

# Mark Twain, Copywriter? Here's What You Can Learn from Him

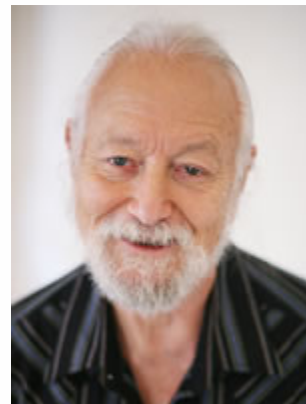
## *By Will Newman*

Many consider Mark Twain America's first great author. And I agree.

But I never thought he had much to say to copywriters.

I proved myself wrong last week. I was searching for a quote of his I half-remembered for the *Circle of Success* blog about the dangers of adjectives and adverbs.

In searching, I came across an essay Twain wrote in 1895 entitled "Fenimore Cooper's Literary Offences." Turns out, he was anything but impressed with Cooper's writing.



**Will Newman**

Twain said, "There are nineteen rules governing literary art ..." He then goes on to identify eighteen Cooper violated in *The Deerslayer*.

These rules apply to fiction. But they really lay a strong foundation for *all* writing, including our copywriting trade. In fact, they're the basis of *The Accelerated Program for Six-Figure Copywriting*.

I'm going to give you the rules that apply directly to copywriting. I've kept Twain's original numbering scheme; so you'll notice skipped numbers. (But you really should read them all — for education and entertainment. I'll tell you how at the end.)

### ***1. A tale shall accomplish something and arrive somewhere.***

Copywriting twist: Understand and develop the purpose of your copy from start to finish.

### ***2. The episodes of a tale shall be necessary parts of the tale, and shall help develop it.***

Copywriting twist: Understand the components of a strong sales letter and use them to develop effective sales pitches.

### ***4. The personages in a tale ... shall exhibit a sufficient excuse for being there***

Copywriting twist: If you use a story lead, have a "guru" or representative for your product, or have real testimonials; make sure they tie directly to your promo.

### ***5. When the personages of a tale deal in conversation, the talk shall sound like human talk ...***

Copywriting twist: On the surface, this is straightforward. Make conversations in your copy sound realistic. Beyond that — and most important — make *all* your copy sound realistic and conversational.

**8. Crass stupidities shall not be played upon the reader by either the author or the people in the tale.**

Copywriting twist: Everything you say *must* be reasonable and sound reasonable. Be ready to prove everything.

**10. The author shall make the reader feel a deep interest in the personages of his tale and their fate; and that he shall make the reader love the good people in the tale and hate the bad ones.**

Copywriting twist: If you have a "guru" or representative, make sure your prospect identifies with her/him. If you identify an "enemy" like unscrupulous stockbrokers, make your prospect dislike them. No middle ground. This even goes for things like side effects, regulations, and the like.

**12. An author should say what he is proposing to say, not merely come near it.**

Copywriting twist: Rewrite. Revise. Edit. Keep at it until you say exactly what you want to say.

**13. Use the right word, not its second cousin.**

Copywriting twist: Twain said it best.

**15. Not omit necessary details.**

Copywriting twist: Details make writing believable. They make the person "writing" the copy believable. They develop trust. Use strong, real details and avoid hype.

**16. Avoid slovenliness of form.**

Copywriting twist: Write tight. Remove all unnecessary words.

**17. Use good grammar.**

Copywriting twist: Yes, write conversationally. Use "like" instead of "such as." Use fragment sentences. But ...

... Do not let poor grammar or misuse slow or stop your prospect.

*"MegaHealth improved mens energy levels so their able to ..."*

"Mens" should be "men's." "Their" should be "they're."

If I saw copy like this, I'd yell, "What's wrong with this guy? He's either sloppy or doesn't know what he's talking about." And I'd stop reading.

**18. Employ a simple, straightforward style.**

Copywriting twist: Twain said it best.

Twain's essay is a fun ... and educational ... read. I recommend it if you're interested in improving your writing. (And I know you are!) You can get it free as an e-book or read it online by [clicking here](#).

Today, we heard from a master writer from over a hundred years ago. Tomorrow, we'll visit with a modern master.

Until then, I'd love to hear your thoughts on Mark Twain's ideas for writing strong. Comment below.

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# 12 Responses to "Mark Twain, Copywriter? Here's What You Can Learn from Him"

very interesting I love Mark twain`s idea , thanks Mark Twain

*Guest (anuoluwapo )* – over a year ago

Thanks for dusting off and showcasing some of Twain's thoughts on writing. Who would've guessed they'd be so relevant to copywriting?

I've admired Mark Twain's for decades. When I'm looking for a quote, in fact, he's my first "go to".

Thanks again for this delightful read.

*Guest (Lee Nourse)* – over a year ago

Will, thank you for providing such insightful, timely and helpful articles. I'm not new to writing, but I am new to the writing industry and freelance writing for a living. The knowledge I've gained by reading your posts has been invaluable in improving the quality and depth of my writing. This article will be printed and pinned on the wall in front of my computer to remind me of these rules and aid me in writing on a deeper level. Thanks again!

*Guy Stephenson* – over a year ago

I am fairly new to AWAI and regrettably have not been reading your column. However, the heading piqued my interest and I just finished Twain's essay on Cooper. I love the classics, but never read any of Cooper's books, and now that I have been forewarned, I never will. Thank you for your insight - I have saved all your emails and now have my work cut out for me. (Along with Accelerated Copywriter.) You are definitely worth keeping!

*Guest (Geri Taylor)* – over a year ago

Love Mark Twain. I can still learn from him. His words still apply today. I really like the way you presented how to use them.

*Guest (Carol Kondrat)* – over a year ago

Love your daily doses, Will. I remember that Twain essay. My favorite (don't recall its number) is "Eschew surplusage." And with that admonishment, I now sign off.

*Guest (John Chambers)* – over a year ago

Yes. Mark Twain is personable! As a writer I believe he used several pen names. He did some great essays on lying.

*Guest (Paris)* – over a year ago

Nice Quotes,, But @ #Will\_Newman, it's not Complete, I'd like to see all.

[FROM WILL: thank you for your comment. I'm limited in the word count for these articles. Consequently, I must cut back some places. I promise not to edit quotes to change their meaning, but I feel they are good places to cut back on my word count and edit them thusly.]

*Guest (Wizaugpet)* – over a year ago

**Thank you all for taking the time to leave your very thoughtful comments. I appreciate your doing so.**

**Good luck, best wishes, and much success, Will Newman**

*Will Newman* – over a year ago

Thank you, Will, for applying Mark Twain's critique on Cooper to copy writing. I'm just starting out in copy writing, and feel that I have been formally schooled in not eschewing surplusages. With that, I shall bid you a fond adieu until your next great article!

*Kathi* – over a year ago

This is my first day. I've been searching everything on this site. I love Mark Twain and read this article. Thank you for the insight you have given me. I took a writing course years ago and loved it. I look forward to trying this new type of writing. I

will continue to read these helpful articles and apply it to my training and see where it takes me!

*Colleen Kidd* – over a year ago

**Welcome Kathi and Colleen. And thank you for your comments.**

**Good luck, best wishes, and much success, Will**

*Will Newman* – over a year ago

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