

Website copywriting 101: A crash course for do-it-yourselfers

Good copywriting is an invaluable resource. And yet, some people see little value in hiring a professional. Why? Many small organizations don't understand the creative process, nor do they see the bigger picture—how strong copy will improve sales, build credibility, inform and persuade. Some people assume, often incorrectly, that they don't have the budget to hire a good web copywriter. Still others are do-it-yourselfers.

What's a do-it-yourselfer?

If you:

- Utilize duct tape as a means of home improvement
- Scoff at mechanics and instead turn to the automotive section of the library
- Knit your own winter-wear
- Stay well fed thanks to your personal garden

Then, you're probably a do-it-yourselfer.

Whatever your reason for not hiring a professional website copywriter, I invite you to explore my website (<http://www.dmorrissey.com>) to learn more about what I do, how I work and what I can do for you. Still not sold? Then here's a very basic, crash course on writing for the web.

How to write well for the web

The plan

Before a single word is written, you need a detailed plan to bring your organization to the web for the first time, or—more likely—to re-work existing content. For starters, what's the purpose of your website? Is it a means to educate customers and prospects about your brand or organization? Do you anticipate your website to close the sale for you, or will it be just one of many items in your sales team's toolbox? Is e-commerce your game?

Define the overall goal of your site and you can begin to strategize the content. This doesn't mean it's time to start typing up a storm.

Instead, sit down and visually map out the navigation of the website. What main navigation items do you envision? (Generally, something like *About Us*, *Services* or *Products*, *Contact*, etc.) How do you want the user to traverse your content? Is it intuitive? If the user can't figure out how to navigate your site, or how you would like her to respond, then you've lost her.

The process

Once you've created a map that details every page you plan to create, outline the content for each. There's no fancy method. Try the Roman numerals you were forced to use whenever outlining an essay in grade school, or just scribble some notes. The idea is simply to have a generic understanding of what content will appear on that page and why. What purpose will that page's content serve? What is its role in the broader sense of the entire website?

After outlining, research. Double- or triple-check your information whenever necessary. It's easy to earn the reputation as an unknowledgeable or erroneous resource; it's difficult to overcome that after the fact.

The writing

Then, write. Write your little heart out, but here's what to keep in mind:

- **Find a tone that's appropriate for your audience**, but remember that the web allows you to write very conversationally. Use contractions. Keep your sentences short and vary the length occasionally. Fragments are not the devil.
- **Be concise.** That's different than being brief. While keeping it short is definitely a good idea, concise writing expresses your key points and drives a response from your reader in shorter form. One easy way to write concisely is to avoid passive language; it clutters your sentences and often confuses the reader. Anyone that tells you it's necessary to have long, detailed, excessive copy on a webpage—whether to sell your product effectively or rank highly with the search engines—is a dinosaur. Don't listen to him; he'll soon be extinct.
- **Clichés, like fragments, are also not evil.** Your language should be colloquial in nature, so inserting a good 'ole cliché is acceptable. Just be sure to do so sparingly.
- **Tell the user the benefits of your product or service, not the features.** What's the difference? I don't care what the electrolytes inside of a sports drink are called, but I sure am interested to hear that drinking it will rehydrate me faster than water. Better yet, try and address your audience's problems or needs. Make sure your message is relevant to them, not you.
- **Headlines and subheads are your friends.** Not only can headlines and subheads improve your rank with search engines, they also make it a whole lot easier to organize your content. Good use of subheads within a page allows a user to "scan", rather than read, which is how most users view webpages. Make your headlines strong and benefit-oriented to ensure that the rest of the page gets read.
- **Bullets are the good guys.** Again, the aim is to keep your text scannable and concise; to deliver a lot of information quickly that brings about an action. When I first started writing for the web, I hated using bullets. I found it dull and uncreative writing. Then, I got over myself and started worrying about the reader. Bullets are a far more effective way to deliver a lot of information than solid blocks of copy.
- **Avoid unnecessary jargon** unless you're certain that the majority of your audience would understand it.
- **Be consistent.** Whether you're following your organization's brand guidelines, a standard style guide, or making the style rules on the fly, your stylistic choices

should be constant. If you use "website" once, the second usage shouldn't be "web site." Same goes for headlines and subheads; be consistent in your use of capitalization and punctuation.

- **Use system text links, don't just link fancy images.** Some users prefer text links; the search engines *definitely* prefer them. In fact, a lot of high-ranking websites will actually use "invisible" hyperlinks; that is, links that aren't seen by the eye, but are detected by search engines. Why? On the most basic level, the more links to and from your site (so long as they are relevant), the better you will be rated by a search engine. This is a good trick, but use it carefully, as it is just that—a trick. Sometimes a search engine will penalize you when it suspects foul play to earn your high ranking.
- **Make your navigation strategy clear and intuitive.** This could mean going so far as to include a simple system text link at the bottom of each page that directs your user to the next page you want her to view. The beauty of the online medium of course, is that testing and statistics are cheap (or free, even!), so it's easy enough to look at how your audience is navigating your site. If you find it's way off from what you had envisioned, re-organize the way you present content to better allow your users to find what they want faster.
- **Learn the basics of search engine optimization (SEO).** While new SEO techniques are constantly being published, the basics of SEO are not all that mystical or cryptic. You just need to take the time to educate yourself. There are several good eBooks available (many of which are free) that cover the basics and are easily found with a Google search. If you turn to a professional, make sure he or she is a professional and not a professional crook. Find out exactly what this person's plan is to improve your rankings. If he promises a high rank quickly, don't do business with him. SEO is a slow, tedious, constant process.
- **Spell check, proofread, edit!** 'Nuff said. And don't rely solely on the spellchecker in your word processor!
- **Be vigilant.** Interactive copywriting is a constant process of analyzing the relevance and overall presentation of your content. Take the time to play with your wording and it's organization. Do so and you'll be rewarded. Like any other writing project, don't settle for your first attempt.

About David Morrissey

David Morrissey is a professional copywriter with extensive digital experience. He works fulltime for one of the largest advertising agency networks in the world, and offers freelance services on the side. He earned a B.S. in journalism from Emerson College and is completing a M.A. in communication from Gonzaga University. David resides in Salt Lake City, Utah, but has worked with clients throughout North America. For rates, copywriting portfolio samples and more, please visit <http://www.dmorrissey.com>.