

At Least 10 Books Every Copywriter Should Read – Twice

By John Forde

On my first day on the [job as a copywriter](#), master marketer Bill Bonner handed me a stack of books. A collection I've long since lost in the sea of books, tapes, and videos – only some about marketing – that followed.

I read them on lunch breaks and while eating dinner. I listened to the tapes in the car. I watched the videos on a borrowed TV (I had sworn off owning one of my own at the time.) Many were good. Some were better. A lot repeated the same principles over and over, which wasn't necessarily a bad thing.

Today, I'd warn any new copywriter or marketer that you're not going to get a full career education from books alone. Nothing beats hands-on experience, actually writing and reading the promotional pieces you hope to emulate and, one day, beat.

Still, if you're hoping to catch up fast ... if you're looking for inspiration or ideas ... even if you're looking for shortcuts ... there are definitely books, jammed full of both theory and examples, that can get you there.

For some time, I used to keep just one or two titles in the back of my mind to share with anybody who wanted a recommendation. But I started getting requests for a reading list so frequently that I pulled one together.

On that list, books on Internet marketing and the new Age of Persuasion? Tomes on how the world of selling has changed and will never be the same again? Not hardly.

In fact, most of these "must reads" were probably written on typewriters. If not by hand. And of those that are more recent, some aren't about writing marketing copy at all.

Take a look. And if you haven't read any of these, hit the bookstore, Amazon.com (there are links below), or the library (remember libraries?) and pick up a copy or two ...

A Copywriter's Bookshelf Essentials

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"Scientific Advertising" by Claude Hopkins – This is the granddaddy of all "how-to" books on writing advertising. It's also a lean, easy read with very direct advice on how to write copy that sells. You can find this one free online. Just type the title into www.google.com.

Or you can [buy the printed version](#).

- **"Ogilvy on Advertising" by David Ogilvy** – There's no doubt about it, David Ogilvy was a genius. In this book, he not only shows you how to sell in print, but also how to run an agency, hire writers, pitch campaigns, and more. Also a very quick, easy read.
- **"Tested Advertising Methods" by John Caples** – This isn't exactly the kind of book you read in one sitting. It's simply so dense with tips and examples, you couldn't possibly absorb it all at once. A bit like reading an encyclopedia of what works. Essential, though, as a shelf reference.
- **"The Copywriter's Handbook" by Bob Bly** – Oft recommended by yours truly, as well as countless other copywriters. Bly, who is now a friend of mine and who's written not one but 70 books, has covered every possible question a new copywriter could ask. (If you read just this and Claude Hopkins, you'll have a jump on half the copywriters working out there today.)
- **"Elements of Style" by Strunk & White** – Writing copy isn't necessarily about writing pretty. But it IS about making the copy disappear so the message itself can shine. Strunk & White can teach you plenty about writing tightly. In fact, everything you would need to know.
- **"On Writing Well" by William Zinsser** – That said about Strunk & White, this one helps you come at the same key lessons from a fresh angle. It's a little dry in spots (it's about grammar, after all). But still a worthy read. Especially for the conscientious writer who cares enough to edit his or her own stuff.

These are the obvious choices. But then, there are some other books you might not necessarily think of when you're stocking your copywriting bookshelf:

- **"On Writing" by Stephen King** – Don't laugh. I know, he's Stephen King. To some, a schlock-master. But there's no question, the guy knows how to spin a yarn. (Consider the incredible number of his books that have been spun into Hollywood blockbusters.) It comes highly recommended from several writers I respect.
- **"Influence: The Psychology of Persuasion" by Dr. Robert Cialdini** – This is a perennial recommendation of mine. I'll be frank: The science of psychology scares me. It always seems like those who study human behavior are driven a little over-analytical, even mad, by it. However, this book is still a brilliant portrait of what persuades and why. Every good copywriter I know has it on his or her reading list.
- **"The Tipping Point" by Malcolm Gladwell** – This wasn't supposed to be a marketing book. It was just about ideas that move masses of people to suddenly change their behavior. But then, what IS marketing if not the effort to move the masses? A great read in that it's interesting and entertaining as it informs.
- **"How to Win Friends & Influence People" by Dale Carnegie** – This really belongs in any list of classics. And if Carnegie were around today, he might write a sequel with the words "on the Internet" tacked onto his famous title.

Online marketing is, after all, about relationships. And this book is all about how to start them.

What else?

One I've since added to this list, which I didn't include on the original, was [Gene Schwartz's "Breakthrough Advertising"](#). Anybody who does anything with business-building or marketing should read it. Mostly because it was so hard to come by. However, it's back in print and well worth getting.

Also, a fun read that's not necessarily marketing, is the recent bestseller ["Freakonomics"](#) ... in which the authors make the point over and over that the thing that makes virtually everything happen (or not happen) is connected to the incentive. Fix the incentive, guide the action. Which, I guess, makes it a kind of marketing book – or at least key marketing insight – after all.

And while you're adding fun reads from the fringes, let's not forget Malcolm Gladwell's follow-up to "The Tipping Point," which is titled ["Blink"](#). It's not as good and maybe not essential reading (some of the examples seem off). But it's still got some points of interest. Mostly those about how people make decisions quickly and emotionally, pre-logic.

And, without betraying a bias, I think any recommended reading list wouldn't be complete without Michael Masterson's latest and greatest (in my opinion) bestseller, ["Ready, Fire, Aim"](#). This is more about business building, but you can't build a business without selling – a point that Michael makes masterfully in the book.

You might also want to throw another of Michael's books onto the pile, ["Power and Persuasion"](#).

However, If You Read Nothing Else ...

There is one thing that absolutely every copywriter, without fail, should read. And then re-read. And then copy out by hand, word for word. And that is: every best-performing promo you come across.

This isn't optional. For any copywriter. This one exercise will probably teach you more – and more quickly – than any of the other reading I've recommended above.

This is the best and fastest way for you to get into the gear-works of what makes a pitch work. Michael Masterson recommends it. Every good copywriter he's trained has done it. I know I have. I know Paul Hollingshead and others have.

[EDITOR'S NOTE: John Forde shares his copywriting insights regularly in his informative and entertaining eletter, The Copywriters Roundtable. If you aren't already a subscriber, I highly recommend you go to his website today and sign up: <http://www.jackforde.com/>]

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33 Responses to "At Least 10 Books Every Copywriter Should Read – Twice"

I found this free version online of "Scientific Advertising" it's more readable than the PDF online version.

[scientificadvertising dot BlogSpot dot com/2006/02/chapter-6.html](#)

Kay – over a year ago

Thanks for sharing!

Sunny – over a year ago

Another one Highly recommend:

Neuromarketing for Dummies by Stephen J. Genco, PhD; Andrew P. Pohlmann; and Peter Steidl, MBA, PhD This is not an easy read as are most of the other Dummies books but very informative.

You will learn the neurology behind the research of advertising and marketing, learn how consumers think and make decisions (even when they may not know themselves), and will learn how to conduct your own marketing studies.

Nora King – over a year ago

This list of books looks helpful. I will get started on reading today.

Barbara L – over a year ago

Wow! I had no idea that this level understanding of the combination of psychology, sales, marketing and writing was available. The light is on and dinner is served.

Gregg R – over a year ago

Excellent advise

Guest (Paul Gibat) – over a year ago

I'm just going to add this, since the article above was actually written before this next recommendation was available: "Great Leads" by... well, by me. And my co-author, the great Michael Masterson. I can't add links in this box, but you can find it by searching "Great Leads" in the search area at the top of this page... ;)

Guest (John Forde) – over a year ago

Thank you for the list, it will be very educational in my path to Copywriting.
Question? What are you referring to in the end of the article when you state 'However, If You Read Nothing Else ...' I got lost at the end. Please help!

sylvia h – over a year ago

Hi Sylvia,

The meat of that last part is this: "...every best-performing promo you come across."

In short, if you're going to read something valuable to every writer but have limited time, read the OTHER sales letters that are working really well in your same market.

That is, ferret out your competitors... look for every ad they seem to run often... and read it, study it, internalize it.

One of the best ways to do that is to simply copy it out word for word, on a separate pile of blank paper. By hand.

You'll learn things by doing that which you can't learn in any other way or pick up more perfectly, from reading any other book.

Best of luck!

Guest (John F) – over a year ago

Delighted to check out this list, even more so to find that some titles are already near and dear to my heart, (Strunk & White, Stephen King and Dale Carnegie) It will be my pleasure to read the other titles and add to my repertoire. A million thanks, in advance.

Channing – over a year ago

Funny, in regard to Dale Carnegie, I spent the summer listening to his old tapes on "Think and Grow Rich." I must have listened to them more than 100 times! I am on a mission in regard to positive thinking and changing our paradigms.

Guest (BlingSkyWrites) – over a year ago

It's amazing how starting out on life's journey believing you are going in the right direction. Things are going good. There are some sunny days and some rainy days. Some days there are some hills and other days there are some valleys. Then one day you notice something on the side of the road that caught your attention and you have a deja vu moment. Then it hits you smack in the face. Then you ask yourself how many years have I been going in circles. Started writing at the age of 9. Now almost 69.

Destined to Write ILS – over a year ago

Thanks for the list of books and the information.

Shazier – over a year ago

These look very interesting and I am sure are very helpful and eye-opening! Thank you!!

Dana M – over a year ago

Thank you for the book list. I have Carnegie and Zinsser in my library already and will definitely look for Bly and Hopkins.

Jeanette B – over a year ago

All this reading and training is definitely equal to a PhD. I have gotten so much knowledge from reading just a few of these programs, that my head is spinning. However, since I have to earn some green notes, I have therefore decided to take a step back, start with some of the smaller projects, and then take the large ones, step by step. This is certainly leading to a "Circle of Success."

Naomi Slowe – over a year ago

I did a search and discovered that Carnegie's book was updated to include the addition of "online" - it's called How to Win Friends and Influence People in the Digital Age. Starting to read it today!

Jeanne B – over a year ago

I am a lifelong reader. Just as literature has opened my eyes and heart to the lives of others, I expect the recommended tomes to enlighten me on the power of words to persuade. I embrace the journey.

BarbBull – over a year ago

I love studying How To courses and books but I need to write something and get paid for it

Tom Daddy – over a year ago

Well written words have power over the heart and the soul of MAN. Take away either and MAN cannot stand.

As a copywriter we should provide ethical tactical solutions that simplify and clarify an ethical message so others can achieve their ethical strategic objective. Heroes leave a legacy that stands the test of time.

The Wise Warrior – over a year ago

OMG! What a great list of books! I feel as though I'm entering an entirely new world, and I can't wait to get started.

I've been a fan of "Mad Men," but never finished watching the series. I'll be picking up where I left off, with a special focus on the ad campaigns.

Trisha – over a year ago

Thanks for the list of books, I'll take a shot at reading some of them. What resonated well with me is your response to Sylvia's comment... read as many copy ad campaigns in my business niche. Thanks

Esi22 – over a year ago

Thanks so much for this reading list.

Alice C – over a year ago

Thank you for adding this as part of the Method (TM) program. I'll jot them down in my training notebook!

Wanda F Sewell – over a year ago

Thank you for the long list of books. I will certainly read some, if not, most of them. I love to read. However, for me, this list comes too early in the training so I will save it for later when I feel that I'm ready to spread my wings and need to strength them by reading the books.

Karla – over a year ago

We all want to become great writers, so we should first be great readers. We should immerse ourselves in great examples of our craft. Thank you for the great recommendations, I already own one of them and I bought three on Amazon this past weekend. I'm slowly adding some of the titles to my bookcase, in hopes that they'll give me the tools and advice that I need to become a great writer/ copywriter and maybe someday what I have written lands itself on a "recommended reading" lists!

Autumn M – over a year ago

On it. Great list. Own 3,& read 1, & working on 2nd one.

Kourosh – over a year ago

Thank you for sharing this list of recommended books. Reading them with the aim to develop skills to monetize one's writing feels like a shift from reading or studying them for purely academic purposes. Finally, some insights to writing as a career are coming to my attention.

Heath – 11 months ago

I'm familiar with many of these but have only read one. I'm getting started on this list now.

K Sheridan – 5 months ago

I just ordered Scientific Advertising for my Kindle. The cost: \$.82.

K Sheridan – 5 months ago

I will start shopping for this list right away! Thank you.

Trudy – 4 months ago

I would add one book to this great list. That would be Peter Bowerman's "The Well Fed Writer." It's perfect for someone starting out and has a lot of useful info.

TomMac – 3 months ago

I'm just starting on this and I think this is going to be a useful set of materials to read and keep in my library. Thanks for the suggestions. I think I'll be back with some of my own as well.

Amigadiana – 2 months ago

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