché Finder** (cliche.theinfo.org) and ClicheFinder.net (clichefinder.net) both . . . well, find clichés.

◆ **Plagium** (plagium.com) lets you check where else your text might appear online. *Plagiarism Detector* (plagiarismdetector.net) does the same.

Word Finders

◆ **Related Words** (relatedwords) is open on my browser every time I'm writing. I like it because it delivers . . . well, related words instead of just synonyms, the way a thesaurus does. For me, it sparks livelier, less-obvious metaphors by suggesting nonobvious connections between words and their meanings.

◆ **Word Hippo** (wordhippo.com) is like a lot of sites related to writing in that it has an old-school look and feel that makes it seem it hasn't been updated since Amazon sold only books.

Still it's a rich, useful site because it allows you to search word categories (such as "rhyme with") in addition to antonyms, translations, or even a 10-letter word that starts with a *B*.

◆ **Visual Thesaurus** (visualthesaurus.com) is one of many word finders on the Web. The interface is also a lotta old-school. But I like Visual Thesaurus because it's what would happen if a really attractive thesaurus and a beautiful dictionary got together and gave birth to gorgeous word maps.

◆ **RhymeZone**. (rhymezone.com) is like Google for rhyming words, if Google went to the Rhyming Gym and jacked itself up on things like searching via number of syllables, meter, beginning letter, and more. I just rhymed *guacamole* and *ravioli*. I don't have a use for it now. But you never know.

Readability Tools

Relying on a formula to spit out how "readable" our text is feels like we're selling ourselves short.

Readability formulas are also famously flawed: They measure how readable something is . . . but they don't measure comprehension. They don't measure how fun or entertaining your writing is.

And most can't keep up with how language is evolving for specific audiences: "LOL BRT" might be understood by many of us. But most readability tools don't know that BRT means *Be right there.*

On the other hand, readability scores can be useful if you're facing a steep learning curve in getting to know a new audience. And sometimes we might need a little extra data to convince a boss or client that something is on target. Plus readability tests can be kind of fun to use. (Kind of.)

There are several readability scoring methods. The best known is Flesch-Kincaid.

Rudolf Flesch fled to the United States to avoid the Nazi invasion of Austria. Rudolf and J. Peter Kincaid co-created the readability scoring methodology in 1975, under contract to the U.S. Navy.

Today, it's embedded in Microsoft Word. It's also embedded in some WordPress plug-ins.

There are more. I'm including a few here that might be helpful in addition to the Flesch-Kincaid embedded tool. And I'll quit being judgmental about their use.

◆ **Edit Central** (editcentral.com/gwt1/EditCentral.html#style_diction) is a readability scoring tool. It's limited to 50,000 characters at a time.

- ◆ **Readability Formulas** (readabilityformulas.com/free-readability-formula-tests.php) is limited to 600 words at a time, but it runs your content through seven formulas.

- ◆ **Readable** (readable.com/features/readability-formulas) has curated a bunch of readability tools if you want to really go down a readability rabbit hole.

Non–Text Writing Tools

I was surprised at the number of friends who record first drafts of blog posts while driving or walking or (in one case) working out . . . and then shape them into a readable format later. Who knew?

- ◆ **Otter** (otter.ai) uses AI and machine learning to transcribe voice to text in real-time.

- ◆ **Descript** (descript.com) is used by many marketers/writers as a way to create transcriptions of podcasts or webinars that can be edited, then published in other formats like blog posts.

    It also magically works the other way: Tweak text to edit audio/video files. Not sure how this last part actually works. Maybe alchemy.

- ◆ **Google Doc voice typing** uses AI to let you dictate your text.

- ◆ **Nuance** (Nuance.com) (formerly Dragon Naturally Speaking) is speech recognition software that's a handy way to capture a first draft.

- ◆ **Rev** (rev.com) relies on not AI but actual people. It's my go-to for transcription and translation.

- ◆ **Speechpad** (speechpad.com), **Speakwrite** (speakwrite.com), and **CastingWords** (castingwords.com) are all solid transcription services with various capabilities and features.

Content Idea Generators

These aren't writing tools. But they can help spark some writing ideas based on keywords you want to focus on. The first three are also mentioned in the chapter on headlines.

◆ **SumoMe's Kickass Headline Generator** (sumome.com/kickass-headline-generator).

◆ **CoSchedule's Headline Analyzer** (coschedule.com/headline-analyzer).

◆ **Answer the Public** (answerthepublic.com) is a self-described "search listening tool," but it also suggests approaches/titles.

◆ **Blog About** (impactbnd.com/blog-title-generator/blogabout) is an idea generator that's ideal when you know your topic so well that you're having a hard time coming up with a fresh or unique angle.

◆ **UberSuggest** (ubersuggest.org) is technically a keyword suggestion tool, but it has a side hustle as a solid idea generator for new blog posts. Enter a word or phrase and the tool delivers a list of results containing the word or phrase, followed by related phrases that can help ignite new ideas.

◆ **BuzzSumo** (Buzzsumo.com) tells you what content in your subject is most shared (among other things). It helps you find underserved content gaps or suggests hot topics you might want to get in on. The Questions tab is especially useful.

Keyword Research Tools

What do people really call our products?

What questions do people have?

How can we be the best answer to those questions?

Keyword research is like using telepathy to read the Internet's mind, because it gives you answers to those questions and more.

Like how many people are searching for answers to specific questions. And how difficult it will be to rank in Google for those words or phrases.

Keyword research is where to start your ranking journey.

Interestingly, keyword tools inspire as much passion as writing tools. You wouldn't think a search technology would ignite squabbles and debate or

cause someone I asked about their favorite tool to email me with the SHOUTY subject line AHREFS OR GO HOME.

Whoa, cowboy.

Anyway, a few favorites mentioned by content marketers, including my email friend MR. SHOUTY PANTS:

- ◆ **Moz Keyword Explorer** (moz.com/explorer). Stupid-easy to use.

- ◆ **SEMrush Keyword Overview** (semrush.com/features/keyword-research/). Not quite as easy to use, but a hair more robust.

- ◆ **Ahrefs** (ahrefs.com) is a tiny business compared with the two above. But it punches above its weight class because it's super powerful. Mr. Shouty Pants and others say it's suited to more serious SEO efforts.

One more thing: Google Search is itself a good keyword research tool. This from marketer Andy Crestodina, who is my go-to resource for all things Search.

Type the phrase you're considering, then hold off hitting the return key, Andy said, adding: "See the keyword suggestions? If it's suggested by Google, people are searching for it."

AI Writing Tools

Should we all be depositing poop emojis in our pants at the idea that artificially intelligent robots are coming to take over all of our writing jobs?

No.

Instead of freaking out, let's freshen the guest room and give the robots a place to lay their molded plastic heads and close their soulless eyes. Let's welcome them with open arms.

The smartest writers will learn about these tools and how they can help us.

Some perspective: AI is already here. All of us interact with AI dozens—if not hundreds—of times every day in our personal lives. Products and

services like Gmail, Netflix, Alexa, Facebook, LinkedIn, Spotify, Uber, and your phone are all fueled in part by AI, says Paul Roetzer, founder of the Marketing AI Institute.

"You don't care that AI powers those experiences," Paul says. "But you do subconsciously appreciate that they make your life incrementally better through the conveniences of voice, prediction, and personalization."

These same technologies are accelerating writing.

What's that means for us?

It means that AI will take over a lot of the mundane, data-driven repetitive tasks most of us creative people don't enjoy anyway. Like researching audiences and content; analyzing data for content strategy; optimizing email (subject lines, send times, personalizing newsletters); and helping to generate social content, templated writing (basic boilerplates, for example), and some initial drafts.

AI increasingly helps us be more creative and strategic, letting us focus on the parts we love while outsourcing the stuff we don't.

It's not that the robots are coming for us; it's that *we* will use *them*.

Of course, they might also just decide to kill us all.

(Just kidding.)

(I think.)

I've already mentioned a couple of AI-powered writing tools above:

1. Grammarly

2. ProWriterAid

Others:

◆ **Hyperwrite** (hyperwriteai.com) is remarkable in its ability to sound nonrobotic. It uses natural language processing technology to generate original content suggestions for us, and it might help you write faster and more clearly.

◆ **Jasper** (jasper.ai) uses AI to create short-form content: short posts, email copy, landing pages, social media.

◆ **Lately** (lately.ai) is similar to Jasper, helping us produce social media messages at scale. I sometimes have used it to suggest the rough drafts of social posts from my email newsletter, for example.

◆ **Copy.ai** (copy.ai) is a copywriting tool for short-form content, also useful for generating social posts and link descriptions.

◆ **WriteSonic** (writesonic.com) seeks to create articles, blog posts, landing pages, Google ads, Facebook ads, emails, product descriptions, and more. It's also available in 20+ languages.

◆ **MarketMuse** (marketmuse.com) is helpful for writing briefs that save time on research. It also helps with first drafts.

◆ **Writer** (writer.com) is geared toward enterprise teams.

Massive thanks to Paul Roetzer for his insights in assembling that list of AI tools.

* * *

The marketing around every one of these technologies always mentions their speed and ease. It also usually talks about non-robot-sounding writing voice. It's mostly true. (Or soon will be as the tech advances.)

But remember also that speed isn't everything. My goal in life is not to create more . . . but to create lasting things that matter.

What's more, these tools work best not as plug-and-play content generators but as tools that work best in the hands of creators: people like you and me.

They give us power. (Can you write the bones of a boilerplate in 30 seconds? I can't.) (Can you write in Dutch? I can't.)

But only in our own adept and capable hands does that power become a superpower.

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Epilogue

A writer who waits for ideal conditions under which to work will die without putting a word on paper.

—E. B. White

Done is better than perfect.

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