

12. How to make your copy easy to read

Copywriters have their own preferred ways of drafting out their copy. I like to write a very rough version, making sure to include all the key points and examples, then go back and revise the draft to make the sentences trip off the tongue. That's why I have included this chapter towards the end of the section.

The following tips help you to simplify your copy so it can be scanned easily by a casual reader, and so you can improve the fluency of your copy so it is easier to read.

12.77. Stick to one idea per sentence; one point per paragraph.

Copy is easy to read when sentences and paragraphs focus on just one thing at a time. Copy is difficult to read when sentences and paragraphs 'fire multiple tennis balls'—the reader doesn't have time to take in one thing before being asked to digest another. Try to break up longer sentences and paragraphs into shorter ones that deliver the message step-by-step, like this copy does:

Free trade sounds like a great idea. But if it's not between equals it doesn't work. Yet free trade is often forced onto poor countries through trade agreements and as a condition of aid and debt relief. This means their growers and producers are overwhelmed by powerful international competitors and unprotected fledging industries are destroyed.

*Trade justice is a better way. Put simply, it means the world's poor nations should have the right to choose for themselves the policies that will help them trade their way out of poverty.
(...)*

12.78. Split up longer sentences.

You'd be surprised how many sentences you could split in two by adding a period/full-stop. Don't worry if you have to start sentences the way you were always told not to do. Starting sentences with *But*, *And*, *So*, and *Yet* is permissible because advertising copy follows the patterns of speech more closely than it follows the rules of written grammar.

If you can't split a sentence with a full stop, use dashes to do a similar thing—they allow you to elaborate on an idea whilst keeping your utterances to a digestible length.

12.79. Break up your copy with bullet points.

Bullets make copy easier to read. Here are some pointers for using bullets effectively:

- **Keep to a consistent style of writing.** If your first bullet point starts with a command verb like this one, your following bullets should also start with command verbs. If your first bullet demonstrates what a feature does, all your bullet points should do the same.
- **Start with a short, bold summarizing sentence.** In longer bullet copy, this technique ensures your copy can be scanned easily.
- **Use bullets to present facts and figures.** Statistical bullet copy can be easily sectioned off as a 'stats section'.

- **Try tick-bullets.** If your bullet copy is intended to look like a check-list, tick points can be more eye-catching than regular bullet points.
- **Number your points.** It is often effective to use numbers instead of bullets and introduce the bullet copy as '5 reasons to...' or '5 ways to...'. For instance, I could have introduced this bullet copy as *5 pointers for effective bullet copy*.

12.80. Use simple words.

Multi-syllable Latin-based words can usually be replaced with shorter Saxon words, as shown in the following list:

<i>Complicated</i>	<i>Simple</i>
Information	Facts
Demonstrate	Show
Regarding	About
Immediately	Now
Construct	Make
Regulation	Rule
Conversation	Talk
Discover	Find
Commence	Start
Gratis	Free
Continue	Keep
Encourage	Help
Majority	Most

Go through each word of copy with a fine-tooth comb, and ask yourself if any word can be simplified to cut down on syllable length. Do this, and your copy will roll off the tongue quicker as your reader vocalizes it in her head as she reads.

12.81. Use simple tenses.

Avoid using complicated syntax. Phrases that use advanced tenses tend to feel clunky and read more slowly. Pretend you are writing for a learner of English, and try to avoid over-using sophisticated grammar structures including continuous past tenses (*You've been doing*), conditionals (*If you had an X would you be looking at a Y?*), and past modals (*You might have made the wrong decision*).

Clumsy syntax

It wasn't until we had filtered through your comments did we realize what we needed to do to improve X.

Simple syntax

We looked at your comments. We saw how to improve X.

12.82. Vary the length of sentences and paragraphs.

Very short sentences in between longer sentences can help to break up your copy and make for a chatty style. Likewise, the odd one-sentence paragraph helps you to vary the pace of your

copy and hold the readers' interest.

Example:

If you wanted to find a good Indian restaurant, you'd probably start by looking through your local directory. Of course. It lists hundreds of restaurants all over town—but how do you know what's hot and what's not?

Simply log on to E-by-us.com.

It's the first online directory that allows browsers to chat about their local amenities. Simply key in the name and (...)

12.83. Break a line in mid-utterance to encourage the reader to read on.

Utterances are the continuous parts of sentences that are not disrupted by punctuation. When you are setting the line breaks in your copy, it makes good sense to break a line mid-utterance to encourage your readers to read the next line. For example, this sentence:

*It's full of goodness, not
goodness knows what*

... is more likely to be read in its entirety than this:

*It's full of goodness,
not goodness knows what*

12.84. Write in an informal style.

Don't get obsessed with grammar. Break the rules if it makes for a flowing style. The attentive reader may want to correct your copy, but your target readers won't care if your prose isn't 100% correct—they simply want the product to *speak* to them.

Don't be afraid of lightening the tone by using conjunctions like *it's*, *I'm*, and *you'll*, or of making up a new word if it does the job of two existing words, or of repeating the word 'or' like I have just done. In short, if it's chatty (the way your product would speak), keep it in.

Punctuation doesn't have to follow the rules either. For example, you'll notice when I list examples I place a comma after the word *and* (to make reading lists of examples easier). Some of my sentences are missing commas (so they read slightly faster). Your aim is to make the copy easy to read, so do what you need to do. I'm not saying you can be *sloppy* with your grammar and spelling. Bending the rules is one thing, but being ignorant of them is another.

12.85. Use sub-headlines.

Sub-headlines help you to expand upon your headline to communicate a general message. People tend to glance through publicity only reading the headlines, so adding sub-headlines increases the number of words the casual reader is likely to read before flicking over. Headlines that are reinforced with sub-headlines are more likely to suck the reader into the following body copy. Point 13.95 shows you how to break up your copy with sub-headings without repeating yourself.

12.86. Use visuals and captions instead of copy whenever possible.

Let visuals do the hard work if you can. Why increase your word count if you can replace a paragraph of copy with a visual demonstrating what you're saying?

Sometimes it is appropriate to add captions by visuals. Captions can be a handy way of exploiting the attention created by the visual to flag up a key selling point. Like headlines and sub-headlines, captions are more likely to hold the attention of a casual glancer.

12.87. Use flashes, copy boxes, and different fonts to highlight key messages.

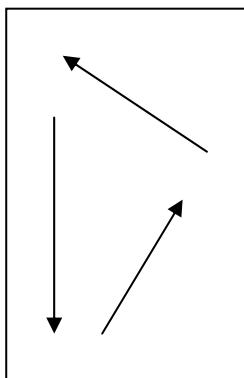
You can make your important sales message shout out by highlighting key sentences in attention-grabbing flashes and copy boxes. Flashes are particularly useful ways of isolating high-impact words such as NEW, FREE, COMING SOON, and others summarized in 7.41.

There are other mechanical devices at your disposal to help you pull out the key messages in your copy, such as highlights, italics, capital letters, underlines, quotation marks, bold words, and reverse-outs. But... be careful not to overuse these features:

- One or two underlines or bold sentences will stand out in an advert, use more and you'll compromise the clarity of your message.
- Black text on a white background is much easier to read than white text on black, so keep reverse-outs to a minimum.
- Lower-case letters are easier to read than capitals. Instead of presenting headlines in upper-case, copywriters often start each word with a Capital Letter As An Attention-Grabbing Alternative To Using Capitals Throughout.

12.88. Give your copy an interesting layout.

Research suggests that people often subconsciously scan a page of publicity momentarily before they decide to read it properly. The eye naturally settles on the top-left section of a page (be it a page of a leaflet, a magazine page advert, or web-page window), then wanders down to the bottom-left part of the page, then up and across to the middle-right.



It is worth bearing this point in mind when you are laying out your text. A few well-placed sub-headlines, flashes, and visuals can catch the eye and encourage the reader to move back to the top of the page to read your copy linearly.