

Writing Great Copy: Where Do You Start?

By Bob Bly

A couple of my [copywriting](#) colleagues from Germany came to visit me in my office, and as we were chatting, the question came up: "When you sit down to write a promotion, where do you start?"

While there is no right answer – you should do whatever works for you – an informal survey of copywriters reveals that these are the most common starting points:

1.

Headline. Many copywriters start with the headline. They write many different headlines. And then agonize over which one is best.

James Web Young recalls sitting at home one evening when the thought "Why does every man hope his first child will be a boy?" just popped into his head. He wrote it down and later used it as the headline for a successful ad.

Other copywriters just write a rough headline as a placeholder and write the entire promotion. Often, something they write in the body copy makes a stronger headline than their placeholder.

I prefer to get a strong headline (with subhead) down on the screen before I start writing the rest of the piece. Reason: the headline is your most articulate expression of the big selling idea behind your package, and if you can write a strong headline on it, you probably understand that big idea pretty well.

2.

A theme or big idea. Porter Stansberry and his team of copywriters, led by Mike Palmer, write virtually all of their promotions around a big idea, theme, or story. I believe they actually build products (in their case, newsletters) around big ideas they think will work in the mail.

One of the early promotions Porter wrote had the headline: "There's a new railroad across America." As I recall, the new railroad was a large fiber-optic data network. The big idea was that just as the railroads connected us in the early days of America, communications networks now connect us in modern times.

3.

The prospect. Copywriter [Don Hauptman](#) says, "Start with the prospect, not the product." Another top copywriter, Sig Rosenblum, advises: "Don't talk about what's interesting to you. Talk about what's interesting to the prospect – his hopes, dreams, need, fears, problems, concerns, and desires."

Traditional advertising often centers on the product. Even Bill Bernbach's classic Volkswagen ad, "Think Small," focuses on the product, not the prospect – at least in the headline.

But a better approach is to start with what's on the prospect's mind – what he cares about – and then connect your product to the prospect's major need or problem.

4.

The list. Ed McLean's classic letter for Newsweek began: "If the list upon which I found your name is any indication, this is not the first – nor will it be the last – subscription letter you receive. Quite frankly, your education and income set you apart from the general population and make you a highly rated prospect for everything from magazines to mutual funds."

Physician's Desk Reference, a directory of prescription drug data, beat a long-time control when they focused their mailings to specific lists. For instance, a mailing to a list of people who had bought their PDR 3 years earlier said, "Your PDR is now 3 years old and woefully out of date. Do not make prescribing or clinical decisions with PDR until you replace your dated edition with the new volume."

5.

Core emotion. Superstar copywriter Clayton Makepeace says the most important thing to nail first when writing a promotion is a lead that somehow resonates with what he calls the prospect's "dominant resident emotion" – the strongest feeling he has relating to your product or the problem it solves.

Once he has a lead capturing that emotion, he writes a headline to get prospects to read it. Example: "LIES, LIES, LIES ... we investors are fed up with everyone lying to us and wasting our money!"

6.

The core buying complex. [Michael Masterson](#) uses a similar approach, except he starts with what he calls the "core buying complex." This consists of the beliefs, feelings, and desires the prospect has that relate to the product or offer.

A training firm launched a new seminar by making the title of the workshop the headline of the letter: "Interpersonal Skills for IT Professionals." It did not do well.

While analyzing the core buying complex, the marketing team determined that a key feeling of prospects – IT managers – was the adversarial nature of the relationship that often exists between IT professionals and end users.

They tested against the control a new letter with the headline: "Important news for any IT professional who has ever felt like telling an end user 'Go to hell.'" The test pulled 6X more leads than the control.

7.

A big problem. A great question to ask your client is, "What's keeping your prospects up at night?" Then write a lead that acknowledges that problem.

My friend Sy Sperling became a multi-millionaire by founding the Hair Club for Men. He began with tiny space ads in the Daily News.

These small space ads had no room for long headlines. If he wanted the headline in big, bold type, he only had room for a few words. His one-word headline focused on the biggest problem of men who had lost their hair: "BALD?"

8.

Body copy. Write the body copy first. Then read it several times. Highlight any strong sentence or phrase you think should be moved closer to the front. One may be strong enough to move to the very front, as your headline.

Jim Reutz said in an interview he used a similar method to beat controls. He'd read the control until he found something buried in the middle that would make a strong headline and lead than the one the copywriter had used.

9.

The offer. If the offer is extremely appealing, or your audience is one that responds to offer-driven promotions (e.g., book and record club buyers), you can start by writing the offer.

Years ago, the Chemical Engineer's Book Club introduced a new offer: join the club and get the major reference work in the field, Perry's Chemical Handbook.

The package I wrote worked very well. The outer envelope teaser was: "Why are we giving away this new 50th anniversary edition of Perry's Handbook practically for FREE?"

10.

Order form. An effective way to overcome writer's block, especially when writing longer documents, is to start with the easy parts. When writing a magalog, DM package, or landing page, that means for some copywriters starting with the order form.

To get something down on the screen, you can even copy the order form from the old promotion. Why not? Having that part done can energize you to move forward. And you can always come back to the order form and improve it later.

11.

Word file template. Another way to overcome writer's block is to create a template for your new promotion in Word. Just copy the file from your last promotion, delete the text, and leave the outline: subheads and breaks indicating where the various elements go. Then start filling in the blank sections on the Word template.

12.

Your swipe file. Keep a swipe file of controls in your market as well as strong mailings in other industries. Look to both files for ideas and inspiration when facing a blank screen on your new copywriting assignment. Copywriter Milt Pierce says: "A good swipe file is better than a college education."

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1 Response to "Writing Great Copy: Where Do You Start?"

How about starting with the bullets. Cuts right into the benefits of the product, and as the real strengths become apparent, so does the positioning, the hook and so on. And some of them can be turned into headline candidates. Works pretty well for me.

Guest (Perinotti) – over a year ago

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