

7 Tips to Shorten Copy Without Losing Impact

By Steve Slaunwhite



If you've been a copywriter for any length of time, you've run into this problem. You've written some copy, but it's too long to fit into the available space.

How do you cut it down? Especially if your copy is brilliant as it is.

For those of you who write a lot of online copy, you may not run into this as often. But if you're writing certain types of content, you're going to run into this quite a bit. And, it's more of a problem than you might think.

Let me give you a quick story to illustrate this ...

Many years ago, I was hired to write a direct-mail sales letter for a company. I jumped right in, and wrote what I thought was a brilliant sales letter.

I submitted it to the client. Then they called me back and said, "Steve, this is a great letter. There's just one problem."

I was expecting them to say something like, you have a fact wrong or we want to highlight this benefit more than that benefit.

Instead they said, "We need it to fit on two pages, and your sales letter is four pages."

At the time, I didn't know that would be a problem. Back then, a lot of B2B sales letters were four pages long. These days, the standard is two pages.

They said they budgeted the project to print on only one sheet of paper. Because it was a four-page letter, it would require two sheets of paper. That would cost more to produce, and give the envelope double the weight which might affect postage costs.

So, they wanted me to edit it down to a two-page format. And, wow, that wasn't easy to take my brilliant copy and whittle it down to fit two pages. Of course I did, because that's what the client needed.

Today, I want to give you some tips that have worked for me when I've run into this situation of trying to fit copy I've written into a very restricted space.

And, by the way, you might think if you don't write direct mail, you won't run into this.

That's wrong. You'll run into the same problem if you write e-zine ads or ads in newsletters. Sometimes the publishers of these newsletters will restrict the word count. They'll say it can only be 200 words or 400 characters or something like that.

You can run into this with press releases and emails too. There are all sorts of projects where the client wants shorter copy.

I sometimes get projects where the client wants a brochure, and the brochure has already been laid out and designed. They've left blocks where the copy goes. So the copy has to fit in that block, or the designer has to redo his work.

If you run into this situation, here are seven tips to help you shorten your copy ...

#1. Cut the Nonessential

Go through your copy, and highlight every word and phrase that doesn't absolutely need to be there. Look for any word or sentence you can potentially cut.

You might have highlighted a feature you didn't really need to highlight. Or maybe you mentioned some other information about the product or service that doesn't absolutely need to be there.

That doesn't mean you're going to cut them. Because sometimes you might need some of those words for style or flavor or content. These are simply suspicious words.

Then go back and decide whether to cut that word, phrase, or section. Perhaps reword it. Change it around. Make it shorter.

If you do this simple exercise, you can cut back, in my experience, anywhere from 10 to 15 percent of the length of the copy.

So, if you're at 200 words and you need to get down to around 180, then this is a good exercise to do that. And, you know what, often doing this makes the copy read better, simply because your copy is tighter and crisper.

#2. Look at Your Lead

This is particularly important with long-form copy like emails, sales pages, and content like articles and white papers.

Sometimes as writers, when we write the opening of our piece, we'll be a little long-winded before we really get into the meat of our copy.

Well, take a look at the first couple of paragraphs or the first few sentences of whatever you've written. And ask yourself, is it long-winded? Can I just say this in a sentence or two and then get right to the meat of the copy?

Sometimes you can cut down the opening of your copy considerably.

I remember a journalist many years ago who had to write newspaper articles in less than a day. So, he had to write fast. And often, he said he would write as fast as possible, and then he would delete the first paragraph.

He found that if he deleted the first paragraph, the second paragraph worked fine as the new first paragraph. And, the piece was tighter and read better.

But the idea is to look at your opening and see if you can cut some of that "warm-up" copy — or see if any of it is even necessary.

#3. Look at Your Closing Copy

Take a look at the sentence or paragraph at the end where you're wrapping things up, putting in a call-to-action, or summarizing what you've just written. In content pieces like blog posts and white papers, often writers will write a really long summary at the end.

Does it need to be that long? Do you need to have a summary at all? Can you wrap it up in just a quick sentence? Sometimes you can make a significant cut right there at the end of the piece.

#4. Look at Your Explanations

Look at all the areas of your copy where you're explaining how a product or service works, the benefits, or a process.

It's very easy to get long-winded when we're trying to explain something. See if you can cut that down and simplify the explanation.

#5. Consider Cutting Stories and Examples

I actually I do not like this tip, but here it is: Take a look at any stories or examples in your copy and cut them.

The idea here is that when you tell a story or provide an example of how something is going to work, it requires a few sentences.

So, if you cut those out, then you can cut down on your copy considerably. And, that can work. You can get rid of an entire paragraph doing that.

The problem with this tip is that stories and examples really work well. They add flavor to copy and take copy up to the next level of persuasiveness and clarity and engagement.

So, if you're going to use this tip, be very careful how you use it. You don't want to take something out of your copy that makes it convincing and persuasive and magical.

But, if you need to cut, you might need to replace a story with maybe just a one-sentence explanation rather than a one-paragraph story. Cutting stories and examples really can cut back on your word count quite a bit.

#6. Do Some Line Editing

By line editing, I mean looking at your grammar and look for ways to make sentences shorter. One thing you can do is look at your adverbs and other modifiers. Do you really need those?

Do you need to say, "Acme forklifts **significantly** improve productivity by up to 50 percent?" Do you need the word **significantly** in there? Can you take that out and simply say, "Acme forklifts improve productivity by up to 50 percent?"

You can shorten the sentence, and make it better. And, while I'm at it, do you need to say "up to 50 percent?" Why not give the exact number? "Improve productivity by 48.2 percent," if that specific number is available.

Also, look at the word **that** with suspicion. Do you need it? Often, if you cut the word **that**, the sentence reads better.

What you can do to make this easier is just do a quick document search for the word **that**. And then see if you can cut those words out without losing the clarity of the sentence.

Also review any passive sentences. These tend to be long, so turn them into active sentences, which tend to be shorter. And, by the way, active sentences also tend to be better writing.

Let me give you an example ...

Here is a passive sentence: *The case was won due to the convincing evidence.*

Now, here's that same information, changed to an active sentence: *Convincing evidence won the case.*

See the difference? The active sentence reads better, and has more impact. And, it's also half the length of the passive sentence.

There's an easy way to find your passive sentences. In Microsoft Word, go to Check Spelling and Grammar. Make sure the Grammar option box is checked.

You'll get a listing of all the passive sentences. Then, you can go through and see if you can turn those around and make them into active sentences.

It will make your writing much sharper and crisper. And you'll reduce the word count. So hopefully your copy will fit.

#7. Will a Visual Work?

This final tip is a bit of a Hail Mary pass, and it doesn't always work. But ask yourself, "Will a visual communicate this same information?" And rather than so many words, maybe there could be a visual that communicates that idea. Then you don't have to spend a lot of time in the copy explaining it because you have a visual that does it for you.

That can be very difficult. It requires you to coordinate with a designer. Maybe you have to go back and look at the layout. So, it doesn't always work.

But, it has worked for me a few times, where I've been writing something, and it's become a bit long-winded. I'm worried about the copy fitting, and there's a section that could be communicated better with a visual. And, I've gone back to the designer and talked about it. And, they created a visual that worked well and I was able to shorten the copy considerably.

So, those are some strategies for fitting your copy in a restricted space that have worked for me. It's not the perfect solution, but as copywriters, that's what we do. We work with the canvas we're given, and we make things work.

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