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## Success Seminar: 10 Steps to Effective Copywriting

### Seminar Description

Want to learn the secrets to writing copy that will increase sales? Copywriter Robyn Bradley shares the ins and outs of writing effective copy in this interactive 45-minute seminar.

### About Robyn Bradley

Robyn Bradley (a.k.a E.T. Robbins) is a freelance feature writer and copywriter from Framingham, Mass. She graduated summa cum laude from Stonehill College in 1995 with a degree in Communication. Ms. Bradley first worked in radio at WMJX, Magic 106.7 in Boston as a Morning Show Producer, on-air talent, and Promotions Director. But writing has always been her passion. She started her freelance writing business, E.T. Robbins Productions, in 2001. Her feature articles have appeared in numerous publications including *The Boston Globe* and *MetroWest Daily News*. She writes copy for Web sites, radio spots, marketing brochures, and other collateral materials. In addition, she teaches a course called "Writing for Lawyers" at Massachusetts School of Law in Andover. You can still hear Ms. Bradley weekends on Magic 106.7. For more information, visit [www.etrobbins.com](http://www.etrobbins.com).

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# What is copywriting?

Simply put, copywriting is any writing that sells a product, service, or person.

**COPYWRITERS ARE NOT CREATIVE WRITERS.**

**COPYWRITERS ARE SALES PEOPLE.**

We encounter copywriting every day. From the radio commercials you hear on your favorite radio station in the morning to the billboard you see on the highway when you're driving into work to the postcard you get in the mail from a cell phone company...these are all examples of copywriting.

You don't have to be an English major to be a good copywriter. But you do need to know some basics. If you follow these ten steps, you'll write better copy. And you'll know what to look for and what questions to ask when working with a freelance copywriter.

## Copywriting Commandments

1. Forget features. Focus on BENEFITS.
2. Keep it conversational.
3. Less IS more. Sentences should NEVER be over 20 words.
4. Honor the KISS Rule - Keep It Simple, Stupid.
5. Know thy audience.
6. Pay attention to your headlines.
7. Choose clear and concise copy over "cute" copy.
8. Lose high calorie words that bloat your writing.
9. Know your competition...and what they're doing (or not doing).
10. Proofread, proofread, proofread (have someone else read it too).

## Forget features. Focus on BENEFITS.

People buy products or services (or even people - think voting) because they believe the product or service is somehow going to benefit them. *"It will make me smarter, younger, thinner, prettier, wealthier, hipper..."*

So, it's important to focus on your service or product's benefits.

### FEATURES AND BENEFITS OF A #2 PENCIL (adapted from *The Copywriter's Handbook* by Robert W. Bly)

Feature	Benefits
Pencil is wooden cylinder surrounding a graphite core	Can be resharpened as often as you like to ensure clean, crisp writing
One end is capped by a rubber eraser	Convenient eraser lets you correct writing errors cleanly and quickly
Eraser attached with metal band	Tight-fitting band holds eraser snugly in place - no pencils ruined by eraser coming loose
Pencil is 7 1/2 inches long	7 1/2-inch graphite core ensures long writing life
Pencil is 1/4 inch in diameter	Slender shape makes it easy to hold and comfortable to write with
Pencil is #2	Graphite core is blended for just the right hardness-writes smoothly yet crisply

## Workshop Sheet #1

Below are five features of a ski mountain. Turn the features into benefits.

### Features

### Benefits

Celebrating its 70th birthday this season

Voted #1 for scenery in the East

Most continuous vertical terrain in the  
White Mountain National Forest

Ski school instructor voted top 100 by  
Ski Magazine this year

New Hampshire's longest and fastest  
Quad chairlift (6 minutes from base to summit)

**Now, pick a partner.** Talk about your own services and products. List your product's features. Have your partner list the benefits (as he or she sees them - this will help you in writing future copy. Maybe there's a benefit that you hadn't considered).

This is where you can get creative. Is there a feature that you and your competitors have, but no one talks about (think of the first beer distributor to jump on the low carb bandwagon)? Is there something about your product or service that is unique to *you* (for example, maybe you're a picture framer who makes house calls)?

### Features

### Benefits

## Keep it conversational. Write the way people talk.

Why? Who would you rather listen to - a friend telling you a story or a sales person giving you a jargon-filled sales pitch?

My guess is you'd rather listen to your friend. It's more comfortable, more conversational. Write your copy that way. Bob Bly, a master copywriter, uses this example in his book *The Copywriter's Handbook*:

*My former boss once wrote a sales letter that began, "Enclosed please find the literature you requested."*

*I asked him, "If you were handing this envelope to me instead of mailing it, what would you say?"*

*He said, "Well, I'd say, 'Here is the information you asked for' or something like that."*

*"Then why not write it that way?" I replied.*

*He did.*

**\*\*\*Remember to keep the focus on your customer.** Instead of saying, "I deliver copy on time" try this: "You'll never have to wait for copy." Whenever you see the pronoun "I" or "We," figure out a way to translate it back to the customer by saying "You."

## Less is more. Sentences should never be over 20 words.

- If your sentence is longer than 20 words, you can turn it into two (maybe even three!) short, punchy sentences. Headlines and billboards have a lot less than that (seven to eight words).
- Forget what your English teacher taught you! You *can* start sentences with "and" or "but." And you don't have to write in complete sentences if a phrase will work. Like this one.

## Honor the K.I.S.S. Rule: Keep It Simple, Stupid.

- Do not use colons or semicolons in your copy. If you feel you need to use these forms of punctuation, the sentence is too long. Turn it into two.
- Forget trying to sound academic or scholarly. If you can replace a big word with a short, simpler one - do it. Big words don't sell products or services. Clear, persuasive messages do.
- Avoid passive voice. Always write in active voice. Why? It has more "forward motion."

**Wrong:** The ball was thrown by Mary. (Passive)

**Right:** Mary threw the ball. (Active)

**Workshop Sheet #2**

A client sent me this copy. It describes the challenge and solution of a home improvement project. Can you write the copy in a more conversational style?

***Before:***

**Challenge:** The rear porch/deck area of this three year old home was encumbered by the use of full door panels with screened upper panels by the contractor who originally built the home. The homeowner wanted to be able to appreciate the view from inside the porch, increase the air transfer and remain bug and element free.

**Solution:** After discussing the desires of the homeowner we agreed on removing the eleven door panels used by the original builder. We then reconfigured the frame system and fabricated and installed a custom set of removable screens. The homeowner can now sit on the porch, take in all the views, appreciate the weather without having to deal with the insects.

***Rewrite the copy:***

**Challenge:** \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

**Solution:** \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_

***After My Rewrite:***

**Challenge:**  
The owner of this three-year-old home wanted to sit inside the rear porch area, enjoy the views, and smell the fresh air without having to deal with bugs or the elements. The original full door panels (with screened upper panels) were interfering with the owner's dream.

**Solution:**  
After discussing the situation with the homeowner, we agreed to remove the 11 door panels used by the original builder. We reconfigured the frame system. Then, we built and installed a custom set of removable screens. The owner can now dream away on his bug-free porch.

## **Know your audience.**

Sounds simple, but there's more to knowing your audience or ideal customer than just the basic demographics of gender, age, and income.

Picture your ideal customer. (For the purpose of this discussion, let's assume this ideal customer is a woman).

- How well do you know this woman?
- How old is she?
- What town does she live in?
- What type of car does she drive?
- What type of job does she have?
- What sort of magazines does she read?
- What sort of stores does she shop at?
- What does she do for fun?
- What does she dream about at night?
- Is she married, single, or divorced?

Think it's impossible to know this stuff? It's not.

But it does take a little time and research. Once you know the basic demographics (such as gender, age, and income), you can discover the answers to the other questions.

Start by talking to the women in your life (even if you are a woman, you need to get feedback from others). Go to a bookstore on a weekend or evening, and observe what books or magazine she's reading. Buy some of these magazines and study the ads and the way they're written. Listen to radio stations she listens to. Watch TV shows she watches. Keep notes on the ads you hear and see.

With any copywriting you do (and remember, copywriting is writing that sells a product, service, or even a person), remember that you're *writing directly to her*. You're having a conversation with her. You want to convince her that your product or service is perfect or necessary for her lifestyle (the fact that you know her lifestyle so well will come through in the copy).

Even if you decide to hire a copywriter to write the copy for you, this exercise is not a waste. The better you can describe your ideal customer to a writer, the better copy he or she will produce for you.

### **Pay attention to headlines.**

What are headlines? Headlines are the attention grabbers. An effective headline convinces the reader to read on, the listener to keep on listening, and the viewers to "stay tuned." *An effective headline does some selling.* Many copywriters spend more time on the headline than the body copy. If the headline fails, it doesn't matter how convincing your body copy is since no one will be reading it.

Effective headlines in print materials (or video) work with graphics. Graphic designers and copywriters often work together to communicate the message through the right combination of words and visual images.

Copywriters (generally) are NOT graphic designers or artists. Don't expect them to be. And don't waste a fabulous headline with a "clip art" graphic. Sometimes it's worth it to invest in the two separate services of copywriting and graphic design. (For a thorough discussion on writing headlines, I highly recommend Robert W. Bly's *The Copywriter's Handbook*).

### **Choose clear and concise copy over "cute" copy.**

This is especially important in headlines. Resist the temptation of using rhymes or shock techniques. Instead, focus on what has traditionally worked (after all, it's worked for a reason). Words like "Free" "Introducing" "Announcing" "How to" "Why" "Last Chance" "Save."

Some of the most famous headlines and taglines are simple and straightforward.

"Good to the last drop." What's the product or service?

"Be all that you can be." What's the product or service?

"Plop, plop, fizz, fizz, oh what a relief it is." What's the service or product?

"Where will you be when your diarrhea comes back?" What's the service or product?

"A diamond is forever." What's the service or product?

"Priceless." What's the service or product?

"Where's the beef?" What's the service or product?

"Don't leave home without it." What's the service or product?

### **Lose high calorie words that bloat your writing.**

Instead of saying "a large number of" say "many." Instead of "ascertain" try "find out." Instead of "conceal" try "hide." (Believe it or not, this is what I tell my law students.)

### Workshop Sheet #3

Replace the following high calorie words with simpler, "leaner" replacements.

#### Clumsy Words or Phrase

1. acquire
2. additionally
3. at this point in time
4. attempt
5. because of the fact that
6. demonstrate
7. desire
8. despite the fact that
9. due to the fact that
10. echelon
11. elucidate
12. endeavor (verb)
13. facilitate
14. fundamental
15. frequently
16. has a negative impact
17. in accordance with
18. in reference to
19. in the event that
20. in regard to
21. is unable to
22. locate
23. manner
24. methodology
25. notify
26. numerous
27. objective (noun)
28. obtain
29. prior to
30. provided that
31. purchase
32. request (verb)
33. retain
34. subsequent
35. sufficient
36. the fact that
37. the manner in which
38. to the effect that
39. utilize
40. very

#### Replacement

### **Know your competition...and what they're doing (or not doing).**

- Go to their stores.
- Go to their Web sites.
- "Become" a customer.
- Register for emails and mailers.
- Study and save their coupons.
- Study and save emails
- Study and save mailers.
- Where and how do they advertise? TV? Radio? Billboards? Direct Mail? If your competitor uses the same medium over and over, that probably means the medium works. You may want to consider it.
- If you see something that works, *it's not plagiarism to use the idea (Note: taglines and logos often have trademarks and copyrights, but ideas are a different story. When in doubt, consult an attorney)*. Beer commercials are perfect examples - recently one beer jumped on the low-carb bandwagon. Once that beer started touting "low-carb" status, it didn't take long for others to follow suit.
- Identify what makes you different (and hopefully better).
- Identify what makes you the same and see if you can reinvent the idea in a new way (for example, most beers have the same amount of carbs...it's just that no one talked about it).

### **Proofread, proofread, proofread.**

You can't do this enough. Nothing, in my opinion, dilutes a message more than a glaring error. Always have at least two other people read your copy before you print a mass amount of mailers etc. (and, no, the printer doesn't count). Many copywriters offer editing services. So, even if you write the main copy, a good copywriter can offer sound editing advice.

*On that note...here's something fun:*

Aoccdrnig to rscheearch at an Elingsh uinervtisy, it deosn't mtttaer in waht oredr the ltteers in a wrod are, the olny iprmoetnt tihng is taht frist and lsat ltteer is at the rghit pclae. The rset can be a toatl mses and you can sitll raed it wouthit a porbelm. Tihs is bcuseae we do not raed ervey lteter by it slef but the wrod as a wlohe.