

Five Absolute Essentials for Making It as a Copywriter

By Master Copywriter John Forde

"If you wish in this world to advance, your merits you're bound to enhance; You must stir it and stump it, and blow your own trumpet, or trust me, you haven't a chance." (W.S. Gilbert)

I've been writing copy for about 10 years.

I started as an intern. I wrote and researched articles and made \$15 a day. Needless to say, I brown-bagged my lunch.

Today, I live in Paris. Our Left-Bank apartment has floor-to-ceiling windows that swing open to a balcony. And my wife and I go out to fine restaurants for dinner.

Every morning, I cross the square in front of Notre Dame. Every evening, I stroll past the splashing fountains of Hotel de Ville.

It's a nice life. How did I get here?

A little luck. A lot of hard work. Most of all, I owe my copywriting success to the five absolutely essential training techniques I'm about to share with you today.

But before we get to that ...

Do You Have What It Takes?

Advertising legend David Ogilvy put it this way:

"The copywriter lives with fear. Will he have the big idea before Tuesday morning? Will the client buy it? Will it sell the product? I have never sat down to write an advertisement without thinking 'This time I'm going to fail.'"

Translation: It takes work to get ahead. In any field, it takes a lot of it. Copywriting is no exception.

It also takes a special kind of person. One Ogilvy described as "curious" and "exuberant."

"Good advertising people," he once wrote, "usually drink too much." But they're also "decent people to know" ... "intellectually honest" ... "natural charmers" ... "good listeners" ... "with well-furnished minds and an above-average sense of humor" ...

Okay, enough flattery. Let's assume you fit Ogilvy's profile – what's next? Only the following ...

Five Absolute Essentials for New Copywriters

In a nutshell – and aside from actually getting your first client – there are at least five things that are absolutely essential to your success as a copywriter:

1.

Read one piece of direct mail daily.

There are, of course, all kinds of copywriting. But even Ogilvy says that it's in direct mail that all the greatest copywriters cut their teeth. It's no wonder that Michael Masterson, copywriting guru and "father" to dozens of incredibly successful businesses, recommends you read at least one full direct-mail promo package a day.

2.

Become a marketing sponge.

Living in Paris, you'd think I listen to French tapes on the way to work. And sometimes, I do. But, even while strolling past 700-year-old architecture, I also listen to modern-day marketing experts. People like Zig Ziglar ... Rene Gnam ... Gary Halbert ... and more. Why?

Fact is, if you want to get good – and stay good – at this stuff, you have to stay focused on technique until it becomes second nature.

What else can you do besides the tapes? Become a sponge for marketing insights. Get copies of Claude Hopkins' "Scientific Advertising," David Ogilvy's "On Advertising," and any of Bob Bly's books (especially "The Copywriter's Handbook"). Go to marketing conferences. Read the trade journals. Look at your ongoing education as opportunity.

3.

Feed your brain morning to night.

The benefit of having a hungry mind shouldn't just be limited to "how-to" marketing advice.

No matter what you're selling, good facts are the food that will feed your creativity. That is, the more you know about your product and your target market before you start writing, the stronger your sales pitch will be.

Read every book you can that is related to the product you're selling. Clip articles, ask questions, and take notes. Then fill your down-time with lots of reading on non-related subjects. Make sure it's quality material. The idea is to pack your cerebellum with deep ideas and fascinating details. That way, you'll have a ready resource of information when you need it most.

4.

Write even when you can't.

"A writer," says an over-quoted quote, "writes." You can't get good if you don't get practice. Often.

Can't get started? Not a problem.

This is a perfect time to try typing out – word for word – a full promotional piece written by someone else. Pick a piece you admire, then copy verbatim. Your creative juices will start flowing fast enough. What's more, you'll learn style points and techniques you couldn't possibly pick up any other way. You won't believe how quickly your writing improves. Which brings me to this last point ...

5.

Do everything you can to get a mentor. Yesterday.

Quick: What do Mozart, Aristotle, and General Electric's chief Jack Welch all have in common? They all had mentors.

And you should get one too. If you can.

I was lucky. I had TWO mentors. I still work closely with both. And they're still teaching me new things. I can't imagine how I would have gotten this far without their expertise showing me the way.

And I'm not alone.

In one 1980s study, an incredible 80% of top business people polled cited a mentor relationship as key to their success. And guess what?

Those same people proved happier at work, made more money, and got promoted an average of two years faster than their non-mentored co-workers.

It's easy to see why.

Mentors can teach you the inside secrets ... prevent you from making common mistakes ... and keep you from wasting time while you re-invent the wheel.

Can you succeed without one? Sure. Many people do. But the bottom line is this: One good mentor can slash years off your development time as a top-notch copywriter. What's more, a mentor can dramatically accelerate the growth of your income.

Where do you find a mentor if you don't have one already? Again, it's not as hard as you might think. One way is to contact a fellow writer you admire. Then offer to work as an assistant.

(Not me, though. I'm booked.)

Another way to find your own mentor is to contact the Direct Mail Association (DMA). Look for medium-sized companies, especially those that have been around for a while. If they produce advertising in-house, offer to work awhile as a low-paid assistant. Or write a package "on spec" (no money until they get something they like).

So far, not such an appealing set of alternatives. But here's another thought. I hope you don't mind if I "pitch" it. The American Writers & Artists Institute (AWAI) – publishers of this very e-letter – actually has its own mentorship program.

And students who have gone through it have come out doing well. Very well indeed. Take Justin Ford ...

Justin started out "green" as a copywriter. He finished AWAI's program and now publishes his own investment guide for kids.

Then there's Edith Nee. She went through AWAI's Masters Program and it gave her the information she needed to find potential clients and approach them. Her first sales letter generated a 72% increase in response and a 247% increase in donations for her client. This same client gave her five more letters to write!

Beth Erickson went through AWAI's coaching program and put together a very successful package after attending one of AWAI's bootcamps. The package was a success, and now she is writing her own e-letter as well as sales letters for clients.

And Glen Strathy had this to say about working with the mentors at AWAI: " Whenever I've gone astray, especially on the first few assignments, or when I'm struggling with an approach for a project, I can count on my mentor to help me re-focus and correct my weaknesses."

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