

How to Prune Your Writing for More Concise, More Successful Copy

By Will Newman

Successful copy uses just as many words as it needs ... and no more. You see this in all the most successful promos.

Here's *Circle of Success* member Kate's question about this successful copywriting essential ...

I've known for a long time that one of my biggest problems with writing is that I'm often long-winded. I try to be concise, but I have trouble finding the line between saying too much and saying too little. I don't think I'm the only writer who struggles with this. Do you have any advice on teaching yourself to write more concisely?

I can answer her request with one word ...

... Editing.

Concise – or tight – writing doesn't happen as you put the words on the page. Your writing tightens with ferocious editing ... not once or twice, but at least three times.

Every copywriter has his editing strategy. I've broken mine down to these six steps.

Tight copy step #1: Research

Tight copy comes before you begin writing. It comes from researching everything you can about your product or service. As you research, take notes, highlight, download, and organize.

After organizing your research, make a checklist of everything you need to include – your big promise, benefits, proof. Use single words or short phrases. Then, on to the next step ... writing.

Tight copy step #2: Write big

Tight copy comes from writing big. Don't try to be concise as you write.

Seems weird, but if you try to be concise as you write, you won't write in your natural writer's voice. You'll struggle. And, in struggling, you'll fail at being concise.

So, write big. Do *not* edit as you write. Editing comes after you're finished.

Here's a master secret about editing. Give your copy a chance to rest before you edit. You're used to what you've written; so you can miss obvious problems. Plus, when you've just finished writing, everything sounds great. Or, sounds like garbage.

When you schedule your writing, set aside three or four days (or more) before editing. If you don't have the luxury of letting your copy rest that long, give it at least a day.

Tight copy step #3: Evaluate the whole

When you're ready to edit, print your copy. Start at the beginning, and give it a quick read-through just to get the flow and sense of it.

Ask yourself if it makes sense as it stands, even if it needs changes. Use your checklist. Have you made your major points, presented your big promise, woven the promise through the copy? Have you expressed the benefits, so the prospect sees his life improve in some way?

In other words, have you employed all the strategies and secrets of powerful, successful copywriting you learn from AWAI? (We'll cover this part of copy review in greater depth in future *Golden Thread* articles.)

If the copy falls short at this point, go back and fix areas that need repair. If your copy passes this first reading, it's time to start pruning.

(You aren't proofreading at this point. You'll do that after you've finished the pruning. But, if you come across any obvious problems, fix them.)

Tight copy step #4: Hack off the big parts

When you write big, imagine yourself a master gardener looking at an overgrown tree. Your job is to cut away parts that don't belong. When you do, the tree grows stronger and healthier.

Look at every single paragraph closely in context with the paragraphs before and after. Ask yourself: Is this paragraph necessary? Have I said the same thing earlier? Does it really add to the copy?

Be brutal. If the paragraph isn't absolutely necessary, hack it out. Continue through your entire copy.

When I started copywriting, I hated cutting out chunks of copy. So, I saved copy I'd cut to a special holding file. I knew if I needed it later, it would be there for me. I seldom needed it.

Tight copy step #5: Trim out sentences

For your next step, go back and reread the copy sentence by sentence. Have the same fierce attitude about getting rid of unnecessary sentences. The more fluff you purge, the more concise (and better) your copy will be.

Tight copy step #6: Clip out words

You've probably guessed the next step: Eliminate unnecessary words. Sounds easy. But this can be difficult and takes several readings.

Why? Because we're used to using more words than we need. Here's an example: The sentence I just wrote started out as, "Because we've become accustomed to using more words than we need to." Twenty-three words became 10. Shorter ... and easier to understand.

We don't have space today to discuss strategies for eliminating words and phrases. We'll do that in the near future.

But for now: Cut most adverbs (words ending in -ly) like "actually" or "completely." Look at phrases like "all of the." This can be shortened to "all." "Have to" becomes "must."

Look at "that." You can cut many of them. Six paragraphs above, I wrote: "I knew that if I needed it later ..." I deleted "that," and the meaning didn't change.

Editing copy to make it concise takes a hard heart. We writers fall in love with our words, and pruning them takes courage. But, your copy grows stronger when pruned of unnecessary words.

How do you feel about cutting and hacking your copy to make it stronger? Is it hard to do? Or easy? Let us all know your thoughts below.

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16 Responses to "Pruning Words for Stronger Copy"

Hi Will,

Thank you for writing and posting this article. I'd like to see more articles offering useful writing tips and how we can improve our own copywriting work in the future.

Articles of this nature are much more helpful to me than reading articles about other people's copywriting successes.

It's nice when other AWAI members achieve copywriting successes, but I get much more out of articles giving useful and constructive writing advice. Thank you.

[FROM WILL: Thank you for the positive comments. I'll pass your concern on to the AWAI editorial staff.]

Sheila – over a year ago

I'm okay with editing and pruning my words. I understand it leads to better writing. What I lacked was a process. Now that that's solved... Thanks for today's great blog.

Sandra K Lynne – over a year ago

Thanks, Will. I am doing a piece for a client as part of the COS Companion Writing series. I not only edited recent drafts, but completely trimmed and merged some parts that were redundant. Reading it out loud helps for reviewing logic and flow. It is easier to trim now. It provides a better end product.

P.S. I edited this response a couple of times for practice.

[FROM WILL: Excellent! Reading out loud is a key part of successful editing/proofing. I'll cover some of those specific strategies in the future. Thanks for recommending them.]

Pat Casello-Maddox – over a year ago

Great article -- very helpful advice!

Anne Kavanagh – over a year ago

This brings forth my favorite dictum from Will Strunk:

"A sentence should have no extra words, and a paragraph should have no extra sentences for the same reason a drawing should have no extra lines, and a machine should have no extra parts." God, how I love his little book.

[FROM WILL: Strunk & White is the bible and all the commandments. Thank you for mentioning it.]

Guest (Bob H) – over a year ago

Hi Will,

I will start by saying I agree with Sheila, as articles about others' success come off sounding too-good-to-be-true and something that does not apply to me.

That being said, I believe one of the two most helpful techniques is to sit on your work for a day or two so as to gather some objectivity. The other is to read it out loud.

Alternately, it may be helpful to be more "wordy". Ask someone outside of your niche to read your work to see if they understand what you are trying to say.

[FROM WILL: Again, two great editing strategies. Thank you.]

Nora King – over a year ago

I'm probably not the norm. I love to edit. A songwriting background serves me well here. It's almost a game. It is amazing to watch a wordy piece rise out of the grain like a master carver pulls an image out of wood with his knife. Great article. Much wisdom in the wider approach narrowing in as you go.

[FROM WILL: I imagine poets and song writers would be good copywriters from the standpoint of making every word do the maximum work. Thank you for bringing this up.]

Guest (Brad Dunse) – over a year ago

I wrote just 82 pages and it doesn't seem long enough to me. I need to add some atmosphere. My case is the opposite of too many words. I am doing a autobiography or memoir. I will get it right and I can proofread as I go along.

[FROM WILL: Good luck on the memoir. And proofing as you go along can work *IF* doing so does not interfere with your writing flow. And *ALWAYS* proof after everything is finished (or at least a chapter). And proof several times.]

Guest (Diana M Molino) – over a year ago

I love the idea of trimming because it suits my style.

However, how does that fit in with l-o-o-o-n-g sales letters?

I hate it when the same info is repeated many times, but it is done so often that I assumed it was deliberate.

[FROM WILL: Good question! The loooog sales letters do repeat because doing so (if done well) boosts response. Long sales letters work best with products whose benefits are complex and need explanation that are being sold to prospects who aren't familiar with them. The repetition reinforces the importance of the benefits and should sell from slightly different perspectives.]

Escritor – over a year ago

Thank you all for taking the time to respond to my article. I've responded individually to some of the comments that needed replies. Unfortunately, I won't use your names in my replies so I can be assured of getting everything in your posting.

I hope to see you all back soon.

Good luck, best wishes, and much success,

Will

Will Newman – over a year ago

I research, organize, write and edit - but have a problem with charging for all the time it takes to create a 'finished' product I'm happy submitting. Any words of wisdom on that aspect?

[FROM WILL: You start by determining what you feel is your hourly rate, although you want to charge by the job, not by the hour. Don't underestimate. Then you figure how much time you'd put into the *entire* project including research time. Calculate your project cost from these figures, multiplying the hours you work by how long you'll work. This is Bob Bly's strategy,]

Guest (Theresa) – over a year ago

How do I get to attend Mr. Joshua Boswell tour, am from Nigeria and my country was not listed. more So, am new to this copyright stuff and I was thinking meeting Mr.Joshua would pave way for my aspirations. please I don't understand this stuffs.

[FROM WILL: Abraham, Joshua is not traveling to Nigeria. You might want to contact AWAI to see if there will be a recording done of any of his meetings.]

Abraham – over a year ago

How do you feel about expressions like "her own, his own, my own"? My grammar software complains that it is tautology, and I agree, but it seems so weak to say "This hand-made lace is all her creation" instead of "her own creation".

Escritor – over a year ago

Excellent advise. I have written oped articles for 2 1/2 years. I struggled to keep it to 2 pages. I wish I had your article then. What you said is exactly what I learned the hard way. I loved my words too but I had a weekly article due with a full time job.No "let it lie" time.Some weekends I could let it rest after a Friday night first draft. Saturday morning surprised me when I thought Friday's read was great. I hope everybody incorporates your steps.They are the most honest,out there.

Guest (Susan) – over a year ago

Hell Escritor,

Grammar software can be a great assistance in making sure your writing follows the rules of our language. But good copywriters know that sometimes, violating those rules makes stronger copy. While "her own" may be a redundancy, it is one that helps accentuate that she did it herself.

Use grammar software as a guide and as a reminder. I appreciate my software catching when my fingers blindly type "there" instead og "their." (It happens!)

Good luck, best wishes, and much success,

Will

Will Newman – over a year ago

Thank you for your supportive words, Susan.

Good luck, best wishes, and much success,

Will

Will Newman – over a year ago

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American Writers & Artists Institute

220 George Bush Blvd, Suite D

Delray Beach, FL 33444

(561) 278-5557 or (866) 879-2924