Introduction

As a copywriter, you can never stop trying to find new and better ways to make your copy stronger. Some you’ll learn on your own, through trial and error. And some you’ll pick up from your teachers and mentors. To get you started, here are dozens of tried-and-true techniques and tips to help you improve your approach and simply and easily turn an ordinary direct-mail package into an extraordinary sales-generating control.

The Most Important Thing You Can Do to Make Your Copy More Persuasive

The best sales letters use three basic techniques developed by the master copywriters of the *American Writers & Artists Inc. (AWAI)*:

1. The Four-Legged Stool

   To be as strong as it can be, sales copy must rest firmly on four legs that show that the product/service

   (1) has a strong and irresistible benefit,

   (2) has an impressive and demonstrable track record,

   (3) comes from a credible company, and

   (4) has a good idea behind it.

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2. The Four P’s
A great sales letter should

(1) make a **PROMISE**,  
(2) draw a **PICTURE**,  
(3) **PROVE** its claims, and  
(4) **PUSH** the prospect into a buying decision.

3. The Four U’s
Good headlines, subheads, and bullets should

(1) be **USEFUL** to the prospect,  
(2) provide him with a sense of **URGENCY**,  
(3) convey the idea that the main benefit of the product/service is somehow **UNIQUE**, and  
(4) do all these things in an **ULTRA-SPECIFIC** way.

These are all very useful tricks. But if you had to choose one of them over the rest, there’s no question which one that should be. Far and away, making the advertising copy specific — or, to be compliant with the **“Four U’s”** rule above, ultra-specific — is the most powerful way to make it persuasive.

If, for example, someone tells you that you should sign up for the AWAI copywriting program because it will help make you rich, you would probably write that suggestion off as hype — or, worse, a cliché.

Look at the difference if you are given specific details like this, instead:

- Less than a year after completing AWAI’s program, former bartender Justin Franklin is well on his way to making his first $100,000 as a copywriter — and he has six months worth of work lined up.

- Don Mahoney went from scratching for a living as a carpenter to making more than $200,000 a year as a copywriter.

- Paul Hollingshead was paid more than $50,000 for a single sales letter.
You will find that you can almost always make your copy stronger simply by asking yourself “Can I be more specific about this?” or “Can I give several specific examples?”

This point is very well made by Roy H. Williams in *Secret Formulas of the Wizards of Ads*, a somewhat hokey but very smart book. After telling a funny story about convincing a cop that he wasn’t a burglar by providing the officer with a hyper-specific explanation of why he was walking around a retail store in the middle of the night, Williams says, “The simple truth is that nothing sounds quite so much like the truth as the truth, and most people seem to know the truth when they hear it. The truth is never full of loopholes and generalities. The truth is made of specifics and substantiations. It’s solid. That’s why it’s easy to spot in a world full of paper-thin lies, half-lies, and hype.”

**How to Be a Better Copywriter — FAST**

If you want to be a successful copywriter, you must master two skills: You must learn how to break complex things down into their individual parts (what we call “the Art of Analysis”) and you must be able to convince people to do things (which we refer to as “the Art of Persuasion”).

Here are 10 general rules to follow for any kind of expository writing you do, not only copywriting:

1. **The headline must grab your reader’s attention.**
   It can do other things too — such as convey an idea or promise or establish a mood — but it must hook your reader’s interest.

2. **The lead (the first few paragraphs, usually) must tell your reader what’s in it for him. It usually does this through a promise.** Sometimes, the promise is implied. Less often, it is explicit. But it must be there. You will lose your reader if, after a minute of reading, he is wondering, “Why am I reading this?”

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3. **Each piece should have one main purpose.**
   It should provoke a single, intended response. That response should be an emotional one. (“I want my reader to be angry about such and such.” “I want my reader to understand the problem with such and such.”)

4. **Each piece should contain one main idea.**
   This idea must be (or seem) new and important. And it must be simple enough to summarize in two or three sentences.

5. **Every piece should have four legs to stand on:**
   credibility, idea, benefit, and proof.

6. **The structure of good writing is not linear, but rhetorical.** Lead with something that your reader will care about and let that direct the flow of everything that follows. If you stray too far from the central, beneficial concept, you have gone too far. Delete.

7. **Density is a must.** The quality of good writing is measured by the quantity of new and good ideas or facts it contains. You don’t need to introduce a new fact, figure, or idea with every new paragraph, but you had better introduce one with every other paragraph.

8. **Authority is mandatory.** Write only about what you know.

9. **Preparation is 80 percent of the game.** When you aren’t writing about something you know well, research it until you feel you’re an expert.
   *(See Rule No. 8).*

10. **End at the beginning.** Leave your reader satisfied. Make sure you have fulfilled the promise you made in the lead. Make sure all your claims have been substantiated.

As we said, these rules apply to all the expository writing you do — which should include your business memos, the notes you write to your friends and family, the speeches and sales presentations you make, and even some casual discussions where you try to get someone to agree with you.
Take the Time to Double-Check Your Sales Letter

Chances are you will be able to upgrade your sales letter significantly simply by measuring it against this 11-point checklist. It won’t take long, yet the results could be significant.

1. **Is your headline great? Eight out of 10 people read headline copy.** Fewer than two in 10 read the letter itself. Good headlines can easily double response.

2. **Every sales letter succeeds or fails on the basis of its primary promise — the one big benefit it offers.** If you get that right, you are 80 percent home. To come up with a killer benefit as your primary promise, you need to spend a lot of time thinking about your prospect’s wants, thoughts, and feelings in relation to the product/service you are selling. What is the core emotion/idea that will get him really interested?

3. **Make sure your letter looks like a letter — a single column in reasonably large typewriter type with a salutation and a signature.** *(Beware of artsy designers. They just don’t get it when it comes to sales letters.)*

4. **Write in the first and second person (“I” and “you”).**

5. **Your tone of voice should be sincere; your conversational style personal but polite.**

6. **Most of your letter should be about your reader.** Stress user benefits over product benefits.

7. **Make your first paragraph very strong and very short.**

8. **Show, don’t tell.** If you want to drive your point home — and “home” means “to the heart” — tell a story that illustrates it. Rather than making the rational case — listing 22 reasons your prospect should do as you say — tell him one or two really compelling stories. Create a little mental movie for him that dramatizes the most important point and *(over, please)*
you’ll have him hooked deep in the emotional tissue of his decision-making mind.

9. **Use a “false close.”** When you’ve finished selling, begin to close the letter and then begin again by presenting another benefit. It reassures your prospect to think that he’s getting more than what he was prepared to pay for.

10. **Keep it current.** References to recent (relevant) events remind your prospect that your letter is current.

11. **Use a strong postscript.** Studies show that next to headlines, postscripts are most often read. Put plenty of time and thought into composing a very good one.

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**Strengthen Your Writing Skills by Building Your Vocabulary**

Here’s a simple little program that will give you more verbal power: Five days a week, learn two new things. One of those things should be a vocabulary word. The other should be something else — pretty much anything you don’t know but find interesting.

You might, for example, learn the meaning of “anodyne,” “pellucid,” “garrote,” “bloodless,” and “labile.” And you might learn something new about Galileo — that he recanted heliocentricism during the Inquisition and was banished to a Florentine farm for postulating it in the first place … something about small boats (Do you know the difference between a pulk and a yawl?) … the full story on Medusa (Pegasus was born out of her blood) … and that Katherine Ann Porter’s book *Pale Horse, Pale Rider* was written in limpid (i.e., pellucid) prose.

It’s fun, and you’ll feel smarter because of it. Here’s how to do it:

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**Five Vocabulary-Building Words to Look Up Today**

- lambent
- inchoate
- feckless
- enervating
- fortuitous
Whenever you bump into a word you don’t really know, jot it down. Look it up later and enter it into a little notebook. After making that entry, consult a reference book (you should have some in your personal library) for something that sounds interesting. Enter that as well.

So, each day you make two entries in your notebook: one word to build your vocabulary and one piece of information to increase your general knowledge. Each evening, do a quick review of the prior day’s entries. And then — most important — promise yourself to use what you learned that day in an upcoming memo or conversation.

Each time you use one of your entries, make a check mark in your notebook. When you’ve used it five times, you won’t have to review it again. It’s set for life.

This may seem a bit much — but the results are immediate and significant. Try it.

How to Be a Master Headline Writer

The hook you use to attract customers is, in several ways, the most important component of your advertising strategy. In the next five minutes, you are going to learn just about everything you need to know to become a great headline writer. This will also apply to envelope teasers, subheads, classified ads, banner-ad leads, and other tricks of the trade that copywriters use to get a prospect’s attention. Pay attention, and you will be richly rewarded by the results of your promotions for years to come.

Headlines and other hooks

Advertising hooks determine how many prospective customers give your sales pitch that critical second glance. They create a mood that makes the sale easier. And they establish a promise on which you can build not only an immediate sale but also a long-term business relationship.

Every direct-mail pro who has ever written on the subject
has emphasized the importance of hooks and headlines. Some, such as David Ogilvy (one of the legends of modern advertising) and Gene Schwartz (another legendary copywriter), claim heads are so important that they merit half your advertising time and attention.

It doesn’t matter whether you advertise in newspapers and magazines, on television and radio, or via direct mail — when it comes to starting the selling process, hooks and headlines are critical. The right headline can double, triple, or quadruple responsiveness. Usually, the best you can expect to get from changing body copy is a 25 percent to 50 percent lift — and that can take days of work!

According to Nat Bodian, a prolific writer on direct marketing, about five times as many people will read a headline as read the body copy. If 20 percent is the average, the range is probably 0 percent to 40 percent — plenty of room to affect results.

The challenge is that you have only a few seconds, at best, to make your headline work. It has an effect on your copy that is 80 percent of the game, yet it must be done with very few words. That’s why so many great advertisers spend so much time getting the heads right.

There are plenty of rules about headlines. Here are a few that make the most sense. (These rules work for both general advertising and direct-response ads.)

**A good headline should:**

1. Make a promise that benefits the reader.

2. Create a sense of urgency by using “magic” words (such as “new,” “here,” “now,” “announcing,” and “discover”).

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**13 “Magic” Words for Copywriters**

According to MethodMarketers.com, the “13 Most Powerful and Evocative Words in the English Language” are: You, Money, Guarantee, Love, Results, Proven, Safety, Free, Save, Easy, New, Health, and Discovery.
3. Reduce buyer resistance by using two more magic words (“free” and “guaranteed”).

4. Lead the reader into the copy. (That simply makes sense. Advertising must be coherent.)

5. Make the reader feel as if he is being addressed personally. (The rule is to use yet another magic word: “you.”)

In the cyber age, a few new rules have appeared:

1. Don’t force a website visitor to go back to a lobby after clicking to a screen. Instead, sell the benefits of moving to the next screen by using short subheads.

2. Enhance benefit statements by using images that suggest benefits. Instead of writing, “Click here for fabulous profit opportunities,” shorten your message and quicken its impact with the words “fabulous profit opportunities” next to an icon in the form of a dollar sign.

None of these rules contradicts a study done years ago by Dr. Henry Durant (reported in Research in Advertising) that identified five common types of headlines:

- that use teasers
- those that use word play
- those that “brag and boast”
- those that say little or nothing
- those that directly present benefits or news

Durant’s analysis of results showed that the ads with direct headlines were about four times more effective than the others. Keep that in mind the next time you want to get clever with puns or alliteration.

David Ogilvy said, “Some copywriters write tricky headlines, puns, literacy allusions, and other obscurities. This is a sin! Every headline should appeal to the reader’s self-interest. It should promise the reader a benefit.”

And advertising great Claude Hopkins had this to say: “When you advertise … your product will interest certain

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people only. You care only for those people. Create your advertisement for those people only.”

Two good examples of headlines used to sell fitness equipment (provided by Jim Kobs of Kobs, Gregory, and Passavant Advertising):

- for the Bullworker: “The Belly Must Go”

And two good suggestions from Robert Bly on how NOT to write a headline:

Make sure your headline is NOT ...

- vague: “A New Breed of Flexibility” or “The Best for the Least!”
- clever: “General Electric Can Light Up Your Life” (or anything alliterative).

Spend More Time on Your Headlines and You Will Spend Less Time on Everything Else

David Ogilvy was a big believer in headlines. He understood that nailing the head is the secret to making the whole ad work.

Ogilvy practiced what he preached. Of his many successful headlines, the best known (“At 60 mph, the only thing you hear in the new Rolls Royce is the ticking of the dashboard clock...”) took 104 drafts to write.

Gene Schwartz once said that he sometimes spent a full week on his first 50 words: the headline and the first paragraph of copy.

Most of the best-known promotions in modern copywriting history are recognizable by their headlines. You may have seen or heard of these prizewinners:

- “Trout Spoken Here.” (Fly Fisherman)
A Cheater’s Guide to Writing Headlines

A recent book by David Garfinkel, a copywriter based in San Francisco, exposes a dirty little secret about advertising creativity: Most of it isn’t very creative. In Advertising Headlines That Will Make You Rich, Garfinkel takes proven headlines — already shown to work in the marketplace — and adapts them to other businesses.

For example, he takes Dale Carnegie’s famous “How to Win Friends and Influence People” headline and provides numerous others that use the same structure (“How to _____ and _____”).

In all, Garfinkel provides 297 customized headlines. Some of these might be useful to you. More useful, I think, is the basic idea that you can become a very successful “marketing genius” in your own field by creatively stealing the best marketing ideas from other, unrelated businesses.

There is nothing new under the sun, but there are plenty
of new fortunes made from old marketing ideas. Importing and adapting good marketing concepts is a fundamental secret of success. See what works in one place. Try it out, with adaptations, in a somewhat different environment.

This is a very powerful way to generate new sales. For some reason, however, otherwise smart and ambitious copywriters don't like to do it. Maybe they feel that anything borrowed is undignified. Maybe they simply don't know how to do it.

Perhaps Garfinkel’s book will help.

**Why This Headline Works**

One of the oldest ideas about headlines is that they should be short — fewer than eight words. This is a rule with many exceptions. Still, a quick scan of the 100 “greatest advertisements” from 1852 to 1958 (from the book *The 100 Greatest Advertisements* by Julian Lewis Watkins) shows that roughly 95 percent of them were fewer than eight words.

Here are some good examples:

- **The Priceless Ingredient** (1921, Squibb)
- **Steinway: The Instrument Of The Immortals** (Steinway & Sons)
- **Why Men Crack …** (1924, Postum Cereal Company)
- **A $10,000 Mistake** (Tecla Jewelers)
- **Do You Make These Mistakes In English?** (1919, Sherwin Cody Schools)
- **Often A Bridesmaid But Never A Bride** (Listerine)
- **“Blow Some My Way”** (Chesterfield Cigarettes)
- **We Traveled 2,000 Miles To Save 65 Cents** (Weber and Heilbroner)
- **Ever Hear The One About The Farmer's Daughter?** (Buick)
- **We Hope We Set A Boy To Dreaming** (General Motors)
■ **Aunt Meg ... Who Never Married**
  (Barre Granite Memorials)

■ **Oh, Darling — You Shouldn’t Have!** (Macy’s)

■ **Who ... Me?** (Pillsbury Cake Mixes)

More than nine out of 10 is a compelling statistic. But keep in mind that these headlines were all written for magazines, where the need for succinctness is arguably greater than in other forms of direct-response advertising, such as direct mail.

In the direct-mail category, a more recent compilation of 50 super-successful promotions published in the *American Writers & Artists Inc.’s Hall of Fame* contained 26 headlines of eight words or fewer. Here are some examples:

■ **Profit With The Insiders Without Breaking A Law**

■ **Read This Or Go Broke!**

■ **Tax Saving Information Most IRS Agents Don’t Have**

■ **Fearless Conversation!**

■ **The Lazy Man’s Way To Riches**

■ **Endangered Antidotes**

■ **11 Medical Breakthroughs That Will Rock The World**

■ **The Plague Of The Black Debt**

And a stroll through Carl Galletti’s *2001 Greatest Headlines Ever Written* shows about 60 percent to be eight words or less.

So what can we conclude from all this? How about this? Although there are plenty of exceptions, it seems clear that when it comes to headlines brevity is a virtue.

**What’s so good about brevity? Let’s start with the obvious.**

Short headlines are easy to scan. A headline of five or six words, printed boldly on top of a letter or across an envelope, cannot be missed. Its power to attract the eye is almost 100 percent.

Contrast that to a headline that is almost a paragraph

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long. It may very well “work” but only after a significant number of prospects have dumped it in the trash basket because they \((a)\) recognized it as advertising and \((b)\) made an instant decision that they didn’t have 15 or 20 seconds to read it. That never happens to a short headline.

**Getting your headline read doesn’t guarantee success.**

Unless your headline says something that is compelling and implies a benefit, it will end up in the same trash basket — just a second or so later.

Great headlines — breakthrough headlines — encapsulate the cutting-edge thoughts, feelings, and beliefs that a given group of people feels about a specific thing. When, for example, Lee Euler wrote his blockbuster headline for Strategic Investment — “**The Plague Of The Black Debt**” — he correctly identified what was, at the time, a major investment anxiety. The black-plague metaphor was just the thing, it turned out, to quickly summarize a complex and powerful fear about U.S. debt and the financial markets.

**The Importance of the Envelope Teaser**

As we said before, there is a rule in the marketing world that the copywriter should spend as much time on the headline as he spends on the rest of the ad put together. This actually makes a lot of sense, because coming up

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**The Best Way to Use Testimonials**

Usually, direct-mail pros will tell you that the best place to put testimonials is in a supporting brochure. But a really good testimonial can also be used with great power ...

▲ as an envelope teaser ▲ as a lift note
▲ on the order device ▲ as the lead of a sales letter
with a great headline is really figuring out the fundamental selling proposition of the ad.

The same thing can be said about the envelope teaser for a direct-mail package.

It is sometimes said that the sole purpose of an envelope teaser is to get the prospect to open the package. This is certainly an objective, but it’s not the only one.

Moreover, it should not be assumed that anything you do to get the envelope opened is good — that the ends will justify any means. Wild and weird teasers that open envelopes by unsupportable claims and deception backfire when the prospect looks inside and discovers he’s been duped.

Yes, get the envelope opened. And the best way to do that is to put no copy on it whatsoever — just a return address (mandatory since 9/11) and a “live” stamp. If you are going to write a teaser at all, you should be doing so because you want to accomplish more than getting the envelope opened. You also want to:

■ suggest an idea that will help you sell the product, and
■ create an emotional mood conducive for the sale

**Important Consideration:**
Don't make a big promise with the envelope teaser and then forget about it. To keep your prospect moving forward, repeat the teaser (though not exactly) with the headline or subhead of the first sales element you want him to read.

**Hint No. 1:**
As a general rule, the more specifically targeted you can make the teaser, the better it will do.

**Hint No. 2:**
It’s a good idea to test your envelope teaser against a blank envelope. If you don’t do it from the get-go, do it later on. You’ll never know if the teaser is working at all until you test it against no teaser at all.

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Make Your Direct Mail Stand Out by Making the Envelope Different

The average American gets 10 direct-mail packages a day. That’s the average. The best direct-mail buyers get two or three times that amount.

How do you make your envelope stand out so it gets opened first? There isn’t a single answer, but there is a method.

Collect 30 direct-mail packages that are currently in the mail. Make sure some of them are from your competitors. Spread them out on a desk — one messy pile. Now put the envelope your designer came up with (a facsimile will do) in with the rest of the mess. Stand back and take a look. The answer should be obvious.

Copywriting Bugaboo

One of the most common copywriting techniques is to say, “I’ll tell you more about XYZ in a moment, but first let me explain ABC ...”

Most copywriters will tell you this is a good thing to do because it creates anticipation and builds interest. What it actually does is signal the reader: “What follows is boring/dull/just here to take up space.”

You will see this technique employed at least once in every direct-mail package, and it is never needed. The next time you see it in your copy — we are talking manuscript stage here — simply cross it out. If you’ve written the next paragraph properly, it won’t be missed.

The benefit will be a faster pace without interruptions. In other words, you won’t risk losing your reader.
Question: How Many Testimonials Do You Have in Your Files?
Answer: Probably Not Enough

After you have sold your prospect emotionally in your sales letter, he’s going to want some intellectual assurance that he’s about to make a sensible decision. Here is where you need to overcome all of his objections. Every possible question he might have about his decision to buy — including value, quality, fulfillment, and customer-service issues — should be addressed.

Most such objections can be overcome with positive reports from people who have bought your product/service before. So when you create a file of testimonials — and when you present those testimonials in your sale literature — make sure they answer these basic concerns:

- product quality
- timeliness of delivery
- reliability of service
- responsiveness of customer service

Use Pictures to Tell Stories

Of the many good ideas and innovations Bill Jayme (one of America’s best-known and most successful copywriters) brought to direct mail, one of the best was his masterful use of photographs. Before Jayme, few direct-mail packages used photography much or well. The idea was that direct mail is about selling with words, not pictures. But Jayme thought this point of view was very limiting. “It’s only direct-mail guys who think this way,” he said in an interview.

Good photos are useful. They can tell your prospect, in a moment, an important story about your product/service. Use them to explain the main benefits of what you are selling. Show your product in action. Demonstrate the satisfaction the prospect will enjoy.

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Photos won’t do the whole job for you. They won’t take the place of good copy. But an intelligent application of smart photography in key places will enhance and strengthen any direct-mail package.

Make It Easy to Respond

One of the worst mistakes most direct marketers make is ignoring the requirements of the response device.

Your advertising copy is designed — or should be designed — to provoke a specific reaction by your prospect. Be sure that your response device makes it perfectly clear to him exactly what steps he then needs to take.

The silliest waste of time for a good marketer is to spend all kinds of creative time and talent (and money) on some promotional campaign only to have it thwarted by a confusing and/or complicated response device that reduces response rates.

Increase Response by Making Your Order Device Sound Less Intimidating

Conventional wisdom says you’ll get a better response rate if you make your order form sound less intimidating. Any phrase you can come up with that makes the decision to order sound like less of a commitment and more of a

One Way to Reduce Bad Debt on Trial Offers

You can reduce bad debt on trial offers by requiring your prospect to make some sort of commitment up front. One of the most common and effective techniques is to require that the order be signed and dated. What other ideas can you think of?
benefit will work. Some common versions of this principle in practice: "Free Trial Certificate," "Sample Offer Form," "Free Copy Reservation."

**Does an 800 Number Create More Sales?**

800 service is available from most carriers. Setting it up doesn’t require a lot of technological know-how. And it’s not expensive. So if you are not using an 800 number on your direct-mail order card, shouldn’t you start now?

Not necessarily. In most of the tests we’ve seen, providing buyers with an 800 option not only costs a little more but actually reduces responsiveness.

That confounds some marketers, so they ignore it. “It’s got to help,” they figure. “The tests are wrong.”

But there is a good reason why an 800 option could decrease buying: It allows the buyer who is committed but still somewhat uncertain to voice his concerns to the 800 operator. Since her answers will never be as strong as the sales copy, many of those little question-and-answer sessions will result in an “I’ll think about it and get back to you” ending.

800 numbers work when you can both answer all likely questions convincingly and upgrade a high percentage of callers.

**The Secret of Good Writing**

The best way to write well is to write only good sentences. If you scratch out all the bad ones, only good writing will remain.

Writing a good sentence is easier than it seems. The first and most important rule is this: Have something useful or interesting to say before you write. Most bad writing is the result of bad, sloppy, and/or insufficient thinking.

If you have something worth saying, write it down simply. Don’t put a single word in your sentence that is not needed.

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And choose only words that convey the exact meaning. Eschew decoration.

Make each sentence simple. Make it meaningful. Make it count.

Put enough of them together, and you’ll be a good writer.

**5 Techniques to Give Your Writing More Energy and Power**

1. **Make your sentences short** — no more than 22 words (about two lines of print).

2. **Vary length.** Every third or fourth sentence should be short. Or a sentence fragment.

   Occasionally, it’s good to use extra-short and/or fragments to begin or end paragraphs. And you can string two or three short sentences together to create cadence.

3. **To give your sentences a quick stop-and-go, use the interruptive dash (—).**

4. **Employ the imperative to grab attention.**

5. **Address your readers directly** to make your message personal and compelling.

**Are Your Sentences Too Long?**

Here’s a tip from master copywriter Bob Bly: The “**breath test**” can determine whether your sentences are too wordy. Without inhaling, read the sentence aloud. If you run out of breath before you get to the end, the sentence is too long.

The solution: Use a dash (—) or ellipses (…) to break the sentence into two or more parts. Or rewrite it as two or more shorter sentences. Doing so will make your writing livelier, more conversational, and easier to read.
Repetition: A Subtle Device
You Can Use to Make Your Copy Stronger

Some of the following suggestions (and most of the examples) come from Stunning Sentences, a very good little book by Bruce Ross-Larson of the American Writing Institute.

1. Used carefully, repetition can give your sentences rhythm and power. When you repeat a word or phrase, you give it more weight in your reader’s mind. This may cause him to dwell longer on its meaning.

   Example: “However, let us not confuse the physical eye, that monstrous masterpiece of evolution, with the mind, an even more monstrous achievement.”

   Isn’t that a nice sentence? The choice of “monstrous” is great because it entirely changes the feeling of the word “masterpiece,” and its repetition creates a strong contrast between “eye” and “mind,” one the reader cannot easily bypass.

2. You can also repeat the root of a word to achieve a similar effect.

   Example: “It was a dramatic, not to say melodramatic, story.”

   Here the repetition of “dramatic” emphasizes the point that the story was full of life and emotion, but not (as people often say today) over the top. By repeating the root word in “melodrama,” this complex thought is expressed quickly and with added power.

3. You can repeat a prefix or suffix to give your sentence a desired pace and to force your reader to think about the relationship between two words or ideas.

   Example: “Acts of charity have about them a whiff of sanctity.”

   By using the simple power of repetition (with “charity” and “sanctity”), this little gem of a sentence brings the reader’s attention to the intended irony: how a supposedly

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good act can be accompanied by a bad feeling.

4. You can repeat prepositions to give your sentence tempo and provide your reader with an easy way to remember the elements you are talking about.

Example: “To the storyteller we turn for entertainment, for mental excitement of the simplest kind, for emotional participation, for the pleasure of traveling in some remote region in space or time.”

Be cautious when repeating prepositions. Since this is probably the easiest way to use repetition, it is the most common. If you use it too much, your writing will seem amateurish.

5. Alliteration is the repetition of a sound at the beginning of two or more words in a sentence.
Like the repetition of prepositions, it can make your sentences stronger or weaker depending on how often and how well you use it.

Example: “Does the quaint quality of quondam make you quiver?”

You are dying to find out what “quondam” means, aren’t you? That’s the power of this type of repetition.

A Quick Lesson in Bad Copy

Take a look at this indecipherable gibberish from a company named Schneider Electric:

“Who can bring together more specialists than the world’s Power & Control specialist? The synergy of our specialist brands (Merwin, Gerin, Modicon, Square D, and Telemacanique) is unique. More than ever, we’re leveraging the synergy to bring customers the expertise of the world’s Power & Control specialist.”

The first rule of advertising is to use language that the prospect is familiar with. Too bad nobody at Schneider Electric ever heard of that.
Don’t Sweat Mixed Metaphors

Ever since Strunk and White made it an issue, pop grammarians and pseudo editorial experts have been descrying mixed metaphors.

A mixed metaphor — in case you don’t know — mixes two unrelated metaphors together. Good examples given by copywriter Don Hauptmann in a recent trade journal include:

- From one of O.J. Simpson’s attorneys: “If the shoe was on the other foot, I’d be peeling you off the ceiling.”
- From Edward Collins, head of the SEC: “Here we are, off to the races like there’s no tomorrow.”
- From *The New York Times*: “Though hardly out of the woods yet, the death watch is over for News Corp.”

Such combinations do evoke absurd images and should be avoided, but it’s a mistake to categorically shun this useful literary device. Shakespeare used mixed metaphors all the time (“take arms against a sea of troubles”) as did many of our greatest writers.

As with the bard’s usage above, some mixed metaphors — though ultimately illogical — create images that are strong, colorful, and memorable.

One such example from Don Hauptmann: “It’s easy to sympathize with George Bush. He must be enormously frustrated to see President Clinton still remain in the limelight as a Goodyear blimp lodged in the Lincoln Tunnel.”

Hauptmann sees that as bad writing. But maybe not. The image of the Goodyear blimp stuck in a tunnel is a very strong and memorable one. The limelight reference is so accessible that it’s hardly even a metaphor anymore.

The image works. And as a copywriter, you want your images to work. You want them to explode in your readers’ minds like a giant pizza pie in the face. You want them sticky like Elmer’s glue on the heart’s doorknob.

(over, please)
Be a Much Better Copywriter by Avoiding the Biggest Mistake Most Good Writers Make

You can make yourself a much better writer almost immediately by avoiding the biggest mistake most people make: They try to cram too much into their writing.

Big words. Intelligent ideas. Intimidating grammar. The sentiment seems to be “If I can’t wow ‘em with one thing, I’ll impress ‘em with something else.”

Here’s what usually happens. You begin writing with a single good idea or vivid impression. That gives you a good first sentence and provides energy to keep you going. As you continue, however, things get complicated. That one, original good idea gets pummeled out of shape by a host of other, not-so-good ideas that creep into your writing along the way. Before you know it, you’re in a verbal bog and can’t seem to climb out.

Here’s what to do about it:

1. **Don’t start writing until your idea is pretty well cooked.** Be sure you’ve looked at it from all angles and that it has passed the test.

2. **When you do write, stick closely to that idea.**

3. **Don’t allow extraneous thoughts and/or information** — no matter how interesting — to intervene.

4. **Remind yourself: “I’m trying to say one thing and one thing only.”**

In other words, you will be a much stronger writer if you restrict your efforts to a single good idea.

Whether you are writing a sales letter, a short memo, an hour-long speech, a long essay, or even a non-fiction book, you’ll do best if you base it on a single, strong idea. State that idea as clearly and as simply as you can. Then prove it with specifics. There is nothing more convincing than tangible
evidence. Your job is to convey one good idea and make it come to life with detail.

This idea — that you are better off writing about one thing at a time — is proven by a cursory review of best-selling books. From *What Color Is Your Parachute?* to *Who Moved My Cheese?* to *The Road Less Traveled*, it’s evident that less is often more.

Next time you sit down to write, ask yourself:

1. “What is my core idea?”
2. “Is it a good idea that’s worth reading about?”
3. “What is the simplest way to express it?”
4. “What kind of details can I use to explain/prove it?”

Do this first and you will see the difference.

**Three Steps to Making Your Direct-Mail Copy Super-Strong**

When you want to make sure that the direct-mail copy you're working on works, subject it to three vigorous challenges that get rid of all the flab and leave it lean, mean, and powerful.

**Phase 1: Power-charge the headline and lead.**

Eighty percent of the impact (and the success) of a direct-mail promotion is derived from less than 20 percent of the copy. That 20 percent is the lead. If you think about how people read mail-order advertising and how much attention they give individual pieces, that makes sense.

Phase 1 is all about focusing a good deal of time and talent on this portion of the promotion. Here's what you do:

- **Give yourself two deadlines.** The first deadline is for the headline and lead of the sales letter; the second deadline is for the rest of the promotion.

When you have the headline and lead, call together three or four critics. If possible, include people who have a variety
of skills and backgrounds: a marketing executive, a product specialist, a creative person, and maybe a typical buyer. As a group, you are going to assign numerical grades — from 1.0 to 4.0 — to the copy.

Start by rating the headline on the two jobs it absolutely must accomplish:

1. **How well does it get itself noticed?**
   (i.e., How catchy is it?)

2. **Does it make you want to read further?**
   (i.e., How sticky is it?)

If it fails to score an average of at least a 3.0, ask your panel for ideas on how to improve it. Do not entertain negative statements. Restrict their contributions to positive suggestions and then rate those as either “helpful” or “not helpful.”

Once you’ve got your headline up to snuff, have your panel read the lead. Ask them if it succeeds in selling them to the point where they have a “Yes, this is just what I need” kind of feeling.

If the lead fails to merit a 3.0 or better, ask your panel to rate it according to:

1. **Enthusiasm.** (Does the language convey excitement?)

2. **Benefit.** (Again, is the benefit big and sticky enough?)

3. **Credibility.** (Do you believe it’s for real?)

In four cases out of five, a single half-hour of this kind of work will produce a lead that is strong to very strong. Rate your revised lead to be sure it passes muster.

**Phase 2: Review the main copy.**

Go through the rest of the copy carefully — highlighting every claim and promise made. Then make sure that each is adequately supported. If it’s not, figure out how it could be done better.

At the same time, read the package to see if it is balanced. A well-balanced package provides four things.

1. **A benefit.** It makes a desirable promise.
2. **An idea.** It suggests something that distinguishes the product from its competitors.

3. **Credibility.** It establishes that the writer of the sales letter, the product, and the manufacturer of the product are reliable and trustworthy.

4. **A track record.** It proves that all the claims are true.

   After this, you should be able to come back with a very strong draft.

**Phase 3: Subject the package to a “live test.”**

Get four previous product buyers to agree to read the promotion and mark next to each head/subhead and paragraph whether they find it to be good, bad, or indifferent.

   When their comments are returned, go through the package mark by mark. Where you have universal or nearly universal “goods,” leave the copy as is. Where you have four “bads,” change the copy. When you have mixed reviews, use your best judgment.

   Not counting set-up time, these sessions should take about 30 minutes to an hour each. If the lead needs work, you may have to rework it two or three times.

   Add up the total amount of time spent doing this, and you are talking about an investment of between 90 minutes and six hours. What you can get from that investment is almost amazing.

   We’ve seen packages that were originally capable of pulling, say, one-half of 1 percent brought up to where they pulled 2 percent. If you figure that out in terms of dollar impact, it could easily be in the hundreds of thousands — and quite possibly in the millions.

   Even more importantly, your track record will improve dramatically with this system. If you were making, say, one package out of three work (i.e., beat the control) beforehand, you could very well raise your batting average to one out of two. What can that mean to your overall career? Simply the difference between being a dime-a-dozen DM hack and becoming a legend.
Highlight the Strongest Benefit

Take a look at your top sales letter piece — the promotion that's bringing in the most customers. Read it over quickly and identify all the benefits it offers prospects. Determine which of those benefits is the most alluring and then ask yourself this: “Have I given this most-important benefit the most visible exposure?”

There may be many reasons to buy your product, but there should be only one BEST reason for each and every ad. Make sure your prospects know which benefit that is.

The “Eureka” Moment

When writing long copy, you've got to arrive at a moment when you find yourself thinking, “Yes! This is good! This is really, really good!” This is the “Eureka” moment. It's the point at which you, as the copywriter, are so sold by the copy that you want to buy the product — even though you already have it. It may seem like a high hurdle to set for yourself, but there's never been a breakthrough package that didn't provide for those who created it a “Eureka” moment.

Summarization is Death

In all forms of expression, summary is lethal. In attempting to capture the gist of something good and big, some writers like to summarize — methodically recount all the important points succinctly. That's specious reasoning. What happens is that the energy of the copy is dissipated and the blood drained off. A much better approach always is to take a single strong element of the bigger thing and present that in its full, detailed capacity. This will have a much greater emotional impact on your reader and will often convey some of the rest of the whole — even without talking about it.

When Is “Good” Good Enough?

You don't need perfect copy (or a perfect design) to create a windfall advertising promotion. What you need is a
fundamentally very good idea. Spend most of your time and effort making sure that your basic idea (the “Big Promise”) is right — and if it doesn't feel right, keep at it. Once you are sure that you’ve got that — and you’ll know when you get that “Eureka” moment — push everyone to get the package finished as soon as possible. Ignore or disagree with any picayune criticisms, because they won't affect the outcome.

Test a #10 Envelope First

One well-known direct-mail publisher has a policy of testing new copy with the most basic format — an 8- (or 12- or 16-) page letter folded into a standard #10 envelope. If the package works, he immediately commissions a number of more expensive knockoffs: magalogs, four-color self-mailers, etc.

The theory is that since the lead is the most important element in the success of a package, it can be tested with the simplest of formats. If it proves itself, one then has the money and the conviction to invest in more elaborate and more expensive approaches. An added virtue: You can turn around a #10 much more quickly than just about anything else.

The Secret of Method Marketing

If you know anything about acting, you’ve probably heard of Lee Strasberg and Konstantin Stanislavski. Strasberg was head of the famous Actor’s Studio in New York. Stanislavski, a founder and teacher at the Moscow Art Theatre, was the man who gave Strasberg his ideas about what came to be known as “method acting.”

In method acting, an actor prepares for his role by getting deep into the skin of the character he is playing. He tries to understand his character by becoming him. Robert DeNiro, Sean Penn, and Marlon Brando are all method actors.

Stanislavski said that great acting makes the audience forget it is seeing something artificial. Strasberg used a literary expression borrowed from poet T.S. Eliot to describe this experience: “the willing suspension of disbelief.”

(over, please)
It’s an apt description of what actually happens when you read a good novel, watch an arresting movie, or see a captivating play. In each case, you forget that you are seeing something fictional. You aren’t fooled. You haven’t lost your mind. You have willingly stopped disbelieving in the fiction.

This is very similar to what we do when we read a good marketing piece. We start off (usually) fully aware that we are being sold and suddenly forget about it. Something is said or shown that triggers an emotional response in us that makes us want to forget about the selling process and focus on the story — the sales message.

The legendary copywriter Bill Jayme recognized this when he said that it is not only “in the theatre but in the marketplace too that there is a factor at work called ‘the willing suspension of disbelief.’”

How often has it happened to you?

Somebody’s trying to sell you something — a product, an idea. Maybe it’s a restaurant or a travel destination. You are listening, but skeptically. “I’m not going to get pulled into this,” you are thinking. Then, bit by bit, detail by detail, you find yourself being drawn into the dream.

At some point in the process, and usually without your noticing it, you are carried over. Your pulse quickens. Your senses glow. Your logical mind stops resisting and starts racing ahead — imagining how good your life will be once you own the product/service.

You have “suspended disbelief” — not because you truly believe all the promises being made but because you want to believe them.

*Method Marketing* is the title and theme of a very good book by Denny Hatch, an old-pro direct-mail guy. The purpose of marketing, Hatch points out, is to get your customer to suspend his disbelief and start dreaming about your product.

Take a look at your copy. Try to identify how well you are able to achieve that goal. If you believe you are falling short, consider whether a method approach might work better.
A method approach demands that you:

1. understand the deepest needs/desires/feelings of your prospect
2. ignore just about everything else and focus on persuading your prospect that those needs are going to be met

Unless you get to the core — your customer’s most heartfelt needs, hopes, desires, etc. — you may never achieve the breakthrough success you are after.

The Simplest, Strongest, and Most Universal Marketing Strategy in the World

Of all the clever schemes and tricks ever seen or tried, there is one that almost always does better than any other. It is, without a doubt, the best thing you can do to make a lagging marketing campaign come to life. And it’s the strongest strategy you can employ to introduce a new product or service to the market.

In fact, it is such a simple and obvious technique that you may be disappointed when you find out what it is.

But you shouldn’t be. Because you can never be reminded too often of the simplest truths.

The First and Greatest Marketing Secret is this:
To make your advertisement work better, make it bigger and bolder.
Or, as James Brown might have said, “Say it loud and say it proud!”

You might remember Crazy Eddie’s television commercials. He was that New York-based appliance dealer who used to shout and scream in front of the camera, challenging his competition to meet his prices.
The same strategy was used by Barney’s to start its very successful men's clothing business.

And do you remember how Charmin toilet paper made it big? DON’T SQUEEZE THE CHARMIN!

Saying it loud and proud might offend some (and most especially your competition), but it is definitely the strongest way to get noticed. So don’t be sensitive to the disapproval of those who want you to make your copy subtle and sophisticated.

Do be careful about what you say, because if you promise more than you can deliver, you’ll end up with a promotion built on quicksand. But if you have a solid product, don’t be afraid to get up on that podium and start yelling.

Here are a few direct-mail examples of saying it loud and proud:

- **Burn disease out of your body** — lying flat on your back, using nothing more than the palm of your hand!
- **I put up over $134,000 to be sure you (and this project) succeed!**
- **A spoonful a day can extend life to an active 130 years!**

Compare these to your own copy and ask yourself, “On a scale of 1 to 10, how outrageous is this?” If the answer is 8 or less, start to examine your thinking. Why haven't you produced an outrageous marketing package yet? Are you embarrassed by the product? What would you have to change to feel OK about boasting? These are questions that must be asked. The answers may point you toward a level of success you’ve only imagined till now.