

The 10% Solution – Mastering the Lead

By Mark Ford

As a copywriter, 90% of your success depends on 10% of the copy you write. Get that 10% right, and you'll have a golden career. Fail to master that 10%, and you'll be eating ketchup sandwiches.

The 10% is the 300-500 words that make up the "lead" of your promotion or advertorial.

To begin, I'd like to take a look at one of the most common lead types – the "problem/solution" lead.

Up-and-coming copywriter Penny Thomas does a very effective job of using a problem/solution lead to engage her reader's interest.

Let's see what she does, starting with the headline:

This is a "how to" headline. The "how to" in this case explains how the author of the article overcame a big problem the reader of the article might be experiencing himself or – at the very least – is worried about, especially given today's economy.

How I Went From Layoff to Payoff –

Penny does three things to a) keep the headline interesting, b) make the headline specific, and c) make the headline a promise.

3 Steps to Becoming the Copywriter You Really Want to Be

By Penny Thomas, Professional Freelance Copywriter

1.

She uses a rhyming phrase: "From Layoff to Payoff." Studies show that most readers respond to and remember rhyming phrases.

2. She adds some specificity to the solution: it will come in three steps. Three steps is a judicious choice for the implicit promise here. The reader is willing to read three steps. He may not be willing to read 33.

3. She deepens the promise. The standard promise would be "six-figure copywriter." She is going after another desire here, a subtler and deeper one, by broaching this promise of personal fulfillment.

I also like the byline. It establishes Penny as both an expert and a role model. Most of the people reading this publication, customers of AWAI, want to become professional freelance copywriters too.

Now let's take a look at how she handles the lead:

Having survived four layoffs, every day at work felt like a gamble.

In only nine sentences, Penny has done an awful lot of work here. It's really very impressive. What she has done is to introduce a problem/solution lead with a story. Rather than state the problem (that many employees today face uncertain futures), she creates a little story in which she is the hero with the problem. It was Christmas time, and the investment banking firm I worked for decided on a fifth layoff – effectively cutting out 25% of the staff. As luck would have it, my name was on that list. Since it is first of all a story, Penny begins in the middle of the conflict: "Having survived four layoffs, every day at work felt like a gamble. All I could think was, 'Will I be next?'" Fortunately, in October of 2002 – a few months before the layoff – I got a letter from AWAI in my mailbox that read, "[Can You Write a Letter Like This One?](#)" Initially, I didn't give it much thought. But once I sensed things might go south at my company, I decided to order **AWAI's Accelerated Program for Six-Figure Copywriting** as an "insurance policy."

And then, she suggests the solution: sending away for the AWAI program.

That is exactly what you want to do when you use a problem/solution lead: get the reader to feel the problem as quickly as possible, and then focus on the solution.

Let's see what Penny does next:

In explaining the solution, Penny discloses that her progress was "slow but steady," and yet it doesn't seem that way to the reader. Because she was sparse on those details, the reader feels like Penny's writing success came very quickly – which is just what the reader wants. And how that I was jobless, the freedom copywriting offered seemed a perfect fit with my love for writing.

To support myself, I did a little [resume writing](#) on the side, and took various temp jobs.

Let's continue:

I studied copywriting every moment I could . . . my rise to success was slow but steady. By 2006, I had enough copywriting. Now Penny is doing something else that is rather clever. Now that the reader understands the solution to the problem, he might put the article aside, feeling that he knows what is going to follow. So she creates a little secret by referring to the "WSM." Much of my success comes from what I call "WSM." It's a system I use to make sure I'm always using my time to do the system – the secret she used to succeed. A secret, she says, that is so good she would "guarantee" that it will work for the reader.

By now the reader is fairly well hooked. He wants to read on to find out exactly how Penny achieved the success she has.

Thus, the article continues:

Here's what it stands for, and how it can help you achieve the writer's life:

W = Write

You're not a copywriter unless you write copy every day. Writing is how you actually gain the skills and find your "voice." Don't get caught up in the easy mistake of wanting to learn it all and never finding the time to write. If you don't have any clients to write for, write spec assignments, re-write any one of AWAI's promos, or write an article you could submit to a potential publisher or use as a self-marketing piece.

S = Study

In addition to writing, you constantly need to be learning and sharpening your skills. And that doesn't mean only studying

In giving the reader an explanation of the WSM's system, I am demonstrating a benefit, one that works, readers will feel more confident in going to the prospect copywriter you'll be ... and the more valuable you'll be to every potential client that comes your way.

And she adds to that by providing another benefit: she tells the reader how to solve a related problem (an objection) he might

The Market

As soon as you feel competent at writing copy, market yourself! It's the only way you'll land paying assignments. And if

And finally she ends by repeating the original promise – the solution to the problem. Although cliché, there's a profound truth

in it.

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Once you follow WSM, you'll be living the writer's life before you know it. It worked for me ...

Related Content:

Out, I marketed myself to small, local companies. As my skills grew, I went to try local rotary, and got a copy of *Direct*

[Marketing Market Place](#), a reference book listing companies who use direct mail. Then I picked out a few companies and

sent them a promo selling my services.

• [Grab Your Prospect by the Eyeballs](#)

- [How to Make Every Sales Letter a Blockbuster](#)
- [A Mini Master's Lesson in Writing Winning Headlines](#)
- More by [Mark Ford](#)
- More from [The Golden Thread](#)

6 Responses to "The 10% Solution – Mastering the Lead"

Thank you for the "Good Reads."

They help a lot.

So does re-writing swipe file headlines and leads.

Patricia del Valle – over a year ago

I appreciate that Michael has broken this letter into segments and explained exactly what is being done.

I found it to be very helpful.

Foxfire – over a year ago

The detailed analysis of each section is very helpful. Something to file for future reference. Thank you.

Ros – over a year ago

Wow, great breakdown! I feel like I could write a strong problem/solution lead by following Michael's step-by-step analysis!

Jerry Bures – over a year ago

Very impressive. Her style is captivating. I would like to read the entire letter

A Francis – over a year ago

Great article, gave me a better understanding on how a letter should be structured. Very helpful, thank you!

Timea – over a year ago

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